

# The Rise of Afrobeats: Musical Culture Combinations on Calm Down Song

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## Abstract

*Afrobeats* is a genre of popular music originating from West Africa. At the beginning of its development, it caused controversy because of the ambiguity regarding African cultural identity. Even though it caused controversy, Afrobeats is now gaining popularity. This research aims to analyze and describe the popularity of the song Calm Down as a medium for transmitting African culture. The method used in this research is qualitative virtual ethnography. Virtual ethnography is used to identify and explore the themes and fan's reactions toward the song. This was carried out by marking some words that have been repeated through the lyrics. Data collection was carried out through observation and literature study. First, the researcher observed the music video, lyrics, views, and like frequency of the song on YouTube and Spotify. Then, netizens' comments were also viewed to get detailed information about the reasons for the popularity of the song Calm Down. For the supplementary arguments, the researcher reviewed some scientific journals and news articles about the popularity of Afrobeats songs. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model. This consists of data reduction, data presentation, and data verification. The research results show that the popularity of the song Calm Down was caused by the song's rhythm which has a positive impact on mental health, its universal theme, and musical culture combinations. Overall, the song has a positive impact on cultural globalization by tightening the bond between Africans and Americans.

**Keywords:** Afrobeats, Calm down, Cultural transmission, African culture

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# Kebangkitan Afrobeats: Kombinasi Budaya Musikal pada Lagu Calm Down

## Abstrak

*Afrobeats* merupakan salah satu genre musik populer dari Afrika Barat. Pada awal perkembangannya, menimbulkan kontroversi karena ambiguitas terkait identitas kebudayaan Afrika. Meskipun terdapat kontroversi, Afrobeats kini meraih popularitas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis dan mendeskripsikan popularitas lagu Calm Down sebagai media transmisi kebudayaan Afrika. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif etnografi virtual. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan mengobservasi dan studi kepustakaan. Pertama, peneliti mengamati video musik, lirik, frekuensi tontonan beserta *like* lagu Calm Down pada Youtube dan Spotify. Kemudian, peneliti juga akan meninjau komentar para netizen untuk mendapatkan informasi rinci mengenai alasan popularitas lagu Calm Down. Untuk pendukung argumen, peneliti meninjau beberapa jurnal ilmiah dan artikel berita terkait popularitas lagu *Afrobeats*. Data dianalisis menggunakan model Miles dan Huberman yang terdiri dari reduksi data, pamarapan data, dan verifikasi data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan popularitas lagu Calm Down disebabkan oleh ritme lagu yang berdampak positif pada kesehatan mental, temanya yang universal, dan kombinasi budaya musikal. Ini merupakan kunci kesuksesan lagu Calm Down.

**Kata Kunci:** Afrobeats, Calm down, Transmisi budaya, Budaya Afrika

## Introductions

On February 11, 2022, the song Calm Down was released and became a phenomenal Afrobeats song. According to the musicweek.com website, Calm Down is the biggest Afrobeats song of all time, the most-watched video by African artists on YouTube, and the first song by an African artist to reach more than one billion listeners on Spotify. This song was created by Rema (a musician from Nigeria) and Andre Vibez.

In an interview with Billboard Music, Rema revealed that the inspiration for the song was his meeting with a girl in a yellow dress at a party. After the girl left the party, Rema was still thinking about it and decided to compose a song in the studio. The song came out and debuted on the Billboard U.S. Afrobeats songs. Seen the impact, Rema discussed with his teams to make the remix versions of the song and he thought that Selena Gomez was the right fit. Rema stated that he chose Selena Gomez because he wanted to take the song to another level (spread Nigerian culture around the world to gain international attention toward African culture).

Since its first release, Calm Down has become a global representation of Afrobeats until

the sentence appeared, "From Nigeria to the World: Afrobeats is having a global moment" (Osiebe, 2022). Afrobeats is a pop music from West Africa. The forerunner was the media liberalization event that occurred at the same time as the final wave of democratization in Africa in 1999 (*Ibid.*). The development of Afrobeats to reach the international stage cannot be isolated from accessibility to technology. The existence of software and hardware that could compete with high levels of audio quality and expensive recording space, created a new style of African music. With technology, this new style focuses on fast tempos and constructs rhythmic patterns, namely the clave.

