

Beyond the Frontiers of Activism and Social Change: The Theatrical Components of Fela Anikulapo Kuti's Afrobeat Music

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Abstract

Fela Anikulapo Kuti (1938–1997) distinguished himself as one of the foremost Nigerian musicians in the Afrobeat genre by identifying with the masses in Africa. He achieved a populist appeal by critiquing social ills and advocating for the establishment of an egalitarian society. He also identified aspects of social decay and challenged tyranny in the corridors of power. However, while many scholars have focused on the potency of his music as a profound, revolutionary artistic penetration of the African socio-political space, its theatrical components have not received sufficient attention, despite some scholars having researched this area. This article contributes to the growing body of literature on the role of theatre in the success of Fela's Afrobeat music. Through the framework of Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, the article argues that, in addition to activism and social change, Fela's music achieved artistic immediacy by adopting all the appurtenances of theatre, such as drama, audience participation, storytelling, costuming, and improvisation. The success of Fela's Afrobeat music derives from a combination of artistic flourishes primarily achieved through various theatrical components, which the new generation of Afrobeat musicians in Africa continues to utilize for the success of their art.

Keywords: Afrobeat, artistic, drama, Theatre of the Oppressed, audience participation

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Introduction

Nigeria's late Afrobeat music legend, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, utilized his music to address economic despoliation, abuse of power, class inequalities, and other forms of social contradictions in Africa. Onyebadi (2018) believes that, in Fela's hands, music was a weapon for challenging corruption and perversion in the corridors of power that threatened equitable governance. Through his music, Fela highlighted the predicaments of Africans under their former colonial masters and outlined how the indigenous political elite entrenched obnoxious colonial conditions after independence. He pinpointed the deteriorating aspects of Africa's social and political matrix as consequences of a neo-colonial mentality. In contemporary times, Fela's songs consistently remind Africans of their gruelling experiences during the colonial era and of how the indigenous political class that emerged after independence perpetuated colonial conditions. The continual deterioration of socio-economic and political structures in Africa earned his Afrobeat music widespread global acclaim. His music flourished mainly during the days of military rule in his native Nigeria. During those days, he was in constant conflict with the military authorities for identifying the corruption and perversion in government.

Fela challenged the legitimacy of military rule and its suitability as a political resolution to the country's multifaceted, complex issues. According to Patrick, "Fela is known all 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" (Patrick 2021, 166). In addition, he sought to rouse the people from lethargy by focusing on social malaise, urging them to aspire to an egalitarian order while resisting all forms of misrule including military, and police brutality. He elevated music as a revolutionary instrument of social awakening that combines entertainment and ideology. Inevitably, people interpreted his songs as protest mechanisms that raised their awareness of the tyrannical dispositions of the ruling class. Fela's songs capture the current and future realities of Africa, so that even after many years, they still address myriad, endemic social issues. These social putrefactions continue to keep African countries, especially Nigeria, shackled and compromised.

Critical and scholarly materials have, over the years, mainly interpreted Fela's Afrobeat music in terms of the above radical, resistant, and revolutionary parameters. While many scholars have explored his music as a radical instrument for understanding Africa's socio-political realities, the theatrical components of his work, through which he disseminates his avant-garde messages, are comparatively under-researched. Yet, theatre is at the heart of his musical *oeuvre*. In all his radical posturing, Fela relied on the capacity of theatre to stimulate the emotions of the audience and galvanize the public into awareness of existing government and bourgeois capitalist tendencies, thus reflecting the ideological framework of Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* establishes how theatrical practice operates as a revolutionary method for the working class and marginalized populations to resist authoritarian governments. Riding on the potential of theatre to reflect social realities, Fela elevated his music as a source of hope, inspiration, and awareness for the masses. According to Olaniyan (2004), Fela's music serves as a 'musical biography', a close narrative of the challenges faced by postcolonial African states. The effect of his protest music is inherently related to the ongoing crises within those states, and engaging politically is a vital aspect of how Fela viewed his responsibility as a musician.

Theatrical components in Fela's music create an artistic synthesis which conforms to total theatre to produce a distinct multi-media composition. Total theatre is the fusion of music,

costume, set design, poetry, instrumentation, and improvisation into a holistic spectrum where artistic equilibrium is achieved. Fela's physical performances gradually moved from entertainment arenas to radical ideological platforms that queried the tyrannical tendencies of the government in power. Beyond the artistic attributes of the theatrical components in his music, he deployed them to inspire, energize, and convert the audience into participants and 'spect-actors' in his social and political engagements. The theatrical components were intricately tied to his physical performance, which achieved the dual purpose of entertainment and social conscientization of the masses. They also pointed to Fela's Yoruba cultural orientation, which utilized local musical instruments to accompany songs that disseminated messages to the public. The components operate as enhancers of his lyrics as political messages and social commentary, which create a multi-media network that could be transmitted either as recorded songs or through live performance. African drama is rooted in ritual. Through his set design in his Afrika Shrine, where his performances took place, Fela created a spiritual spatial continuity that acknowledged the supremacy of Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron. His set design and costumes helped the audience to understand his spirituality.

