

MUSIC AS HISTORY: A STUDY OF FELA’S “WHY BLACK MAN DEY SUFFER” (1971)

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Abstract

Using Fela Anikulapo-Kuti’s seminal 1971 album *Why Black Man Dey Suffer* as a focal point, this paper highlights the powerful role of music as both a vehicle for historical knowledge and a tool for social critique. It explores how Fela employs music to illuminate and interrogate African traditional practices and enduring cultural realities. Influenced profoundly by Pan-Africanist figures such as Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver during his time in the United States, Fela harnessed music to project Africa’s rich and complex history onto the global stage. The songs in this album serve as incisive commentaries on the socio-cultural, political, and religious dynamics shaping Africa. Importantly, Fela’s work establishes a vital link between historical experiences and contemporary challenges, such as political corruption, social inequality, and cultural identity crises, that continue to confront Nigeria and the African continent today. This analysis affirms the enduring truth that the past persists and shapes present realities, making Fela’s music as relevant now as it was five decades ago in addressing ongoing struggles for justice, unity, and cultural preservation.

Keywords: Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Afrocentrism, Westernisation, Music, History, Culture

Introduction

Over the years, there has been an increased interest in the in-depth analysis of performance practice in popular music. This is borne from the fact that popular music has transcended the terrain of just a mere entertainment genre. It is believed that scholarly inquiry into some of the typologies unravels the unique qualities embedded in them. Music is found in every known culture past and present, varying widely in time and space. As an ancient phenomenon, music is a fascinating topic for evolutionary theory, natural philosophy, and narrative construction; it is a highly valued feature of all

known living cultures, pervading many aspects of daily life, playing many roles.¹ Making music has been an activity of human beings, both as individuals and groups, for thousands of years. Written texts, pictorial representations, and folklore sources provide evidence that people from all over the globe and from the beginnings of recorded history have created and performed music for religious rituals, civil ceremonies, social functions, storytelling, and self-expression.² The human voice was the first instrument of music. Indeed, the human voice is a natural musical instrument and singing by people of all ages, alone or in groups, is an activity in all human cultures from the dim and distant past.

Music in Africa embraces folklore, history and culture. It promotes African ideas and ideologies and teaches lessons, and castigates offenders. African music is an exploration of African culture, society, history and proverbial explorations; it is used to tell tales, teach the young and old, divulge secrets, praise dignitaries, and divulge important coded information to people; celebrate the achievement of kings and heroes (war, cultural and village heroes etc.).³ In Africa, music is a social activity inextricably woven into everyday community life. Particularly in ethnically homogenous societies where communal ideals and collective experience govern aesthetic value, music seems poised to generate mass appeal. Given this, it may be said at this point that the generality of African music is popular. Beyond the recognition that African musicians maintained a vibrant and very distinct art, it has also been noted that African Music, especially that of West Africa, from where the majority of slaves were taken - has played a significant role in the black cultural Diaspora, with important

¹ Anton Killin. "The Origins of Music: Evidence, Theory and Prospects." *Music and Science*, Vol.1 (2018): 1.

² Douglas Cohen. *Music: Its Language, History and Culture*. (Brooklyn: Brooklyn College of the City University of New York): 3.

³ Funmilayo Modupe Adu. "Re-Inventing Fela Anikulapo Kuti: Radical Musicology and Political Expressionism, A Dialectical Interrogation." *International Journal of Research in Commerce and Management Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 02 (2020): 73.

implications for the music of Latin America, the Caribbean and a variety of African American traditions.⁴

The African heritage of musical and dance forms such as the Negro Spirituals, Gospel, Blues, Charleston, and Jazz of the United States; Calypso and Reggae of the Caribbean; Rumba, Conga, Mambo, and Mozambique of Cuba; Candombe of Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina; Samba of Brazil; Cueca of Chile; Tango and Milonga of Argentina; and the Morenada of Bolivia is no longer in doubt. This affirms that music remains a rich source of history, particularly African and African-American history, and a vital component of what historians refer to as ethnographic data.

The continuous expansion of the frontiers of historical studies has great implications for the methodology of research in the discipline. The most noticeable implication has to do with the sources of historical reconstruction. Oral sources/tradition, which are part of the corpus referred to as primary data, are regarded as viable data when obtained from knowledgeable persons who understand past events and can relate the past to the present. Historians of Africa have realised the importance of ethnographic data for the reconstruction of African history. Oral tradition consists of all verbal testimonies which are reported statements concerning the past. They may be sung or spoken.⁵ Ethnographic data can be defined as artefacts, customs or beliefs held by a group which testify to their earlier usage in the past.⁶ They include songs, proverbs, drum beats, horn blowing, dirges, oaths, religious incantations, and the like.⁷ For the historian attempting to reconstruct Africa's past, therefore,

⁴ Douglas Cohen. *Music: Its Language, History and Culture*, 55.

