



Contradictions and Misconceptions in the Life, Music, and Philosophy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti

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ABSTRACT

Fela Anikulapo Kuti enjoys a colossal reputation owing to his hugely enigmatic musical talent which has generated a lot of scholarship among scholars in Africa. His rebellious musical career garnered a sea of disciples mostly among the youths in Africa. His radical and acerbic slurs and corrosive attacks on successive military and civilian governments in Nigeria brought him myriad hardships, harassments, sufferings, unlawful arrests, and fame. However, while Fela projected sublime ideas in his music, some of his rhetoric and philosophy contradict many of these ideals for which he is admired and respected. Except for a few uncritical reviews about his bohemian lifestyle and eccentricities in informal writings, many of the works done on his innovative music and virulent activism are silent or in some cases apologetic about these contradictions and misconceptions. This paper hopes to shed light on these contradictions and misconceptions to show how they problematise a healthy evaluation of his contributions to the fight for justice and human liberation. This study makes use of both primary and secondary sources of data. Fela's views and lyrics which constitute the primary data are purposively selected from several tracks and will be subjected to close reading using content analysis as the evaluation tool. Psychoanalytic theory was used to evaluate Fela's views to determine how some of the sublime ideals projected in his music contrasted his beliefs and philosophy. The study concludes that while Fela fought some evil with one hand, he embraced the same with the other hand.

Keywords: Fela; *Felasophy*; Misconceptions; Contradictions; Reaction formation.

INTRODUCTION

Fela Anikulapo Kuti (1938 - 1997) is an institution and a gargantuan musical talent that is beyond the intellectual grasp of a single individual, as each scholar adds refreshingly

new layers to the knowledge of his music and life (Ajayi 2017). Aside from his radical activism, Fela is universally known as a controversial and strange personality. Many of the exotic dramas which he orchestrated resulted in the pet name *Abami Eda* (strange being) that he is fondly called by fans and admirers (Olaleye & Osuagwu 2020). His whole personality is a commixture of courage, doggedness, generosity, absurdities, intrigues, and drama. Sodipo reveals that Fela's strange ways originated from his ancestral lineage traced to Chief Balogun Ogunbona dynasty; "People from that dynasty are always non-conformists, and it can be traced down to Balogun Ogunbona, the very founder of the dynasty... they do strange things" (Adesina, 1992, p. 5). Sodipo identified some other people who originated from the Ogunbona dynasty; himself, Wole Soyinka, Reverend Olu Abiola, Dr. Abiola Oshodi, Professor Olikoye Ransome Kuti, Beko Ransome Kuti, Jonathan Majeagbe (SAN), Bola Kuforiji Olubi, etc. This may be true given Fela's mania for self-mystification and obfuscation fertilised by the morbid taste of his fans for comic absurdities which can only be orchestrated by someone like him. However, many of his outlandish behaviours, exotic rhetoric, and queer eccentricities are embedded with lots of disturbing ironies and contradictions.

The contradictions and ironies which surround Fela's life, music, and philosophy are conspicuously too obvious for comfort and too loud to be swallowed up by rationalised silence. A scholar who approaches Fela's music and life with lots of veneration or subjective scrutiny may gloss over them, but for a scholar intent on critical objectivity, these contradictions and misconceptions problematise a healthy evaluation of his contributions to the fight for justice and human liberation. And in the final analysis, the ideals for which he was tortured and suffered many indignities may suffer a serious setback. Carlos Moore (2010) who is something of an enchanted disciple of Fela apologetically admitted that;

Fela's personality encompassed many extremes and ranged from a refreshing cosmopolitanism to what was dumbfoundingly parochial. He would switch from one pole to its antipode without missing a beat or perceiving contradictions, morphing from an inquisitive freethinker into a shameless obtuse dogmatic (p. 24).

Although Carlos Moore marginally captures the crux of this paper, he did not dwell on any of the issues he raised. This paper hopes to explore this in great detail. Often the cause of these confounding rhetoric and contradictions can be attributed to Fela's penchant for histrionics and donnish garrulity which sometimes bothers on logomania; a disorder that has to do with excessive and incoherent talks. For instance, Fela says of his marriage in London to Remi Taylor, his first wife;

It was really colonial, inside a court. Oh! We Africans have missed the road. Oh! We have confused ourselves so much. That is why we do not progress. Some people keep doing these things till they die. Oh goodness! We are so confused. Can you imagine me standing in front of a white man to get married? Then he started asking me... Anyway, the marriage was not in my mind, because I cried throughout. I cried throughout because I didn't want to marry in the first place. I had to marry but my mind wasn't marrying. I was crying, my mother joined me in the crying (Adesina 1992, p. 29).