The cultural flavour of Fela's Afrobeat music is deeply rooted in his native Yoruba tradition, characterised by performance and the use of local instruments through which he expressed his art. Waterman (2008) observes that Yoruba popular music is a combination of social commentary and moral sermonizing both of which are achieved through praise and critique. The music also functions as a metrical articulation of community interface and recreation. Waterman notes that although tradition and culture are important to Yoruba musicians and their audience, international influences also play significant roles in their art (Waterman 2008, 199). Euba (2003) reiterates the Yoruba influence of Afrobeat by asserting that, "Yoruba traditional dance is composed of motifs that depict events from everyday life. In essence, Yoruba dance is dance-drama and, to the extent that dance relies on music, traditional music too may be described as dramatic" (Euba 2003, 210). As Euba observes, Fela's Yoruba background richly influenced the lyrical content of his Afrobeat music.

Before Fela's political engagements in his Afrobeat music, his art drew mostly on the components of Yoruba traditional theatre to moralize and to criticize Africans who repudiated African religion and culture to embrace Western values. His music's popularizing tendencies were achieved through stage performances, where thousands of people gathered every weekend at his popular venue, the Afrika Shrine, to cheer him. Waterman again reminds us that, "Performances of most genres of Yoruba popular music occur at elaborate parties; after rites of passage, such as namings, weddings, and funerals, and at urban nightspots ('hotels')" (Waterman 2008, 199). During these live performances, people entertained the audience with dancing, singing, and other forms of artistic expression. Royster (2011) illustrates the theatrical aspect of Fela's performances, stating that Fela and his dancers exhibited a very sensual and energetic style. With expert choreography, the dancers wriggled and twisted their bodies, shaking their rumps in suggestive ways to the admiration of the audience. This type of sexually expressive dance was created by Fela, and it was performed in tandem with local African traditional dance steps, which emphasized the physical manipulation of different body parts. Fela's stage performance told different kinds of stories about the human condition and satirized various social institutions. His Afrobeat music rode on the directness of theatre and its affective contiguity. It is through the artistic capacities of theatre that his music blossomed and earned global acclaim.

Methodology

Several critical methods can be used to describe the distinct artistic, social and cultural panoply of Fela's musical *oeuvre*. This article relies on discourse analysis for critical interpretation. It also adopts a lyrical analysis method to interpret a selection of Fela's songs. The chosen songs are "Army Arrangement", "Sorrow, Tears and Blood", "Coffin for Head of State", and "Shuffering and Shmiling". These songs explore Fela's philosophy and commitment to highlighting the deteriorating aspects of society under unconscionable leadership. The songs also demonstrate how theatrical components promote his stage performance and align with his political message to achieve an artistic unity. The discourse analysis of the selected songs and their lyrical interpretation catalyze this research in line with Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. The songs penetrate the Nigerian/African social fibre, thus awakening the masses to the immediate realities that confront them. Further interpretations of the songs examine how Fela's use of language in his Afrobeat music creates meaning and affects social, cultural, and political actualities in his native Nigeria and Africa. The use of language in his lyrics is revolutionary and is intricately tied to Africa's social code, portraying Afrobeat as a form of Boal's political theatre. Through performance, Fela used language to establish a connection with the audience. The language of his lyrics during live performances also elicited responses from the audience. In his music, theatrical components align with the revolutionary language of his lyrics to produce a harmonious sound that resonates with the audience.

Fela and his Afrobeat music

Afrobeat is a music genre traced to Yorubaland, Southwest Nigeria, in the 1960s and 70s, at a time when the country was grappling with post-colonial challenges. Its origins are credited to Fela Anikulapo Kuti, who developed it from traditional Yoruba music, fusing it with jazz, soul, rock, Latin music, and local fuji songs. Having studied music at Trinity College of Music in London from 1958 to 1963, he understood the elements and focus of his chosen music genre. When he returned to Nigeria in 1963, he started playing jazz with his first band, Koola Lobitos, but gradually came to concentrate on Afrobeat because, in addition to jazz, his new music genre combined other genres of music. He learned and perfected the art of playing different musical instruments such as saxophone, trumpet, keyboards, and organ. He also mastered how to play different African musical instruments such as *shekere*, *djembe*, *congas*, *bata*, and *agidigbo*. These local African musical instruments also play essential roles in African theatrical performances. Traditional Yoruba music makes use of polyrhythm and percussion, which appeal to the local people because they express a deep-seated sense of locality and nativity. Waterman observes that:

Over more than twenty years, the organizational principles of Afrobeat have remained remarkably constant. The basic rhythm-section pattern divides into complementary strata: a bottom layer, made up of interlocking electric-bass and bass-drum patterns; a middle layer, with a rhythm guitar, congas, and a snare backbeat; and a top layer, with percussion sticks and *s.è.kè.rè*. playing ostinatos. The horn section provides riffs in support of Fela's singing, and its members play extended solos (Waterman 2008, 211).

For Fela, developing a genre of music which speaks to ordinary people and their sense of tradition arose from his conviction that music must begin from the roots and be accompanied by

devices which the people recognize. That is why he mostly sang in Yoruba and Pidgin English, to reach the common, uneducated people. Ayobade (2023) notes that Afrobeat music is characteristically presented during live performances accompanied by a local musical ensemble, which the audience can easily relate to and identify. These live performances feature specialist instrumentalists who have mastered their roles. He goes on to stress that the band leader and his crew are the major characters of the genre, and must necessarily dedicate their performance to political, revolutionary issues that directly concern the people.