⁵ Jan Vansina. *Oral Tradition as History*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

⁶ Okon Edet Uya. *African History: Some Problems in Methodology and Perspectives*. (Calabar: CATS Publishers, 2009): 12.

⁷ Simon Majuk. *Understanding History: A Guide for Beginners*. (Calabar: Fomaprints Ltd., 2001): 83.

the knowledge of, and the techniques of collecting and analysing oral tradition, are indispensable. Africa as a whole has gone through different stages and experiences in the past that have either shaped or marred her history. It is now fashionable to study Africa's history through music and songs. Thus, popular music, whether in the past or present, plays a vital role in the way an individual or collective views of the society are projected and shaped because a song at the top of the charts will not only sell hundreds of thousands of copies, but will be played over and over again, on radio and television stations, thereby causing the music to receive even more exposure.⁸ For both traditional and modern civilisations, music is more than an avenue for entertainment; it is used to recount and reconstruct history and proffer a wide range of awareness of the past, which can in turn guide the actions of present and future generations. Songs play a functional role in society because they deal with matters that are important to the people. Songs and music are also used as a means of invocation, which means that they have meaning and reflect reality as perceived by the people.

Generally, music and song provide historical information. First, their use in religious ceremonies indicates that African religious orientation is invocative rather than contemplative. Second, they provide a chronicle of important events in society.⁹ This paper, which focuses on Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and his "Why Black Man Dey Suffer" (1971), aspires to showcase how music can be a source of history. The hindsight and foresight provided by Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's music say a lot about the history of Nigeria in particular and the black race in general, and thus justifies the claim that the past survives in the present; indeed, the present is the past undergoing modification.

⁸ Adebukunola Babalola. "Overlooking Misogyny: A Critical Examination of Fela Anikulapo Kuti's Music, Lifestyle and Legacy." Master of Arts Thesis in Communication, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, (Corpus Christi, Texas May 2018): 14.

⁹ Simon Majuk. *Understanding History*, 86.

In analysing further on Fela's behaviour and "assaults", it will be fair to adopt the views of the conflict theorists as they posit that social structures are created through conflict between people with different interests. Individuals and resources, in turn, are influenced by these structures and by the unequal distributions of power and resources in the society. The power elites, like the military, emerged from the fusion of the corporate elite and the executive branch of government. The interests of these elites are sometimes opposed to those of the masses. The policies of the power elite may result in increased escalation of conflict and possibly the annihilation of opponents.¹⁰ This theory, as propounded by C. Wright Mills, is important in this paper because the paper focuses on the importance of music to Nigeria's social realities. Therefore, it should be noted that there is an ever-existing correlation between the artist and the immediate society for the art to meaningfully thrive in dealing with the home, society, times, and philosophical, historical, religious and political issues.

Africa: From Pre-Colonial to Post-Colonial Times

Africa is the second largest continent in the world, and home to a tenth of the world's population and at least a thousand different indigenous languages. People have lived in Africa for more than three million years, with a rich and varied history, and it is widely believed to be the birthplace of modern human beings and is where some of the world's greatest civilisations, such as the Egyptian and Nubian civilisations, emerged.¹¹ Africa was never an isolated environment; human interactions existed, both internally and externally. Africa had a glorious and sophisticated history as seen in the various economic, social, political and religious developments that took place on the continent. Majorly, Africans lived a communal lifestyle during the precolonial times. Communal values express

¹⁰ Oja Egwemi and Salifu Musa. Music Performance and Social Reality: Fela Kuti's Zombie And 2face Idibia's E Be Like Say as Paradigm."": 16.

¹¹ Toyin Falola and Tyler Fleming. "World Civilizations and History of Human Development – African Civilizations: From the Pre-Colonial to the Modern Day". *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS)*: 2.

the worth and appreciation of the community; the values which guide the social interaction of the people towards a common goal. Interpersonal bonds go beyond biological affinity in expressing the values of communality; Africans shared mutually, they cared for one another, they were interdependent, and they solidarized. Whatever happened to one happened to the community as a whole. The joy and sorrow of one extended to other members of the community in profound ways.¹² This was virtually practised in most areas of Africa before the advent of colonialism.

Africa's contact with European colonialists affected the continent both negatively and positively. One of the negative effects was that in most cases, the socio-political and cultural fabric of the African people was unravelled, to an extent that the true culture and identity of Africans were thrown to the mongrels, and exterminated in some cases. Africa was among the last regions of the globe to be subjected to imperial rule. During the colonial era, most African people were subject to the rule of bureaucrats in London, Lisbon, and Paris rather than being ruled by leaders they had chosen.¹³ More importantly, colonial rule was an imposition that unleashed a sort of deadly blow on Africa's culture with immediate consequences after the introduction of such values as rugged individualism, corruption, capitalism and oppression. Colonial rule is believed to have disrupted the traditional machinery of moral homogeneity and practice. The method of moral inculcation was vitiated, which resulted in the abandonment of traditional norms and values through a systematic depersonalization of the African and paganisation of its values. Instead of the cherished communalism which defined the

¹² Benson O. Igboin. "Colonialism and African Cultural Values". *African Journal of History and Culture*, Vol. 3(6), (July 2011): 99.

