6. The Afrobeat Continuum

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Fela died on August 2, 1997. And though his life was particularly eventful, once the announcement of his exit was made, the events leading to his interment began to bear a symbolic imprint. The airwaves were filled with diverse castings of his 'second' death in a fortnight. And to die August 2, on the birthday of his beloved brother, Beko Ransome-Kuti, who was serving a 15-year jail term imposed by the General Sani Abacha regime, fans insisted, was indicative of a unique bond between them.

In anticipation of being able to control the crowd, the family had fixed a week-day Tuesday August 12, for the burial. But when they brought his corpse to the Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS) for the lying-in-state a day earlier, over half a million people paid their last respects. He was draped in his favorite orange color and, it seemed, he was having his first peaceful sleep in 58 years. The rite of passage, again, testified to a uniquely Afrobeat counterculture experience.
While the guttural blare of the baritone saxophone persisted at the far end corner of the expansive square, acolytes sprinkled his casket with the forbidden leaves of marijuana—for whose possession he was arrested and had just been released from detention a few weeks earlier. Then, for good measure, a jumbo-size wrap of marijuana was placed between his fingers; for who knows how scarce such stuff could be on this long eternal way? The sum of 300 Naira was also tucked into the coffin for contingency expenditures along this journey into ancestorhood. And in a show of final defiance, Baba Ani—the band leader—called on the Nigerian State to dare arrest the corpse for violating the law of the land!

The burial rites, while taking an unconventional tone, nevertheless resonated a traditional 'cosmic vision.' Through their acts and symbolism, fans and acolytes, to a large extent, were acting out a cultural script that affirmed the continuity of life after death and the possibility of dialogue with characters of the supersensible world. The imaginative space is hardly different from that which Soyinka identified in his *Death and the King's Horseman* when he notes:

> The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind—the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition.¹

Much earlier, Soyinka had captured this continuity for the Yorùbá, which he says operates both through the cyclic concept of time and animist interfusion of all matter and consciousness. And with Afrobeat fans, too, it is not simply ancestor veneration for its own sake, but a protest ritual. Here we are in the terrain of anti-establishment social praxis and throughout the duration of the rites, the laws of Kalakuta Republic were evoked, while those of the Nigerian state were momentarily suspended.

After eleven hours of lying-in-state, the casket was taken to Fela's Gbemisola residence, but it had to endure a seven-hour traffic jam as citizens would not allow a free passage to the hearse, with each neighborhood along the route insisting on paying a last respect. Later in the evening the corpse was brought to the Afrika Shrine on Pepple Street, Ikeja, a suburb of Lagos. Worship rites started against the background of a dark and silent stage; but figures in white wrapper, a symbol of the Ogbóni cult, could be gleaned faintly from afar. Out of this silent night came the intermittent clacking of wooden ratles. These communicants of ancestral voyage clanged away in the dark, first with the metal gong—sharp and intruding—and then the conga followed in a staccato fashion. From the depth of the darkness, these figures began to chant “Yeeepaaariipaa, Yeeep-aaariipaa” repeatedly, in a manner reminiscent of the mythical yelling of anguish by assistants of the Yorùbá deity, Obàtálá, as earlier described in Chapter Four. This code, mythology teaches, had since mythical time been adopted by worshippers of the orò cult. It prefixes their ritual encounter and denotes a vow of commitment to a collective cause—the ethos of awo. With the introduction of the percussive section (no guitar, piano or saxophone), and the energetic chirping of cymbals, the beat took a faster pace, reaching crescendo with the rising smoke of a burning wick tucked away in an inner cubicle housing the deities.

The ritual paraphernalia are a melange of diverse African ancestors as earlier described, but something is amiss today: the inscriptions of Sàngó, the Yoruba god of thunder, and Ôgún, the muse of creativity, deity of metallurgy and patron of the...
blacksmith. These were quite visible during Fela’s last worship here. Are these signals of a new beginning, a foretaste of post-Fela Afrobeat cultural practice?