Imagine the great Olufunmilayo Ransome Kuti who sent the Alake of Egbaland (Oba Ademola II) packing from his throne crying over a marriage that could either be

jettisoned or delayed. Surely, such mendacity of the imagination could only have been cultivated for mere histrionics. Sometimes one gets the feeling that Fela engages in this sort of talk to humour his fans. Obafemi Ilesanmi (1984) believes that Fela has a “penchant for subtle humour” (p. B6) which is hardly noticed by the majority of the people. Ilesanmi (1984) reviews a humorous instance;

When a national newspaper published a letter about alleged fraud by the then Minister of Steel Development, Paul Unongo, Fela had some comments to make about it. “Reading *Tribune* story about Paul Unongo and our President. I want to suggest a Commission of Enquiry to be set up. Me I go be judge, me I go be prosecutor, me I go be lawyer and me I go be witness. Oh by the way, 2.8 is not missing, e loss! Eat for tomorrow you may die! Me self, I wan sue Nzeribe for owing me #5.55k (p. B6).

Fela’s incredulous elocutions work well when deployed to torment or sing a corrupt and oppressive government to a fall. They are useful because they form part of the arsenal with which he fights injustice, corruption, and brutalities cultivated by the political class. However, there are times when he goes off the tangent. Many times he turns round to embrace the very things which he has condemned. Hence, the crux of this paper is to examine some of the misconceptions, contradictions, ironies, and delusions inherent in the life, music and philosophy of Fela to show how they problematise a healthy evaluation of his contributions to the fight for human liberation and justice.

POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND PARANOIAC CONTRADICTIONS IN FELASOPHY

Fela is known over the world for his rebellious confrontations with repressive military regimes and corrupt civilian governments who orchestrated the brutalities, exploitations, corruption, suppression, and poverty suffered by the masses especially in Nigeria. However, Fela started his musical career on a whimsical note of producing highlife and later, slow soul sounds of jazz without any serious thought of weaponising it to fight the brutalities and corruption of the political class and their agents. Like many other revolutionary musicians such as Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Victor Jara of Chile, etc. Fela’s radical and rebellious inclinations were nurtured by the upsurge of brutalities, repressions, oppressions, suppressions, and corruption which characterise politics in Nigeria especially during the military juntas in which human rights abuses became the norm. During those periods, Fela was a torn in the flesh of successive military heads of State in Nigeria. He was their fierce critic and suffered greatly on account of that. He became resolute and tenaciously continued to torment each of the tyrannical leaders who ruled Nigeria one after the other. In several musical tracks such as *Alagbon Close* (1974), *Zombie* (1976), *No Agreement* (1977), *Sorrow Tears and Blood* (1977), *Shuffling and Shmiling* (1978), *V.I.P* (1979), *I.T.T* (1979), *Authority Stealing* (1980), *Original Sufferhead* (1981), *Power Show* (1982), *Custom Check Point* (1984), *Army Arrangement* (1985) and *Teacher Don’t Me Nonsense* (1986), etc, Fela was corrosively critical of each of the regimes that came to power and attacked the excesses of those in government.

On the whole, African politics has fostered many military dictators, despots, and tyrants who brutalised their citizens and drained the resources meant for the growth and development of their nations. Idi Amin is the worst sample of such crops of rulers.

He was like a marauding beast inflicted on Uganda. It is therefore a shocking contradiction that Fela who fought lesser military tyrants and dictators in Nigeria would turn round and herald Idi Amin as a great leader. Amin's ruthlessness and brutalities are unprecedented in Africa. Dowden (2009) reveals that Idi Amin;

is said to have killed one of his wives and eaten parts of her. They found her remains in his fridge. Amin became the prototype of African military dictator and clown, the jumped-up sergeant who ruled like a profligate king in a wasteland of terror and destitution (p. 47).

During the reign of terror in Uganda, the fear of Idi Amin was the beginning of wisdom. Several scholars, journalists, and researchers documented the horror orchestrated by Amin while in power. Donald (1977) observes that;

Some reports tell of prisoners forced to commit cannibalism and ordered to roll in the blood and gore of mutilated corpses. The number of Ugandans who have met death at the hands of the Black Butcher is reliably reported by Amnesty International to be more than 300,000 men, women and children (p. 12).