¹³ Hassan Mudane. "African Political Thought in a Nutshell" *Encyclopaedia of Political Science*, (February 2018): 7.

life of the African, for example, a burgeoning societal construct was introduced which alienates and destroys the organic fabric of the spirit of we-feeling.¹⁴

Colonialism served as a vehicle for the implantation of cultural imperialism in Africa. Western civilisation and culture began to creep into the African socio-cultural milieu, the first major contact being the Berlin Conference, which intensified the race for European pilfering of African resources and, later, consolidated by the unstoppable wave of globalisation. It is important to stress that colonialism distorted and retarded the pace and tempo of cultural growth and trend of civilization in Africa. One of the most profound consequences of colonization has been how the political and economic rape of the colonies has led to what sometimes seem to be an unbridgeable cultural gap between the nations that were the beneficiaries of colonization and those that were its victims.¹⁵

With Africa subjugated and dominated, Western culture began to slowly displace African cultural heritage. Traditional African cultural practices were subdued by foreign cultures as Africans became fully 'Westernised'. Western culture was now regarded as frontline civilisation while the African ways of doing things became primitive, archaic and regrettably unacceptable in the public domain. Not only were certain aspects of the material culture in the colonies lost or destroyed, but colonial societies also lost the power and sense of cultural continuity, such that it became practically impossible to recover the ability to strive for cultural progress on their terms.¹⁶ Africa's social fabric was completely disallowed, and a new culture of violence was implanted. Traditional African systems of conflict resolution were destroyed, and in their place, nothing was given. The democratic process,

¹⁴ Benson O. Igboin. "Colonialism and African Cultural Values", 100.

¹⁵ Dare Arowolo. "The Effects of Western Civilization and Culture on Africa". *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, Volume 1, No. 1, (2010): 2.

¹⁶ Dare Arowolo. "The Effects of Western Civilization and Culture on Africa". (2010): 3.

rudimentary though it was, with great potential as accompanies every human institution, was brutally uprooted and replaced by the authoritarianism of colonialism. A new crop of elites was created, nurtured, and weaned on the altar of violence and colonialism, armed with the structures of the modern state to continue to carry out the art and act of subjugation of the masses of the people in the service of colonialism.¹⁷

The extended family gave way to the nuclear family, the issue of single parenthood soon became a norm, proficiency in African language soon declined, new religions other than African traditional religion were introduced, amongst other regrettable changes. The African cosmos became a victim of extraneous ideology, of which it has continued to grapple with, with little or no success. For instance, as part of the erosion of African cultural values, Africans now bear at least a European or Christian name.¹⁸ This means that the entire African fabric was affected by the proliferation of Westerners into Africa's geographical landscape. No sane society chooses to build its future on foreign cultures, values and systems. Every society is obliged to search deep in its history, culture, religion and morality to discover the values upon which its development and liberation, its civilisation and its identity should be based.

During the colonial agitations, African leaders, educated in Europe and the Americas, inculcated the Pan African ideological spirit and started the movement for the independence of African states. Pan Africanism became a voice to express the spirit of agitation across Africa. The conflict with colonial domination in the domain of music was not limited to this era, as most African states began to experience military takeover of government soon after their political independence. The brutality of

¹⁷ N.O. Mimiko. "Would Falola Frustrations Suffice? Tradition, Governance Challenges and the Prospects of Change in Africa." in Niyi Afolabi, ed. *Toyin Falola: The Man, The Mask, The Muse*. (North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2010): 641-42.

¹⁸ Benson O. Igboin. "Colonialism and African Cultural Values", 100.

military dictatorship invited the revival of a pre-colonial ethnomusicology, a practice of political protest songs to express misgivings about the leaders of the day. Several musicians like Bob Marley and Mariam Makeba of South Africa expressed the spirit of protest and agitation in music. Fela Anikulapo Kuti was not left out in creating a notch for himself in this category. The ultimate aim of these legendary musicians was to effect a revolution in their societies.¹⁹ Music became an important avenue for these expressions because it has an insidious way of permeating the most unexpected minds. It is often said, music is the language of the soul.²⁰

Fela Anikulapo Kuti and Nigeria and Africa's History

Every society is made of individuals and groups whose actions, both conscious and unconscious, form and mould events at different historical epochs. However, the place of big men in history has always caused serious debate in the process of historical reconstruction among historians. These problems have divided scholars into two mutually exclusive positions, namely the individualist and the collectivist schools. While scholars in the individualist school of thought postulate outstanding 'individual genius as creative force in history,' the collectivist school of thought are of the position that individuals are parts of the organic whole and that the actions of individuals cannot be treated in isolation from society.²¹ In this case, the individualist position is underpinned by the idealist conception of history, which holds that thoughts, ideas or consciousness by individuals are the major force and determinant in history. Hence, the ideas and deeds of outstanding great men constitute a decisive factor in historical reality. Significantly, one will agree that historical reconstruction from the individualist

¹⁹ Funmilayo Modupe Adu. "Re-Inventing Fela Anikulapo Kuti: Radical Musicology and Political Expressionism, A Dialectical Interrogation." 72.