At the heart of theatre is performance. It constitutes the centripetal force of Afrobeat identity. Given that performance is an inexorable component of theatre from which Afrobeat draws its stimuli, political messages and sundry social commentaries are better propagated in the musical genre, thus to understand Afrobeat, we must first understand theatre. Afrobeat music is one of the cornerstones of popular arts, at least within the African context. Many people in Africa rely on popular arts to relate to socio-political developments, which are often veiled or obscured by mainstream media. That is why popular arts enjoy a positive reputation among the common people. Barber elucidates this point further, remarking that, "The most obvious reason for giving serious attention to the popular arts is their sheer, undeniable assertive presence as social facts. They loudly proclaim their own importance in the lives of large numbers of African people. They are everywhere. They flourish without encouragement or recognition from official cultural bodies, and sometimes in defiance of them" (Barber 1987, 1). With its vast credentials as a form of popular arts, Afrobeat music subtly immerses itself within the rank and file of the masses by utilizing the instrumentality of theatre as a vehicle both for entertainment and a socio-political communication. Again, Barber points to the general allure of popular arts: "But popular arts are also much more than constellations of social, political, and economic relationships—they are expressive acts. Their most important attribute is their power to communicate. This power is eloquently testified to by the frequency with which they are repressed" (1987, 2). The "expressive acts" inscription of popular arts according to Barber, is subsumed by their performance ingredients, which make it easier for people to identify with them. Performance and Barber's "expressive acts" are not far apart and as theatrical components, they animate the Afrobeat genre to its sensational reputation.

The theatrical components of Fela's Afrobeat music inevitably culminate in exciting performances on stage, which confer urgency, popularity, and potency to his revolutionary, political messages. The success of Fela's stage performance was achieved through the deployment of instruments such as saxophone, drums, gongs, pianos and other local instruments that enhanced the rhythm of his lyrics. As a leading soloist, he moved about on stage, directed the movement of his backup singers, and also encouraged audience participation by urging the audience to respond to some of his chants and queries. Audience participation was prominent during Fela's live musical performances, and it is also a cornerstone of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. Stewart (2013) underscores the fixed, theatrical nature of Fela's compositions by remarking that, in contrast to the flexible configuration of highlife and *jùjú* music, Fela's songs were faithful to an unchanging structure. His songs started with a rudimentary rhythm and developed into broad horn solos, integrating chanting and audience engagement, and finishing with more solos, often with a duration of up to half an hour. Through the theatrical composition of his music, Fela erected a reflexive, realistic mechanism that enabled his audience to see the underlying, avoidable social hindrances in their lives, which were most often state-inflicted. The success of Fela's music could be adduced from the foregoing.

Theoretical Framework

Theatre of the Oppressed is a seminal work by renowned Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal. It was initially published in 1974 in Spanish and Portuguese, but was eventually translated into English in 1979. The text outlines how theatre can become a revolutionary tool for the working class, as well as for ordinary citizens who are victims of tyranny. These sets of people are encouraged to agitate for a new social structure that guarantees social justice and equitable economic empowerment. Although *Theatre of the Oppressed* is a revolutionary book from a theatrical perspective, it has morphed into a galvanizing ideological spectrum as an academic framework employed to critically analyse how social change can be achieved through the vast instrumentality of theatre, such as through drama, music, dance, improvisation, costuming, and audience participation. Besides its identity as an academic instrument of analysis, *Theatre of the Oppressed* has also become an avenue for common people to express their frustrations about the social and political contradictions in their immediate society. Over the years, theatre has served as an outlet for preaching social change through its various elements. Garcia et al (2019) argue that, "For more than a century, theatre practitioners have used performance to incite social change and provoke audience members into political action" (Garcia et al 2019, 3). Fela recognized the potential of theatre and utilized it in his Afrobeat music through a synthesis of entertainment and ideological doctrines. By emphasizing the radical and revolutionary potential of theatre, Boal reiterates its imaginative and creative bent. He justifies his political, activist use of theatre by remarking that "all theatre is necessarily political because all the activities of man are political and theatre is one of them" (Boal 1985, ix). Viewed from Boal's perspective, the use of theatre as a radical, revolutionary instrument has catalysed its distinctiveness as an artistic, cultural, and all-encompassing medium of creative expression.

At the heart of Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* is performance. At the heart of Fela's Afrobeat music is also performance. Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* thus provides an analytical template for the interpretation and understanding of Fela's Afrobeat music. It uses theatre as a forum for political criticism, seeking to provoke the audience into awareness of the deplorable social conditions that exist. Its motive is to turn the audience from passive observers to participants or spect-actors. This reflects Fela's method of using his Afrika Shrine as a political theatre to raise mass awareness of socio-political decay in Nigeria. He draws the audience into his performance through antiphony, thus creating an atmosphere of dialogue and exchange, turning the audience into Boal's spect-actors. Fela's performance on stage and his public demonstration reflects the ideological leaning that undergirds *Theatre of the Oppressed*, where theatre and stage are used as political weapons for mass mobilization.

