

Balancing Cultural Heritage and Global Influences: Promoting African Music as the Foundation of Musical Literacy for Nigerian Children

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Received: 10.12.2025 / **Accepted:** 26.12.2025 / **Published:** 02.01.2026

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.18133327](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18133327)

Abstract

Original Research Article

In the face of globalization, the prominence of Western musical forms in educational systems across Africa, including Nigeria, has increasingly sidelined indigenous musical traditions. This study examines the role of African folk songs, specifically from the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa cultures, in shaping musical literacy among Nigerian children. By investigating the distinctive musical forms, rhythms, and cultural narratives embedded in these folk songs, this paper advocates for the integration of African music into the educational curriculum as a critical tool for cultural identity formation and musical skill development. Through a comparative analysis of Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa folk songs, the paper demonstrates how these musical forms can foster a sense of cultural pride, cognitive development, and emotional connection to one's heritage. The research also situates African folk music within a globalized context, recognizing the increasing influence of global music trends on young learners. While acknowledging the importance of global musical exposure, this paper argues for a balanced approach to music education one that integrates African musical traditions as a fundamental part of the curriculum, enabling Nigerian children to develop musical literacy that is culturally relevant and globally aware. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on decolonizing music education in Nigeria, urging for a more inclusive and sustainable approach to music education that honors and preserves African cultural heritage.

Keywords: African music, Igbo folk songs, Yoruba folk songs, Hausa folk songs, musical literacy, ethnomusicology, cultural transmission, Nigerian children, global music education.

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Introduction

Music is more than just an art form; it is a vehicle for transmitting culture, preserving history, and reinforcing identity. In Nigeria, a country with rich ethnic diversity, music plays a crucial role in cultural

expression and education. However, the increasing dominance of Western musical influences in Nigerian schools, along with the globalization of music, has led to the erosion of indigenous African musical traditions. This has sparked concerns about



Citation: Ayeyemi, E. O., & Eluwole, A. G. (2026). Balancing cultural heritage and global influences: Promoting African music as the foundation of musical literacy for Nigerian children. *GAS Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences (GASJAHSS)*, 4(1), 20-29.

the sustainability of African cultural heritage, particularly in the realm of music education.

Western music, especially classical music and popular genres, has taken precedence in Nigerian educational settings, where it often overshadows the indigenous music traditions of ethnic groups like the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa. This trend is detrimental not only to the preservation of African cultural identity but also to the holistic development of children, as indigenous music offers essential learning opportunities that global music forms cannot provide.

The primary aim of this paper is to explore how folk songs from the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa cultures can serve as foundational tools for musical literacy in Nigerian children. These folk songs, which are rich in rhythm, melody, harmony, and cultural narratives, have the potential to offer a robust educational framework for teaching both musical skills and cultural identity. By examining these musical forms in the context of education, the study argues for the integration of African music into the curriculum, advocating for a balanced approach that embraces both African and global music influences. This research contributes to the ongoing dialogue on decolonizing music education in Nigeria and ensuring that Nigerian children receive an education that honors their cultural heritage while preparing them for a globalized world.

Objectives of the Study

To analyze how Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa folk songs can be practically integrated into the Nigerian music education curriculum. This study shall this includes:

1. Identifying curriculum gaps, determining how these folk songs can be incorporated into existing frameworks, and proposing modifications to ensure their inclusion without displacing global music influences.
2. To examine the pedagogical methods that can be employed to teach indigenous folk songs effectively. This objective focuses on exploring specific teaching techniques, such as the use of call-and-response, group performance, storytelling through song, and rhythm-based exercises, which

have proven effective in conveying musical and cultural concepts.

3. To assess how music educators can be trained to incorporate African folk music into their teaching practices. This includes designing professional development programs that equip music educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to teach folk songs. The study will explore whether teacher training should focus on cultural competency, knowledge of traditional music forms, and the development of creative teaching strategies to engage students with indigenous music.

4. To evaluate the cognitive, social, and cultural benefits of learning indigenous folk songs in Nigerian schools. The objective here is to investigate the broader benefits of integrating folk music, including improvements in memory, cognitive skills, cultural pride, and social cohesion, which will provide evidence for the importance of folk music in a child's overall development.