He killed anyone he perceived to be an enemy of the state; real or imagined. Donald who surreptitiously recorded and documented some of the shocking discussions, atrocities, and evils committed by Amin right in the State House in Kampala, reveals very shocking accounts of the killings carried out by Amin's secret police. Most of those killings were executed in the most brutish and gruesome manners during which Amin himself attended and supervised the macabre system of liquidating political prisoners by his special bureau of police;

Was it true, I asked that he had personally taken part in the torture and murder of prisoners, both men and women? Amin replied; "Of course, and I enjoyed every minute... Only last week I led my men in the execution of hundreds of traitors. We hung them upside down like racks of meat and pulled out their tongues and eyeballs. Such a death is a tribute to them anyway. We are giving them a magnificent death. You should hear them squeal and beg for mercy.... One man thought he had escaped when we agreed to hear his confession. We took him from the meat hook and gave him a wonderful dinner. He told us everything about the spies and the enemies of the State. Afterward, we took him back to the meat hooks and burned him over a fire. He was too good to waste so we chopped him up and fed him to the other prisoners. Every bit of him they ate (Donald, 1977, pp. 27-28).

Uganda is yet to recover from the nightmares orchestrated by Idi Amin. If awards were to be given to political leaders for ruthlessness, brutality, corruption, and cruelty, Idi Amin stands next to nobody in the history of politics in the whole of Africa. His taste for human flesh and blood is unimaginable. He sent thousands of Ugandans to early graves. He delighted in seeing blood flow out of the human body as they struggle for their lives. Donald (1977) says;

I asked Amin about the claims that he had ordered the slaughter of tens of thousands of his countrymen. He answered "...my special bureau of police has got rid of thousands of these enemies of the state. I make no secret of that.... We start with their fingers, one by one, and we saw them off and feed them to the victim. Then their toes and then his pride

and joy. The women, they get their breasts hacked off and a bayonet where it hurts the most (p. 27).

Many who escaped telling the tales of their ordeals were traumatised for life. It is then outrageously unimaginable that the same Fela would pledge great regard for this sort of evil leader yet condemn lesser tyrants. This sort of contradiction is paranoiac, for there is enough evidence that supports a case of paranoia especially that which condemns a lesser evil only to uphold a more sinister one. In Psychoanalytic theory, this sort of contradiction is termed “Reaction Formation” which, according to McLeod (2021), “is a psychological defense mechanism in which a person goes beyond denial and behaves in the opposite way to which he or she thinks or feels” (p. 4).

There is a consistent pattern of contradictory behaviour with Fela which bothers on reaction formation. He could hold a particular view for some time only to wake up the next day to proclaim the very opposite. For instance, while the Nigeria Civil War was ongoing, Fela was on a musical tour in America. He waxed an album in which he dedicated a track titled *Viva Nigeria* to the promotion of peace and unity of Nigeria. In the track, he earnestly pleaded for Nigeria to remain one indivisible nation. I beg here to quote the lyrics in full for a better understanding of his message;

This is Brother Fela Ransome-Kuti
This is one time I would like to say a few things
Men are born, kings are made
Treaties are signed, wars are fought
Every country has its own problems
So has Nigeria, so has Africa
Let us bind our wounds and live together in peace
Nigeria, one nation, indivisible
Long live Nigeria, viva Africa

The history of mankind
Is full of obvious turning points and significant events
Though tongue and tribe may differ
We are all Nigerians
We are all Africans
War is not the answer
It has never been the answer
And it will never be the answer
Fighting amongst each other
Let's live together in peace
Nigeria, one nation indivisible
Long live Nigeria, viva Africa

Let's eat together like we used to eat
Let's plan together like we used to plan
Sing together like we used to sing
Dance together like we used to dance
United we stand, divided we fall
You know what I mean

I hope you do
 Let us bind our wounds
 And live together in peace
 Nigeria, one nation indivisible
 Long live Nigeria, viva Africa

Brothers and sisters in Africa
 Never should we learn to wage war against each other
 Let Nigeria be a lesson to all
 We have more to learn towards building than destroying
 Our people can't afford any more suffering
 Let's join hands, Africa
 We have nothing to lose, but a lot to gain
 War is not the answer
 War has never been the answer
 And it will never be the answer
 Fighting amongst each other
 One nation indivisible
 Long live Nigeria
 Viva Africa