²⁰ Funmilayo Modupe Adu. 72.

²¹ Carr in Shina Alimi and Iroju Anthony. "No Agreement Today, No Agreement Tomorrow: Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and Human Rights Activism in Nigeria." *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol.6, no.4, (September 2013): 76.

perspective, particularly biography, often results in eulogising historical actors and their deeds, immortalising history and embarking on a forlorn journey into the investigation of conscious or unconscious motives behind the behaviour of great men.²² It is therefore on this premise that this paper aligns with the individualistic school of thought to investigate Africa's past from Fela's perspective through the instrumentality of his music.

Several academic works by notable scholars such as Carlos Moore, Christopher A. Veal, John Jaboro, and Abdul Awuni have examined Fela's biography, his musical accomplishments, his countercultural lifestyle, Pan-African views, and ideological ambivalence, among other themes. For instance, Carlos Moore graphically chronicled the life of Fela in his early biography, detailing his birth, achievements, and experiences in the United States during the 1960s, including his introduction to the Black Power Movement, which significantly shaped his political consciousness.²³ Moore later revised this work in *Fela: This Bitch of a Life*, devoting the opening chapter to Fela's views on African unification and discussing the Nigerian military dictators' response to his defiant lifestyle.²⁴ Similarly, John Jaboro explored Fela's belief in the ancient Egyptian mystery system, particularly after his 1979 encounter with the Ghanaian magician Kwaku Addae, along with Fela's nostalgia for traditional African communal life and his eventual death from HIV/AIDS in 1997.²⁵ Abdul Awuni, in his work "The Contribution of the Afrobeat Legend, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti to Pan-Africanism," offers a concise

²² Shina Alimi and Iroju Anthony. "No Agreement Today, No Agreement Tomorrow: Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and Human Rights Activism in Nigeria." 76.

²³ Carlos Moore, *Fela Fela: This Bitch of a Life* (London: Allison & Busby, 1982).

²⁴ Carlos Moore, *Fela: This Bitch of a Life* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009).

²⁵ John Jaboro, *Fela Kuti: The Abami Eda* (Lagos: Rhythm House, 2012).

biography of Fela, from his childhood in Abeokuta to his rise as a celebrated African musical figure.²⁶

Although much has been written about him, it remains useful to provide a brief biography of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti for readers unfamiliar with his life and work.

Fela Anikulapo Kuti was born in 1938 in Abeokuta to the family of Right Reverend Israel Oludotun Ransome-Kuti and Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. His father was a Christian schoolmaster, minister and master pianist, while his mother was a feminist leader who was very active in the anti-colonial Nigerian women's movement. Fela began his education at Abeokuta Grammar School, where his father was the Principal. It was under his tutelage that Fela also learnt the rudiments of music and piano. In 1958, Fela's parents sent him to London for further studies. The original course he was to study was Medicine, like two of his brothers (Koye and Beko), instead, he opted for Trinity College's School of Music.

By 1963, Fela returned to Nigeria and kickstarted Koola Lobitos, and the trumpet was his initial preferred instrument. Most literature suggests that the immediate force behind his political consciousness was his mother, who greatly inspired him. Apart from this domestic factor, which played a major role in shaping Fela's political philosophy, an important external factor equally contributed to the formation of his political consciousness was his second American sojourn in 1969. He came in contact with his American friend, Sandra Izsadore, and was introduced to the activities of the Black Panther Movement and the Autobiography of Malcom X. All these convinced him that Africa had a history of which the world must hear and the earlier Africa started conscientizing other people about her rich cultural and historical heritage, the better it will be for Africa.²⁷ Fela was preoccupied with a

²⁶ Abdul Awuni, "A Critique of the Political Philosophy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti." An M.A. Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of African Studies, University of Ghana, July 2014.

²⁷ Inusah Awuni. "A Critique of the Political Philosophy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti." An M.A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of African Studies, University of Ghana, (July 2014): 31-32).

political philosophy not only for his country, Nigeria, but also a political philosophy for Africa as a whole. The political philosophy of Fela can be gleaned from his music, popularly called Afrobeat or to use his own expression, 'African Classical Music'.²⁸ He created a new musical movement, Afrobeat, using that forum to express his revolutionary political opinions against the dictatorial Nigerian government of the 1970s and 1980s. His exploits in music helped in the fight against military rule in Nigeria.

