

# Protest, Politics and Popular Music as Social Philosophy: A Century of Paradigmatic Shifts in Nigerian Musical Activism, 1925–2025

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| Article History                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Abstract                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
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| <b>Published: 13-10-2026</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited. |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Citation:</b> Nwolisa, Marcellinus Ikechukwu & Esinkuma James Amaegbe, PhD. (2026). Protest, politics and popular music as social philosophy: A century of paradigmatic shifts in Nigerian musical activism, 1925–2025. UKR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 2(10), 82-93.                                 | <p><i>Popular music is a significant cultural medium through which societies interpret experience, construct identity, preserve memory, and challenge structures of power. In Nigeria, protest music has addressed colonial domination, military authoritarianism, corruption, inequality, economic hardship, police brutality, insecurity, and failures of governance. This study examines Nigerian popular music as a form of social philosophy, focusing on paradigmatic shifts in musical activism and political expression from 1925 to 2025. Using historical, theoretical, and analytical approaches, it traces changes in themes, genres, rhetoric, performance, audiences, and technologies of circulation. The study is informed by Critical Theory, the music-and-social-movements perspective, and Critical Discourse Analysis. It argues that Nigerian protest music has moved from indigenous communal commentary and nationalist expression toward explicit political resistance, democratic accountability, youth-centred activism, and digitally networked participation. Across these changes, recurring philosophical concerns include justice, freedom, authority, equality, responsibility, human dignity, identity, and social transformation. The study concludes that Nigerian protest music transcends entertainment: it functions as popular social philosophy, public voice, collective memory, and a cultural resource for political consciousness and social criticism.</i></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Popular music; social philosophy; protest music; musical activism; political expression.</p> |

## Introduction

Music is an enduring means of communicating experience, values, emotions, memories, aspirations, and interpretations of society. Beyond entertainment, it participates in identity formation, historical memory, social criticism, and political communication. Frith (1996) links music to identity through experiences of the body, time, and sociability, while Merriam (1964) emphasizes its communicative function. In African societies, music has traditionally been integrated into communal life, moral instruction, political institutions, oral history, and collective memory. The musician can therefore function simultaneously as entertainer, historian, social commentator, satirist, moral instructor, and custodian of communal values (Nketia, 1966).

Nigerian popular music demonstrates these functions through highlife, juju, fuji, Afrobeat, reggae, hip-hop,

Afropop, and Afrobeats. These genres have addressed morality, identity, class, poverty, corruption, religion, inequality, political authority, and national development. Emielu (2011) argues that African popular music is rooted in traditional musical practices, while Onanuga and Akingbe (2020) emphasize language, context, and milieu. The use of English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and other languages enables musicians to communicate social concerns in culturally accessible forms.

The political dimension of Nigerian popular music is particularly visible in protest music. Protest may be direct, through criticism of political actors, or indirect, through representations of poverty, unemployment, insecurity, police violence, exclusion, and social injustice. Eyerman and Jamison (1998) show that music can provide social movements with collective identity, emotional bonds,

memory, and symbolic resources. In Nigeria, political crises, military rule, economic hardship, corruption, democratic transitions, electoral controversies, and inequality have repeatedly generated musical responses. Fela Anikulapo-Kuti remains central because he transformed Afrobeat into a sustained vehicle of political criticism; songs such as *Zombie* raise questions about authority, obedience, freedom, and moral responsibility (Olaniyan, 2004; Afolayan & Falola, 2022).

The tradition has continued through artists such as Eedris Abdulkareem, African China, Lagbaja, Seun Kuti, Falz, Burna Boy, Davido, Chike, and Nasboi. Recent studies identify continuity between Fela and contemporary artists in their use of satire, linguistic creativity, social commentary, and lyrical activism (Onanuga, 2025). Songs such as *This Is Nigeria*, *20.10.20 (Wahala Dey)*, *Monsters You Made*, *Hunger Games*, and *Tell Your Papa* demonstrate how political expression increasingly operates through lyrics, images, performance, and digital circulation (Akingbe & Onanuga, 2020; Adiwu, 2022; Jemiluyi, 2025). This study therefore examines the philosophical and social meanings of Nigerian protest music from 1925 to 2025 and identifies the major paradigmatic changes in its themes, genres, rhetoric, audiences, performance practices, and technologies of circulation.