(Songwriter: Olufela Olufemi Anikulapo-Kuti, Viva Nigeria lyrics)

While this may seem a noble task to accomplish with his music, Fela turned round and embraced the division of Nigeria. He backed the secession of the Biafrans and unequivocally advocated for the breakup of the country;

The Biafrans were fucking right to secede, man. If it was secession, it was good secession. Because secession is what could have brought Africa together at that time. From secession, we could come together again. But by not seceding, we're put together by force. Uhuhhhhh! That's what's happening in Nigeria today. The Ibos don't understand why they're in Nigeria. The Yorubas don't know what's happening. And the Hausas, they want to dominate everybody (Moore, 2010, p. 85).

Sensing that he made a blunder with *Viva Nigeria*, he puts the blame squarely on the shoulders of Duke Lumumba, a Ghanaian music promoter in the United States who tried to help him out of the financial crisis facing him at the time;

The Biafran war was still on. One day Duke came up with an idea: to release a pro-government record just so we could get some bread, man. I wanted to hustle the Nigerian government to back my band. So I wrote a song: keep Nigeria one. Now, wait for a minute-o. You see, it wasn't my idea. It was Duke Lumumba's idea. It was he who was putting the money down. You see, Duke had this old woman he would take money from. He went to the old woman and she gave him 2,500. So he got this studio to do the recording and said to me, "Fela, I have to make just one record that the Nigerian government will like, just in case the government will want to back the band." So we made this tune. It was just bullshit: "Nigeria, we must not fight ourselves we must be like brothers," I feel so

bad about that record now; I was on Biafra's side. But it wasn't my idea. Anyway, nothing came of it (Moore, 2010, pp. 89-90).

This sort of paranoiac contradiction occurs yet again in some other albums. In *Woman na Mattress*, Fela not only projects the view that women are subservient to men, he claims that women are better as objects of sexual gratification. Yet in *Akunakuna*, which he produced later, he condemns the sex exploitation of women especially by the law enforcement agents and counsels that women deserve some form of veneration and respect. However, the general view which Fela holds about women is patriarchal and primitive. In the following subheading, we shall explore more of this view in order to determine how Fela perceived the women in his life.

FELA AND THE PATHOLOGIC CONCEPTION OF WOMEN

Fela harbours a pathologic view of women and their place in society (Babalola 2018). In some of his lyrics and a multitude of interviews he granted several newspapers, magazines, and other mass media, he airs them without the faintest of incredulity. His perception of women folk is not only low and controversial; it is recklessly chauvinistic and parochial. On many occasions, he states clearly that women are not in the same class as men. He says; "Equality between male and females? No! Never! Impossible! Can never be! It seems the man must dominate...men are the masters, not women... A woman has to respect her husband... they need you to show authority, man" (Moore, 2010, pp. 234-5). In another instance, he declared;

What I think about women, in general, is a subject that calls for a colloquium... First they like to be slept with. They like you to make them do things for you. They're like Satan in that stupid book, the Bible...but they're not on the same level with men...what's the woman's role? To keep the home smooth, the children happy, the husband happy. To make the husband happy, that's a woman's job. Women got no other work than making the man happy (Moore, 2010, pp. 252-253).

Fela did not stop at mere rhetoric. He held this view to be sacrosanct such that it became the focal point of some of his tracks such as *Lady*, *Woman na Mattress*, *Na Poi*, etc. Ayu (1986) observed that "in *Mattress*, Fela views the woman's sole function in life as that of acting as a mattress for the men to lie in" (p. 40). Going by this morbid logic of Fela, it will not be unkind to say that the many women who propagated his musical career missed their calling.