The immediate setting that shaped his political consciousness was the United States, and the revolutionaries that influenced him were Black Americans. Since he was not an American, he felt it was more relevant to transfer his revolutionary struggles to his society, where sociohistorical conditions were different from those of the United States. He had to devise his type of revolutionary struggle suitable to his social environment as well as the possibilities of his existential condition. Music was the instrument he chose, and music, like other varieties of art, is located in the conjunction of structure and culture; music influences structure and culture, and they, in turn, shape music. So, a careful examination of Fela's life can tell us something about Nigerian society.²⁹ Fela indicated that Africans, and for that matter, the post-colonial State, had lost their direction. From dress code to governance system, the post-colonial African man was imitating the former colonial powers as if the African could not boast of any culture before colonisation.³⁰ Fela's music was a form of political music that attempted to fix the complexities and contradictions of post-colonial Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. His agitation was multidimensional: he created the Afrobeat genre of popular music

²⁸ Olorunyomi and Carlos Moore in Inusah Awuni. "A Critique of the Political Philosophy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti." 10.

²⁹ Justin Labinjoh. "Fela Anikulapo-Kuti: Protest Music and Social Processes in Nigeria", *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1, (September 1982): 119-120.

³⁰ Inusah Awuni. "A Critique of the Political Philosophy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti." (July 2014): 10.

with an unusual style of "politically charged lyrics and anti-establishment politics," through which he periodically "launched comprehensive venomous critique of both institutions and individuals he considered as causes and perpetrators of Nigeria's reigning incredible anomie."³¹ For Fela, music was not only a weapon but a means to change the world. Thus, throughout the 1970s and into the mid-1980s, the wind was at Fela's back; no other musician in Africa, A continent superlatively rich in musical traditions and trends, was as prolific, ingenious and admired as he was.³²

Fela traced the roots of Africa's socio-economic and political problems to slavery and colonialism. Like Dr Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, in his book *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*, Fela believed that although colonial rule in Africa had formally ended, the Western domination of Africa continued through "the invisible government" and subtle monopoly of the African economy.³³ Fela was able to achieve his political convictions and social corrective through this musicology, and for decades and beyond his death, Fela continued to impact the African and international scene as the activist, political spokesman and voice of the oppressed.

"Why Black Man Dey Suffer (1971)": *Yellow Fever, African Message, Suffering and Shmiling, Perambulator: An Appraisal*

A number of strategies have been engaged by Nigerians and Africans to address issues of national and continental development. One of such is music. The role of music in social control can never be overemphasised. Music x-rays happenings in the society while the artist (musician) retails

³¹ Tejumola Olaniyan. *Arrest the Music! Fela and his rebel art and Politics*. (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2004): 4. See also, Tejumola Olaniyan. "The Cosmopolitan Nativist: Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and the Antinomies of Postcolonial Modernism." *Research in African Literatures*, 32(2), 2001.

³² Carlos Moore. *Fela: This Bitch of a Life*. (Allison & Busby: Lawrence Hill Books, 1982): 304.

³³ Shina Alimi and Iroju Anthony. 79.

his/her role as the conscience of his/her society.³⁴ Over the years, music has been used by many Nigerian musical artists to educate Nigerians about their social realities for positive change and development. Music and musicians have helped over the ages and are still contributing to nation-building. In “Why Black Man Dey Suffer”, Fela pointed out that:

*We dey sit down for our land jeje – We were living peacefully in our land; We dey mind our business jeje – Minding our own business peacefully; Some people come from far away land. Dem fight us and take away our land – They fought us and stole our land; Dem take our people and spoil all our towns – They enslaved our people and destroyed our towns; Na since then trouble start ... - That’s when our troubles started; Dem take our culture away from us – They took away our culture; Dem give us dem culture we no understand – They imposed on us their culture which we don’t understand; Black people we no know ourselves – Black people we don’t know ourselves; We no know our ancestral heritage – We don’t know our ancestral heritage.*³⁵

The above excerpt clearly illustrates the history of Africa before European incursion and the subsequent suppression and subjugation of Africa and her cultural heritage. Commenting on European expansion and influence in Africa, Imbua, Onor and Odey think that the explorers who promoted the idea of European superiority over African socio-cultural, political, and technological advancement were involved in the internal politics of some kingdoms.³⁶ This racial superiority persisted until the colonial times. Fela was angered by the European despoliation of Africa and the imposition of Westernisation against Afrocentrism. He viewed post-independent Africa as ‘a prison of peoples.’ He believed and stated firmly that Africa fell into the hands of corrupt individuals who wrecked the continent instead of developing it.

³⁴ Oja Egwemi and Salifu Musa. “Music Performance and Social Reality: Fela Kuti's Zombie And 2face Idibia's E Be Like Say as Paradigm.” *Hofa: African Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, Vol.4, No.1, (2019): 17.

³⁵ Tejumola Olaniyan. *Arrest the Music! Fela and his rebel art and Politics*. (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2004): 233.

³⁶ David Imbua, Sandy Onor and Patrick Odey. *A Companion to African History in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. (Makurdi: Aboki Publishers, 2017): 109.