To propose a framework for effectively integrating indigenous folk songs into both formal and informal music education settings in Nigeria. This will include practical guidelines for curriculum designers, educators, and policymakers to ensure that African folk music is integrated into teaching practices at different educational levels, from primary schools to secondary schools.

Literature Review

Music serves as a cultural practice that shapes and reflects the values of a society. Nettl (2015) defines ethnomusicology as the study of music within its cultural context, highlighting how music influences social relationships, community identities, and cultural transmission. In Nigeria, indigenous music forms, particularly folk songs, play a vital role in transmitting cultural knowledge and reinforcing identity. These folk songs offer children not only opportunities to develop musical skills but also a deeper connection to their cultural roots (Barker, 2013).

Studies on music education consistently emphasize the importance of integrating indigenous music into formal education. Sanga and Mtyuda (2014) assert



that incorporating indigenous practices is essential for children's cognitive development. Folk songs, with their intricate rhythm patterns and rich storytelling traditions, are effective tools for teaching musical concepts like timing, pitch, and harmony. Additionally, Adeyemi and Akindele (2019) emphasize that the inclusion of African folk songs in educational curricula is crucial for preserving cultural heritage and fostering pride in African traditions. Furthermore, Ayeyemi, Ogunrinade and Falusi (2024) posited that:

In many rural parts of Nigeria, traditional music is an integral part of community life. Music is not only a form of entertainment but also a medium of education, socialisation, and the transmission of moral values. Traditional music education often takes place informally, where elders and community members pass down songs, rhythms, instruments to younger generations. This form of

education teaches children important cultural values, history and communication skill...These skills are vital for learning in other academic areas, showing the potential of music education to foster cognitive development from a younger age.

However, the integration of indigenous African music into education systems remains limited. Despite the clear educational advantages, Western music dominates Nigerian schools, often overshadowing indigenous music forms. Kirkegaard (2018) highlights that Western music is often given more prestige, leading to the marginalization of indigenous music. The lack of a structured framework for incorporating African folk songs into the curriculum exacerbates this issue. Nevertheless, recent studies suggest that folk songs from the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa cultures provide valuable resources for music educators seeking to preserve African cultural heritage while offering a well-rounded music education (Adebayo, 2018).

Table 1: Comparison of Key Musical Elements in Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa Folk Songs

Musical Element	Igbo Folk Songs	Yoruba Folk Songs	Hausa Folk Songs
Rhythm	Complex, syncopated rhythms often involving polyrhythms.	Call-and-response rhythms with strong emphasis on drum beats.	Simple, repetitive rhythms often using the drum as a lead.
Melodic Structure	Linear melodies that often follow a pentatonic scale.	Melodies can range from simple to complex with use of vocal slides.	Use of pentatonic scale with drones and simple melodic lines.
Harmony	Limited harmony, often monophonic.	Harmonies introduced through overlapping voices in chants.	Usually homophonic with occasional modal shifts.
Themes	Folklore, morals, communal life, and daily struggles.	Family values, respect for elders, community cooperation.	Love, tradition, heroism, and historical events.
Instrumentation	Vocal, percussion (drums, rattles), string instruments (e.g., okpala).	Percussion (talking drums), voice, and sometimes string instruments (e.g., guitar).	Drums, kora, balafon, voice.
Cultural Context	Songs reflect the communal and agricultural lifestyle.	Used in rituals, festivals, and storytelling events.	Often used in ceremonial settings or celebrations.



This table highlights the distinct musical elements that define Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa folk songs. The comparison includes rhythmic patterns, melodic structures, harmony, and themes, all of which are central to the cultural contexts of the three groups. The table aims to provide a clearer understanding of the role these songs play in shaping musical literacy while preserving cultural identity.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in two key theoretical frameworks: Ethnomusicology and Cultural Transmission Theory, which provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the role of music in shaping cultural identity and facilitating cultural knowledge transmission.

