

Nigeria in the Search for Democratic Rebirth: An interrogation of Fela Anikulapo Kuti's Musical Impact, Ethno Musicology and Political Expressionism

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ABSTRACT

Fela Anikulapo Kuti's musical genre entails Afrocentricity, highlife, musical activism, and song writing. Fela's musicology speaks in high dialectic tone of social protest severally for decades, to impact political change in Nigeria. The decades between 1958 and 1997 popularized the defense of the oppressed and expressed an African ideal as opposed to colonialism, post-colonial domination, and political oppression. Historically radicalism in music was a battle against oppression in Europe and elsewhere. The invention of the Afrobeat by Fela created a vent to criticize, correct and project an expectation of an ideal of African democracy. Historically, Fela was born into a family where activism and human right protection was an important agenda fought by his mother, Mrs Funmilayo Kuti and later his Brother Beko Ransome Kuti, who led the campaign for democracy, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in Nigeria, defending human rights and political oppression in the hey days of military dictatorship. Fela defended the oppressed through his musical expressionism, a traditional mix of jazz and African lyrics which he termed Afrobeats. Fela's music was musical expressionism per excellence; it was patterned after the African theme in ethnomusicology. This paper argues that radical musicology in Fela's presentation was unique as it inculcated two cultural values of African and the European and even post-humans; it still expresses criticisms of the political class and speaks out as a voice to promote change (political revolution). It is further the argument of this paper that democratic reordering in Nigeria severally benefited from Fela's political expressionism in music.

Keywords: Fela Anikulapo, Political Expressionism, Musical Impact, Democratic Rebirth, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Olufela Olusegun Oludotun Ransome Kuti, alias Anikulapo's musical genre entails Afrocentricity, highlife, musical activism, and song writing. Fela (born 15th October, 1938) was described as Africa's most noted 20th century musician, activist, political spokesman, and voice of and for the oppressed. Fela's musicology speaks in high dialectic tone of social protest. The decades between 1958 and 1997 popularized the defense of the oppressed and expressed an African ideal as opposed to colonialism, post-colonial domination, and political oppression. Historically radicalism/ activism in music was a battle against oppression in Europe and elsewhere. The invention of the Afrobeat by Fela created a vent to criticize, correct and project an expectation of an ideal of African democracy. Historically, Fela was born into a family where activism and human right

protection was an important agenda fought by his mother, Mrs Funmilayo Kuti and later his Brother Beko Ransome Kuti who led the campaign for democracy, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in Nigeria, defending human rights and political oppression.

Fela grew up in an era dominated by the pan African ideals and activism (in the 1950s and 1960s). African leaders such as Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Nelson Mandela, Obafemi Awolowo, Azikiwe and Sir Dauna of Sokoto were leaders who had fought for African and Nigerian independence, these Africanist leaders had made pronouncements and organized conferences, produced volumes of literature in support of pan African ideals which had influence on the happenings at this time. Fela Anikulapo, the son of a historical activist woman, who led the women uprising in Abeokuta against gender imbalanced policies

will necessarily have towed the same line. Mrs Funmilayo Ransome Kuti had been killed by the military while residing with fela in his house. Fela had incurred the wrath of the military government of President Olusegun Obasanjo through his radical music. The army had engineered the untimely death of Fela's mother, touching the life of Fela, who had the same natural inclination to activism. Fela defended the oppressed through his musical expressionism, a traditional mix of jazz and African lyrics which he termed Afrobeats. Fela's music was musical expressionism per excellence; it was patterned after the African cultural theme in ethnomusicology. Radical musicology in Felas presentation was unique as it inculcated two cultural values of African and the European. This is noted in the jazz presentation and African lyrics. Fela's stage performance involved dancing young ladies who sway to the rhythm, in abandonment and project the African cultural mood in musical explorations. The words of Fela's music, though sounds a little too intellectual to an uneducated, usually impact high intellectualism and arouse philosophical thinking. The messages are usually prophetic in nature, e.g Everything scatters, scatter Nigeria suffer suffer also teacher teach me nonsense,,,,, "I No Be Gentleman at All oo, I Be Afrikaman, Original..."—Fela Anikulapo Kuti, "Gentleman"