### Conceptual Clarifications and Theoretical Framework

Popular music refers broadly to music created, circulated, and consumed within everyday social life. It is commonly associated with mass audiences and is shaped by media institutions, recording industries, technology, commercial interests, and audience practices (Sunday-Kanu, 2016; Amaegbe, 2026). Its importance extends beyond entertainment because it can communicate social, religious, and political concerns. Nigerian popular music has developed through interaction between indigenous traditions and external influences. Highlife, juju, fuji, Afrobeat, reggae, hip-hop, and Afropop demonstrate adaptation, indigenization, and syncretization (Emielu, 2011).

#### Protest Music

Protest music is a musical expression that responds to perceived injustice or unacceptable social and economic conditions. It can articulate grievances, mobilize audiences, challenge domination, and express demands for change (Titus, 2017). Its significance lies not only in literal lyrics but also in its capacity to make social problems emotionally intelligible. Through music, issues such as corruption, inequality, unemployment, and police brutality become recognizable human experiences (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Egere, 2025).

#### Political Expression and Musical Activism

Political expression encompasses communication of ideas, grievances, identities, beliefs, and demands concerning collective power. Music becomes politically significant because lyrics interact with rhythm, melody, repetition, performance, language, and emotional intensity. Musical activism refers to the deliberate use of music and performance to express social concerns, challenge injustice, influence public consciousness, and encourage collective action (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998). In Nigeria, this tradition has developed from communal praise, criticism, satire, and moral instruction to mass-mediated and digitally networked activism. Social media and streaming platforms have made protest increasingly interactive and multimodal.

#### Social Philosophy

Social philosophy examines the relationships, institutions, values, and structures through which collective life is organized. Its concerns include justice, freedom, equality, authority, responsibility, rights, citizenship, power, and human flourishing. Nigerian protest music can be interpreted as popular social philosophy because it makes such questions accessible through lyrics, metaphor, satire, rhythm, and performance. A song against corruption presupposes standards of public responsibility; a song against police brutality presupposes rights and limits on state power; and a song about poverty raises questions of distributive justice. Music becomes philosophically significant when it moves beyond representing reality to evaluating, questioning, criticizing, and imagining alternatives to it.

Social philosophy is concerned with the critical examination of the relationships, institutions, values, and structures through which human beings organize collective life. It addresses questions concerning justice, freedom, authority, equality, responsibility, rights, citizenship, power, social order, and the conditions necessary for human flourishing. Unlike philosophy that focuses exclusively on abstract metaphysical or epistemological problems, social philosophy examines human beings as members of communities and institutions. The relevance of social philosophy to popular music lies in the fact that cultural expressions frequently contain assumptions about how society ought to be organized. A song condemning corruption, for example, does not merely describe corrupt behaviour; it presupposes that public officials have moral obligations to citizens. A song protesting police brutality presupposes that human beings possess rights that state institutions are obliged to respect. A song criticizing poverty and inequality raises questions concerning distributive justice and the responsibilities of government and society.

Popular music can therefore serve as an informal but potent locus of philosophical reflection. Frith (1996) re-echoes that it “constructs our sense of identity through the experiences it offers of the body, time, and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives” (p. 275). These concerns overlap significantly with social philosophy because they involve questions about how individuals understand themselves and their relationships with others. The philosophical significance of popular music becomes particularly visible in protest music. Nigerian protest music can consequently be interpreted as a form of popular social philosophy because it provides ordinary audiences with accessible ways of thinking about social and political problems. Fela Kuti's *Zombie* illustrates this relationship. Social philosophy also helps explain why protest music remains relevant across different historical periods. The specific political actors may change, but questions concerning justice, freedom, inequality, authority, and responsibility persist. Social philosophy is very essential in popular music, because Nigerian protest music is treated not merely as a collection of politically themed songs but as a body of cultural texts through which musicians and audiences reflect on the moral and political conditions of collective life.

Musical activism refers to the deliberate use of music and musical performance to express social concerns, challenge injustice, influence public consciousness, and encourage collective action. It extends the function of music beyond entertainment by positioning the musician as an active participant in social and political discourse. Eyerman and Jamison (1998) pointed out that “Music becomes both knowledge and action, part of the frameworks of interpretation and representation produced within social movements” (pp. 23-24). In other words, music provides social movements with cultural resources through which collective identities, memories, emotions, and political commitments are formed.” Musical activism therefore involves not only what a song says but also how it creates solidarity and encourages listeners to interpret social realities differently.