The phenomenon of skin bleaching that was rampant among urban Nigerian youths of the 1970s and early 1980s – a practice Fela read as self-hatred and a craving for Caucasian standards of beauty – is vehemently criticised in *Yellow Fever*. He articulated the yellowness that results from bleaching as a disease by adroitly playing upon words and linking it to “yellow fever”.³⁷ In Kuti’s classic hit and title track, “Yellow Fever,” Kuti expressed his disgust for women who bleached their skin, and he showed no hesitation in relaying his views about such women to his audience. From Kuti’s “Yellow Fever” lyrics: “You dey bleach o, you dey bleach. Sisi wey dey go, yellow fever, stupid thing, yeye thing, fucking thing, ugly thing,”.³⁸ The racist notion that white ladies are more beautiful than dark-skinned women made some African women desire to be fair-skinned like European women, a desire that led them to bleach their skin. This added to the several reasons for Fela’s criticisms of Africans who adopted or admired Western culture. However, while everyone is entitled to their personal beliefs, regardless of gender, it is important to recognise that personal perspective does not necessarily equate to truth.³⁹ In *African Message*, Fela was of the notion that the indigenous “chewing stick” cleaned the teeth much better than toothpaste and that the local habit of using water is much more hygienic than the foreign-introduced toilet paper that was threatening to supplant it.⁴⁰

Regarded in some quarters as Africa’s most controversial musician, Kuti used his music to forewarn the people of the dangers of military dictatorship and neo-colonialism. His song, “Shuffering and Shmiling”, brought attention to the sufferings of the masses, the oppressive rule and corruption

³⁷ Tejumola Olaniyan. *Arrest the Music! Fela and his rebel art and Politics*. 234.

³⁸ Adebukunola Babalola. “Overlooking Misogyny: A Critical Examination of Fela Anikulapo Kuti’s Music, Lifestyle and Legacy.” Master of Arts Thesis in Communication, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, Corpus Christi, Texas May 2018): 39.

³⁹ Adebukunola Babalola. “Overlooking Misogyny: A Critical Examination of Fela Anikulapo Kuti’s Music, Lifestyle and Legacy.” 39.

⁴⁰ Tejumola Olaniyan. *Arrest the Music! Fela and his rebel art and Politics*. 234.

prevalent in Nigeria during the period of military rule.⁴¹ “Shuffering and Shmiling” was a message to Africans asking them to open their eyes and acknowledge that they are to blame for their sufferings. In the lyrics, he notes that: “Every day my people dey inside the bus, forty-nine sitting, ninety-nine standing. Dem go pack themselves in like sardine... everyday nah the same, suffer suffer for world ... suffer suffer for world, enjoy for heaven, Christians go dey yab, in spiritum heavinus, muslims go dey call allahu akbar. Open your eye everywhere, Archbishop na miliki, Pope nah enjoyment, Imam nah gbaladun, Imam is enjoyment.” Kuti is emphasising that despite the widespread poverty, Africans are still smiling in the face of suffering because religious leaders are encouraging them to endure hardship in exchange for rewards in the afterlife. At the same time, he is exposing the hypocrisy of these leaders, who are living in luxury at the expense of the people.⁴² Thus, Fela’s idea of revolution is promoting a way of life where people are rejecting fear, acting naturally and rationally, and refusing to submit blindly to religion.

To Fela, the term “Perambulator” applies to individual representations of institutions, victims of named systems or institutions, and to systems and political institutions themselves.⁴³ The song targeted the political state and the condition of Nigeria. At independence in 1960, there was great hope - hope of reversing a colonially induced African dependency on the global economy and of creating prosperous, politically stable, and socially cohesive entities. In short, there were hopes of “rapid modernisation.” However, by the 1980s, many African nations had sunk into the depths of destitution and despair. This song depicted the problem of legitimacy, corruption and military involvement in

⁴¹ Adebukunola Babalola. “Overlooking Misogyny: A Critical Examination of Fela Anikulapo Kuti’s Music, Lifestyle and Legacy.” 36.

⁴² BBC News, 2003 in Douglas Cohen. 37.

⁴³ Tejumola Olaniyan. “The Cosmopolitan Nativist: Fela Anikulapo- Kuti and the Antinomies of Postcolonial Modernism.” *Research in African Literatures*, 32(2), (2001): 141.

post-colonial Nigeria and Africa. It also depicted a lack of progress in post-colonial Nigeria and Africa. For Fela, the fundamental absence of self-knowledge lies at the heart of African perambulation in the contemporary world.⁴⁴ Thus, from the songs highlighted so far, it is evident that Fela's music reflects the socio-political realities of Nigeria. His songs document key historical developments within Nigeria and Africa, while also critiquing the lasting impact of European incursion into the continent. These themes represent some of the pressing social issues confronting the Nigerian nation and Africa at large. Such problems have significantly impeded the socio-economic and political development of both the country and the continent as a whole.