This interesting dimension (philosophical music) also had cultural connotations and grandstanding. Ethnomusicology connotes that a cultural implication is rooted in a musical composition; this is highly expressed in Fela's music. Michael Veal (Undated) argued that Fela's music was no jazz, that the cultural placement of jazz music in all its continental domiciles did not reflect the same rhyme and composition. It could be argued however that there was an element in Fela's music that reflected his European training. Obviously too, was the African ideology, and I argue in this paper and elsewhere that there was also the Yoruba musical philosophy, this is what I refer to as the cultural dimension in Fela's work. This was further spiced by his activism, a fight against military dictatorship and a defense against human rights violation, which existed as a spirit in the mother and brother of Fela. Historical Yoruba traditional music expressed the mind of the individual and the society. It promoted information and education and projected the African cultural values. These

elements were highly present in Fela's composition and musical performance. Music in Yoruba land is more than entertainment. It is a voice for the voiceless, an activists method of castigating the high and mighty without the opportunity for retaliation, as music is usually presented in the proverbial. Yoruba songs are open to teach wisdom to all and targeted at correcting individuals and society. The wealthy could employ a musician to help abuse an enemy. Who in turn could retaliate in the same way? Yoruba musicians are fond of using proverbial words/songs to sensitize a politically high individual that his secrets are out, or a policy is not popular among the people or that his government is no more popular and he should abdicate (a good example are the songs of ologundudu). This trend is a form of indirect activism against the political class, it also creates awareness amongst the citizenry. This paper explores the musical works of Fela to note that they were a good achievement in political expressiveness and provide a good archive on Yoruba ethnomusicology. It is further noted that it had elements of European civilization, Philosophy and culture. This interesting potpourri is a vision of excellence that won him several awards and continues to impact his society and elsewhere even after his death. The paper noted the interesting input of Fela's work on Nigeria's democratic reordering and political change, while laying emphasis on his musical radicalism in the wake of pan Africanist and nationalist struggles and into the era of military dictatorship. This is consequently argued to have impacted democratic change. The paper is subsequently divided into conceptual clarifications, Musical Radicalism in Europe and Elsewhere, African Politics, Music and Expressionism, Fela Anikulapo's Musicology and Political Expressionism in Africa: An Assessment of Impact on Nigerian's Democratic Reordering and the Conclusion

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Political Expressionism

Political expressionism is not strange to Africa. Historically political expressing was rapt in colonial and pre-colonial Africa. In the pre-colonial times, kings were castigated through music as a medium of expression. Words were difficult in these usages because the castigator would usually be dealt with, even with a death sentence. It is often said, a roba fin loba npa i.e it is him that is rude that the king kills; that is to

say the king had a right to execute whosoever was rude to him. But when it comes to the realm of music, the king's hands are tied as the musical presentations are indirect in language and at the same time so expressive, that it will take even a simple mind to sometimes understand the message and the information remains for generations as long as the song is sang. In the colonial era, in Nigeria as case study, demonstrations against colonial government policies required songs as attendant information giver to the demonstrating participants and the colonial government (Eesuola, *ibids*). Interestingly a very good case was the one led by Fela's mother in Abeokuta against salt tax, and other anti-gender policies of the colonial government. The Aba women's riots in the eastern part of Nigeria, is also assumed to have adopted a form of music for demonstrations as it was a rallying point for participants, this is noted by Eesuola (see radical musicology below). Political electioneering processes, political information giving and anti-policy agitations were usually accompanied with song renditions (*ibid*). For example, a Lagos state politician used songs to send home his message to voters, Adefuye ni e dibofun, mummy Daddy, Adefuye ni e dibofun (1991). This short song was easy to understand and retain in memory, and the candidate won the election. As noted earlier, such songs could carry positive or negative messages, depending on the purpose which it was meant for. In the instance of Fela, the political needs of the times made his musical activism relevant. Fela thought that art and his own music should have political meaning and provide a wet ground towards political revolution (this never happened until his death, in 1997). Fela lived in an era when military dictatorship was prevalent across African states. Fela's music was a voice for the oppressed and castigation for the evil rulers of the day. Fela's music awakened the urgent need for activism and agitations towards democratic reordering. No wonder, his brother Beko, was a forefront advocate in political agitations for a return to democracy (The Nigerian June 12, 1993 agitations).

