

## Fela as a Conscious Musical Caliban

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Fela Kuti's choice of a language of musical communication has always coincided with his perception of who his primary audience is and, even here, we find convergence with the three broad Fanonian stages he underwent. He sang mainly in English in that phase of his high modernist mode of African-American jazz music with tracks like *My Baby Don't Love Me* and *Everyday I got My Blues*; in Yoruba, during the reactive ethno-nationalist phase (having experienced racism in the West); and pidgin, once Pan-Africanism became his main ideological focus.

His version of Pidgin English strove towards the Midwest variant spoken in the Sapele-Warri areas of Delta State of Nigeria — generally regarded as the standard Nigerian Pidgin (henceforth NP). The convenience of this variant for other users of the form, in the vortex of a politically charged language situation like Nigeria's, cannot be divorced from its emergence among minority nationalities. Its cultural dominance over politically dominating larger language groups such as Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba poly-nationalities is not new in history. A most ready example is the cultural incorporation of Fulfude by Hausa language in spite of the fact that Fulfude was the language of the conquering Fulani nationality after the 1804 Jihad in northern Nigeria.

This is not suggesting however that the NP both at Kalakuta Republic<sup>1</sup> (Fela's residence) and the Afrika Shrine<sup>2</sup> (His place of worship

and nightspot) does not hold promise for the inflection of many other variants in Nigeria and, particularly, from Anglophone West Africa. On the contrary, research conducted in the sub region reveals a symbiosis of loan words derived from those sources and the broadcast of registers of Fela's cultural practice in these countries. Constantly referencing Ghanaian folk forms in several lyrics, a country he considered his spiritual home, he sings entirely in Twi in the track "*Fefe Na Eye Fe*". "Ichibuchi", "Tiafi", "Sakarame", "Saluga" and "Gunusi", used to describe the traditional method of faeces disposal in various parts of the continent, are only a few of the breadth of such borrowings.

This is hardly surprising for, apart from the role of the mass media in popularizing a deviant cultural practice (especially outside the shores of Nigeria), Kalakuta in its heydays was residence to "every African escaping persecution,"<sup>3</sup> a truly micro Pan-African commune. An important factor that aids the normative role that NP plays in the commune is the existence of a creolised pidgin among the younger generation from the Midwest (mainly Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw) for whom pidgin is a first language, spoken as a primary language in a manner that pidgin is not among the numerical majority Yoruba nationality in the Lagos area. I find the suggestions of Ben Elugbe and Augusta Omamor on the subject quite persuasive, both on the count that "Pidgin is decidedly a recent development in metropolitan Lagos" and the fact that "there

was linguistic heterogeneity all along the coast, except for the Yoruba part.<sup>4</sup>

For a language that first emerged from contact established with trading and colonizing missions in the Niger Delta, and later transferred to the 'interior' Midwest, Fela's role in further broadcasting the language was preceded by first 'domesticating' it in Lagos, and transforming it (along with other composers) into a valid medium for serious musical composition. By using pidgin to contest the 'airspace' of the linguistic (English) code of officialdom, he gave prestige to it and helped in transforming it into a prominent language of the broadcast medium. Being the official language of the commune, this status came to confer a privilege on the variant, which others aspired towards as a means of gaining the social exclusivity and identity against official culture, which the Republic typifies. This is in many respects similar to the manner in which Rastafarians and other sub cultural groups use language as an "effective means of resisting assimilation and preventing infiltration by members of the dominant groups."<sup>5</sup> While it is correct that pidgin has become a language used by all classes in the Nigerian society, as Elugbe and Omamor assert, it is indisputable that there is a higher dexterity of use, with a variety of coded decoys and hidden transcripts, among persons for whom it is the only medium of communication. This is more so for a community of artists constantly targeted by a repressive state. This dexterity is manifested at the various levels of Kalakuta speech act, ranging the lexical-conceptual structure of their tenses, morphological realization patterns in verb phrases and an increased syntactisation in word order. Surely, there are codes for identifying security agents, demobilizing enemies and generally 'surviving', which I believe disclosing will not only further endanger these habitués but

also amount to an abuse of confidence generously granted a researcher.

The structural pattern of the more open transcript noticeable in the song lyrics conforms to the general usage of NP in a number of ways. Fela uses the repeated adjective qualifier to intensify meaning as in the lines "Na *so so* water for Africa," and "Good good things e go dey happen" of *Original Suffer Head* and *Pansa Pansa* respectively. Juxtaposed against the abundance of water so described, he says there is not a drop for citizens to drink. In *Alagbon Close*, he narrates the ordeal of the suspect against whom the police "... go bring dem dog to *bite bite* you." Not done, the police "...don butt my head with dem gun." In capturing this brutality against his person, Fela transforms a noun (butt, of a gun) into a verb, a process. The interrogative clause "No be" in BONN anticipates an affirmation:

*No be* outside police dey?  
*No be* outside soja dey?  
*No be* outside court dem dey?  
*No be* outside magistrate dey?  
*No be* outside dem kill dem students?  
*No be* outside all dis dey happen?

