

Pop Music and Popularity in Nigeria Today: A Conversation with Naomi Haruna

In November 2023, Dr Naomi Haruna, University of Maiduguri, held a research fellowship at CRC 1472 as part of the Cooperative Research Group “Resilient Gender Regimes in Pop Music Cultures.” The joint exchange left a lasting impression on the participants of the Cooperative Research Group, particularly with the insights on pop and popularity that Naomi Haruna contributed from a Nigerian perspective. In order to further elaborate on some aspects of the discussions, Florian Heesch asked Naomi Haruna for an interview for our blog. The conversation took place via video call on 22 February 2024.

Florian Heesch

Naomi, I remember these very interesting conversations with you about some differences between popular culture in the so-called Global North and in West African countries – in particular in Nigeria, one of the African countries with a very large cultural industry, not only in music, but, among others, also in film. We know some of the African pop stars like Burna Boy or Tems even here and they are reaching chart positions. I think, there are many interesting aspects to talk about. One of the issues of popular culture that we are dealing with are evaluations. And as you know, I’m particularly interested in music. I would like to talk to you about these aspects starting with a very broad question: To what extent are there any high/low hierarchies in popular culture in Nigeria?

Naomi Haruna

It depends on where you are in the country and what is popular. I would try to stick to the music references as much as possible. There are songs that are very popular in the country. But the problem we usually encounter, where we can’t make generic or flat statements that apply to everyone, is usually the north because of its fabric and the importance of religion and its cultural norms, values and belief systems. Certain music might be listened to in the north, but its popularity in that part of the country might be a little bit debatable because, when you go to places like Kano,

Katsina, Sokoto, Zamfara, you would hear more of the Hausa songs, infusions of Arabic connotations, and even Hausa words in them, even if there are imitations of Afrobeats in some of the songs. I think, I can probably say that Nigerians have found a way to infuse Afrobeats with Western sounds. You can clearly say: “Okay, I can hear the Afrobeats in it, I can hear some of the Western influence in it, especially when it comes to the instruments.” But, to the best of my knowledge, in 70 per cent of the songs, you can hear the ethnic sounds in them – unique drums. We have different drums in the north, different drums in the south. Sometimes they might look alike but they produce different sounds and these are the variations that separate the sounds coming from the north and also the popular sounds coming from the east, from the south and also from the west. So, Afrobeats as a genre is really popular in the northeast, south and the middle of Nigeria which we call middle belt. You’ve mentioned some of our artists that are popular, not just in Nigeria, but also in the West. So internationally, that is very popular within African communities, but then their popularity might dim a little bit, when you come to the northern part of the country. So, that’s as best as I can make popular music generic within the Nigerian context to the best of my knowledge.

Then, when we talk about artists who produce these sounds, some of the northern artists that have been trying to break into the Nigerian market – that is the Nigerian popular music market, which has its own rhythm, its own beats, its own wordings – have to adapt some of these characteristics to make their music also appealing to the rest of the population. There are artists that have tried to do that, successfully or not, I can’t really say, it depends on where you are and I don’t want to be too biased.

Another thing that we have in Nigeria that is really making us stand out a little bit, is the government policy that any music that is produced in Nigeria has to get 80 per cent airplay time. So, that’s another strategy to make these songs really popular. They might not necessarily be popular, but because of the 80 per cent airplay we can assume: “Oh, okay, they are popular.”

Florian Heesch

This is also a question I am interested in: How do you measure what is popular?

Naomi Haruna

I know from the media and from my own little experience in my fields that things that you keep repeatedly listening to over and over again, from morning till night – even if you’re not singing it, it’s just somehow in your head – you find it in your head and eventually it becomes the national anthem. When we call a song a national anthem is basically, when it is played every other time: when a song on the radio plays now after two songs that song would play again. So that’s another thing you might consider, when you’re talking about measurements or characteristic of what makes a song popular.

Florian Heesch

In Germany, when it comes to the measurement of popularity, we have started to just count clicks: clicks on Spotify, clicks on YouTube, whatever platform. Today, you can easily see a certain popularity in that way, but on the other hand, these clicks are difficult to situate. What you are telling is very interesting, when it comes to a country that is obviously quite diverse in different regions.

Naomi Haruna

I’m happy you mentioned the clicks thing because I would like to connect a little bit with that. We do have the Nigerian charts, and when you look at them, they are also based on downloads. What the Nigerian charts don’t totally take into consideration is where is the heaviest download looking at the regions. For a certain time, I was specifically observing what music was on the airplay and what was found in public spaces. So, we have bars, we have gardens, you know, weddings, naming ceremonies and all of that: What was being played over and over again, was not what was on the charts. There are also these variations that occur. So, what you might term popular – let’s say someone looking in from outside saying: “Oh, I want to look at the Nigerian charts and look at what is popular” – might not actually be what is popular in the country. It might just be a popular download. But then a popular listening to a popular song that is being continuously repeated might be something entirely different.