Theatre as a mode of artistic expression goes beyond physical buildings designated for acting. It embodies the spirit of contemporary reality, where prevailing social tensions are laid bare. The artistic flavour of theatre can be appreciated through the ideological compass of *Theatre of the Oppressed*, because the tactics and strategies of activism, radicalism, and political doctrines are all carried out through theatrical enactment. Performance in theatre creates an atmosphere where the performer and the audience interact, sharing a bond already established by the artistic message. By including the numerous resources of theatre, Fela identified with the oppressed and with the victims of political power play, galvanizing the people into awareness of the social malaise that existed. His artistic and political consciousness coalesce with Boal's radical prescriptions in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Kritzer argues that, "Theatre's most basic political potential lies in its paradigmatic relationship to the polis: within theatre's space, assembled citizens view and consider representations of their world enacted for them in the immediacy of

live performance” (Kritzer 2008, 1). The regular weekend musical interface between Fela and a large audience at his Afrika Shrine provided a synergy where radical ideas were exchanged. By providing entertainment and domiciling his music among the people every weekend, he established an end product for his radical, political messages. Although many people viewed theatre as an essential form of entertainment which only marginally engaged with serious political and social issues in the form of satire, we can profitably argue that Fela's Afrobeat music propagated politics and engaged with other social issues through theatre, thus creating a new theatrical orientation among the people. He elevated theatre, marrying it with music to demonstrate how the combination of the two artistic forms can achieve social sentence by addressing political issues that affect the populace. Indeed, it is difficult to isolate his revolutionary posturing from the role of theatre. The use of Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* as a vital ideological instrument to espouse the success of theatrical components in Fela's Afrobeat music is thus justified.

The contents of Fela's music and its vehicle of dissemination - theatre - have transmuted from mere entertainment to a radical, political weapon. The 'political weapon' content of his music commenced from the early 70s, immediately after the Nigerian civil war, which claimed more than three million lives. After the war, the military government of General Yakubu Gowon allegedly mismanaged the enormous economic resources of the country that accrued from the sale of crude oil. There was a sharp class contrast between the rich and the poor. Having already established a large following due to his dedication to social issues, Fela drew the attention of the masses to the government's reckless and brazen appropriation of their patrimony. He was arrested by the military authorities several times and his Kalakuta Republic, the commune he founded in Lagos, was destroyed. Olaniyan graphically captures the debacle of Fela versus the Nigerian military government as follows:

Fela had infinitely more or *real* violent visitations from the security agents of successive Nigerian governments over the course of the three decades of his musical career. One such, on February 18, 1977, resulted in the invasion and sacking of his residence by nearly 1,000 soldiers. Residents – including Fela - and guests were brutally beaten and bayoneted and scores ended up with broken heads, legs, backs, shoulders, arms, and ribs; women were sexually assaulted; Fela's ailing mother, Nigeria's foremost anticolonial nationalist and feminist, was tossed from a second-floor window, and the house itself was razed – all in broad daylight with thousands of citizens in the mostly lower-class neighbourhood watching in disbelief (Olaniyan 2004, 1).

Fela's mother later died from injuries sustained during the military onslaught on his residence. That episode inspired his song “Coffin for Head of State” which will be analysed later in this article. The above scenario reveals how he constantly clashed with the military authorities and suffered personal harm for his critical, radical commentaries in his music. Despite regular assaults from the military, he interacted with the oppressed people of Nigeria through his public performances on stage, where various narratives captured in his songs were dramatized to achieve artistic sublimity. His stage performances promoted audience participation, which is a major cornerstone of theatre as captured by Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. According to King, “In devising *Theatre of the Oppressed* methods, Augusto Boal created forms in which the audience not only could take to the stage but were motivated so to do” (King 2001, 94). There is a synergy between the theatre and politics advocated by Boal and the radical, revolutionary messages inherent in Fela's Afrobeat music. As an analytical framework, *Theatre of the Oppressed* educates the masses about the prevailing social deterioration and allows spectators

to become active participants in the dramatic depiction on stage. As an artistic, creative model, it adopts various theatrical concepts such as storytelling, characterization, costumes, choreography, audience participation, improvisation, and stage design. It also adopts different approaches, including Newspaper Theatre, Image Theatre, Invisible Theatre, and Forum Theatre. In all these approaches, it seeks to convert spectators into actors, not just actors on stage but active participants in social engineering, in the quest to achieve an egalitarian social structure.