Clave is the main foundation in various musical genres in West Africa and the Caribbean including son, highlife, dancehall, and reggaeton. The beginning of 2010 was a point in the development of Afrobeats where this genre adopted various elements but still maintained its local side. The development and popularity of Afrobeats have made the Nigerian cultural industry grow into the most productive field on the African continent (Krings and Simmert, 2020).

Based on this phenomenon, researchers are motivated to examine factors in the popularity of the song Calm Down as a medium for transmitting African culture.

## **Afrobeats Popularity Amidst Its Controversy**

Afrobeats is a popular music genre from West Africa. This genre combines hip-hop, dance hall, R&B (Rhythm and Blues), and EDM (Electronic Dance Music). At the end of 1990, Afrobeats developed in Nigeria and Ghana until 2000 (*bantunauts.com*). Afrobeats was emerged from Afrobeat that was created by Fela Kuti. According to jazz history websites, Afrobeat existed between 1960 and 1970. The word "Afro" derived from Africa while "Beat or beats" defined the music styles. When the words were combined, they referred to African music styles. As the time goes by, African music genres were under development and Afrobeats was introduced. Although the two genres look similar, there were some differences between them. Due to the history of Afrobeat that has correlation with political vibes in Africa (probably in 1970), especially about injustice and military corruption, the themes of the song are identical to the politics movement (*scribd.com*). Whereas Afrobeats tends to bring fresh topic around everyday life issues like relationship, personal things, parties, and et cetera (*Ibid.*). This results to Afrobeats popularity around the world for its melodious and energetic vibes. Despite its popularity, there are controversial aspect about the genre. Burna Boy and Davido have stated that Afrobeats has confused the previous genre (Afrobeat) by Fela Kuti.

## Research Method or Approach of Discussion

This research used a qualitative descriptive method. Qualitative is a research procedure that uses diction as a form of the research output. This was stated by Bogdan and Taylor (1975) about qualitative function as a methodology to draw descriptive data. Based on the Elon University website, virtual ethnography is defined as studying the cultural and social aspects of human interaction in media. In this research, the method will be used by selecting some comments from YouTube users and marking some words that have been repeated through the lyrics to find the African cultural vibes especially on the diction pronunciation. An object that will be used in this research are music video and lyrics of the Calm Down song (a collaboration version between Rema and Selena Gomez).

The reason behind the object reference is there are some correlations with the Afrobeats popularity in an international scale. This resulted in many of the Afrobeats songs gaining popularity and becoming phenomenal songs. The research data is divided into two types, primary and secondary data. In this research, the primary data consists of music videos and lyrics from the Calm Down song. The secondary data are using scientific journals, news articles, watched and amount of likes by public frequency, and comments on YouTube and Spotify about the Calm Down song popularity. First, the researcher conducted an observation of the Calm Down music video and lyrics.

To gain detailed information, the researcher did a literature review of Afrobeats and Calm Down song popularity. Besides that, the researcher will also observe the comments and song's popularity from YouTube and Spotify. The comments will be sorted by classifying some comments into three categories, for relaxation, culture appreciation, and mood booster. Those elements will be supported by viewing the song's popularity in YouTube and Spotify. After all of the data were collected, the researcher reduced the data. Data reduction refers to sorting the research data. It aims to gain whole information based on the research questions or topic. Lastly, the sorted data is analyzed to get a conclusion from the research. Overall, these whole techniques were used Miles and Huberman (1994) model.

## The Combination of Locality and Contemporary Elements in Calm Down Song

Calm Down became the first Afrobeats song to stay for 57 weeks on the Billboard Hot 100 charts (the Economic Times). This achievement has surpassed the record for the song titled Essence previously achieved by Wizkid, a Nigerian Afrobeats artist (*Ibid.*). Osiebe in his article, "From Nigeria to the World: Afrobeats is having a global moment", states that there are five factors behind the popularity of Afrobeats. These five factors include diaspora influence, dance videos, musical collaborations, radio airplay, and global-scale acceptance (Osiebe, 2022).