In Nigeria, musical activism has a long history. Musicians have traditionally used songs to praise or criticize rulers, condemn social misconduct, preserve historical memory, and communicate communal values. The development of modern popular music expanded these functions through recording, radio, television, live performance, and, more recently, digital media. Nigerian popular musicians have therefore transformed music into a platform for addressing corruption, poverty, inequality, unemployment, police brutality, political irresponsibility, insecurity, and other social problems. Olaniyan (2004) argues that Fela Anikulapo-Kuti represents one of the clearest examples of

Nigerian musical activism, and that his artistic practice cannot be separated from his political activism; given that his music, performance, public identity, and resistance constituted an interconnected form of social intervention.

Digital technology has further expanded the possibilities of musical activism. Social media, streaming platforms, and other digital networks enable musicians to circulate politically conscious music without depending entirely on traditional media institutions. Protest songs can now be accompanied by music videos, hashtags, interviews, memes, comments, and audience-generated content. Musical activism has consequently become increasingly interactive and multimodal.

Different ways in which individuals, a group, or a given community communicate their opinions, beliefs, concerns, dissatisfaction regarding their society or political issues are all known as political expressions. This can be in the form of speech, writing, art, music, demonstration, and even social media. Hence, political expression concerns the communication of ideas, judgments, grievances, identities, and demands relating to collective power. Hence, Nwankpa and Okunade (2018) describe music as having “power and shaping force capable of influencing the physical, mental and emotional states of individuals” (p. 46). Music is politically significant because lyrics operate together with rhythm, melody, repetition, performance, and emotional intensity. Onanuga and Akingbe (2020) demonstrate the importance of language and context in Nigerian popular music. Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages can establish intimacy between artist and audience while challenging elite political discourse. A political argument embedded in a popular song can consequently reach audiences who may not participate in formal political debate.

“Protests result from unpleasant situations and the need for change in the social and economic conditions of the people. Music is often employed during protests” (Titus, 2017, p. 109). In the light of this thus, protest music may be understood as a music through which people express their grievances and dissatisfaction with situations they consider unjust or unacceptable. It also refers to musical expression that challenges perceived injustice, oppression, inequality, exploitation, domination, or unacceptable social conditions. Protest inherent in this type of music may be direct, through criticism of political actors, or indirect, through imaginary representations of poverty, unemployment, insecurity, police violence, and exclusion. According to Titus (2017), “protest music may be understood as musical expression employed in response to unpleasant social and economic conditions, particularly as a means of articulating grievances, mobilizing people, and expressing the desire for social change” (p. 109). Eyerman and Jamison (1998)

emphasize that “music contributes to social movements; and social movements are not merely political activities. Perhaps even more importantly, they provide spaces for cultural growth and experimentation, for mixing of musical and other artistic genres, and for the infusion of new kinds of meaning into music” (p. 1). In Nigeria, Egere (2025) confirms that “musicians continue to use protest songs to criticize political, social, and economic conditions and encourage demands for better governance.” The strength of protest music lies partly in its capacity to make social problems emotionally intelligible. It gives human experience to issues that might otherwise appear as abstract political or economic statistics.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Critical Theory**

Critical Theory, associated here with Horkheimer (1972), directs attention to domination, inequality, ideology, power, and emancipation. It is useful for Nigerian protest music because musicians expose contradictions between political promises and lived realities. Songs that contrast official claims with poverty, insecurity, corruption, or unemployment perform a critical function by questioning dominant representations of society.

### **Music and Social Movements Perspective**

Eyerman and Jamison's (1998) perspective explains how music contributes to collective identity, solidarity, memory, and mobilization. A protest song can become powerful when audiences recognize their own experiences in it. Individual frustration can thereby become collective consciousness, while songs preserve the memories and symbols of movements.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) treats language as social practice and examines how discourse constructs representations of power, institutions, social actors, and political realities. This is particularly relevant to Nigerian protest music, where metaphor, satire, repetition, Nigerian Pidgin, indigenous languages, code-mixing, slang, and local symbolism shape political meaning (Ademilokun & Bamigbade, 2021; Awoniyi et al., 2026). Together, these perspectives allow protest music to be examined as criticism of power, a resource for collective action, and a discourse through which political realities are contested.

## **Philosophical Foundations of Nigerian Popular Music**

The philosophical foundations of Nigerian popular music are rooted in the values and social experiences expressed through musical performance. Nigerian musicians have historically used music for social commentary, education,

moral reflection, and political engagement (Okafor & Okafor, 2009). Six interconnected foundations are especially important.