Florian Heesch

What importance do weddings have for understanding Nigerian culture?

Naomi Haruna

I think, weddings are so much part of the fabric of all our cultures. Even though we have adapted too much of what we call the “white wedding” – it’s called “white” because of its influx from the west and how you call the white man white. It’s a celebration time, first of all. So, you need to dance and everything has just to be happy. You cannot play what is not popular. You just have to play these popular songs. You find couples who specifically say: “I want a playlist of the top popular songs for the year.” And that is what they would just keep playing in the wedding because they need to dance, they need to be happy and celebrate with friends. So, music is really synonymous with dance here.

Florian Heesch

We had that group of students from Ghana making Highlife music together with our students. And that was just one of the very impressive aspects that we never had so much dancing in our music hall like in that concert.

Naomi Haruna

It’s really synonymous with dance. A lot of the popular songs now always come up with a dance step. The artists usually put the accompany dance step out as a challenge and it also makes it gain more popularity because people try to do the challenge. And then they also try use the songs. It just takes a life of its own.

Florian Heesch

I can connect to that via the South African “Jerusalema” song that has gone viral here in Germany during the pandemic because lots of staff groups from hospitals for instance did the “Jerusalema” dance challenge. I think, it came through several African countries. Of course, there was the Nigerian part with Burna Boy’s remix that got popular again. Then, there was that group of dancers from Angola performing a dance challenge that got viral.

Naomi Haruna

It’s really something that the African community takes advantage of because they employ dances. Because dancing is part of music, because music making is also dance making. I think, we started focusing on the differences and the individualistic characteristic of these things because of the influx of the west, where you only study music and you can play music and create these wonderful songs and you’re just sitting in one place and nothing is moving. Then you can also just dance without making a single sound. To the best of my knowledge, I think that’s when we started separating the two. But deep down in an African culture and in the Nigerian culture, they are mixed.

Florian Heesch

With regard to the weddings, you were telling about the so-called “white” aspects in today’s Nigerian wedding culture. I was wondering, how is this discussed in Nigeria with regard to the “white” or Western elements in popular music? Is there also a discourse of evaluation on that? I was wondering to what extent that might be the case because it is something from the outside and with regard to the colonial past, there might be some bias against cultural aspects coming from that anglophone culture.

Naomi Haruna

Now, I would bring the generation into play. I have found my own generation with the present awareness of self, coming from us rejecting certain things like the western influence. If you go to Catholic Church now, traditional music before was frowned upon because of the colonial influence. You have the big organ, you have your pamphlets, you're just reading or singing everything from the book. You can't deviate from that and they follow that strictly because that is what the church permits. Then, when they step out of the church and it is their space, everything just goes a little bit wild. Then, the tone of the music changes.

So, the traditional marriage is found almost in every part of the country. And I know for a fact that it is mostly the traditional songs that are being played. Most of the songs are even in the ethnic language of that particular tribe. Now this is important: If you do not have a certain traditional band play in your traditional marriage, then it becomes like: "Oh, you did not actually really get married per se," not like high class. Well, you are married, but it just adds a lot to the fabric of the wedding that you get a traditional group to play at your wedding. Immediately when they start to sing, you would see almost everyone on the dance floor. If you had just the DJ playing before – when the traditionalists come to the center of the arena, everything changes. The energy changes, the hype changes, even the tone that people are talking. Everything just goes up. So, that matters a lot. I have seen it matter now.

But I know that before, due to the colonial influence, our parents were okay with the "western band." So, you had the pianos, you had the guitars, you had the bars, you had the trumpets – you know, all these things that are not part of what we used to create music. But they were acceptable because that is what is "accepted." Now you're talking about the anglophone, I would just go straight to England, the prime and proper strict confined way of life. So, you can't just dance "like a mad person" – pardon my description, but I've heard elderly people say it. My generation doesn't always have decorum. They just dance like mad people. But this is our own way of expression. And if you're listening to the popular music now, it's always upbeat because you should be able to dance to it. And those songs are even the ones that are consumed more.

So, it's the generation that matters. The generation before me, my father would never sit down and listen to this music. He even keeps saying they do not understand the words: "It's too fast. How do we hear things?" But funny enough, we do hear the words. We understand the songs. We dance

to them. So, you can see that the colonial thing is more with the older generation. And that's why Afrobeats was born in this particular generation and it is really thriving. But if the music doesn't have an African instrument that is beaten, then that is not Afrobeats.