- Ethnomusicology:** As a discipline, ethnomusicology examines music within its social, cultural, and historical contexts. Nettl (2015) emphasizes the value of indigenous music traditions, positioning them as integral components of cultural systems. In Nigeria, folk songs are not merely musical compositions but serve as repositories of cultural knowledge, embodying history, values, and social norms that are passed from one generation to the next. By examining these folk songs through an ethnomusicological lens, we can better understand their dual function as educational tools and cultural texts that promote musical literacy while ensuring cultural continuity.
- Cultural Transmission Theory:** Cultural transmission theory, as described by Barker (2013), explores how cultural knowledge is passed across generations. Music plays a significant role in this process, and folk songs, with their distinctive rhythmic, melodic, and lyrical structures, serve as a form of socialization that teaches children about their cultural identity, values, and heritage. By learning and performing these songs, children internalize key aspects of their cultural identity, making music a vital

tool for cultural preservation and transmission.

Together, these frameworks help us understand how African folk songs specifically those from the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa cultures function not only as vehicles for teaching music but also as powerful means of reinforcing cultural identity and heritage.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, combining ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and music analysis to explore the role of Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa folk songs in promoting musical literacy in Nigerian children.

- Ethnographic Fieldwork:** Fieldwork will be conducted in both urban and rural schools across Nigeria to ensure a diverse representation of educational settings. The fieldwork will include participant observation in music classrooms, where students will engage in the learning of folk songs. This will allow the researcher to observe firsthand how these songs are taught and how students engage with them.
- Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with music educators, cultural practitioners, and school administrators to gather insights into the current state of music education in Nigeria. Interviews will focus on the inclusion (or exclusion) of indigenous music in the curriculum and the perceived benefits of folk songs in teaching musical concepts.
- Song Analysis:** A comparative analysis of Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa folk songs will be conducted to examine their musical structures, rhythms, and cultural content. This analysis will highlight the distinct educational benefits that each group's music offers, such as rhythm patterns, melodic intervals, and storytelling techniques that can enhance children's musical and cognitive development.



The combination of ethnographic observation, interviews, and song analysis will provide a comprehensive understanding of how indigenous music can be integrated into Nigeria's music education system.

Analysis and Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the valuable role that Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa folk songs play in promoting musical literacy, cultural identity, and cognitive development among Nigerian children. These folk songs provide an effective means for teaching essential musical concepts such as rhythm, melody, harmony, and timing, while simultaneously connecting children to their cultural heritage and community values. However, while the integration of these songs offers numerous benefits, it is also important to consider the challenges and limitations that may hinder their successful implementation within Nigerian schools.

Logistical and Pedagogical Barriers

1. Teacher Training and Expertise:

One of the primary challenges in integrating indigenous folk songs into the curriculum is the **lack of adequately trained teachers**. Many music educators in Nigerian schools are more familiar with Western music traditions and may lack the knowledge or skills to teach folk music effectively. While some universities and music programs, such as the **University of Ibadan's Music Education Department**, offer training on indigenous music, this is not the case in most schools, especially in rural areas. The absence of **professional development programs** focused on indigenous music means that many teachers are not equipped to teach these folk songs in an authentic and culturally sensitive way.

To address this, there is a need for **specialized training** for music educators, where they can learn both the technical aspects of indigenous music and the cultural significance behind it. Professional development programs should include workshops on music theory as it applies to folk songs, cultural

context, and pedagogical methods tailored to teaching indigenous music.

2. Resource Availability and Curriculum Limitations:

Another significant barrier to integrating folk songs into the education system is the **limited resources** available for music education. Many schools, particularly in rural areas, lack the basic infrastructure for teaching music, such as **musical instruments, recorded materials, or access to cultural experts**. Without the necessary resources, it is difficult for teachers to implement lessons that are rich in both musical content and cultural context.

In addition, **curriculum constraints** often prioritize Western music education, focusing on classical music and popular Western genres. This focus leaves little room for the inclusion of indigenous music, which is not always seen as "academic" or "prestigious." The **standardized curriculum** for Nigerian schools is often rigid, with limited flexibility to incorporate non-Western music traditions. In this context, teachers may find it challenging to introduce indigenous folk songs without deviating from the prescribed syllabus.

To overcome these challenges, **curriculum reform** is necessary to allow for the integration of both global and local music influences. Schools should be encouraged to incorporate indigenous music as part of the formal curriculum while also securing **funding and resources** (such as instruments, recordings, and expert guidance) to support this initiative.