First, communalism and collective existence place individual experiences within shared social realities. Poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and political frustration can be transformed into collective narratives. Second, social responsibility establishes moral standards by praising integrity, courage, solidarity, and good leadership while condemning corruption, exploitation, violence, and irresponsibility. Third, justice and equality are expressed through criticism of unequal access to resources, opportunities, security, and political power. These concerns are particularly evident in contemporary Nigerian hip-hop, which responds to state failure and collective hardship (Aboh & Ishamali, 2025).

Fourth, freedom and human autonomy are central to protest music that challenges oppression, intimidation, police brutality, exploitation, and blind obedience. Fela's *Zombie* is a major example because its portrayal of mechanically obedient soldiers raises questions about individual judgment and legitimate authority (Olaniyan, 2004). Fifth, identity and cultural self-understanding are negotiated through indigenous languages, Nigerian Pidgin, local rhythms, cultural references, and global musical forms. Sixth, collective memory and resistance allow music to preserve experiences of repression, hardship, struggle, and social transformation while providing cultural resources for challenging domination.

## **Paradigmatic Shifts in Musical Activism and Political Expression in Nigerian Protest Music**

### **1. Colonial Musical Expression and Nationalist Consciousness, 1925–1959**

The roots of Nigerian musical activism predate the modern state. Indigenous music served social commentary, moral instruction, satire, historical documentation, communal communication, and protest. Within the period covered by this study, the 1925 Women's Dance Movement or Nwaobiala is identified as an early organized use of dance and music in opposition to colonial authority (Aderemi, 2025). The Aba Women's War of 1929 similarly involved songs, chants, and dances in resistance to colonial taxation and administration; Iweze (2022) notes the importance of Igbo folkloric songs and traditional war songs during the protest. Akpanya women continued this tradition in 1940 through protest against increased taxation.

Hubert Ogunde's *Strike and Hunger* connected theatrical performance, music, and political satire to the 1945 general strike (Coates, 2017). The Abeokuta women's movement led by Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti in the late 1940s further demonstrated the political use of songs, chants, and dance.

Scholarship identifies her activism as an important influence on Fela Kuti (Shonekan, 2009). By the 1950s, popular music and highlife increasingly participated in nationalist consciousness and the struggle for self-rule (Igbi, 2016). The paradigm was therefore a movement from communal protest and anti-colonial expression toward mass-mediated nationalist consciousness.

## **2. Independence, Civil War and Radical Political Resistance, 1960–1997**

After independence in 1960, highlife musicians such as Rex Lawson, Victor Olaiya, Celestine Ukwu, Osita Osadebe, and others participated in national and cultural expression. Music initially emphasized unity and integration, but the 1966 coups and Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) altered the musical landscape. Musicians were displaced, and musical expression increasingly reflected ethnic identity, territorial belonging, patriotism, and the trauma of war. Celestine Ukwu combined philosophical reflection and social commentary, while Victor Olaiya's wartime involvement reflected the relationship between music and national politics (Agawu, 2020; Onwuegbuna, 2023).

The 1970s marked a major shift toward explicit political activism, most importantly through Fela Kuti. From 1970 until his death in 1997, Fela confronted military dictatorship, corruption, police brutality, inequality, neo-colonialism, and political irresponsibility (Eesuola, 2011; Olaniyan, 2004). *Zombie* became a defining example of radical musical resistance because its metaphor challenged unquestioning obedience and raised questions concerning freedom and moral responsibility. Other genres, including reggae, highlife, juju, and Afrobeat, also contributed to protest culture. During the military regimes of the late 1980s and 1990s, music, theatre, and oral performance became alternative public spheres as conventional media were restricted (Olukotun, 2004).

## **3. Democratic Transition and Broader Protest Culture, 1998–2009**

Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999 changed the political context of musical protest. Under military rule, artists had concentrated on dictatorship, repression, and denial of democratic freedoms. Under the Fourth Republic, musicians increasingly addressed corruption, poor governance, electoral malpractice, poverty, unemployment, infrastructure failure, and political marginalization. Nigerian hip-hop became especially important because it offered younger audiences a contemporary language for criticizing state failure (Adedeji, 2013).