This slavish image of the African woman who is supposed to be an object of sexual gratification is evident in many of his lyrics especially in some of his hit tracks such as *Mattress*, *Lady*, *Shakara*, *Na Poi*, etc. And because of the immeasurable admiration and respect that he enjoys, Fela gets away with many of these parochial views without serious reproach. While some scholars rationalized these delusive perceptions as inconsequential, others merely dismissed them as illusions of a conservative mind. However, a closer and critical evaluation of Fela's iconoclastic rhetoric and philosophy stirs up some irritations in the mind, especially when you factor in Fela the fighter of oppression and the advocate of human liberation. For someone who decried the beatings that he got from his parents while growing up to retain such parochial patriarchy is not only disturbing but nauseating as well. He tells Moore;

Until I was seventeen I got beaten. Mercilessly! Me, I've never beaten my children-o. I swear! But sometimes it's necessary to give my wives

some paf-paf-paf-paf-paf-paf. I slap ‘em. Yeah. You see, when you talk ‘bout women, you’re talking ‘bout something else, man. A woman has to respect her husband. If she don’t, I feel sorry for you. They need you to show authority, man. See what I mean? Then they’ll say to themselves: “Ah-aaaaaaaah! This na good husband-o (Moore, 2010, p. 175).

This repulsive approach smacks of paranoid delusion. It is a huge irony that someone whose mother fought all through her life for the emancipation of women in Nigeria could turn around to propagate this sort of idea. It does not occur to Fela that the idea of beating a woman into submission is not only primitive but anarchical. It is ridiculous that rather than beat his children who must have indulged in pubertal misbehaviours common to all children, Fela condescended to beat his wives who are adults. And he did beat them at the slightest provocation. To complicate this situation, Fela was slapped by Sandra Smith Daniel on a number of occasions and he never slapped her back;

When we got there...”Fela” I said, “I want to talk to you!” Irritated, he answered, “Not now! Don’t you see I’m busy? Go sit down!” “Fela,” I insisted, “I want to talk to you.” Again he answered, “I said not now!” “Fela, I want to talk to you, N-O-W!!!” “NOT NOW!” he said. And I just went whaaaaaaam... in front of the whole audience (Fela was slapped by Sandra Smith Daniel).

Question: How did Fela react?

Answer: The members of the band had grabbed him. They all grabbed him, Isaac, his saxophone player, said: “Good! It serves you right.”

Question: Was that the only time you’d hit him?

Answer: No. We had fought before. He’s the one who stopped me from having them temper tantrums.

Question: How many times did he slap or hit you?

Answer: Never (Moore, pp. 108-109).

While it would have been very wrong for Fela to retaliate, it is, however, unimaginable that Fela who beats his wives (the queens) could do nothing in the face of the open rape on his much-touted male supremacy and dominance. Fela’s misconception of women is further compounded by his self-confessed disregard for any woman whatsoever. He declares;

So I said to myself, if I’m gonna sing about any one woman, I would sing about this one. At least to clear my conscience. That’s how low I was at that time, man. I hate to give women any fucking credit, man” (Moore, 2010, p. 97).

The amusing irony is that, if there is any musician in Nigeria who is very much indebted to women it is Fela Anikulapo Kuti. His whole musical career has been propagated and promoted by women. The debt of gratitude which Fela owes women is inexhaustible; starting from his gracious mother to Sandra Smith (whom he reluctantly sang about), down to the many women who put their all in his music and stayed with him through thick and thin. His path to musical greatness was propagated by Sandra Smith (now

Sandra Izsidore) and watered by the queens who entertained the audience while he performed (Olorunyomi 2021). Fela himself readily admitted that Sandra widened his acuity about Africa and its cultural values;

Sandra gave me the education I wanted to know. She was the one who opened my eyes. I swear, man! She's the one who spoke to me about ... Africa! For the first time, I heard things I'd never heard about Africa! Sandra was my adviser. She talked to me about politics, history. She taught me what she knew and what she knew was enough for me to start on. Yeah, Sandra taught me a lot, man. She blew my mind really... Nothing about my life is complete without her (Moore, 2010, p. 93).

For the first time, he learned that Africa is the first centre of civilisation and that it had a profound system of governance and administration. She gave him books to read to enlighten him more about Africa's beautiful culture and tradition. Thus the foundation of Pan-Africanism – the philosophy which later defined Fela's life and music - was laid by a woman. Several scholars share this view. Idonije (2016) for instance, says "Indeed, Sandra was responsible for the political and cultural transformation that changed Fela's life." (p. 78). In the same vein, Olaniyan (2009) adds that;

Sandra became Fela's mentor. She introduced him to the history, ideas, literature, and personalities of the black struggle for civil rights. Fela absorbed all these and in the process learned even more about himself. Sandra was the midwife of this personal self-(re)discovery (p. 48).