Theatre of the Oppressed shares unmistakable proximity with Marxism, a theoretical framework that dedicates its radical approach to equitable wealth distribution between the working-class proletariat and the owners of the means of production, the bourgeoisie. While Marxism repudiates capitalism and exploitation, it seeks class realignment through the equitable distribution of economic resources in society. In the same vein, Fela's Afrobeat ideology consistently challenges class disequilibrium, exploitation and different shades of social contradictions. Like Karl Marx, Fela utilized his music to extend the frontiers of polemical licence towards the attainment of social justice. *Theatre of the Oppressed* also shares an ideological similarity with the avant-garde, a new and innovative method in arts and theatre, popularized by Bertolt Brecht in the 20th century. It encouraged spectators to transform from passive observers to active participants in the drama unfolding on stage. By adopting *Theatre of the Oppressed* as a theoretical template, this article demonstrates how Fela's Afrobeat music utilizes theatre as a revolutionary tool to create awareness among the oppressed in society, urging them to aspire for a favourable system where they will function as protagonists. As Schroeter observes, "*Theatre of the Oppressed* aims to develop the critical consciousness of participants in a way that enables them to recognize and challenge social structures that oppress, so as to transform social structures" (Schroeter 2013, 397). Fela's fictional recreation of class dichotomies and the dramatic enactment of these realities on stage have a close relationship with *Theatre of the Oppressed*. By turning the various apparatuses of theatre into radical instruments, *Theatre of the Oppressed* also promotes these theatrical elements as cultural and aesthetic artefacts that contribute to entertainment and artistic consciousness.

Literature review

Fela's Afrobeat music has attracted multiple interpretations from different perspectives, such as politics, Pan-African consciousness, popular culture, and theatre. Sithole is convinced that "Fela's music is tied with a political code, and that is why the music is Afrobeat, the musical form that channeled his oppositional politics which were anti-establishment par excellence" (Sithole 2012, 2). Sithole establishes that there is a correlation between politics and Afrobeat, which makes it easier to connect with the local people. Politics galvanized Afrobeat and the spine of Afrobeat is theatre. Theatre gave Fela's political messages urgency, leading to mass patronage and awareness worldwide. His code switching from English to Pidgin was intended to achieve a mass, populist appeal with local, uneducated people, and this contributed to the global popularity of his art. While he entertained the people, he also laid bare the social and political conditions that threatened their collective existence. Salawu corroborates the foregoing by remarking that:

Fela's music underscored his sympathy for the masses, and his adoption of Pidgin was the blueprint of his music. This linguistic vision made his music accessible to the local audience without forestalling its space globally. After Fela switched to Pidgin, he became a renowned musical figure globally. He saw Pidgin as a linguistic vehicle

for his ideology as a Pan-Africanist. His *Yabis* aesthetics are also entrenched in his politically charged Pidgin lyrics (Salawu 2019, 10).

There is a difference between music and politics on the one hand and Afrobeat music and politics on the other. Not all music is Afrobeat. While Afrobeat music relies on theatrical ensembles and socio-political commitment, other forms of music may not necessarily rely on theatricality or focus on socio-political issues. Among the other distinctive characteristics of Afrobeat, such as complex rhythms, call-and-response, Pidgin English lyrics, and political critiquing, theatre stakes a huge claim as the most vibrant and dynamic, given its potential to aggregate other art forms. Any celebration of Fela's Afrobeat music as an instrument of oppositional politics must recognize the role of theatre in the success of his art. Olusegun and Adejube also corroborate Fela's political and social commitment, observing that, "Fela uses his music as a tool for the mobilization of people to defend the cause of human rights against the oppression and corruption of the political ruler and military dictators in the country" (Olusegun and Adejube 2024, 4). His instrument of political mobilization was the theatre, which he relied on to entertain and educate. Thus, politics and theatre imbricated each other in Fela's artistic universe.

Adu presents an all-encompassing idea of Fela's music, which includes politics, theatre and a cultural slant. According to her, "Fela's musical genre entails Afrocentricity, highlife, musical activism, stage performance and songwriting" (Adu 2020, 68). By recognizing some components of theatre in the success of his art, Adu reinforces Fela's music as being rich in theatrical elements. The stage performance approach of his music and songwriting are aspects of theatre that combine to promote Afrobeat as a global artistic form, inspiring various talents and musicians across Africa. Afolayan (2013) celebrates the impact of Fela's enduring music legacy long after his death claiming that Fela's reputation still commands respect all over the world, especially in Africa, specifically because his songs were dedicated to analyzing and interpreting socio-political issues which threatened the existence of the masses. By continually addressing issues of exploitation and misrule in Africa, Fela promoted a Pan-African consciousness which pointed Africans to their shared destiny and humanity. In the same vein, Alimi and Anthony celebrate Fela's legacy by comparing him with the legendary reggae sensation Bob Marley, who also used his music to advocate for the rights of ordinary people. In their words, "Fela's greatness was rooted in his indefatigable interactions with the ordinary person in society and untiring effort to revolutionize it. Thus, like Reggae King Bob Marley, Fela Anikolapo Kuti is well qualified to be called a revolutionary African musical genius" (Alimi and Anthony 2013, 75). Alimi and Anthony acclaim the immortal impact of Fela's music as socially edifying and as a concise vehicle for the dissemination of his radical ideology, as well as for entertainment, and cultural rehabilitation.

Effiong (2021) reiterates that Fela's Pan-African consciousness was expressed through the use of his music to promote African culture while rejecting Western values which ultimately robbed Africans of identity. According to him, "Fela would also emerge as a shameless proponent of the use of art to promote and commemorate culture, and he was emphatic in his conviction that colonial values, unless rejected, would obstruct the regeneration of a viable Nigerian (and African) identity" (2021, 62). As Effiong pointed out, many of Fela's songs, like "Gentleman" and "Lady" excoriate some Africans for rejecting traditional ways of life while embracing Western values, which operate at cross purposes with the African quotidian reality. The songs further admonish Africans to appreciate their culture and embrace it to the admiration of the world. His Afrika Shrine in Lagos became an African mouthpiece where the problems

and challenges of Africans were identified and analyzed. It inevitably attracted thousands of people globally. While some visited it for research, others visited it for tourism.

