

Rhythmic Architecture and Tonal Identity in Afrobeats: A Compositional Analysis of Selected Contemporary Nigerian Works

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Abstract

Afrobeats, the contemporary Nigerian pop genre that emerged in late-1990s Lagos, draws on jùjú, highlife, hip hop, and electronic production while remaining distinct from the earlier Afrobeat tradition. Despite its global commercial success, Afrobeats has received limited compositional analysis, with most scholarship focusing on political and cultural themes rather than musical structure. This study investigates how selected Afrobeats works integrate indigenous Nigerian musical idioms within modern studio practice. Four compositions released between 2015 and 2023 were examined through close listening and score transcription, and the resulting data were organised using thematic analysis. Three core compositional paradigms were identified: the translation of Yoruba talking-drum rhythmic logic into programmed digital percussion, the use of pentatonic and hexatonic melodic materials rooted in indigenous tonal systems, and the adaptation of call-and-response structures within contemporary harmonic frameworks. The findings show that Afrobeats extends indigenous Nigerian compositional practice, offering significant implications for music pedagogy and for recognising the genre as a legitimate field of African art-music scholarship.

Keywords: Afrobeats, Nigerian music composition, indigenous musical traditions, tonal identity



Introduction

Afrobeats emerged from the vibrant arts scene of late-1990s Lagos, where musicians and producers fused indigenous jùjú and highlife idioms with hip hop and electronic production techniques. In this paper, the term Afrobeats follows recent scholarship in referring to the contemporary, producer-driven Nigerian pop genre that gained global prominence from the early 2010s. It is treated as distinct from Afrobeat, the earlier style pioneered by Fela Anikulapo-Kuti in the late 1960s and 1970s, which combined highlife, jazz and funk within politically confrontational, large-ensemble formats (Veal, 2000). Although the two genres share historical roots, they differ significantly in instrumentation, political orientation and structural design.

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, Afrobeats artists such as Burna Boy, Wizkid and Davido were performing internationally to sold-out audiences. This visibility is measurable: Davido's *Fall* (2017) became the first Nigerian Afrobeats track certified gold by the RIAA, Wizkid and Tems's *Essence* (2020) became the first Afropop song to enter the Billboard Hot 100 top ten, and in 2023 the Recording Academy introduced a dedicated Best African Music Performance category, awarded for the first time at the 66th Grammy Awards in 2024. Comparable global expansions in reggae, K-pop and Colombian salsa have attracted sustained musicological attention (Fuhr, 2016; Waxer, 2002). Afrobeats, despite similar international reach, has not yet received equivalent compositional scrutiny.

Existing scholarship focuses largely on political, diasporic and commercial dimensions of Afrobeats. Far less attention has been paid to how composers and producers structure the music itself (Agawu, 2003; Veal, 2000), and recent interventions continue to highlight the scarcity of detailed, transcription-based analysis (Yusif, 2024). As a result, Afrobeats has not yet been examined with the compositional depth afforded to other globally circulating genres.

This study addresses that gap by analysing how four Afrobeats compositions released between 2015 and 2023 integrate indigenous Nigerian musical traditions within contemporary recording practice. The selected period captures the genre's



transition from a regional Nigerian sound to an internationally charted category, beginning with the wider sampling window surrounding Davido's *Fall* and ending with Afrobeats' formal recognition in Billboard and Grammy classifications. The study pursues three objectives: to identify rhythmic practices rooted in indigenous Nigerian traditions, to examine the tonal and melodic structures that shape the genre's sonic identity, and to analyse how call-and-response, a core feature of Nigerian musical heritage, is adapted within modern studio production.

The central argument advanced here is that Afrobeats extends, rather than breaks from, Yoruba, Igbo and other Nigerian compositional traditions. This continuity carries implications for composition studies and for the pedagogy of African popular music. The next section reviews relevant literature, followed by the methodology and the thematic analysis of the four selected works. The paper concludes by outlining directions for further scholarship.