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's incisive lyricism in *Why Black Man Dey Suffer* and other seminal works powerfully encapsulates the historical trajectory of African subjugation and its long-lasting effects on the continent's identity and development. His portrayal of Africa's pre-colonial peace violently disrupted by European imperialism lays bare the processes of cultural erasure, displacement, and systemic exploitation that underpin much of Africa's contemporary struggles. This historical narrative echoes the foundational insights of postcolonial theorists like Frantz Fanon, who argued that colonial domination not only dispossessed Africans of their land but also imposed alien cultural values that alienated them from their own heritage.⁴⁵ Fela's music acts as a counter-discourse, reclaiming African identity by exposing the ongoing psychological and socio-political consequences of colonialism. The phenomenon of skin bleaching, as critiqued in "Yellow Fever," symbolises this internalised colonial

⁴⁴ Tejumola Olaniyan. "The Cosmopolitan Nativist: Fela Anikulapo- Kuti and the Antinomies of Postcolonial Modernism." 141.

⁴⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 1963, p. 32.

mindset, a manifestation of the deep scars left by centuries of racialised oppression that continue to shape beauty standards and self-perception among African youth today.⁴⁶

Moreover, Fela's sharp critique of post-independence governance and societal complicity, as articulated in *Shuffering and Shmiling*, highlights the painful paradox of African self-governance where freedom from colonial rule did not translate into liberation from oppression. His observation that Africans bear responsibility for their continued suffering, often pacified by religious rhetoric, remains strikingly relevant in contemporary Nigeria and beyond, where corruption, authoritarianism, and socio-economic inequalities persist. This aligns with C. Wright Mills's concept of the "power elite," where new indigenous elites replace colonial rulers but continue patterns of domination and exclusion.⁴⁷ Fela's music serves not only as historical testimony but also as a radical call to consciousness and action, urging Africans to confront their internal contradictions and reclaim their destiny. His artistic legacy remains a vital lens through which to understand the intertwined histories of colonial trauma, postcolonial challenges, and the quest for genuine socio-political emancipation in Africa today.

Since postcolonial Africa is a complex phenomenon, it is essential to engage in a multiplicity of ideological tools which are essential to antagonise and reconstitute a new imagining of the African continent and the livelihood of its postcoloniality.⁴⁸ An attempt to prescribe the ideal state suitable for the reconstruction of postcolonial Africa did not escape the intellectual curiosity of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, who consciously and for the most part, expressed his views in music. Thus, Fela saw the prevalent

⁴⁶ Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid*. Wits University Press, 2009, p. 118

⁴⁷ C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*. Oxford University Press, 1956, p. 13.

⁴⁸ Tendayi Sithole. Fela Kuti and the Oppositional Lyrical Power," *Muziki: Journal of Music Research in Africa*, 9:1, (2012): 10.

political economy of postcolonial Africa as a phenomenon which could not lead Africa out of its colonial past. Indeed, corruption, oppression, mismanagement of Africa's resources by the continent's leaders, neo-colonialism in Africa and the African cultural crisis were all phenomena Fela attempted to address in his musical compositions and attempted to propose a way out of this morass. He proposed that the solution to Africa's problems is for Africans to embark on continental unification under democratic governance, a return to the communal ways of their ancestors, as well as purging themselves and the continent of Euro-Christian and Islamic influences.

Post-colonial Nigeria continues to grapple with a myriad of socio-political challenges, ranging from entrenched corruption and nepotism to more violent and destabilising vices such as terrorism, kidnapping, armed robbery, banditry, the herder-farmer conflict, and widespread insecurity. These problems have escalated over the decades, undermining national development and threatening the fabric of Nigerian society. In the face of rising internal displacement due to insecurity, persistent intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts,⁴⁹ the terror inflicted by bandits across much of the northern states, ongoing militancy and oil theft in the Niger Delta, as well as separatist agitations in the South-East, the question arises: how can Nigeria's cultural values be preserved? With traditional institutions weakened and displaced populations struggling to maintain their customs, what remains of Nigeria's indigenous heritage is increasingly at risk. The erosion of communal values, respect for elders, and indigenous languages is becoming more pronounced, particularly among displaced youth and in urban centres where Western and global influences dominate.

As Fela Kuti lamented in his timeless "*Shuffering and Shmiling*", Nigerians often endure their suffering with silence or misplaced faith in corrupt systems. Decades after the song's release, its

⁴⁹ Godspower A. Uduigwomen, "The Idere-Ito Agitation over Limestone Site: A Study of Resource Competition and Intra-Ethnic Relations in Cross River State." *Sophia: An African Journal of Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 18, No. 2, April 2018: 165-176.

message remains painfully relevant. Despite democratic governance and increased access to information, life and the quality of leadership in Nigeria remain far from the aspirations envisioned at independence. Citizens continue to bear the brunt of poor governance, economic hardship, and the decline of traditional norms, all of which threaten the preservation of Nigeria's rich cultural legacy. However, in today's poverty-stricken and increasingly volatile climate, Nigerians are no longer smiling. The persistent prevalence of social vices - corruption, insecurity, terrorism, kidnapping, and armed robbery - has severely undermined the nation's socioeconomic and political development. These issues have not only hampered economic progress but also stalled the emergence of a cohesive and genuinely unified Nigerian state. The challenge before us now is twofold: to preserve and promote Nigerian and broader African cultural values, while aggressively addressing the internal crises threatening national stability.