This ‘omission’ may be partly explained by the oral nature of liturgy at the Shrine, a factor that plays up the improvisational. Added to this is the fact that, as a result of Fela’s oppositional politics, the Nigerian state had always attacked the sanctity of his place of worship, thereby resulting in a constantly shifting Shrine with contingent itinerant gods. During such raids, hapless deities were destroyed or carted away. On this particular night, the limitation of the mnemonic became evident when the officiating acolyte stepped in. He skips (some would suggest ‘forgets’) the preliminary divination motion, squats in a strange pose and revises the entire ritual order.

Further still, he neither tastes the honeycomb nor throws the cowry shell—a process considered obligatory to gain access to spiritual realms. And so it was time to partake of the ritual sip of palm-wine, and he does just that, but fails to hand over the calabash to the deceased’s children in a diagonal-cross-hand stretch. Fela had always insisted on this diagonal-cross-formation as a recreation of the traditional oríta, the crossroads where a ritual offering is generally placed.

Meanwhile, the smoke has enveloped the worship cubicle and it was homeward journey for a migrant soul, after all the path had been cleared. The old faithful and habitues of the Shrine break down in tears as pallbearers adorning moody gray àdíre with black berets arrive to carry off the raffia-woven casket. The entire hall makes the clenched-fist black power salute.

By noon next day the body would be interred and Fela’s daughter, Yeni, would be pleading with the throng of crowd: “I take Fela name beg you, make una no harass innocent citizens, Fela could be angry o!” A few weeks later, a rash of deaths would ravage the household, snatching Fela’s daughter Soladegbin and his cousin Fran Kuboye, and the population would interpret this in the context of àkúfà, implying one who is drawn as a fellow traveler in another’s death. Then there would be the need to ‘properly’ propitiate the warring spirits, which was eventually carried out during the unveiling of the Fela mausoleum when nine Ifá priests, led by the paramount Apènà of Lagos, Chief Nasiru Dosunmu appeased the collaborative deities.

With the pallbearers making their final round at the exit of the Afrika Shrine, I gazed at the stage again and it was bereft of the Chief Priest. It was like returning to the stable without your favored stallion. At this same spot a while back, I had watched the frail frame blare away at his tenor saxophone, holding the audience spell-bound for a while. Then, the female dancers, all tattooed and in raffia-type synthetic skirts, would wriggle in, inviting a thunderous applause from the crowd... Those were days when the mind would rove, pondering the irony of this son of a clergyman who deviated into Òrìsà worship. Surrounded, as he was, by a crop of brothers and one sister trained in orthodox western medicine, he insisted on alternative African medicine. He idolized his mother, but held patriarchal views of other women. He was opposed to drugs such as heroin and cocaine, and yet affirms marijuana as medicinal herb; after all, “it is grass; it is African!” He was a hybrid of the traditional and avant-garde. His life: one continuum of alternative voicing.

Once named Fela Ransome-Kuti, he altered it to Fela (He who emanates greatness) Anikulapo (I have got death in my pouch) Kuti (the one who never dies). He had been born ‘twice,’ first as the third and, later, the fourth child of his parents. Like his spirit-
companion Azaro in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, he also felt compelled by peer pressure to return to the idyllic world of primal voids and fresh beginnings. The annoyance that drove him to his initial death, according to him, was the sacrilege committed by his parents in allowing a German missionary to “name me ‘Hildegard.’” Throughout his life, he celebrated this ethos of the àbíkú—children who in the cosmogony of Yorùbá belief keep hovering between the land of the dead and the living.