Radical Musicology

Writing on radical stylistics, some scholars (Eesuola, 2015,) Veal, undated, Dateref) have argued that radicalism in music is not limited to any society or time. From the ancients and historical times, activism and resistance have usually been embellished and projected through

songs. Radical music does not stand to entertain but usually accompanies some forms of protest noted Eesuola. Protest against societal ills such as racism, political oppression, economic downturn, human right violations, conflictual situations among ethnic units and a host of others. Eesuola (2015) insists that In Nigeria for instance, students' activists, labour unions and civil society organizations often use songs whenever they embark on any protest: solidarity forever...we shall always fight for our rights, and their struggles have yielded several positive results.

He reiterates further many of Fela Anikulapo Kuti's songs are often used by striking unions, demonstrators and protesters, as exemplified in the 2012 protest against removal of fuel subsidy where lyrics of Fela's Army Arrangement and Shuffering and Shmiling (*sic*) extensively marked the procession of people around Lagos and Abuja (Arukaino 2012, cited in Eesuola 2015, p83-84).

Expressing the presence of musical radicalism in the international environment he noted Bob Marley and other renowned musicians. He emphasized thus, Music – protest relation was also prominent in the United States' Civil Rights Movements of the 1970s (Lipset 1970, p.72; Eesuola 2012), and in most places where one form of resistance or protest occurs in the world today, people involved are often seen chanting songs and playing music (*ibid*).

Eesuola observed that Fela composed Sorrow, Tears and Blood, when he sensed that the people of Nigeria were not prepared to confront their unrepentantly corrupt government. It was from this point that Fela began confrontational protest, while also making frantic efforts to sensitize the citizens and incite them towards staging popular revolt against the government (*ibid*. p88), and concluded that the foregoing roles that music and songs are perceived to play in protest and political demonstrations engender it as a source of radicalism within musical forms (*ibid*).

MICHAEL VEAL (*ibid*) recorded that Fela may be placed in a generation of world musicians born during the 1930s, who fused jazz with a variety of local styles to achieve international recognition. Among these are listed Hugh Masekela of South Africa, Abdullah Ibrahim, p.k.a. Dollar Brand of South Africa, Randy Weston of U.S.A. and Hermeto Pascoal of Brazil (VEAL, *ibid*).

The issue of Afrobeat and jazz is complicated by the conflicting cultural perspectives which frequently occur when any artistic expression crosses cultural borders and assumes a new functional and symbolic identity noted Veal (ibid). It is importantly explained by scholars (Eesuola, 2015, Veal, undated) that fundamentally, jazz was an African- American expression and has in fact been subjected to a variety of new interpretations in cultural spheres as dissimilar as Japan, West Africa, Russia and Western Europe and elsewhere. While Fela's Afrobeat style is strongly associated with jazz (probably because of his adoption of the saxophone) in Nigeria, attempts to define his music as jazz have been met with strong resistance in Europe and the United States. Interestingly, in this dimension, Veal noted an example of this in Afrika '70's headlining performance at the 1978 Berlin Jazz Festival causing a controversy in the German music press in which jazz critics denigrated the musicianship of the Afrika '70 band and Fela in particular, probably this is a crux of the matter as I argue in this paper that Fela's cultural potpourri presentation appealed to areas without geographical bounds that were limited by culture. Veal (ibid) had a strong point in noting that there are several fundamental aspects - political, cultural, and religious - which militate against Afrobeat's simple characterization as jazz (ibid). In spite of this, Veal (ibid) insists that Fela's work - while not 'jazz' in the strict sense does represent a contribution to jazz evolution. Musicology and ethno musicology attempt to explain the depth and breadth of the human phenomena in musical expression. Both are historical and technical interpretations of music but differ in some important ways. Musicology or musical folklore relies on the phonograph as a means of achieving its objectives. Such music is expected to influence ideas about life and the particular culture (ibid) and as such ethno musicology imparts and assert ethno cultural ideals and ideology.

Veal argued that in order to provide the widest perspective on the subject, it is necessary to discuss the continuous circulation of musical elements of cultural symbols between West Africa and its descendants in the Americas, a process which has operated at least since the earliest years of this century, influencing stylistic development throughout Africa and the African diaspora. He further argued, This will enable us to place Fela's work in the larger

context of jazz's historic influence upon West African popular music through the time that the Afrobeat style was developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It must be noted that many of the musical presentations of this era also added the Pan African ideological forms which laid emphasis on return to the African traditional religion, This Fela did without an apology. Fela insisted he was a priest of African traditional religion and usually poured libations before his performances. He also named his performing village "The shrine". This was located at Ikeja in Lagos. Fela's radical music was an insidious awakening for several transitions to democracy. According to Eesuola(2015) Fela's music was adopted for protests during the June 12 political agitations.