Diaspora is often defined as the marginalization of immigrants, minorities, and ethnic communities in the realm of social inclusion and foreign policy inclusion (McGown, 2008). The African diaspora occurs when people from the Sahara region migrate to other regions. This movement crossed the Indian Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, and Atlantic Ocean until it reached Asia, Europe, and America. This movement was caused by the enslavement of the African population that lasted from the 15th century to the 19th century. Through colonialism, there was a process of cultural diffusion between African culture and non-African culture. In addition, trade and strong ties have formed within the African region and the African diaspora (Manning, 2000).

In the remix version of the song Calm Down (a collaboration with Selena Gomez), elements of the African cultural diaspora produce Pidgin English. In Obeng's book, "West African Languages in Contact with European Languages" this language can be interpreted as the English language of African people. Based on historical records, this language emerged from interactions between African ethnic groups and was influenced by trade activities, conquest, and geographical proximity. One example of the usage of this language is the Fulbe tribe. The Fulbe Tribe is a part of the Hausa Kingdom and speaks the Hausa language with its accent. Language complexity increased when traders, missionaries, and European colonization arrived on the western African continent. European nations who arrived in West Africa included the Dutch, Portuguese, Danes, Swedes, Germans, British, and French. Exploration of the West African coast was pioneered by the Portuguese. Portuguese occupation lasted until the early 1600s (Ecu & Obeng, 2004).

The Netherlands, Germany, England and France also colonized the African region over a long period. Colonization had a major impact on language development in various regions of Africa. Pidgin English is an example of assimilation between a regional language (Africa) and a foreign language (which comes from Europe). This linguistic form is different from English in general. Socio-culturally, the existence of pidgin English is used for African people to understand European speech.



In summary, the spelling modifications above can be summarized in the following table.

No.	Sentences	Stages	Pidgin English	English
1.	Girl this your bodye put my heart for lock down	Morphology modification	e	It
2.	<i>Shawty come gimme your lo- lo-lo-lo- lo-lo-lo- lo-lo-lo- lo-lo- love, mm- mm”</i>	<i>Resyllabification</i>	<i>Shawty</i>	Shortie
3.	<i>Naim I dey find situation I go use take tell em hello</i>	<i>Resyllabification</i>	<i>Naim I dey</i>	Now I am
4.	Finally I found a way to talk to the girl but she <i>no wan</i> to follow	<i>Resyllabification</i>	<i>No wan</i>	Don't want
5.	I know she sabi pass that one	(pure African language)	<i>Sabi</i>	Know or Understand
6.	Go <i>dey gum</i> her like chewing gum	<i>Resyllabification</i>	<i>Dey gum</i>	They surround
7.	Another Banger	<i>Devoicing</i>	<i>Anadba bangga</i>	Another Banger

Table 1. English Pidgins from Calm Down Lyrics

Combining African locality and contemporary music in the song *Calm Down* produces a complex song rhythm because it combines traditional African and American music rhythms. This is related to the forerunners of afrobeats which came from a harmonious blend of traditional music, jazz, highlife, and funk (Ayodele, 2024). The diffusion between traditional African music and contemporary music can be found in the *Calm Down* song resulting in Afro-rave. Quoted from the Billboard music website, this song is a composition of hip-hop, African music, lo-fi and alternative. The placement of traditional African music in the song *Calm Down* aims to expand African culture.

This is reinforced by Rema's statement when interviewed by Billboard Music. He said he wanted to take Afrobeats forward and contribute to his home country, Nigeria. The collaboration between local and contemporary music represents the ability of musicians Rema and his team to further strengthen Afrobeats' adaptability to cultural boundaries. The adaptability of Afrobeats increasingly brings diversity to African musical culture (Ayodele, 2024, p.51).