His musical style may reflect diverse influences, including aspects of Afro-American jazz, but they all merely overlay a crisscross African rhythmic style, a structure that is essentially indigenous, and infused with the crest and trough, the pulse of Africa’s daily living in an age of disillusionment. The aimless balloon (yèyè ball as he calls it) depicts the lack of an ordering presence in national political life, while the beast image, reminiscent of the apocalyptic, transgresses the land, trudging the continent’s nurseries and plucking the moon out of its night. His performance venue he called a Shrine, which, as Grass reflects, was intended to be more than a night club; he conceived of it as a place of communal celebration and worship. Rather than the ‘tribal’ communalism of old, however, his new society became a “rallying point of radical pan-Africanism.”

Fela used the mask costume of spiritual (traditional chalk) powder on his face as symbol of man conquering death. His communion with the ancestors was a sort of ritual device to negate absence and affirm presence with these beginnings. This form merely complements the name Anikulapo-Kuti, a cultural signifier that refers to this concept of continuity. It is not just an ideational category for the Yorùbá, it implies both sameness and difference. By the power of the mask you cannot die; when ‘death’ is eventually reckoned, however, it is deemed to represent only an aspect of existence, one lives on in other forms and could indeed reincarnate. Any wonder, therefore, that Fela aggregated this consciousness shortly before his demise when he proclaimed: “I am not dying, I am only going to the land of the spirits.”

Abàmì Èdá, the unfathomable, is a sobriquet fans invested in him, and he was to embody the features of a number of deities he worshipped. For his vanguardist role and, almost, Dionysian excess, he was invariably playing medium for Ògún; while his preoccupation with mask dramaturgy and the celebration of the fire ether are to be found in Sàngó, the thunder god and progenitor of the Egúngún mask. Then there is his sublime spirituality in herbal medication, which is answerable largely to the meta-intellectuality of Osányìn, the primeval herbalist. But above all, Fela was the embodiment of Èsù, the archetypal trickster, god of fate, undecidability and interpretation. In this sense, he was for Africa and the Black world a telling Hermes, with an artistic oeuvre well positioned for the twenty-first century.

Quite often I have been asked: who steps into Fela’s shoes? And in the form of an answer this is how I reply: “I followed every stage of the final rites of passage and saw him interred with his favorite oxblood shoes on!” However, the question is not totally misplaced especially if we begin to recast it in terms of his effect on a broad artistic movement. There is a sense in which the sheer breadth of Fela’s artistry, coupled with a larger-than-life image, did not allow for an early emergence of confident, young Afrobeat acts. And with his death, we can only contemplate the direction of the Nigerian, African and global post-Fela Afrobeat scene. For one, we have to contend with a tendency in history of that factor of appropriation of cultural forms of subordinate classes by the ruling class. Such transformation, or even hijacking, is evident in religion.
and music—as we find in early Christianity, jazz and, to some degree, juju music. From a mass movement that aggregated the collective voice of the underprivileged classes (being itself constituted by members of these classes), and was; somewhat seen in opposition to the state, Christianity was to later receive the endorsement of the same state that had held the faith in suspicion. There are suggestions that Christianity “was originally a movement of the oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and freed men, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome.”

However, in less than 400 years after its appearance, it became the recognized state religion of the Roman Empire, albeit with a hierarchical structure, and less mass movement orientation such as would reduce the potential radical spontaneity of the faith as was evident in the “organisation of the Bohemian Taborites.” It is also a measure of the success of such appropriation that when we now listen to jazz music, our mind quite often conjures the image of the genteel upper class rather than the pioneers who were of the lower class extraction. Though the process has not gone its full circle with juju, owing to a blurring class formation and stratification in Nigeria, it is significant to note that juju music too is a creation of the cosmopolitan Lagos ‘underdogs’ of the 1930s,’ though the form’s major preoccupation in the nineties has become the legitimation of the status quo.