Democratic Reordering

In Nigeria, change of governments pervaded the six decades of political history which spanned democracy and military dictatorship. Military rule had become a norm in Africa and stories of military takeover of government was pervading the political scene, but agitations for change continued through several fora, un-noticed but impactful were musical renditions that presented radicalism and criticisms of the military and dictatorships, enlightening the people and nudging towards democratic rebirth. Musical radicalism was never a popular method of agitation against dictatorship as it provided an insidious method of agitations and information spreading. It is argued by this author however that the June 12, agitations in Nigeria created the opportunity for an awareness of the voice of Fela in expressions of anti-governmental protestations. Most notable were demonstrators adoption of Fela's music as protest songs (Eesuola, ibid). These were further gingered by the activities of pro-democracy activists, a leadership arm of which was also provided by Beko, Fela's brother.

Musical Radicalism in Europe and Elsewhere

Music is found in every known culture, past and present, varying widely between times and places. Radicalism in music is also world historical (internet source- [https:// en.m. wikipedia.org/wiki.20thc](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/20th_c)). During the 20th c there was a huge increase on the variety of radical music that people had access to (ibid). Prior to the invention of mass market, twentieth century music was a historical organization of musical style in modern Europe and America. [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki.20thc](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/20th_c). In the

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1970s African American hip hop musicians began to use the record turn table as a medium (ibid). New musicology is a term applied since the late 1980s to a wide variety of work emphasizing cultural study, analysis, and criticism of music, the internet source noted this could be based on feminist, gender studies, queer theory, or post-colonial theory, or work of Theodor. W. Adorno. Musicology-Wikipedia <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>>... The 20th century saw dramatic innovations in musical forms and styles. Composers and songwriters explored new forms and sounds that challenged the previously accepted rules of music of earlier period, such as the 1940s era music (ibid). New musical styles such as genre fusion e.g the fusion of jazz and rock music, the use of new electric, electronic and digital instruments and musical devices were notable innovations of this era (ibid). In the 1980s, electronic dance music genre such as house music created largely with synthesizers and drums machines were new upcoming innovations. The ability to jet travel with band increased the spread of musical styles. Jerome khol, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org.wiki.20thc.in.9.07> Ethno musicology focuses on the interpretation of musical genres, styles and performances of non-western peoples noted Wikipedia. It is further explained that there are four branches of the study of music. Ethnomusicology is music history, music theory, and systematic musicology. Radical musicology became more prominent in the wake of pan Africanist movements and the works of decolonization (ibid).

African Politics, Music and Expressionism

African philosophy is usually expressed by African musicians to delight and inform listeners. Music and musicology (research based music) in Africa is very rich in information and education. Most African music explores folklores, histories and culture (Adu, 2020). They promote African ideas and ideologies and teach lessons and castigate offenders. African music is an exploration of African culture, society, history and proverbial explorations; to tell tales, teach the young and old, divulge secrets, praise dignitaries and heroes, and divulge important coded information to the people (ibid). Music in Africa is a way of life; the man and his music are synchronized to a point where you can barely understand one without a good understanding of the other (ibid). African and Nigerian music express the society; provide corrections and tech history and lessons.

For example Ebenezer Obey in *Ko Sogbon te le da*, explored the tale of a wise man who attempted to satisfy the whole world but failed woefully and concluded that no wisdom nor attitude can fully satisfy humanity. Some local dialectical conceptions are more realistic, sometimes with contradictory innocence as presentations become hash enough to connote meanness and impact, or elicit shame(enough to make the offender commit suicide or go into self-exile) (also see Adu, 2020).