Fela's life and music never remained the same after the encounter. Sandra's contribution to Fela's life went beyond enlightenment; she equally placed all her resources (money, house, car, food, etc) at Fela's disposal while he and his band members were stranded in America. Fela even noted that he almost rendered her family bankrupt;

Oh, this woman, she has helped me in America-o. She has fed me for five months. There are telephone bills I've run-up, they've even cut one telephone line of their house... I've almost made her family bankrupt... I've spoiled their cars... (Moore, 2010, p. 96)

Fela was handicapped at this time owing to his inability to perform as a result of the fact that his band was not registered with the musicians' union in Los Angeles. Idonije (2016) explains that "In L.A., they could not play in places where they could earn money because of the band's non-membership of the Musicians' Union" (p. 76). Thus, Sandra's generosity extended to using her influence to secure gigs and shows for him in many of the nightclubs which dotted Los Angeles at the time. After Fela eventually returned to Nigeria, she came to Nigeria intending to stay permanently. Her experience at getting a visa was nightmarish; she was denied a visa and when she managed to get into Nigerian through another means organised by Fela, she was hunted all over the place and had to hide in Fela's family home in Abeokuta.

Fela had married twenty-seven women in one day, (the Queens) but they never got any credit musically. To underscore the contributions of these women to the music and life of Fela, we have to examine their sacrificial contributions in three folds. The first side to their contribution is that many of these women turned their backs on their families and friends like Jesus' disciples and followed Fela. For instance, Alake, one of the twenty-seven women whom Fela married in one day, tells us;

...so I told my father that unless he explains why he doesn't like Fela 'cause I like him – if he doesn't want me to stay in his house I can choose where I'll stay. He didn't want me to leave the house and he didn't want me to go to Fela's house. There was nothing he could do then about my movements (p. 213).

Of course, the father who happened to be a lawyer did not take it lying down. Fela could not keep her in his house knowing that the father would give him some trouble, so he asked his bosom friend, J.K. Braimah, to allow her to stay with him for a while. She continued schooling for some time while hiding in J. K Braimah's house;

Yes, I was still going to school. They paid already for that term so I was going to school. When I started going to school my father planned... You know, my father is working for the government, so he had some CID on me, coming to school to watch me. You know, sometimes I'd just be in class and I'd hear my name, the principal wants me. They were just giving me all sorts of trouble, so I went to see my uncle. I told my uncle everything. You know, my uncle is on my father's side. He said he wasn't the one who born me and the only thing he can tell me is to go back to the house and keep away from Fela. And I told him I can't keep away from Fela. If they don't want to take Fela, me I've taken him (Moore, 2010, p. 214).

The parents of Kevwe Oghomienor, one of the queens of Fela from the Itsekiri ethnic group in Delta State, equally enlisted the assistance of the men of the Nigeria Police Force to retrieve their daughter from Fela's house. She tells us that her parents "brought police but police didn't find me. Then the police came back again. I was hiding in the house. So they did not find me" (Moore, 2010, p. 202). Many others hid the knowledge of their stay with Fela from their parents to avoid trouble.

It could be argued that these women had their own aims and expectations for going to stay with Fela since they were in no way lured. That they went to stay with Fela willingly and against the wishes of their parents make their sacrifices all the more worthy and honourable. As a result of the cumbersome and rigorous nature of musical rehearsals and performances which took them to several places and countries, none of those who were in school when they met Fela was able to finish secondary school. They ended their education prematurely as they were consumed by the glitz and glamour that come with performing most nights at Fela's *Afrika Shrine* and in several countries (Awuni 2014). Although Fela married all of them in February of 1978, only about two of them had children for him. Those who were interviewed by Carlos Moore expressed strong aspirations to have children for Fela which did not happen before Fela divorced them all. So for the many years spent with Fela, apart from the money for their daily upkeep which Fela paid faithfully, many of them had nothing to show for their sojourn in Kalakuta.

The second side to the contributions made by the queens to Fela's music is of course very obvious. They were the singers and dancers at the *Afrika Shrine* every time that Fela performed. It will not be out of place to say that Fela and Afrobeat would not have been this popular without them. Their velvet voices coupled with their erotic dances helped in projecting Fela and Afrobeat. Olaniyan (2016) brilliantly explains the impact made by the queens on Fela and Afrobeat;

...the immediate propulsive force that sent Afrobeat to the forefront – not just as a music, but as a phenomenon – was “the girls”: the nearly forty young women who at various times featured in Fela’s life and organisation as chorus singers, dancers, wives, girlfriends, cashiers, disc jockeys, and many mixtures of all of these. More than the music itself, and certainly more than any other factor, it was these young women – the fact of so many of them living with one man with impunity, their flamboyant lifestyle, their skimpy dresses, their carefree smoking in public, their heavy makeup, and the general seductive ambiance they evoked – who made Fela’s and Afrobeat’s reputation in Nigeria spread – well, as Nigerians would say, like bush fire in the harmattan (p. 169).