Afrobeats' compositional foundations draw on several decades of West African popular music history. Although Afrobeat and Afrobeats are often conflated in casual discourse, they represent distinct genres shaped by different technological and stylistic priorities (Veal, 2000). Afrobeats developed from *jùjú*, a Lagos-based Yoruba popular music tradition that combined indigenous drum patterns with Western recording technologies (Waterman, 1990). This hybrid logic informed subsequent Nigerian genres, including highlife and fuji, and remains audible in Afrobeats. Collins (1989) traced highlife's evolution across Ghana and Nigeria, describing its blend of local melody and Afro-European harmony, elements still evident in Afrobeats guitar voicings and melodic design. Omojola (2012) similarly identified Yoruba popular music as a repository of compositional techniques drawn from ceremonial and popular traditions.

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's Afrobeat remains central to Afrobeats' lineage. Veal (2000) argued that Afrobeat modelled the integration of Yoruba and Igbo musical elements, particularly talking-drum conversation and polyrhythm, within extended studio-oriented structures. Afrobeats compresses this blueprint to suit contemporary production aesthetics. Akindes (2002) further described African popular music as a diasporic practice through which musicians reshape and transfer musical traits across contexts.



Afrobeats also draws directly on traditional Nigerian musical material. Nketia (1974) defined African cross-rhythm as the simultaneous operation of multiple rhythmic streams, a principle reflected in *dùndún* talking-drum practice. Adegbite (1988) showed that *dùndún* rhythm and melody emerge from tension-based pitch manipulation rather than fixed pulse, a technique that has influenced Yoruba rhythmic composition. Akpabot (1998) identified pentatonic and hexatonic scales, falling contours and ornamental phrase endings as central to Nigerian melodic practice, features that persist in Afrobeats despite engagement with Western genres.

Foundational studies of West African rhythm, including Jones (1959) and Agawu (1995), emphasise interlocking patterns organised around referential meter rather than additive construction. This framework aligns with Afrobeats' layered rhythmic design. Okafor (2005) argued that Nigerian composers work within functional ideological systems in which musical structure mirrors social meaning, a cultural logic that informs Afrobeats composition.

This study adopts three theoretical lenses. First, a postcolonial perspective (Agawu, 2003) challenges approaches that exoticise African music, treating Afrobeats instead as a compositional practice deserving analysis on its own terms. Second, Turino's (2000) account of cosmopolitan and indigenous interaction explains the hybrid aesthetic negotiated by Afrobeats composers working between local traditions and global pop industries. Third, Feld's (1994) concept of style as iconicity frames the rhythmic and melodic features analysed here as carriers of cultural meaning rather than mere sonic materials.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine Afrobeats compositional practice as a culturally grounded creative system. The approach prioritised meaning, musical intention and contextual interpretation, making it suitable for analysing how indigenous Nigerian musical logics are embedded within contemporary studio production. Four Afrobeats compositions released between 2015 and 2023 were selected because they represent the genre's transition from a primarily Nigerian sound to an internationally recognised category, and because each track demonstrates clear engagement with indigenous rhythmic,



tonal or responsorial structures. The selected works also differ in their compositional emphasis, with one foregrounding rhythmic construction, another highlighting melodic design, a third showcasing call-and-response organisation and a fourth drawing audibly on highlife idioms. This diversity allowed for meaningful comparison across contrasting compositional strategies.

Data collection proceeded through repeated close listening, during which each track was examined for rhythmic organisation, melodic contour, harmonic progression, timbral layering, production texture and vocal arrangement. Listening sessions were spaced over several days to ensure analytical consistency and reduce perceptual bias. Melodic lines, drum patterns and significant instrumental gestures were then transcribed into staff notation to create stable analytical representations of each composition. Both pitched and unpitched materials were notated, including syncopation, cross-rhythmic layering, contour shifts and responsorial phrasing. Producer and artist statements, interviews and critical commentary were reviewed to contextualise the musical findings and to understand the creative intentions behind each work, although these materials did not determine the analytical categories used.