3. Lack of Community Involvement:

While some schools have embraced the inclusion of folk songs in the curriculum, many others have not involved **community cultural practitioners**, such as elders and traditional musicians, in the educational process. The inclusion of local musicians and community elders can provide valuable insights into the **authentic performance** of folk songs and deepen students' understanding of their cultural significance. However, schools often fail to recognize the importance of this **community**



collaboration, limiting the scope and depth of the folk music education being offered.

Strengthening the link between schools and local communities by inviting **cultural practitioners** into

the classroom can provide students with a richer and more immersive experience. Schools should explore partnerships with local musicians, cultural organizations, and elders to ensure that folk songs are taught with cultural authenticity and depth.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Integrating African Folk Songs in Music Education

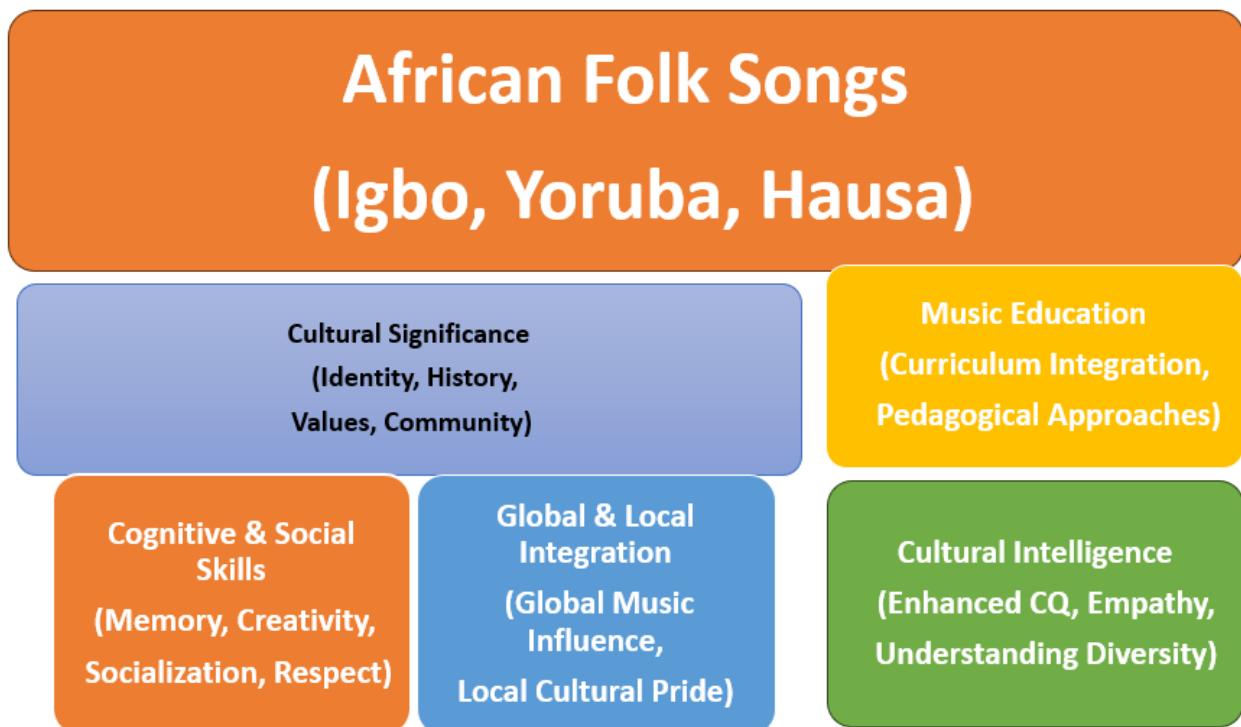


Figure 1 Explanation:

African Folk Songs (Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa): The starting point, which serves as the foundation for cultural and educational integration.

Cultural Significance: Folk songs hold deep cultural value, imparting knowledge about history, values, community roles, and identity.

Music Education: Integration into school curricula helps children develop musical literacy through indigenous songs, fostering both technical skills and cultural awareness.