Eedris Abdulkareem's *Jaga Jaga* became a major example of early Fourth Republic protest, while African China addressed marginalization, suffering, and resistance. Lagbaja employed masking, satire, anonymity, and social

commentary to critique society and politics (Okuyade, 2011; Adegoju, 2009). Between 2006 and 2009, Niger Delta issues became more prominent, shifting attention toward environmental injustice, oil politics, poverty, damaged infrastructure, and resource conflict. This period therefore marked a shift from primarily anti-military protest to multi-genre democratic accountability and regionally grounded resource politics.

## **4. Youth-Centred and Digitally Mediated Activism, 2010–2018**

The period 2010–2018 was characterized by the increasing importance of Nigerian hip-hop, Afropop, youth identity, satire, humour, code-switching, indigenous expressions, and popular cultural references. Sound Sultan and M.I Abaga's *Light Up*, for example, criticized failed promises and power-sector problems, while Wande Coal's *Se Na Like This* addressed unemployment and corruption (Adedeji, 2013; Osiebe, 2016).

Between 2013 and 2015, music became increasingly connected to electoral consciousness and political mobilization. Musicians participated in campaigns, political jingles, peace advocacy, and national unity, although this also complicated the boundary between protest and political patronage (Uthman, 2017; Osiebe, 2019). Seun Kuti continued the Afrobeat tradition while extending its critique to corruption, exploitation, inequality, and neo-colonialism. From 2016 to 2018, digital circulation and multimodal activism became more important. Falz's *Wehdone Sir* and especially *This Is Nigeria* demonstrated how protest could operate through music videos as well as sound. Akingbe and Onanuga (2020) show that *This Is Nigeria* uses visual imagery to intensify criticism of corruption, police misconduct, social values, and youth conditions. The paradigm therefore shifted from primarily heard protest to protest that is heard, seen, shared, and digitally reproduced.

## **5. Networked, Collective and Movement-Based Activism, 2019–2025**

From 2019 to 2025, Nigerian musical activism became increasingly networked and participatory. Social media and streaming platforms enabled songs to circulate rapidly and allowed audiences to comment, remix, reproduce, and attach protest music to wider political actions (Apata, 2025). Falz's *Talk, Follow Follow*, Johnny, and Hypocrite continued satire and direct political commentary. The major turning point was the #EndSARS movement of October 2020, when music became closely connected to youth-led political mobilization. Chike's *20.10.20 (Wahala Dey)* functioned as a protest and remembrance song, while Davido's *Fem* became associated with protester culture and Burna Boy's *Monsters You Made* framed resistance within

wider questions of historical and political injustice (Adiwu, 2022; Oloruntoba-Oju, 2023; Osibodu, 2023).

The significance of protest music continued after 2020. Music became a resource that could be remembered, replayed, circulated, and recontextualized within digital youth activism. During the 2023 elections, songs became important instruments of political communication, campaign mobilization, and youth-targeted awareness (Alabi, 2023; Fadakinte & Busari, 2023). By 2024, economic hardship became a dominant concern. Nasboi's Hunger Games addressed economic hardship, political repression, and public disillusionment (Jemiluyi & Tajudeen, 2025). In 2025, Eedris Abdulkareem's Tell Your Papa represented further confrontational accountability. Its combination of sound, image, performance, direct address, and digital circulation illustrates contemporary multimodal protest (Jemiluyi, 2025; Omaren & Olagunju, 2025). The central paradigm is the movement from the individual musician as principal protest voice to networked and participatory musical activism.

At the dawn of the Nigerian independence on 1st October 1960, highlife was already deeply established, with musicians like Victor Olaiya, Rex Lawson, Celestine Ukwu, Osita Osadebe, Eddy Okonta and others as the major performers. The musical activism at the beginning of this era, especially between 1960 and 1966, were all geared towards the celebration of national unity and cultural integration. Igbi (2016) noted succinctly that "Cardinal Rex Lawson was one of the central figures of this period. His music dominated the highlife scene and spanned across ethnic and language barriers; it enjoyed considerable patronage and received significant acceptability when and wherever it was performed" (p. 175). On the other hand, Onwuegbuna (2023) described Celestine Ukwu as a musician who skillfully fused "philosophical reflection and social commentary" (p. 46) on the ground that his music addressed such themes as life, justice, social responsibility and equality, encompassing nationalism, philosophy, interpersonal relationship and spirituality therein.