The transcribed and descriptive data were analysed inductively. Codes were generated directly from the musical material rather than from predefined theoretical frameworks, allowing the analysis to remain grounded in the sound itself. Through iterative comparison, three dominant compositional patterns emerged across the four works: the translation of Yoruba rhythmic cycles into digital percussion programming, the use of pentatonic and hexatonic tonal structures rooted in indigenous melodic practice and the adaptation of call-and-response into contemporary studio-based vocal and instrumental design. These themes form the structure of the Results and Discussion section and reflect the most consistent compositional logics observed across the selected tracks.

Rigour was ensured through explicit documentation of analytical procedures, triangulation of listening, transcription and contextual sources, and systematic cross-comparison of musical features across all four compositions. The methodology was designed to be fully reproducible, enabling other researchers to replicate the listening, transcription and thematic procedures using the same or comparable Afrobeats recordings.

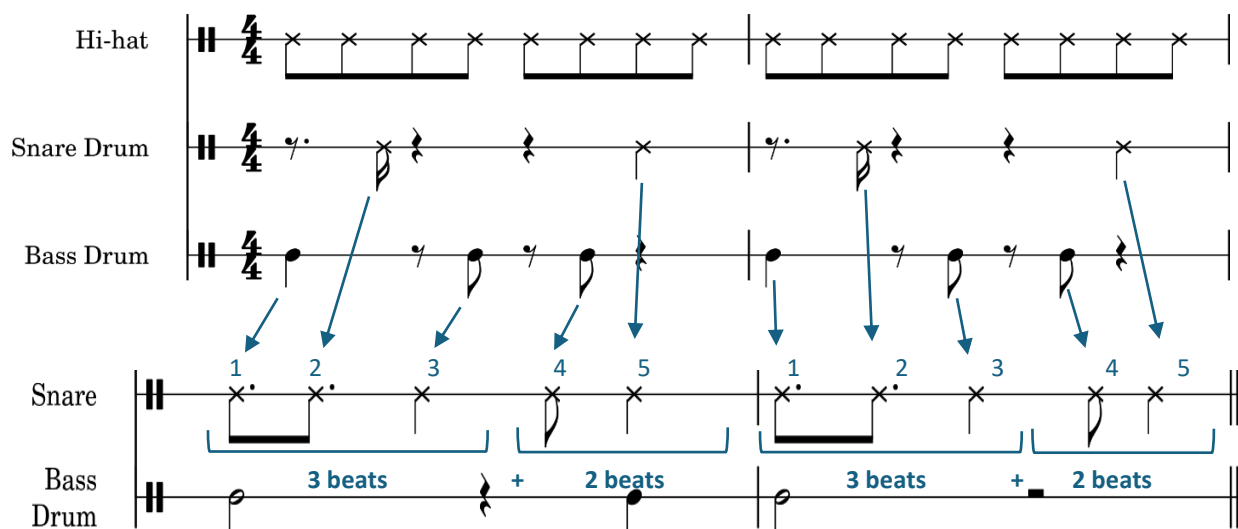
Findings and Analysis

Theme 1: Indigenous Yoruba Rhythmic Cycles in Digital Production

Analysis of the four tracks revealed that Yoruba cyclic rhythmic structures form a central foundation of Afrobeats percussion design. In *Ye* and *Essence*, the snare and bass drums articulate a recurring five-pulse cycle that aligns with the standard West African bell pattern. Although this pattern traditionally functions within compound time, both tracks adapt it to a linear 4/4 grid by overlaying a three-plus-two subdivision across a steady eight-quaver hi-hat pulse. This interaction produces a cross-rhythmic tension that drives the groove and establishes a stable rhythmic framework for the rest of the arrangement.