Oikelome (2009) traces Fela's original artistic intentions and points out that he altered his musical vision to embrace other forms of music genres. His first loves were highlife, jazz, the twist, the Madison, rock and roll, and rumba. However, as his social awareness and musical career developed, he slightly altered his vision and focused on only jazz and highlife. This could be attributed to his search for a genre that could fully accommodate theatrical constituents such as drama and active stage performance. Thus, we can say that Fela's artistic transposition was intentional. Sajnani et al argue that, "By representing contradictions, inviting doubt where there was once certainty, and by activating possibilities within dramatic reality, participants rehearse options for action within seemingly unchangeable circumstances" (Sajnani et al 2020, 572). Sajnani et al view drama as a vital aspect of theatre which helped to propagate Fela's songs among millions of his fans worldwide.

Given the nature of Afrobeat music and all the traditional artistic modules that accompany the genre, its assimilation and appreciation are better comprehended through theatrical animation. Balogun and Ademowo elucidate Afrobeat's imbrication with theatre. According to them, "Afrobeat is oftentimes defined as primarily a cultural, political and musical practice, or, better still, aesthetics of cultural politics. Its performance is equally characterized by the creation of a liberal, cultural space that is admissive of a free discussion of the society's fears, doubts and inhibitions, be it related to governance, sex, or the yearnings of restive youth" (Balogun and Ademowo 2024, 68). Balogun and Ademowo acknowledge performance as a key ingredient of Afrobeat through which social and ideological convictions are projected.

Afrobeat music was Fela's fount. He saw in it a genre that synthesized all other forms of music but created a different pathway by delivering it with traditional ensembles, which produced a dissimilar, iconic rhythm. Adiele (2024) supports the symbolic role of theatre as a mode of artistic expression able to convey every aspect of human endeavour. He states, "Generally viewed as a reflexive instrument of collective and individual examination, theatre reinvents every aspect of society from politics to religion, love, vengeance, exploitation, gender issues and most importantly, class, social contradictions" (Adiele 2024, 325). Although the fulcrum of Fela's music is generally understood as focusing on a radical and revolutionary crusade to rouse the people to action, its success could be ascribed to theatre, which accommodates his Afrobeat brand of music as a unique artistic form.

Theatrical components in Fela's Afrobeat music

Explaining the meaning of theatre is a daunting task because it has many divisions and subdivisions. Stern remarks that, "There is no single, useful definition of theatre; it's the label for a loose, rag-tag bundle of social and cultural practices that more or less began in Ancient Greece but that had probably been going on long before in various different guises and under various different descriptions" (Stern 2014, 1). The word '*theatre*' is traced to the Greek word *theatron* which means a place for viewing artistic performances or displays. It can be understood as an arena for different artistic performances with spaces for spectators and a stage for the artist. Fischer-Lichte and Wihstutz point out that:

The emergence of the theatre as a public space is just as intimately tied to politics. During the course of the Dionysian festivals, the theatre would host state ceremonies honoring distinguished citizens, announce decrees, and provide a forum for political

speeches, in addition to the tragedy and comedy competitions. The emergence of the theatre as a place of assembly for the polis is directly linked to the idea of democracy, which was also the reason why Plato dismissed it as a space for the masses (Lichte and Wihstutz 2013, 3).

Theatrical performances can take place in non-purpose-built venues like schools, churches and open spaces. Given its all-encompassing image as a venue for diverse artistic performances, theatre requires various elements to flourish.

Drama could be regarded as the most iconic component of theatre. It is an artistic form which thrives on performance through dialogue and action by the characters. The roles of the characters are interpreted and advised on by the director when the drama comes to stage. Drama can be presented through different media, including the theatre, film, television or radio. Tombak (2014), remarks that drama as an artistic and performance genre affords the audience the opportunity to relate to different social and political concerns in society. By coming to terms with these issues, the people are better equipped to appreciate their society and their roles in challenging obnoxious narratives. Stage drama commands immediacy and affects the audience more because it allows them, through audience participation, to become part of the artistic enactment on stage. The dramatic aspect of Fela's Afrobeat music encompasses all the elements of drama: storytelling, plot, characters, dialogue, costume, and improvisation. Storytelling is an essential part of drama because it provides the spine, which supports the chronology of dramatic development. Damiano and Lombardo opine that, "The effectiveness of stories depends on their dramatic quality, that creates an emotional bond between the audience and the characters" (Damiano and Lombardo 2009, 436). Through storytelling and a specific plot, Fela's songs focus on politics and capture sequentially how African politicians plundered the continent through corruption and flagrant abuse of office.