Even though Nigeria's independence generated expectations of political freedom and national development, the country subsequently experienced political instability, the military coups of 1966, the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), and military rule. The Nigerian civil war (1967 - 1970) intrinsically disrupted the Nigerian popular music ecosystem. In the words of Onwuegbuna who expressed it vividly, "Highlife music encountered its first major setback in 1967 with the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War, which raged until 1970" (p. 45). Many musicians were displaced from their home lands and different places of domicile. These conditions created new subjects for popular musical expression. During this time,

there emerged a paradigm shift in highlife music, from nation building to ethnic identity and territorial belonging. Mostly, musicians were apparently divided and became more tribalistic. For example, Agawu (2020) stated that "Olaiya offered his services to the Nigerian army musical band during the Nigerian Civil war (1967 - 1970), playing for the troops at various locations. During this period, he was decorated with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel (honorary)" (p. 123). On the other hand, Celestine Ukwu, even though his band mates fled when the war broke out, "he stayed to entertain and boost morale as part of the re-grouped band. They released patriotic songs in support of the short-lived Republic of Biafra" (Onwuegbuna, 2023, p. 45).

The period from the 1970s represents an important transition from relatively broad social commentary toward increasingly explicit political criticism. Nigerian musicians began to seek reconciliation and reconstruction through their music. It was the period that saw the emergence of Fela Kuti who transformed political criticism into a central component of his musical identity and artistic practice. Eesuola (2011) referring to Fela, observed that "It was in 1970 when he returned from the United States tour that he became politically conscious" (p.18). "From that period till 1997 when he died, he protested against the regime of military dictatorship and misgovernance in Nigeria" (Eesuola, 200, p. 18). Fela Kuti's afrobeat became a vehicle through which military authoritarianism, corruption, police brutality, inequality, neo-colonialism, and political irresponsibility were confronted directly. Olaniyan (2004) argues that Fela's music cannot be separated from his political activism. His music, performances, public persona, and political activities constituted an integrated practice of resistance. Fela's Pan-African musical activism gained full force between 1978 to the year 1985. He therefore transformed the music from a social commentary into a radical political activism, especially with his song - Zombie, which portrayed soldiers as mechanically obedient figures and thereby criticized unquestioning submission to political authority. The metaphor also carried philosophical implications concerning obedience, moral responsibility, individual autonomy, and legitimate authority. The significance of Fela's period extends beyond his musical innovations. His protest music established a paradigm in which the musical performance itself became a political act. His concerts, recordings, lyrics, stage presence, and public statements were interconnected expressions of resistance.

However, Osiebe (2018) noted that "Whereas Fela's afrobeat gained renown as a strong protest category, other forms such as reggae and highlife also provided avenues for popular music protest in the time Fela held the reins" (p.

423). On this line of thought, Okunade (2023) remarks that “Since the early 1970s, juju music in Nigeria became the most commercially successful popular music. Its two greatest exponents in the 1970s and early 1980s were Sunny Ade and Ebenezer Obey” (p. 2). Yet for Oludare (2017), “Juju music reached its climax beyond the sixties in the music of Ebenezer Obey, Sunny Ade, Tunde Thomas, Shina Peters and others, who combined the genre’s original commemorative and panegyric functions with contemporary functions such as gospel, party, nightclub and political during the transition period” (p. 55). Worthy of mention is Sonny Okosun, whose musical activism extended Nigerian protest music into pan-African liberation politics. Protest music became part of civil society from the year 1988 to 1993. In his study of anti-military struggle, Olukotun (2004) is of the opinion that music, theatre and oral performance became important predominantly as a result of the restrictions on conventional media. Explaining this era, he states that “the terrain of music, theatre, and orature is especially important in the conflict between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic values” (p. 101). Within this period, music became an alternative public sphere. Nigerian musicians at this time communicated through vernaculars, live performances, cassettes, satires and their different traditional performances, especially when newspapers, radio stations and television networks were under close monitoring. The period from 1993 to 1997 ushered in democratic cum radical music resistance. In the words of Olukotun (2004), “the protest songs, poems, as well as theatre reached a crescendo” (p. 114). Within this period, musical activism was no longer a direct confrontation to the government; it became a representative voice of the society. By and large, Nigerian musicians during the post-independence period used different musical genres such as highlife, reggae, and other forms of music to engage the country's sociopolitical realities. The significance of this period lies in the deep transformation of the musician's role. The musician was increasingly not simply a commentator who described social conditions but a cultural actor who questioned political authority and called attention to injustice.