The affirmation is eventually given by the chorus: *Na craze world* (it is a crazy world), implying the extent to which the public sphere has been circumscribed in spite of the presumption of living in a free ('outside') world.

Like Victor Jara, the Chilean folk singer persecuted for his alternative vision, Fela is essentially a deconstructionist whose creative *spiel* is at its best when subverting standard norms and coinages. He stretches to the limit, the centrifugal potential of language through his re-coinage of standard acronyms and words in order to subvert actual and perceived

hegemonic constructs. During *Yabbis* sessions in the Shrine, in between the night's musical performance, he either heightens the trivial into a grotesque, laughable proportion, or deflates presumed formal categories such that they are removed of their larger-than-life image and re-cloaked in their ordinary, human dimensions. In other words, he creates a burlesque scenario with which he demythologizes the dominant discourse of the ruling elite while at the same time empowering the margins. In a country where the military uniform is dreaded by citizens as a semiotic of power symbolized in the repressive State, Fela, in *Fear Not For Man*, emboldens the margin to deride it reminding that:

Uniform na cloth  
Na tailor dey sew am  
A (military) uniform is also made of normal threads  
(And just as well) sewn by a tailor

Playing his usual Hermes, he alters each of these standard acronyms into novel utterance:

1. *VIP (Very Important Person)*  
*Vagabonds in Power*
2. *BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation)*  
*Big Blind Country*
3. *BONN (West German city)*  
*Beast of No Nation*
4. *SAP (Structural Adjustment Programme)*  
*Suck African People*
5. *US (United States of America)*  
*Underground System*
6. *COP (as in police)*  
*Country of Pain*

While he taints in the negative such references that appear to reinforce institutions or concepts of (authoritarian) power, he cloaks in positive registers others that pertain to his vision of African humanism; hence:

7. *MASS (as in the political mass)*  
*Movement Against Second Slavery, and*

*Music Against Second Slavery*

8. *MOP (as in cleaning up)*  
*Movement of the People*

These ribald practices constitute the basis of *yabbis* at the Shrine, where Fela highlights otherness: that silent but potential alternative in every discourse. The linguistic potential for this has its background in his Yoruba tone language, where any utterance beyond the phoneme can become victim of a tricky polysemy. Hence, *Àbùjá*, the nation's capital, differently inflected in this game of playful distortion could become *Àbùjá*, a short cut.

In what must now appear like an irony, given that he died of an aids related complication, Fela had said that the developing world was bound to contract AIDS once it started taking aid from the developed world. In another breath, he could not understand the whole fuss about the emergence of violent cults in Nigerian universities given that the institutions are structured along a 'Fa-Culty' system, which in Yoruba language will translate as 'invitation to cult.' Germany, he says, can hardly be blamed for the world wars of this century since the Yoruba rendition of the name 'Jà-mà-ni', with a silent (i)-initial position, means 'it is about war'. When officials of the recording label, Motown arrived in Lagos to sign a contract with Fela, he suddenly gave an impossible condition that had frustrated the business executives. Once they left, Fela explained to fans and acolytes at the Shrine that he reneged when he suddenly realized the Yoruba etymology of 'Mo-ta-oùn' (Motown), which is, "I have pawned my voice!"

*All the jive 'bout 'Popular Culture'.*

By describing Afro beat as a popular music we may not necessarily be stating the obvious, because there has been a major confusion in clarifying such related but different terms like

'popular', 'mass', 'folk' and 'people's' art. As a result of the ideological inflection assumed in the discourse of some of the forms, a watertight definition has become all the more difficult. Karin Barber had partially alluded to this in noting that "there is a vast domain of cultural production which cannot be classified as either 'traditional' or 'elite', as 'oral' or 'literate', as 'indigenous' or 'western' in inspiration, because it straddles and dissolves these distinctions."<sup>6</sup> Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel attempt to distinguish between 'folk', 'popular' and 'mass' art. The identification of popular art as an interest of study, for them, is itself informed by the significant difference observable between the form and folk artistic production in the same way that written literature was predicated on oral literature. The main distinction they make between folk art and popular art is that, unlike the latter, folk art is a pre-industrial variant of popular art. Barber complements this view in identifying another level of difference in the fact that, generally, unlike in folk music proper, popular music is produced by professionals and they are mainly in the urban centres. With mass art, there is general agreement that it shares the modern medium of communication with the popular arts; unlike popular art however, it is considered a product of mass mechanical reproduction beside being potentially politically reactionary as Theodore Ardonio has argued.<sup>7</sup> To further clarify the popular art debate, Karin Barber isolates two features of the same phenomenon: "emanating from" or "belonging to" the people; while the first aspect is concerned with the origin, the latter emphasizes the interest it serves. Even this has received a sharp critique by Dapo Olorunyomi who notes "there is nothing in the internal character of the text to assist in the definition, yet the externality of this reality cannot provide a sufficient basis for its definition."<sup>8</sup>