The song "Army Arrangement" recounts how the army hierarchy, in power in Nigeria at that time (from 1976 to 1979) embezzled funds indiscriminately without accountability. Although the song starts with a vulgar narration of the shape, size, and activities of *yansh* (buttocks), it gradually locates its political and historical content. It narrates how 7 billion naira disappeared from Nigeria's foreign reserves, indicting the Military Head of State, Olusegun Obasanjo, and his Chief of Army Staff, Musa Yar'Adua. According to the lyrics, everybody was arrested, but in the end, no one was implicated, and the funds were not recovered. The song also tells the story of how 2.8 billion naira vanished from Nigeria's oil corporation, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). Again, Fela indicted the Military Head of State, Olusegun Obasanjo, who set up a panel that concluded that no money was missing. Storytelling in the song transcends verbal rendition. It relies on theatrical instruments and musical ensembles as communicative strategies to create an artistic unity. Africa's literary tradition started in the form of orature to educate the people and document events. Fela's native Yoruba is famous for using storytelling to serve didactic purposes and preserve history. Given that Fela's artistic ideology draws copiously on his Yoruba heritage, he extends the frontiers of his musical flavour by incorporating storytelling as an aspect of theatre to mobilize the masses, document history, criticize corruption and establish an emotional link with the audience.

Furthermore, the song narrates how the Head of State, upon leaving office, replaced himself with old politicians who had despoiled Nigeria, thus enthroning a culture of recycled, corrupt leadership in the country's political corridors. Finally, the song captures how a few people grow fat on the country's patrimony while the populace is hungry. Fela challenged the military authorities to take him to court, where he would prove all the allegations right. Conclusively, he

asserts that the entire dubiety is all “army arrangement”. Through storytelling, Fela brings to life historical events and shocks the audience into awareness of the complicity of former military rulers in the plundering of the country's collective patrimony. The lyrical intensity of the song captures the imagination of the audience and satirizes the military as inefficient managers of the country's economy. Through the song, Fela urges the audience to trace the country's current economic struggles to an era when the military burglarized the exchequer with impunity. For him, the military in Nigeria can never be exonerated from the social and economic malaise in the country, and the audience should be aware of these realities.

Through his repetitive call-and-response strategy, Fela draws the audience into his art, making them become part of the artistic unfolding on stage, typical of Boal's theatrical inclinations. For example, when he echoes “give me the answer”, the audience responds “army arrangement”. This call-and-response method intensifies the dialogue between the performer and audience. It continues for more than 5 minutes towards the end of the song. Zheltukhanaa et al (2016) remind us that, “Drama is more than dialogue, where dialogue is employed as a dramatic resource; its mechanics have a fundamental role to play” (2016, 7416). Through vocal transformation and role-playing, he assumes the mannerisms of the military characters in his songs to the admiration of the excited audience. The dialogue is achieved by a rhythmical exchange between him and the dancers, who also double as the chorus. During the stage performance of “Army Arrangement” in his Afrika Shrine in Lagos, Fela wore military camouflage to reflect a military identity and further ridicule the military class for the country's derelict conditions. This change of costume is symbolic of a military class that contributed to the ruination of Nigeria. Beyond his vocal expressions, Fela relied on costumes to communicate corruption, greed, and deceit on the part of the military as former leaders of the country.

The historical substratum of “Sorrow, Tears, and Blood” derives from the era of police and army brutality in Nigeria, especially in 1977, when they invaded and destroyed Fela's Kalakuta Republic with impunity. In the song, Fela adopts a storytelling technique to convey his political and historical message to the audience. At the beginning, through vocal transformation, he dramatically produces a throaty noise, mimicking police and army sirens. This serves as a prologue which captures the sober mood following the usual movement of army and police vehicles around the metropolis. It also conveys a mental picture where the men in uniform arrive at a public place unannounced and uninvited. As they arrive, there is chaos and disorder. People scamper to safety in different directions, and in the milieu that followed, some people die, and some go missing. After seven minutes of chaos, all is quiet again. The police and army are gone, leaving sorrow, tears, and blood in their wake as regular trademarks. Through a call-and-response technique, achieved with his chorus, he emphasizes sorrow, tears, and blood as the regular trademark of police and army activities. During live performances, the audience joined the chorus to chant “them regular trademark”. Thus, a collective dramatic orchestra for the condemnation of police and army brutality is achieved. The invasion, destruction and immediate disappearance of the police and army are characteristic of dramatic tragedy with its attendant bedlam. During his live performances of “Sorrow, Tears, and Blood”, Fela came on stage with a bandaged head, crutches, arm in a sling, and stumbling footsteps to underscore the symbolic, brutal consequences of police and army raid. At the end, there are three sets of characters, Fela, the chorus, and the audience, who combine to achieve artistic unity that transcends the mere rendition of music.

In “Sorrow, Tears, and Blood”, Fela adopted the epic poetic form to tell stories of anguish, misery, and abandonment. Poetry is one of the most notable, imaginative, and creative properties of artistic creation. It thrives on the inspirational use of words to appeal to the emotions in

celebration of nature, divinity, or the different circumstances besetting humanity. Fela's poetic ingenuity is demonstrated in his retelling of the masses' unwillingness to fight for freedom due to their love for and attachment to material things. This is captured in his chronicling of the reasons the people are afraid to fight for their rights.