The roots of Nigerian musical activism can be traced to indigenous musical traditions that existed before the emergence of the modern Nigerian state. Music traditionally performed functions that extended beyond entertainment, including social commentary, moral instruction, satire, praise, historical documentation, communal communication and cry against injustice. Perhaps, the earliest examples of musical protest (within the scope of this study) took place in the year 1925, when women in the Eastern provinces organized themselves into what is described in the words of Aderemi (1925) as “Women’s Dance Movement or Nwaobiala” a strong

movement wherein “the women used dance as a non - violent protest against the colonial authority and local chiefs” (p. 147). This was followed by Aba Women’s Riot of 1929, triggered by the colonial government’s attempt to conduct a census, and ipso facto, reassessment of women and their property; which action, Aba women feared was a preparation for extending direct taxation to them. However, scholars such as Ina (1992) argue that it was “not a riot but a war fought for specified goals” (p. 171). On his own part, Zukas (2009) describes it as a “strategically executed anti-colonial revolt organized by women to redress social, political, and economic grievances.” Iweze (2022) recounts that “The Igbo folkloric songs and dances were greatly enriched during the protest” (p. 127), and that Aba women used traditional war songs like *nzogbu nzogbu*, *enyimba enyi*, to showcase their grievances.

The women's protest did not stop with Aba women. Akpanya women took it up in the year 1940, this time in a strong revolution against increased taxation. “Over 600 women from the Akpanya and Amaka zones of the Adoru district marched to the office of the divisional officer in Nsukka chanting war songs” (Iweze, 2022, p. 123). Next in the line was the protest initiated by Hubert Ogunde in 1945, who left the Nigerian police force for theatrical performances. Using his political satirical performances, especially his work titled *strike and hunger*, Ogunde criticised colonialism as worse than any crime. Coates (2017) describes the work as “an allegorical dramatization” (p. 166) of the 1945 general strike. Now, “With the end of the Second World War in 1945, major political and social changes began to sweep throughout colonial Africa as the prelude to de-colonization” (Ngobili, 2021, p. 40).

The period between 1946 - 1949 marked yet another significant protest, this time, by Abeokuta Women’s Union, led by Funmilayo Ransome Kuti (Fela Kuti’s mother) still against taxation and harsh colonial administration. Between 1948 - 1949 was the climax. Using songs, chants and dance, these women demonstrated on the road, in the streets, in the markets and in different villages. This political protest initiated by Funmilayo, no doubt contributed greatly in shaping Fela’s radical musical activism decades later. Shonekan (2009) expressed it better when she noted that “Fela’s experience with activism began with his study of his mother’s political movements” (p. 5). Oikelome (2014) re-affirmed this, stating that “The reason for Fela’s inclination toward political activism is not hard to find...an activist mother, Olu Funmilayo Ransome - Kuti” (p. 204). Summarized in the words of Ilesanmi (2021), “She was Fela’s primary ideological influence.” The common denominator with all these women protest in general, is that they demonstrated in a very indisputable and outstanding manner, a strong historical foundation of Nigerian protest

music; portraying that music was already functioning as a means of expressing grievances concerning political oppression, corruption, inequality, economic hardship, police brutality, and failures of governance before the present day sophisticated forms of mass-mediated and digitally networked political expression and musical activism.

Accordingly, in the last period before the independence (1950 - 1959), “Music became one of the strongest tools for fighting European dominance, and became the loudest voice of the masses” (Igbi, 2016, p. 174). Explaining this era clearer, Igbi (2016) stated that “the period preceding independence was characterized by immense social changes some of which impacted on popular music” (171). For him, “highlife is one of the oldest popular music styles in Nigeria” (p.171). Though highlife was not directly a protest music, it was rapidly on spread during this era. Characterizing highlife thus, Ngobili (2021) describes it as “a genre globally acknowledges as a West African creation in the quest for decolonization and socio-political independence” (p. 42). In an interview discussing the origins of Nigerian highlife, Idonije (2000) states that” Bobby Benson was the first to create the Nigerian highlife alternative and parallel” (p. 54). Igbi (2016) re-echoed that “Bobby Benson’s band became the first Nigerian highlife band to hold serious musical performances in Nigeria” (p. 173). And for Ngobili (2021), “Benson trained virtually all of the first generation of Nigerian Highlife musicians, hence through his channel, highlife became mainstream music in Nigeria” (p. 41). Other Nigerian musicians such as Sam Akpabot, Tunde King, Ambrose Campbell, Eddy Okonta, Zeal Onyia, Stephen Amaechi, E. C. Arinze, Rex Lawson, Victor Olaiya, Roy Chicago were also notable. Consequently, the use of music to comment on social conduct and political authority predates the development of modern Nigerian popular music.