This interesting dimension is taken to a higher spatial spiritual and international dimension by Fela, who was born in Africa; Nigeria, and trained in England. Fela is a musicologist per excellence, having won several international awards, even post humus. Fela's music could be termed scientific as each one was innovative and highly intellectual. The understanding of Fela's music was not only philosophical but impacted more on the learned. Fela's music usually arouses a chain of beads in thought that would leave the listener rummaging over it for days and hours on end. Fela, a mixture of Afro European trained entertainer, but with a rebellious opposition to European cultural domination, termed his musical genre afro beats or afro pop. A combination of the European jazz and African cultural musical innovations, Fela's music was one unique beauty in both composition and lesson and leaning (ibid). Fela's music castigated the military, opposed human rights violations and promoted African traditional religion. It was a pattern originated from Yoruba cultural musical practices of making music out of societal ills and histories; a way of repository Knowledge, castigating offenders, praising heroes and redefining politics and society (Adu, ibid).

Fela Anikulapo's Musicology and Political Expressionism in Africa: An Assessment of Impact on Nigerian's Democratic Reordering

A cursory look at the state of knowledge on the roles of music and songs in socio-political engineering generally purport an understanding of the hidden value inherent in this cultural designation. Ethnomusicology remains the most interesting way of a society' method of transferring information, imparting knowledge and motivating citizens to learn about the aspects of the particular culture, act right, resolve agitations and entertain.

Eesuola (2015) argued that politics has so many definitions, insisting that it is defined and

remain a game which in Lasswell (ibid) assertion determines who gets what, where and how. To buttress this he reiterated that, This is so because the action of man as political animal often revolves around what to get at particular times and places, as well as how to get them. Protest therefore becomes inevitable in all social formations since man cannot get all the values he desires at all times. Man's reaction against what he gets or does not get often manifests in some form of protest and resistance. It is the cause of political protest. Others have also argued in support of the fact that the African philosophy (retained in each unique local culture) was obvious in traditional musical forms and in songs with western European influence (such as that of Fela). Political expressions and ideology are presented through oratory and musical explorations to further insidiously penetrate the minds of the people. Fela took his music as an important medium for political expressiveness. Particularly as it pertained to Africa, Fela's music was in perfect timing with the needs of the day.

From the 50s and 60s, it took cognizance of the agitations against colonialism and oppressions of the black man. After independence, Fela's music went further in the era of military rules to express the need for democratic reordering. The evils of military dictatorship was highlighted to warn, castigate the ruling junta, provide the necessary onslaughts against human right violations by the military and raise the hope of the oppressed that he was not alone in this difficult battles. Songs such as 'Colonial Mentality' was a reflection of Fela's feelings as concerns colonialism. Most interestingly, Fela's music has portrayed the prophetic (Adu and Ogunrotimi, 2021, Exploring Indigenous Epistemologies and Spiritualities) till date and probably into the future, it serves to express, castigate, correct (social anomalies) and promote human rights ideals. It further served as a political corrective, to impact democratic reordering in Nigeria especially that of 1999, which was a cumulative of the struggles of June 12, 1993 (June 12 political agitations adopted Fela's music as song of agitation...see Eesuola, 2015), to commemorate the democratic election (presidential) in what has been adjudged to be Nigeria's freest and fairest elections in Nigeria's political history. It is argued in this paper that Fela's musical impact was insidious but highly influencing politics and society, even post humus.

CONCLUSION

Legendary Fela was a colossus that bestrides the sand of times in African ethnomusicology. Fela projected the ideals of African philosophy and expressiveness. He projected the African ideal in culture, society and politics as opposed to colonialism, post-colonial domination, and political oppression. The military was a target of Fela through the era of military dictatorship. The invention of the Afrobeat by Fela created a vent to criticize, correct and project an expectation of an ideal of African democracy. Political expressions and ideology are presented through oratory and musical explorations to further insidiously penetrate the minds of the people. Fela took his music as an important medium for political expressiveness. Particularly as it pertained to Africa, Fela's music was in perfect timing with the needs of the day. From the 50s and 60s, it took cognizance of the agitations against colonialism and oppressions of the black man. After independence, Fela's music went further in the era of military rules to express the need for democratic reordering. The evils of military dictatorship was highlighted to warn, castigate the ruling junta, provide the necessary onslaughts against human right violations by the military and raise the hope of the oppressed that he was not alone in this difficult battles. Songs such as Colonial Mentality was a reflection of Fela's feelings as concerns colonialism. Most interestingly, Fela's music has portrayed the prophetic, till date and probably into the future, it serves to express, castigate, correct and promote the human right welfarist ideals, this is here concluded political expressionism per excellence and positively contributory to democratic rebirth especially that of the 1999 democratic transitions.

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