Cognitive & Social Skills: Learning folk songs enhances cognitive abilities (memory, pattern

recognition) and social skills (cooperation, empathy, respect for elders).

Global & Local Integration: While integrating global music influences, the focus on local, indigenous songs maintains cultural pride and identity, balancing the two.

Cultural Intelligence (CQ): Ultimately, this framework nurtures cultural intelligence by increasing empathy and understanding of both local and global cultures.

The growing influence of global entertainment platforms such as *Cocomelon*, *Disney Jr.*, *Disney World*, and *JimJam* have led to significant shifts in

the cultural and educational landscapes for children worldwide, including in Nigeria. While these platforms provide valuable entertainment, their increasing dominance in Nigerian children's media consumption has had a profound impact on the formation of cultural intelligence and the preservation of African cultural heritage. This discussion explores how the replacement of indigenous Nigerian folklore, folktales, and folk songs with Westernized media content has distorted the development of cultural identity and musical literacy among Nigerian children.

1. The Impact on Cultural Identity and Heritage

African folklore and folk songs have long been central to the transmission of cultural values, norms, and history in Nigerian communities. Traditionally, Nigerian children learned about their cultural heritage through storytelling, folk songs, and proverbs passed down through generations. These forms of cultural expression not only entertained but also taught children important lessons about their identity, responsibilities, and place within the community (Adeyemi & Akindele, 2019).

However, with the rise of global children's content from platforms like *Disney Jr.* and *Cocomelon*, there has been a noticeable shift in the cultural framework that Nigerian children are exposed to. These platforms, while entertaining, primarily promote Western values and narratives that are often disconnected from the realities of Nigerian society. This shift poses a risk to the continuity of African cultural traditions, as the stories and songs that once provided a foundation for children's understanding of their culture are being replaced by globalized content that prioritizes individualism, consumerism, and Western family structures (Sanga & Mtyuda, 2014).

As *Cocomelon* and *Disney Jr.* focus on content that caters to universal themes like friendship and learning through play, they often neglect the rich, localized stories that are central to African culture. For example, while *Disney* characters may teach values like sharing or kindness, they do not offer Nigerian children the opportunity to connect with their own cultural narratives, such as the famous

Yoruba deities' stories or the Igbo *tortoise* tales, which are rich in moral lessons and community values. The loss of such culturally significant content not only diminishes children's understanding of their heritage but also weakens their sense of cultural pride and identity (Adeyemi & Akindele, 2019).

2. Loss of Cultural Intelligence and Empathy

Cultural intelligence (CQ) is the ability to understand, adapt to, and engage with different cultures. It is formed through the exposure to and interaction with diverse cultural contexts, both familiar and unfamiliar. As Nigerian children are increasingly exposed to globalized media, particularly those from Western cultures, their ability to understand and appreciate both their own culture and others' cultures is weakened. Cultural intelligence thrives on a foundation of cultural self-awareness, which is rooted in understanding one's own cultural background and traditions (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004).

By replacing indigenous Nigerian folklore, folktales, and folk songs with global entertainment, children lose a crucial avenue for developing cultural intelligence. These traditional forms of cultural expression provide not only a link to the past but also a framework for understanding one's role in the present and future. For instance, Yoruba folktales teach children the importance of respect, wisdom, and community cohesion, which are essential values in a collectivist society (Kolawole & Akinleye, 2015). When children are disconnected from these lessons, they may develop a less nuanced understanding of cultural dynamics, leading to a weakened sense of cultural empathy and adaptability.

Furthermore, Nigerian children in the diaspora, who may already face challenges related to cultural identity, are particularly vulnerable to the effects of this media shift. In the absence of culturally relevant content, children raised in Western societies may struggle to reconcile their Nigerian heritage with the dominant Western cultural influences they encounter daily. This can lead to confusion regarding their identity, as they may internalize Western values at the expense of their cultural roots, which ultimately



impedes the development of cultural intelligence (Kirkegaard, 2018).

3. The Homogenization of Cultural Values

A significant concern with the dominance of global children's media is the homogenization of cultural values. *Disney Jr.*, *Cocomelon*, and similar platforms are rooted in Western values and cultural norms that prioritize individual achievement, material success, and nuclear family structures. These values may not align with the communal values that are central to Nigerian society, where family, respect for elders, and collective responsibility are paramount (Sanga & Mtyuda, 2014).