Fall demonstrates the same structural logic. Its electronic percussion line presents the five-pulse pattern as a continuous snare-based ostinato, anchoring the track's rhythmic identity and providing a consistent metric reference against which melodic and harmonic materials unfold.

Something Different applies Yoruba rhythmic logic differently. The primary ostinato is intentionally displaced from the downbeat, creating a subtle off-centre feel that intensifies the dialogue between rhythm and melody. This displacement produces a heightened sense of forward motion and reflects indigenous drumming practices in which tension is generated through strategic metric shifts.



The diagram illustrates a 4/4 rhythm with a five-pulse cycle. The staves are labeled: Hi-hat, Snare Drum, Bass Drum, and a combined Snare/Bass Drum staff. The Hi-hat has a steady eighth-note pulse. The Snare Drum has a five-pulse cycle (1-2-3-4-5) marked with blue arrows. The Bass Drum has a five-pulse cycle (1-2-3-4-5) marked with blue arrows. The combined Snare/Bass Drum staff shows the 3+2 subdivision with blue brackets and labels '3 beats' and '2 beats'.

Figure 1. *Transcriptions of the recurring rhythmic patterns in Ye, Essence and Fall, showing the embedded five-pulse bell pattern and its interaction with the eight-quaver hi-hat grid.*

Theme 2: Tonal Architecture Grounded in Indigenous Melodic Systems

Across all four tracks, tonal organisation is shaped primarily by pentatonic and hexatonic scalar structures. These scales avoid semitone motion and rely on wider intervallic spacing, producing open, resonant melodic contours characteristic of indigenous Nigerian melodic practice.

In *Essence*, the vocal melody is built on a hexatonic pitch collection that shifts fluidly between major and minor colouration. The flattened third acts as a tonal pivot, giving the melody a distinctive expressive profile. This structure is illustrated in **Figure 2**, which highlights the six-note framework that anchors the track's tonal identity.

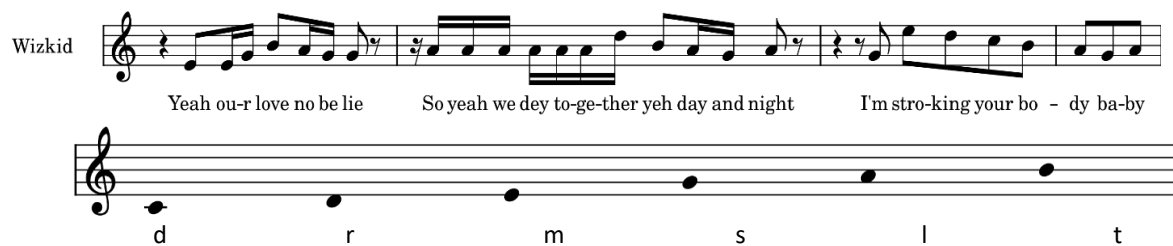


Figure 2. *Excerpt of the vocal melody in Essence, illustrating its hexatonic structure.*

While *Essence* demonstrates the expressive potential of hexatonic organisation, *Ye* offers a contrasting example rooted firmly in pentatonic design. Its melodic contour rises and falls in broad arcs, avoiding semitone motion and producing a chant-like quality. The pentatonic structure allows the melody to sit smoothly above the harmonic progression without creating dissonance. This contrast between hexatonic and pentatonic organisation demonstrates how Afrobeats composers draw selectively from different indigenous tonal systems to shape distinct expressive outcomes.