The current situation reveals that Nigeria can no longer rely solely on internal efforts to solve its complex security challenges. From the insurgency of Boko Haram and ISWAP in the North-East, to the surge in banditry in the North-West, and rampant kidnapping and militancy in the South-South and South-East, the magnitude and transnational nature of these problems necessitate broader international cooperation. Global terrorism networks, porous borders, and illicit arms flows have made insecurity a regional and international concern. In light of these developments, Nigeria must deepen collaboration with regional bodies like ECOWAS and the African Union, while also strengthening its partnerships with global powers and institutions such as the United Nations, the African Development Bank, and international counter-terrorism coalitions. The interconnectedness of global security demands multilateral responses, a fact continuously emphasised by the UN and international policymakers.

More than six decades after independence, Fela Kuti's prophetic message still resonates - "we are our own problem." Yet, acknowledging internal culpability does not negate the strategic necessity of aligning with external partners. Solving or mitigating Africa's deep-rooted issues requires both internal reform and global solidarity. Only then can Nigeria become a stable, prosperous nation where cultural values are not only preserved but proudly exported to the rest of the world.

Fela's music vividly critiques this unequal distribution of power and exposes the lived realities of Nigerians oppressed under military regimes. His songs like *Shuffering and Shmiling* highlight how the ruling elite maintain control through systemic oppression, including the manipulation of religion to pacify the masses. This mirrors Karl Marx's assertion that ruling classes use ideology as a tool to perpetuate their dominance by shaping the consciousness of the oppressed.⁵⁰ Both theorists help explain the antagonistic relationship between the elite and the marginalised, with Fela's music serving as a cultural resistance against this domination.

The repression Fela faced from the Nigerian military - raids, arrests, censorship - reflects conflict theory's concept of elite suppression of dissent to maintain hegemony.⁵¹ These actions reveal how power elites escalate conflict when their dominance is threatened, often resorting to violence and coercion. This dynamic situates Fela not only as a musician but as a social critic and resistor confronting entrenched power structures.

Furthermore, theorists of conflict have underscored the significance of cultural expression as a battleground for social change. Fela's music transcends entertainment, functioning as a vehicle for raising awareness and mobilising opposition to injustice. This relationship between art and society

⁵⁰ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*. Edited by C.J. Arthur, International Publishers, 1970, p. 64.

⁵¹ Wright C. Mills, *The Power Elite*. Oxford University Press, 1956, p. 41.

illustrates how social structures shape cultural production, and conversely, how art can challenge and reshape these structures. As Marx emphasises, culture is both a reflection of material conditions and a site for potential transformation.⁵² Ultimately, this suggests that Nigeria's ongoing socio-political challenges, such as corruption, ethnic violence, and insecurity, are deeply rooted in structural inequalities perpetuated by elites. Effective solutions require confronting these power imbalances and empowering marginalised groups. Fela's legacy, when analysed through this theoretical framework, remains a compelling call for social justice and collective responsibility in addressing Nigeria's enduring struggles.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that popular music transcends mere entertainment, serving as a vital repository of history and social commentary. Building on the insights of scholars like Uya and Majuk, it has been shown that music remains an indispensable source of historical knowledge. Through Fela Kuti's powerful works - *Why Black Man Dey Suffer*, *Yellow Fever*, *African Message*, *Shuffling and Shmiling*, *Perambulator*, and *Colonial Mentality* - we access rich narratives that trace Africa's encounters with European colonialism and unravel the complexities of the post-colonial era. While these songs offer historical context, this paper has focused more sharply on how Fela's music critically interprets post-colonial challenges facing Nigeria and Africa at large. Crucially, it challenges the oversimplified narrative that external forces alone are to blame for contemporary woes. Echoing Fela's candid assertion in *Shuffling and Shmiling*, the harsh truth is that many of Africa's problems are self-inflicted. We are the problem when corruption cripples our institutions, when greed and selfishness override communal progress, when leaders abuse power instead of serving the people, and when

⁵² Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*. Edited by C.J. Arthur, International Publishers, 1970, p. 57.

citizens remain silent or complicit in the face of injustice. These internal failures - poor governance, lack of accountability, and societal complacency - have stifled development and eroded cultural values.

The cultural and moral fabric of the continent is at stake. If African nations are to preserve and celebrate their rich cultural heritage, there must be a conscious societal shift - a turning point where communities reclaim their values and reject apathy. Only by confronting internal issues head-on can Nigeria and Africa transform these crises into opportunities for renewal. In doing so, their culture will not only survive but thrive and resonate globally as a source of pride and identity.

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