Even prior to Fela’s death, evidence of such appropriation had become manifest in the profile of the succeeding generation of Afrobeat artists in Nigeria. There is a sense in which this trend is inevitable owing to a cultural economy that dictates the necessity for the creation of a material basis and structure for the survival of the form. Someone had to pick up the bill of the musical ensemble, its instruments and equipment, the club house and its overseas tours, which, invariably turns out to be the corporate patrons or/cultural institutions, including recording labels and individual patrons with primarily a faddish interest. The artist who shops for support from such quarters may find himself inadvertently having to anticipate the concern and mood of these patrons. Fela’s ability to resist the potential of art patrons foisting their preferences on him was accounted for primarily by the fact that, later in his career, he became his own patron, and this made it possible for him to retain the peculiar radical verve of his composition. After achieving this status, it was the cultural establishments that needed him to legitimize their projects.

The gradual slide of post-Fela Afrobeat into an elite art (as distinct from art music) is not always obvious, partly because the basic formulae are still retained in its rhythmic structure, costuming, choreography and, to some degree, the character of song text. Fela’s conception of Afrobeat was, however, one of a cultural praxis—through which he expressed a distinct aesthetic and ideological vision of art and life. What the more influential Nigerian proteges of the form such as Femi Anikulapo-Kuti (Positive Force), Bisaode Ologunde (Lagbaja), Dede Mabiaku (Underground System), Dele Ogunkoya (AfroGbedu Ensemble), Charly Boy, Dele Sosinimi (Gbedu Resurrection), Tony Allen (Afrobeat Revenge), KunNiraN (Afara-Oyin), Funso Ogundipe (The Aiyetoro Band) and Juwon Oungbe (African Connection) have retained, to varying degrees of success, is more of the aesthetic than the latter, even though their nomenclatures are undoubtedly resonant of Fela’s Afrobeat temperament.

Though the new age Afrobeat may sing on behalf of the masses and express a Pan-African yearning—at times in club houses with gate-taking far above the national...
minimum wage—it is neither ‘privileged’ with a deviant republic which created a truly
African micro cosmopolis from which Fela easily drew his vocabulary and allusion, nor
is its social context the sort of idealism and zeitgeist of the sixties and seventies which
propelled the youth of Fela’s generation to redemptive causes. More so, it is now a
unipolar world, with the abiding influence of the intellectual African youth being
determined more by Bill Gates and the stock exchange than by Frantz Fanon or Kwame
Nkrumah. Besides, as far as Nigeria is concerned, the era of the oil boom is over and, as
in many other African countries, the national currency has had to be devalued in excess
of 100 per cent, in spite of efforts to redress the slide through the creation, in the
eighties, of a two-tier Foreign Exchange Market.

Rather than one based on class alliance, the new rallying call of youth is informed by a
creed of a universal ethic sponsored by a rash of post-cold war non-governmental-
organizations or other multilateral institutions—even transnational corporations such
as Rothmans Kingsize, which is set on a task of uniting the African and Western youth
through the puff of tobacco and musical dance steps. The young Afrobeat artist,
derived from the traditional patron, has found himself inadvertently responding eagerly
to clinch contracts with these agencies, perhaps to offset the band’s bill. With this, an
apolitical attitude sets in, and is rationalized with the suggestion that Fela’s self-
sacrifice and persecution by the state has somewhat atoned for steps taken by these
musical scions, such as renders superfluous the necessity to reenact the ritual of the
activist artist. The Afrobeat artist who aspires to transcend this role begins by evoking
aspects of the Fela symbolism, both in form and content.

NOTES

1. Excerpt from Maik Nwosu’s “Elegy for Twigs” in the poet’s collection: The Suns of Kush (Lagos:
2. Fela had been rumored dead a fortnight before he finally died.
3. See Preface to Wole Soyinka’s Death and the King’s Horseman.
4. See Randall Grass, in “Fela Anikulapo-Kuti: The Art of an Afrobeat Rebel.” The Drama Review,
5. See Frederick Engel’s “On the History of Early Christianity,” in On Religion. Moscow: Progress
6. Ibid.
7. Christopher Waterman’s Juju, p. 228.