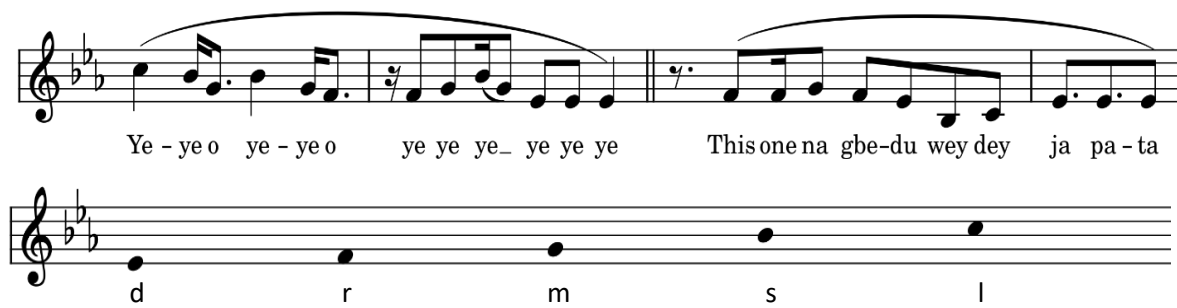


Figure 3. *Recurring melodic fragments from Ye, demonstrating the pentatonic contour underpinning the track.*

Something Different incorporates more overt Western tonal elements, particularly the major and minor seventh degrees associated with highlife guitar voicing. Even so, the melodic line retains a pentatonic core, resulting in a hybrid tonal identity that merges Nigerian and Western pop idioms. Across all four tracks, harmonisation is shaped to accommodate pentatonic and hexatonic melodic movement, reinforcing the centrality of indigenous tonal systems in Afrobeats composition.

Theme 3: Hybridised Call-and-Response Structures

Call-and-response emerged as a defining structural feature across the four compositions. In each track, the lead vocal is paired with a responding part that mirrors its phrase length, density and tonal profile. These responses are delivered through background vocals, instrumental lines or digitally layered vocal doubles, creating a dialogic texture that shapes the musical narrative.

In *Fall*, call-and-response unfolds between the lead vocal and an electric guitar. Initially, the guitar provides short, two-note replies during vocal rests. As the track progresses, these replies expand into full phrases that match the length and contour of the vocal line. This development transforms the guitar from a supporting interjector into an equal dialogic partner, producing a fully realised responsorial exchange.

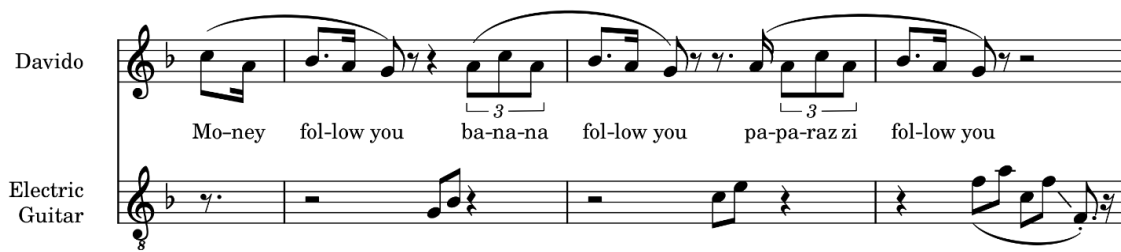


Figure 4. *Call-and-response exchange between the lead vocal and electric guitar in Fall, showing the expansion of the guitar's role from brief interjections to full conversational phrases. (Placeholder: Insert Figure 4 here.)*

In *Something Different*, call-and-response occurs between the lead vocal and a horn section in the chorus. The horns punctuate the ends of vocal phrases, reinforcing melodic resolution points and creating a communal, ensemble-like texture. Their responses affirm and extend the vocal line, producing a layered dialogic structure that mirrors collective performance practices.

Across all four tracks, call-and-response is adapted from its traditional communal context into a studio-based environment. Producers achieve this by layering vocal doubles, shaping instrumental responses through digital processing and aligning responsorial gestures with the formal constraints of a pop single.