Thus, their voices, bodies, and dance skills propelled Fela and Afrobeat to the world stage. Being his wives, they satisfy him sexually and equally feed the erotic curiosity of his numerous fans during performances.

The third side to the contributions made by the women was that they stayed with Fela during the toughest periods of his iconoclastic musical career. Ayu (1986) tells us that; “When Fela’s art becomes “conscious” of class polarities and social injustice between 1974 and 1983, Fela is harassed by the police, repressed violently by the army, delegitimized by the judiciary, ex-communicated by the radio stations, and stigmatized and sensationalized by the bourgeois press” (pp. 45-6). Ilesanmi (1984) adds that “Fela has numerous brushes with the police and other security forces. He rivals Mr. Ayodele Awojobi’s infrequent court appearances. But while Awojobi goes there often as a plaintiff, Fela contented himself with being a defendant in one case or the other” (p. B6). In 1974, precisely on the 30th of April, batches of men of Nigeria Police Force stormed Fela’s house on a routine raid. Olaniyan (2009) recounts the event;

More than fifty heavily armed officers of the Nigerian police showed up at Fela’s residence. They said they were there to investigate reports of “hemp peddling, drug addiction, and underage girls on the premises.” More than sixty of the occupants were arrested and sent to jail. Most of them were released the next day, while many of the girls were sent to a juvenile welfare home. The girls escaped back to Fela soon after (p. 79).

Fela narrates the brazen manner of their escape from the juvenile welfare home; “The women spent about two months at welfare. They had to escape by themselves. They jumped over the fence. They escaped; all of them escaped, except maybe Eve or so” (Moore, 2010, p. 132). But the worst was yet to come. And it came on the 18th of February 1977. It was the worst of all the attacks on Fela. Alegbe and Ojudu (1988) reveal that “some one thousand soldiers from the Abalti Barracks in Lagos besieged his house, burnt it aground, after raping and maiming many, among them the musician’s 77-year-old mother” (p.22). Fela tells us the travail of one of the women;

The first one they brought out was Najite, one of the girls. Ooooooooh! They beat her! When I saw that, I said to myself: “The way they beat her, today they will kill me!” They beat her, tore her clothes off, made her naked... Then they began flogging her, to make her run to the barracks... ooooooooh! It was too much, man. They were flogging away, beating everybody, cutting, using bayonets, broken bottles... raping the women! It was terrible! Ooooooooh! Terrible!!! (Moore, 2010, p. 151).

Aside from his house and property that were burnt, those who suffered the greatest casualties in that encounter were the women whom he calls his queens. Fela's seventy-seven-year-old mother was thrown out of a window in a two-story building. She sustained serious injuries which quickened her death a few months later. The women went through dreadful and horrific experiences (Njoku 2006). Kevwe narrates the horrendous ordeal she suffered at the hands of the soldiers;

They blind my eyes with gun. At first they came and shot house. I was bending down in the toilet, so as I heard the gunshots I just flew out in their midst. Then they give it to me, they beat me up, then they tear my pants. They took me... two soldiers, with heavy sticks... took me to room...put stick... that's when I started shouting, "Mama! Mama!" Then I fainted and then I couldn't remember anything. When I woke up I saw myself on the floor with a girl called Kehinde. So I called her, "what's going on?" She said, "Everything is ... they're taking me to hospital" (Moore, 2010, p. 202).

As a result of this harrowing experience, Kevwe suffered a mental breakdown from which she never recovered. Moore reveals that she was avoided by the co-wives in the household;

Her shattering and brutal experience at the hands of the soldiers who raided and set fire to Kalakuta in 1977 has indelibly left its mark...the breakdown came and she tried committing suicide... isolated by the others who consider her "crazy"... Usually keeping to herself now. It is not unusual for her to suddenly disappear from the household for days and weeks on end, only to return (Moore, 2010, p. 200).