For example, in many Nigerian cultures, music is a communal activity that involves participation from family members, neighbors, and community members. Songs like *Oro Ibo* (Igbo folk songs) or *Eyo* (Yoruba songs) are performed collectively, reflecting the collective nature of Nigerian societies. However, global entertainment platforms tend to focus on individual success, often highlighting characters who solve problems on their own rather than with the help of a community. This emphasis on individualism can mislead children into thinking that success is an individual pursuit, undermining the collective values that are integral to Nigerian culture.

By reinforcing these individualistic values, global media platforms contribute to the diminishing importance of community, which is a core aspect of cultural identity in Nigeria. The absence of collective musical expressions in children's media reduces children's opportunities to learn about community-based practices and to develop a sense of belonging to their cultural groups (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004).

4. The Decline of Indigenous Languages and Music

The replacement of indigenous Nigerian folk songs with global children's content also contributes to the decline of indigenous languages and musical traditions. Nigerian folk songs, sung in languages like Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa, are an essential part of children's early education, offering an interactive way to engage with language, rhythm, and cultural

knowledge (Adebayo, 2018). However, when children are exposed primarily to media in English or other widely spoken languages, they are less likely to engage with the songs and stories in their own languages.

The loss of indigenous language use in media content makes it more difficult for children to connect with their cultural heritage. Language plays a crucial role in shaping children's understanding of their identity and their community's worldview. Without exposure to the rich linguistic textures found in indigenous songs, children miss out on the cognitive and social benefits that language provides, such as improved memory, pattern recognition, and emotional expression (Kolawole & Akinleye, 2015).

5. Recommendations for Balancing Global and Cultural Influences

To counter the negative effects of global media on Nigerian children's cultural identity, it is crucial to strike a balance between global and local content. Nigerian children should be encouraged to engage with both global media and indigenous Nigerian content, including folk songs, folktales, and stories. Schools and media platforms can play a significant role in this process by promoting Nigerian music and stories while also introducing global perspectives.

The integration of indigenous music and culture into formal education can also help ensure that children grow up with a well-rounded understanding of both their cultural heritage and the globalized world. Music educators, parents, and community leaders should work together to create spaces where Nigerian folk songs are celebrated, and where children can learn about their cultural roots in a fun, engaging way. By doing so, they can help foster the development of cultural intelligence, which is essential for navigating an increasingly interconnected world while staying connected to one's cultural identity.

Potential Solutions and Recommendations

1. Enhancing Teacher Training:

Comprehensive training programs for music educators should be developed, focusing on both the **technical** and **cultural aspects** of



folk music. These programs could be offered through teacher training colleges, universities, and professional development workshops, ensuring that educators across Nigeria are equipped to teach indigenous music.

2. Curriculum Flexibility and Integration:

Policymakers and curriculum developers should work to integrate indigenous folk music into the national music curriculum, ensuring that students are exposed to both Western and African musical traditions. This could involve creating **modular music education frameworks** that allow for the teaching of folk songs alongside other genres, thus creating a more inclusive and representative music education system.

3. Resource Allocation and Community Engagement:

Schools should collaborate with local communities to secure resources and cultural knowledge. This could involve seeking funding from governmental and non-governmental organizations to provide schools with **musical instruments, recorded materials, and access to cultural experts**. Community involvement should also be prioritized by inviting **local musicians, elders, and cultural practitioners** to participate in music lessons and performances, enriching the educational experience and fostering cultural pride among students.

Conclusion

While the integration of Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa folk songs into Nigerian music education offers significant benefits, including fostering cultural pride and enhancing cognitive development, challenges related to teacher training, resource availability, and curriculum constraints must be addressed. By implementing targeted teacher training programs, reforming the curriculum to be more inclusive of indigenous music, and engaging local communities in the educational process, the successful integration of folk songs into Nigerian

schools can be achieved. These steps will ensure that Nigerian children not only develop musical literacy but also gain a deeper understanding of their cultural heritage in an increasingly globalized world.

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