Florian Heesch

Would you say Afrobeats is really the music of young people?

Naomi Haruna

Absolutely. But especially in the west, there are also other kinds of Afrobeats. Those might not be as popular because they have more ethnic heaviness to them. They are language heavy, depending on the ethnicity. They are more traditional also. So, the one for the younger generation now does have this little bit like borrowing from the west. Maybe that's why it goes pretty well. I can't say because still the youth consume a lot of the western songs. You have this amazing marriage, I can't determine that, but I know that in Afrobeats, they are even heavier. Fela Kuti, the father of Afrobeats was not in my generation. He was in the generation of my parents. And he started with a certain kind of song that wasn't as upbeat as it is now.

Florian Heesch

Isn't that just the reason why some people say that Fela Kuti's style was Afrobeat and today's African pop is rather Afrobeats with the plural "s" in the end?

Naomi Haruna

I think I would agree. A distinction has to be made because the difference is a lot. Fela Kuti had heavy ethnic sounds.

Florian Heesch

Yes, but also this jazzy and experimental, orchestral, improvisational character.

Naomi Haruna

Right. Those are the characteristics. It's more reflective music. You sit down and you reflect deeply. Yes, you move your head to it, but it's not something that you can particularly dance to. Pick one or two or three of the songs that you can dance to, but the majority of his songs were really reflective.

Florian Heesch

And very political also.

Naomi Haruna

Highly political! But people like Burna Boy, too: you need to listen to his "Monsters You Made": That was highly political.

Florian Heesch

You told me last time about Logos Olori, the artist signed by Davido, and that debate about the Muslim dancing in one of his music videos. I was wondering to what extent that seems to be a matter related to religious conservatism or tradition. It's very interesting because it seems like from the viewpoint of the critics in that case that something like pop culture has to follow certain rules although it is clearly not religious music.

Naomi Haruna

Davido had this artist who signed under this label. The audio was popular, even though not popular in the north because it had the Yoruba ethnic language in it. It was well consumed but the problem started when the video for the song was made. The Islamic religious institutions felt insulted by the depiction in the video. The north had an outcry. Certain Yoruba clerics also said they didn't particularly support it even though to them, it was not as harmful as how the north made it out to look. In Nigeria, I think from my own perspective, religion is part of culture. It's part of our norms, values and beliefs. We have gone so deeply into that. Religion is in every fabric of the society. It's not something wrong, since it's part of a way of life with a certain group of people. But yes, it determines consumption and yes, there are certain parameters on how things should be done – especially in the North. So, in music videos, there is a certain way you have to dress. There are words that should be spoken about, there are words that shouldn't.

There have been people that have fought against the system. Mamman Shata is one of them. His songs were highly political. His songs also spoke about discrimination. But he spoke about the discrimination of religion and he was an Islamic cleric. Will it determine the rate of consumption of a certain song? Absolutely, because the clerics tell you how to live, what to consume basically and what not to consume.



Reference Article [here](#)

Florian Heesch

As I understand it, this is one of the important differences inside the country that you have this traditional northern part that differs by religion from the urban centers like Lagos or Abuja, I would guess.

Naomi Haruna

And it's quite distinct, you know. Abuja would be termed somewhat the north. Not in its entirety, but people from Lagos and the east always turn Abuja the north because of its conservative nature. But when the northern people come to Abuja, they think it's basically Sodom and Gomorrah because of how exposed it is. That was to tell you that if you go down to Lagos, it's something entirely that the majority of the northern elites or the northern gatekeepers would disagree with. And because Davido is one of the people who has songs consumed in the North, they also felt that the integrity of their youth was at stake because this was basically depicting things that are sacrilegious. If the youth get to see this and decide to imitate it, it would be going against their religious doctrines. So, that song was absolutely cancelled in the North. The posters were torn down in a lot of places. A lot of northern people who gave him deals even canceled those deals and pulled out their money. So, it's another way how you can create hierarchies.

Florian Heesch

Against that background that religious gatekeepers turned down the Davido video and anything connected to Davido: Was that accepted by everybody? Or do you know about people who listen to it anyway?