In all, music inherent in this epoch was only a significant medium through which Nigerians voiced out their grievances against the ills of the colonial masters and social inequalities. The eventual transition to political independence on 1 October 1960 did not terminate these functions. Instead, changing political conditions, urbanization, recording technology, radio, and the development of commercial popular music expanded the capacity of musicians to address wider audiences. Igbi (2015) went further to provide particularly important historical evidence for this period stating that “the era witnessed a tenacious agitation by Nigerians for independence and self-reliance from the stranglehold of colonial rule” (p. 174). The foundation of Nigerian musical protest can therefore be understood as a gradual movement from traditional communal commentary toward modern mass-mediated political expression.

## Research Findings

### Music as Social Philosophy

Nigerian popular music possesses significant philosophical value because it engages justice, freedom, authority, responsibility, inequality, identity, and human dignity. Protest songs convert everyday experiences into moral and political reflection; philosophical thought can therefore emerge through lyrics, satire, metaphor, rhythm, and performance.

### Consciousness, Solidarity and Collective Memory

Musical activism transforms private grievances into collective consciousness. Poverty, unemployment, police brutality, exclusion, and political frustration become recognizable as shared social problems when articulated through music. Protest songs also preserve memories of repression, hardship, corruption, and resistance, functioning as informal historical archives and creating solidarity among audiences.

### Music as Public Voice

Protest music provides an accessible avenue for political expression. Familiar languages, storytelling, humour, satire, repetition, and culturally recognizable symbols allow musicians to communicate with audiences who may not participate in formal political discourse. Music therefore operates as an alternative public sphere for criticism and discussion.

### Persistent Social Concerns

Despite major changes in genre, technology, and political context, Nigerian protest music repeatedly addresses corruption, inequality, poverty, poor governance, abuse of power, unemployment, insecurity, and political irresponsibility. The persistence of these themes reflects continuing unresolved social problems (Olaniyan, 2004; Onanuga, 2025; Aboh & Ishamali, 2025).

### Language and Resistance

Nigerian Pidgin, indigenous languages, code-switching, slang, repetition, satire, and local symbolism strengthen audience identification and make political messages accessible. Language is consequently not merely a vehicle for protest; it is an instrument of resistance, identity, and political representation (Ademilokun & Bamigbade, 2021; Awoniyi et al., 2026).

### Digital Activism

Digital technology has expanded the reach, immediacy, and participatory character of musical activism. Songs can circulate alongside videos, hashtags, memes, comments, and audience-generated content. Protest has consequently

become increasingly multimodal and networked (Apata, 2025; Jemiluyi, 2025).

## Conclusion

Nigerian popular music transcends entertainment and constitutes a significant form of social philosophy through which individuals and communities interpret lived experience, evaluate political conditions, question authority, construct identity, preserve collective memory, and imagine alternative forms of collective life. Its philosophical significance is particularly clear in protest music, where poverty, inequality, corruption, police brutality, political exclusion, economic hardship, and poor governance are transformed into reflections on justice, freedom, authority, responsibility, and human dignity.

Historically, this function is rooted in indigenous musical traditions of communal criticism, moral instruction, praise, historical documentation, and social reflection. Colonialism and nationalism expanded the political role of music; military rule intensified radical resistance; democratic transition redirected attention toward accountability and governance; youth culture and hip-hop broadened participation; and digital technologies transformed protest into increasingly multimodal and networked activity. These paradigmatic shifts changed the forms and channels of protest without eliminating its underlying concerns.

The study further establishes that protest music transforms individual grievances into collective consciousness and serves as a repository of collective memory. Nigerian Pidgin, indigenous languages, satire, slang, repetition, and local symbolism make protest accessible while enabling musicians to challenge authority and construct solidarity. Fela Kuti remains central to this tradition, but contemporary artists demonstrate that musical activism is not confined to Afrobeat or to individual performers.

Digital platforms have introduced a major shift by expanding the reach, immediacy, and participatory possibilities of musical activism. Nevertheless, protest music should not be treated as an independent solution to structural problems. Its principal strength lies in consciousness formation, cultural memory, public discourse, solidarity, and giving language to experiences of injustice. Nigerian protest music therefore does more than provide a soundtrack to Nigerian history; it helps shape how Nigerians interpret, remember, criticize, and re-imagine society, affirming its enduring significance as popular social philosophy.

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