### **Calm Down Song Impact as the African Culture Transmission Media**

Based on the KBBI (Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia), transmission means forwarding and spreading. If it is related to the cultural context, it means the spread of culture. Cultural transmission correlates with cultural change (Bruner, 1956). Eerkeens and Lipo said in the article, "Cultural Transmission Theory and the Archaeological Records: Providing Context for Understanding Variation and Temporal Changes in Material Culture", that cultural transmission appears as the second mechanism (after genes) of the inheritance system (Eerkens & Lipo, 2007). This means that the emergence of culture comes from social behavior based on an evolutionary perspective (*Ibid.*)

*Calm Down* is a medium for transmitting African culture because there are cultural components, including Rema's social background as a Nigerian artist, language system, and traditional African cultural arts. Rema's influence as a famous Afrobeats artist from Nigeria (West Africa) influenced the style of the song *Calm Down* which has an upbeat tempo but is calming because it is combined with traditional African music. As it appears to be the African culture transmission media, *Calm Down* can be mentioned as a medium to tighten the bond between Africans around the world. It reminds the Africans that wherever they go, they always can remain stick to their culture through the song. The spelling and pronunciation of the lyrics are in Pidgin English, and the simple African-style interior decoration plays a vital role in representing African culture. Afrobeats' flexibility towards contemporary culture is reflected in the collaboration between Rema and the famous American singer and actress, Selena Gomez.

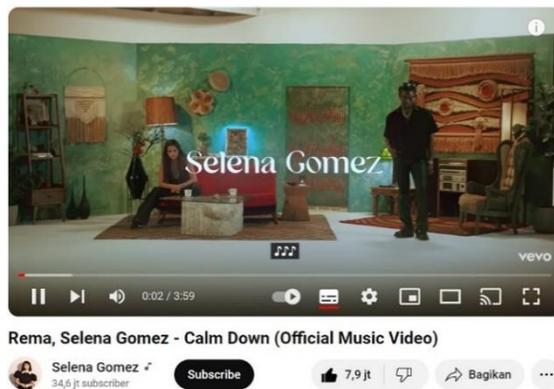
His collaboration with Selena Gomez made the song Calm Down increasingly well-known, breaking many records. According to the Economic Times, the popularity of this song increased because it was supported by the appearance of Selena Gomez. Although Selena Gomez's singing part is said to be relatively small, her figure still has a big impact on the song's success. In this song, Selena Gomez can be called the best representative of American culture due to her background as a Latin American. As a Latin American, she can adapt easily with the Nigerian culture by matching the song vibes. This was proven by her light and small movements with the melody which make the song more sooth and calm. From her background, it can be concluded that as Latinos, Selena Gomez was the best match because Latinos like dancing and music to preserve their indigenous culture. Calm Down achieved an achievement by ranking third in the Billboard Hot 100 category. Another achievement or record was the song's staying power for 57 weeks on the Billboard. Based on this phenomenon, it can be understood that the popularity of songs is also influenced by an individual's social status.

Quoted from the Instagram page @selenagomez, the total number of followers is 427 million. The large number of followers also contributes to the song's popularity. Strategies for achieving song popularity along with cultural expansion can be carried out through musical collaboration activities. To date, the total views of the song video have reached 878 million times and received 7.9 million likes. On Spotify music media, this song has been listened to more than 3,543,126 times. This frequency broke a new record to this day.



Picture 1. Number of views of the Calm Down Music Video

(Source: YouTube)



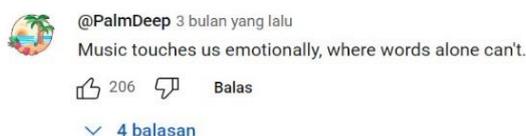
Picture 2. Number of Likes on the Calm Down Music Video  
(Source: YouTube)

Based on comments from netizens, the song's calming yet upbeat rhythm has a positive impact on mental health. Despite the simplicity of the music video, most netizens commented positively and appreciated the representation of African culture. This makes African culture increasingly known for its positive nuances. Several comments stated that the simplicity and elegance of the song helped them relax (self-healing), improved their mood, and lifted their spirit. Overall, this song helps most netizens deal with their daily lives.

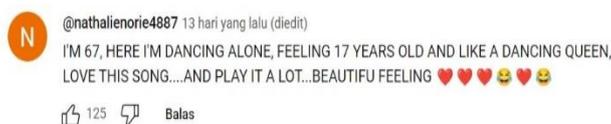
Referring to various comments on YouTube, the calm-down song serves as a means of relaxation and healing therapy. From a music therapy perspective, a song can evoke and regulate emotions (Nwoga & Oburumu, 2023).