While the distinction between folk art and popular art is fairly clear, the same cannot be said of popular art and mass art. Since their features could overlap on a continuum rather than through any fundamental lateral shift, to insist on a rigid taxonomy may only impoverish the debate. It is perhaps more helpful to identify the features identified with each. For instance, even while in general decline, elements of the folk survive till to date, and supposedly mass forms such as the Nigerian Juju and Fuji music, and the 'junk' press have demonstrated the potential of popular forms in specific contexts. In the aftermath of the annulment of the general elections of 1993 by General Ibrahim Babangida, the 'junk' press — so called because of a preoccupation for breezy, personality slant of story ideas momentarily joined the pro-democracy advocacy media offensive, contrary to the general public's perception of their traditional practice. The later Fuji music too, in spite of its conservative ideological character has, through a secularizing hybridity, blunted the sharp edges of the Islamic orthodoxy from which it emerged. It must be added though that these are only tentative gestures and a more compelling reason for such a shift could also be the promise of an expanded income space in articulating the sensibilities of such diverse persuasions.

Many factors inform the classification of Fela's musical practice as popular (music) art, as distinct from mass (music) art. An important distinction usually alluded to in the debate is the relationship between the artist and his audience. Mass art, as it were, presumably panders to the whims of its clientele and does not engage them in problematising their social situations in a manner that popular art does. By refusing to act the commercial art superstar, or what Michael Veal refers to as "substituting the

myth of art as a communal enterprise in place of the Western myth of the concert hall, or of the artist as separate, other-worldly sphere,"<sup>9</sup> Fela was invariably re-enacting the subversive griot of ancient times, with the burden of delivering his art uncorrupted by material lure. Rather than pander to the whims of even his audience, he challenged their claims, *yabbed* their assumptions and constantly invited them to a debate. Quite often at the African Shrine when the audience would request that a particular number be played, he could counter after a mild debate that, "I used to play that kind of stuff when I was blind like you now are."<sup>10</sup>

The morbid fear expressed by successive Nigerian governments against a popular music expression like Afrobeat is not unique; countries as diverse as the Soviet Union and Canada had embarked on such ventures. A popular music research conducted by James Lull<sup>11</sup> reveals that while the Chinese government embraces Western classical music as part of its 'spiritual modernization', it strictly limits importation of youth oriented popular music to avoid the sort of incidence in which China's most famous western-style domestic pop musician, Ciu Jan, became a central figure in the ideological and cultural uprising for "freedom and democracy" in the late 1980s.<sup>12</sup> While the Nigerian state forbade the airing of Fela's Afrobeat (even after his death, only a select few 'harmless' numbers can be aired), it actively encouraged other mass music forms like Juju through generous allocation of air time and patronage, mainly because, unlike Afrobeat, Juju does not challenge its ideological assumptions or the elite project to "reproduce...its structure of dominance."<sup>13</sup> Herein lies the uniqueness of Fela's Afrobeat form which, even as a popular musical idiom, exhibits a rare capacity to locate society's sense of place, time and event, while also challenging the patronage structure

on all these fronts.

#### NOTES

1. Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's communal residence, created out of the desire to accommodate "every African escaping persecution." The Nigerian authorities ceaselessly attacked this attempt to foist this autonomous republic within the confines of its nation state.
2. Fela's place of worship and nightspot.
3. This was Fela's conception of his extended household.
4. Ben Elugbe, and Augusta Omamor. *Nigerian Pidgin*. (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1991. p. 12.)
5. See Dick Hebride, "Reggae, Rastas and Rudies" in James, Curran, et. al. (ed.) *Mass Communication and Society*. (London: Edward Arnold Ltd, 1977. p. 427.)
6. Karin Barber, ed. in introduction to *Readings in African Popular Art*. (Oxford and Bloomington: James Currey, 1997. p. 2.)
7. See *ibid* and Michael Etherton, *The Development of African Drama*. (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1982. p. 361.)
8. Dapo Olorunyomi, "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Art." Ph.D. Graduate Seminar, Ilorin. 1991. Indeed, a rather timely caution has been given by others who observe that the designation 'popular culture' may be misleading in so far as it carried the implication that popular culture is as coherent and uniform as the official culture.
9. Cite Michael Veal, "And After a Continentalist," in *Glendora: African Quarterly on the Arts*. (Vol.2 No.2. 1997. p. 051.)
10. In other words, he saw his music as a dynamic process, which over the period became increasingly spiritual.
11. See introduction to James Lull's "Popular Music and Communication," in James Lull (ed.) *Popular Music and Communication*. (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1992. p.14.)
12. *Ibid*.
13. Cite Stuart Hall, "Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect' ", in James Curran, et. al. (ed.) *Mass Communication and Society*. (London: Edward Arnold Ltd, 1977.)