The analysis demonstrates that Afrobeats composition is grounded in indigenous Nigerian musical logic. Yoruba rhythmic cycles are translated into digital percussion programming, pentatonic and hexatonic tonal systems shape melodic design, and call-and-response structures are reimagined within contemporary studio practice. These findings show that Afrobeats extends and transforms indigenous musical heritage within modern production environments.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that Afrobeats derives its contemporary sonic identity from the deliberate transformation of indigenous Nigerian rhythmic, tonal and responsorial systems within digital production environments. This insight matters because it challenges the persistent assumption that Afrobeats is primarily a cosmopolitan pop derivative and instead positions the genre as a continuation of long-standing African compositional logics. In doing so, the study reframes

Afrobeats as a legitimate site for African art-music scholarship and expands the theoretical space within which African popular music can be analysed.

The central research problem concerned how Afrobeats integrates indigenous Nigerian musical traditions into modern studio practice. The findings indicate that Yoruba cyclic rhythmic structures, pentatonic and hexatonic tonal systems and responsorial organisation are not peripheral stylistic gestures but foundational compositional principles. This suggests that Afrobeats producers are not simply borrowing from tradition but reorganising indigenous musical knowledge as structural material. Waterman's account of jùjú as a technologically mediated continuation of Yoruba musical logic provides an important point of alignment, as he argues that Yoruba musicians historically used new technologies to extend rather than replace indigenous practice (Waterman, 1990). The present study extends this argument by showing that digital audio workstations now serve as the latest site of this continuity.

The prominence of pentatonic and hexatonic melodic systems across the analysed tracks indicates that indigenous tonal organisation remains central to contemporary Nigerian popular music. Akpabot's claim that Nigerian melodic systems persist across generations despite engagement with Western genres is directly supported here (Akpabot, 1998). The findings also refine Agawu's critique of exoticised representations of African rhythm by demonstrating that Afrobeats rhythmic organisation can be analysed with the same compositional rigour applied to other global genres (Agawu, 2003). The identification of five-pulse bell-pattern derivatives embedded within digital percussion programming suggests that Afrobeats producers are actively transforming indigenous rhythmic cycles into new metric environments, complicating simplistic narratives of rupture between tradition and modernity.

The adaptation of call-and-response structures within studio-based vocal and instrumental arrangements further illustrates how Afrobeats extends indigenous musical logic. Nketia's assertion that responsorial organisation is foundational to African musical thought is affirmed by the persistence of dialogic structures across all four tracks (Nketia, 1974). Yet the compression of responsorial exchanges to fit the temporal constraints of pop singles introduces a productive tension. Coplan's



observation that urban African music often bypasses purely traditional idioms as it adapts to modern social contexts helps explain this phenomenon (Coplan, 1982). Rather than signalling a loss of tradition, the compressed responsorial structures indicate adaptive creativity shaped by global industry expectations.

Theoretically, these findings complicate binary framings of African popular music as either traditional or modern. Turino's model of cosmopolitan-indigenous interaction provides a useful interpretive lens, as Afrobeats exemplifies the negotiation between local musical knowledge and global production aesthetics (Turino, 2000). The genre's rhythmic and tonal structures remain indigenous, while its timbral palette, mixing strategies and formal constraints reflect global pop conventions. This hybrid logic challenges assumptions that globalisation necessarily erodes indigenous musical identity and instead suggests that digital production can serve as a site for the preservation and transformation of cultural knowledge.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of transcription-based analysis in African popular music research. Scholars such as Jones and Agawu have emphasised the importance of detailed rhythmic and melodic transcription for understanding African musical systems (Jones, 1959; Agawu, 1995). By applying transcription to Afrobeats, this study challenges methodological biases that have historically marginalised African popular music within composition studies and demonstrates that the genre can be analysed with the same structural precision applied to jazz, salsa or K-pop.

An unexpected finding concerns the degree of structural compression observed in call-and-response patterns. Traditional responsorial forms often unfold over extended durations, yet Afrobeats compresses these exchanges to meet the demands of radio-friendly formats and digital streaming environments. This tension suggests that Afrobeats composers negotiate between inherited structural logics and contemporary industry pressures. The compression does not diminish the cultural significance of responsorial organisation; instead, it reveals how traditional musical principles adapt to new aesthetic and economic conditions.