Naomi Haruna

Actually, yes. There were even a couple of videos online of the same Islamic youths. They did a recording actually saying that: "Oh, we are still going to listen to it because it's good music." You had this, and then on the other hand, you still had some doing videos tearing down his stuff. So,

even though it's these Islamic clerics, you also have to take into consideration that the North has a minority Christian population. That's where I am from. And this totally didn't affect us. If you go through the online conversations, it's like: "Oh nothing is going to stop us from listening to this." And there were northern youths that were supporting the fact that the music would still be listened to, just that the majority of them agreed with what the clerics said. But in the southern part of the country the conversation was like: "Oh, you people are nothing. Whatever you decide, you cannot dent the image of this particular artist. Whether you consume his products or not, he's still a success and we have enough population to make him successful".

Florian Heesch

So, there is then another hierarchy that comes into the play, being the hierarchy of the market.

Naomi Haruna

Absolutely! One thing about the market is that there is no really bad publicity. If you look at it in terms of your marketer, the only thing that this particular outcry from the north did was that it made Davido the trending topic for more than two weeks. Which meant most songs of his were downloaded out of defiance. More songs of his were listened to out of allegiance and loyalty. And just because they can.

Florian Heesch

I was also thinking about what does Islam or Muslim culture mean in Nigeria? From my own background here in Germany, I think it's often problematic when people construct all Muslims as being Islamic or Islamistic. And this, of course, also is the background of some of the xenophobic and racist arguments that come up in our country. I think, sometimes this happens when people look at a culture or at a religion as being all the same and connected to traditionalist views or even just of low value. That's one of the ways how hierarchies are fostered within a society and growing in a very problematic way.

Naomi Haruna

Ultimately it would affect everything else, when it comes to consumption. So, music is in point. My only problem would be about these hierarchies that they also affect the minority within certain groups. When you have your own kind of songs, when you have your own kind of dances and all of that, but just because you're from the North, it's not good. And that's just the general consumption: that it's not good. Even if you have a northern scholar talking in the news and it's clear and the person is really making so much sense on all of that, the question would be like: "Oh wow, this person is from the North?" So, northern music is definitely not on the top. Not at least with the vast majority. But for us in the North, that's what we have. That's what we consume. But the generation younger than myself really do consume other kinds of songs coming from the southern part and eastern part. And we're even conscious that something like Afrobeats, Afropop, Afro-this and Afro-that exists, that we connect to because we still see ourselves there. Ultimately, we are one Nigeria. Ultimately, we are one people. We don't necessarily understand some of the words that are used. But do we sing it nonetheless? Absolutely! Are we happy when we sing it? Absolutely!

Florian Heesch

That's very nice. I understand this as an openness that exists inside your culture. Could you describe in some very short terms, what you particularly like about the actual music of the North?

Naomi Haruna

Yes, of course. The first thing I would say is that I see myself and my identity in it because that's who I am. That means I can sing it in the language it's been sung, you know? I can connect to the values within the song and the narration and the lyrics. We have our own traditional dances and when these songs come along, you can just go along with the flow – even unconsciously. When I listen to the others, there are certain parts that I will keep quite or say: "Nom, nom, nom, nom, nom" and just pass it and then sing the English one. But it just goes back to the identity that I see

myself in the northern songs because that's who I am. I would really be happy listening to it. Not that I won't be happy also listening to the other one. But when it comes to language, identity, connection it gives me that for me as a person.

Florian Heesch

As a final question, is there something you would like to add about popular music, popularity and valuations and these topics we've been talking about?

Naomi Haruna

What I would like to add would be that popular anything – not just music – would still be relative at the end of the day. I mean, it depends on who is saying what and on the person's experiences. What I always try to do, is to look at the broader picture and read between the lines of the engagements, the encounters I have with people and with songs and what is termed popular at the moment, you know? And even how it makes me feel as an individual. There are lots of popular music and popular what it is, but it must not necessarily make me feel nice about that thing. As long as we keep in our mind that the popular is always relative to an individual and nothing is particularly static.

At the same time, with Nigeria, I'm really happy with where we are with Afrobeats and how popular Afrobeats is as a genre. Coming from a minority part of the culture, I've seen the growth at least in my short lifetime. And I hope to see more of the growth. I'm happy that we even have something that we can turn popular, something that we are proud of. Especially, that it's gaining international recognition. So not just with the West, but even within our community. And now I'm talking about Africa. I will be in Ghana in two days and I can't wait. The funny thing is, I keep hearing Nigerian songs and I'm like: "Oh, I'm a Nigerian and oh, this is from my country." It might sound horrible, but we say it with pride. We have something that we can share with other people, Africans, the West, whoever it is. And if they enjoy it, we have a connection. There is nothing better than that. That you have a commodity that is popular that connects you with another individual who has nothing to do with the fabric of your existence, but at least they get that one

thing that you connect to, which is the Afro-popular, Afro-beat-sound. It's amazing. I just needed to say that.