These positive comments can be seen in the screenshot of the song's YouTube comments column as follows. Overall, the netizen's comments were classified into three categories such as, music for relaxations, cultural appreciation, and mood booster (effected our emotions).

a. Music for boosting the mood



Picture 2. Comment by the account @PalmDeep  
(Source: YouTube)



Picture 3. Comment by the account @nathalienorie4887  
(Source: YouTube)

b. Music for relaxations and healing



Picture 4. Comment by the account @bryanguagan6937  
(Source: YouTube)



Picture 5. Comment by the account @KristenAllen-jv1en  
(Source: YouTube)

c. Music for relaxation, healing, and cultural appreciation



Picture 6. Comment by the account @Gameress84  
(Source: YouTube)

**Rema - Spotify Top Songs | Current charts | YouTube stats**

Last updated: 2024/05/23

	Total	As lead	Solo	As feature (*)
Streams	3,543,124,126	2,866,251,198	1,380,360,082	676,872,928
Daily	2,902,925	2,107,262	1,087,037	795,663
Tracks	110	60	43	50

Song Title	Streams	Daily
1 Calm Down (with Selena Gomez)	1,371,155,226	957,740
2 Calm Down	577,799,977	311,352
3 * BUBALU	146,260,586	301,445
4 Soundgasm	139,779,851	113,753
5 Dumebi	123,806,344	84,931
6 * Soweto (with Don Toliver, Rema & Tempoe)	122,870,094	222,724
7 Charm	108,086,151	142,993
8 * Ayo Girl (Fayahh Beat) [feat. Rema]	49,433,063	24,974
9 Fame - A COLORS ENCORE	44,883,094	36,391
10 Corny	43,124,093	16,033
11 Holiday	42,945,631	39,632
12 Woman	38,350,335	24,775
13 * Dimension (feat. Skepta & Rema)	37,820,521	20,553
14 * 44	33,791,956	12,649
15 Time N Affection	31,482,026	15,278
16 DND	30,015,596	78,976
17 Bounce	27,009,756	32,948
18 Beamer (Bad Boys)	26,080,905	14,289
19 * 4AM	25,750,253	5,626

Picture 8. Calm down Rank in Spotify  
(Source: *kworb.net/spotify*)

Universal themes play a significant role in the popularity of Afrobeats songs. The song

"Calm Down" explores the theme of love at first sight. The lyrics describe the singer's encounter with a girl in a yellow dress at a party, which leaves him unable to focus because he has fallen in love with her. This theme is evident in various parts of the song's lyrics.

"I see this fine girl, for my party she wears yellow"

"As me I wake up na she dey my mind (na she dey my mind)

"Day one, day two, I fit no focus (I no fit focus)

(Source: *Musixmatch*)

The light theme, upbeat rhythm, and the presence of Selena Gomez make this song stand out in the Afrobeats genre. Rema employs a strategy of musical collaboration to promote African culture by fusing it with contemporary American music. This cultural exchange is facilitated through platforms like YouTube and Spotify, acting as spaces for cultural transmission.

## **Conclusion**

The origins of Afrobeats can be traced back to Afrobeat, which emerged from the influence of European colonialism in countries like Portugal, the Netherlands, and France. Cultural contact through interaction between residents and the colonialists gave rise to something new in the African linguistic system, namely, Pidgin English. This phenomenon has contributed to the African cultural diaspora which has had an impact on the song and music styles of African people. The song *Calm Down* is included in the Afrobeats category because it consists of a combination of traditional African music and contemporary music. Using pidgin English, the song has brought and kept Nigerian culture alive to gain more international attention. This was supported by the music video which represented a simple African decoration style by using some African traditional colorful fabric. Musical collaboration with Selena Gomez has boosted the song's popularity due to its upbeat and soothing rhythm, and its universal themes as they are not limited to any particular culture. Indirectly, Selena Gomez has contributed to the song's popularity by matching the vibes between Latin American culture and Nigerian culture. It is shown through a perfect match between the melody and light movements from Selena Gomez to match the music arrangements. From these collaborations, it can be concluded that culture can be easily adapted into music and melody arrangements without losing its cultural essence. Through music, a culture can be kept alive by preserving its indigenous elements.

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