The study's limitations define the boundaries of interpretation. Only four tracks were analysed, and although they were selected for their representativeness and compositional diversity, they cannot fully capture the breadth of Afrobeats

practice. The reliance on close listening and transcription means that certain micro-timing nuances and digital processing details may not be fully represented. These limitations do not weaken the study's contribution but instead highlight areas for further inquiry.

Future research should expand the dataset to include a broader range of Afrobeats recordings, incorporate computational rhythm analysis to capture micro-timing detail and engage directly with producers through ethnographic interviews. Comparative studies with related genres such as Amapiano, Afroswing and Alté would illuminate broader patterns of African musical innovation in the digital age. Such work would deepen understanding of how indigenous musical knowledge is negotiated within contemporary studio practice and how digital tools shape the evolution of African popular music.

In sum, this study advances theoretical, methodological and empirical scholarship by demonstrating that Afrobeats is not a stylistic departure from indigenous Nigerian musical practice but a contemporary extension of it. The genre's rhythmic, tonal and responsorial structures reveal a coherent musical logic grounded in indigenous knowledge and reimagined through modern production technologies. This insight positions Afrobeats as a significant site for African compositional scholarship and challenges prevailing assumptions about the relationship between tradition, modernity and global popular music.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Afrobeats integrates indigenous Nigerian musical traditions into contemporary studio practice, and the analysis demonstrated that rhythmic, tonal and responsorial systems drawn from Yoruba and other Nigerian musical cultures remain central to the genre's compositional identity. In doing so, the study established that Afrobeats is shaped not by a departure from tradition but by the creative transformation of indigenous musical logics within digital production environments.

The study accomplished this by analysing four representative Afrobeats compositions and identifying three compositional paradigms that reveal the genre's structural continuity with Nigerian musical heritage. The findings make three key



contributions. Theoretically, the study shows that Afrobeats extends established African compositional principles, refining debates on hybridity, cosmopolitanism and musical continuity. Methodologically, it demonstrates that transcription-based analysis can be applied rigorously to African popular music, challenging assumptions that such genres resist structural examination. Empirically, it provides evidence that Yoruba rhythmic cycles, pentatonic and hexatonic tonal systems and call-and-response organisation remain foundational to Afrobeats composition.

Taken together, the findings indicate that Afrobeats is best understood as a contemporary recontextualisation of indigenous Nigerian musical knowledge. This insight advances scholarship by challenging narratives that frame Afrobeats primarily as a global pop formation and by showing instead that its creative logic is grounded in long-standing African musical systems. It also highlights the need for music education and compositional training in Nigeria and across Africa to treat indigenous musical traditions as core creative resources rather than peripheral cultural markers.

One tension emerging from the analysis concerns the compression of responsorial structures to fit the temporal constraints of pop singles. This suggests that Afrobeats composers negotiate between inherited structural logics and contemporary industry expectations, revealing how traditional musical principles adapt to new aesthetic and economic conditions. This tension does not diminish the cultural significance of responsorial organisation; rather, it illustrates the dynamic relationship between tradition and modernity in African popular music.

The study's interpretive boundaries arise from its focus on four compositions and its reliance on close listening and transcription, which may not capture all micro-timing or production nuances. These boundaries point to productive avenues for future research, including larger datasets, computational rhythm analysis and ethnographic engagement with producers. Comparative studies with related genres such as Amapiano, Afroswing and Alté would further illuminate how African musical innovation evolves across digital contexts.

Overall, the study demonstrates that Afrobeats is not a stylistic rupture from indigenous Nigerian musical practice but a contemporary extension of it. The genre's rhythmic, tonal and responsorial structures reveal a coherent musical logic



grounded in indigenous knowledge and reimagined through modern production technologies. These findings carry implications for music composition pedagogy and for the wider recognition of Afrobeats as a legitimate subject of African art music scholarship.

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