Many sustained serious injuries and were hospitalised for days. Fehintola, one of the wives, recounts the beatings and humiliation she suffered;

they beat me, shook me and abused me with bottle and knife. When they take me to the hospital people don't know that there is a bottle inside my body and they saw the bottle and knife on my body so they carry me to Kirikiri... The knife was in my body; they sew it together" (Moore, 2010, p. 343).

Some of the women were brutally raped. Adeola, another of Fela's wives, tells us; "They want, you know... Two of them hold a bottle of whisky. They broke the bottle on my head, 'cause I don't want to agree with them to do it. So they want to open my legs..." (Moore, 2010, p. 224). Once again, many of the women ended up in Kirikiri with Fela. The Kalakuta incident traumatized many of the women for a very long time and has remained evergreen in their memories.

Moreover, the marijuana which became Fela's trademark was the handy work of a woman. Fela initially smoked neither cigarettes nor marijuana. It was said that he took only soft drinks and was never into women. J. K. Braimah, his bosom friend, tells Moore (2010);

Not even cigarettes, let alone grass, even for fucking. He was afraid to fuck! We had to take his prick, hold it and put it in the cunt for him, I swear! Well, for example, I tell Fela, "Fuck this woman. This girl will leave if you don't fuck her." Fela would answer, "Ohhhhh, she go get pregnant-o!" (p. 66).

This naïveté was neutralised by the smoking of Indian hemp. The lady who introduced Fela into it was a chain-smoker whose eyes were always red. Fela became curious when he saw her very red eyes and was told that she smoked a lot;

Her name is Eunice, I'd always see her eyes red and a friend said she 'smoked' a bit. So one day I asked her: "Do you smoke? ...I'd tried it once or twice in London. I liked it in London. But my brother professor told me a long time ago that if I 'smoked' I would go crazy, so that is why I ran away from it. But when this girl gave me the smoke and I had sex with it... Ohhhhhhhh, it was fantastic! (Moore 2010, p. 81).

Part of the componential elements which came to define Fela's personality is smoking Indian hemp or *igbo* as it is generally known in Yoruba parlance (Onyebadi 2019). It is doubtful if Afrobeat – Fela's brand of music - could have had the vigour and militancy with which Fela projected his message across elegantly without *igbo*. Olaniyan (2009) equally expresses this view; "It is not an exaggeration at all to theorise that Afrobeat would not have become "political" were it not for the role of marijuana, locally *igbo* or "weed", or "grass", in its factors and relations of production" (p.204). Marijuana nourished and sustained Afrobeat as Fela graduated from smoking small quantities to plantain size.

Initially, Fela was not into smoking whether cigarettes or Indian hemp. During the Koola Lobitos years, he was highly conservative and reserved (Pattison 2016). It is instructive to know that on a tour to the United States of America, he viciously rebuked some of his band members who, while on the tour, sauntered off to smoke Indian hemp. Idonije (2016) recounts the encounter;

Fela called Lekan Animasahun (Baba Ani) and alto-saxophonist, Isaac Olasugba, to 'come and smell their hair and body'. Fela then warned that the band boys should not tarnish his image with involvement in Indian hemp in America and that he cherished his musical career, which he was just about to boost with his tour of that country (p. 76).

Fela later graduated from an avoider to an avid user of Indian hemp.

Thus, while Sandra Smith laid the foundation of the Pan-African philosophy which defined his life and music, the queens nurtured and nourished Afrobeat to the point of eminence just as Eunice provided the inspiration and driving force behind the music. And so it is very clear from the foregoing that Fela's epic boasts about women deserving no credit is misguided. What these women deserve from Fela is unalloyed gratitude, not attitude. Although Fela immortalised his mother, Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, and did a musical tribute for Sandra Smith titled: *My Lady Frustration* (O'Neal 2020), the many women who used their voices, dance skills, bodies and risked their lives for his music got nothing other than a mangled wedding ceremony in a single day.

CONCLUSION

Fela Anikulapo Kuti is both a colossus and a conundrum in equal measures. His legendary personality is a commixture of a liberator and a dictator. While a great crusader for social justice and tireless advocate for human liberation, he, at the same time, retained an oppressive and patriarchal mentality especially as regards women. Even in his virulent condemnation of injustice and corruption, he fights one evil with one hand and embraces a bigger one with the other, a situation that makes a healthy

evaluation of his contributions to the fight for justice and freedom very problematic and cumbersome.

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