We no want die
We no want wound
We no want quench
We no want go
I get one child
Mama dey for house
Papa dey for house
I want build house
I don build house
I no want quench
I want enjoy
I no want go.

He goes on to urge the people to resist police and army brutality, warning that only the people can save themselves because the leaders do not care much about them. Beyond the radical content of the song, his use of language contains imagery, metaphor, and alliteration. The last verse of the song dwells on repetitive alliteration and a rhyming pattern that makes it easy for the chorus to repeat "them regular trademark" simultaneously.

"Coffin for Head of State", chronicles Fela's march to Dodan Barracks, Nigeria's former seat of power, to present a mock coffin to Olusegun Obasanjo, the then Military Head of State. Fela's improvisation of a coffin serves as an emblem of confrontation against the military government and a means of indicting them for official sadism. Improvisation and costume are important components of theatre. According to Dennis and Madinatu, "Improvisation focuses on how a creative work is achieved based on an existing one. Costume design, as one aspect of the visual elements in theatrical performances, is no exception as it is one area where improvisation thrives" (Dennis and Madinatu 2015, 37). The original coffin held the body of Fela's mother, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, who was thrown down from Fela's house while the military were raiding the Kalakuta Republic. She suffered multiple injuries and later died. The grim narrative above aptly illustrates the inevitable conflict between Fela's political proclivities and the government of the day. In live performances of the song, he improvised a coffin and brought it on stage to communicate the murderous nature of the government to the audience. In the song, he improvises a series of Christian and Islamic religious expressions like "Amen Amen Amen", "By the grace of Almighty God", "In Spiritus Christus", "Habbah Allah", and "Allahu Wakubar Mohammed Salamalekun" to mock the military hierarchy who resort to religion while presiding over a murderous government. Through his improvisation in the song, he establishes a call-and-response dialogue with the audience to publicly critique the government. Nobody gives another person a coffin as a gift, but in this case, he presents a coffin to the Head of State to remind the government of their complicity in the murder of his mother.

Fela improvised lighting on stage to achieve different shades of day or night. Thus, with effective lighting, he communicated the message of doom and hopelessness with darkness, then hope and renewal with brightness. In "Coffin for Head of State", when he brought the coffin on stage, the lights went off and it was completely dark. The darkness conveyed the tragic moment

of bereavement and mourning. When he removed the coffin, the lights came back on to usher in a new beginning. Meanwhile, the audience section of the Afrika Shrine was always bathed with multi-coloured lighting during his performances, which concealed the identity of the spectators. Since Fela's songs were anti-establishment, many people who attended his shows were seen as anti-establishment too. Therefore, respected members of society preferred their identities to be hidden to avoid being identified or incurring the wrath of the government. Special effects in Fela's stage performance included effective use of pyrotechnics, which added colour and razzmatazz to the atmosphere. The pyrotechnics included colourful fireworks, oxygen candles, and various harmless explosive devices like crackers and colourful bursting balloons. These special effects added colour to Fela's theatrical creation and elevated his music to a classic artistic form, both for entertainment, social mobilization, and revolutionary ideas communicated through the language of the masses – Pidgin English and sometimes Yoruba.

Fela's costume and his flamboyant, distinctive, colourful appearance on stage are part of the distinguishing aspects of dramatic performance that resonate with the audience. In "Coffin for Head of State", he dressed in long black trousers that spread out downwards, covering the ankle, which conveyed a mood of mourning for his late mother. In other performances, he wore trousers made from special African materials in different colours. He also wore the same materials as shirts usually with the shirts slightly open to reveal his chest. He wore a long chain on his neck which cascaded down his chest to his stomach. Osiebe (2020) remarks that, all through Fela's music career, he wore remarkable costumes which distinguished him in his Afrika Shrine. As well as wearing flamboyant clothes, he also painted his face with local white chalks, which made him appear like a typical native doctor with spiritual powers. In the later part of his life, he completely discarded his costume and appeared half-naked on stage except for his underpants. His lack of clothes portrayed the nakedness of the masses and the utter deprivation they suffered at the hands of the government. By appearing naked, he identified with the misery among the people. The ladies who performed in the chorus for him also appeared in flamboyant dresses and decorated their faces in different styles with African powder made up of local chalk.

In "Shuffering and Shmiling", he artistically alters the spelling of the keywords in the title "Suffering and Smiling". This is to ridicule the conditions of the masses who suffer daily but present a façade to mask their misery. Artistry is an essential part of theatre, which grants the artist an opportunity to demonstrate different, unique skills in the theatrical style on display. Boiko et al observe that, "The artistic image in the theatrical production represents the artist's opinion or a generalisation of his feelings, expressed not directly, as in science, but allegorically, through various metaphors" (Boiko et al 2023, 3). Fela mastered different kinds of creative artistry, which were peculiar to his Afrobeat creation. In the song, he creates two contrasting situations which capture the appalling social realities of the masses - while they suffer, they also smile. The 12-minute sustained instrumental introduction to the song prepares the audience for the sad narrative which depicts the daily survival struggles of the average Nigerian. Through narrative artistry, he portrays a typical scene inside a popular public means of transportation in Lagos, called *molue* where people are packed like sardines with 49 people sitting down and 99 people standing on their feet. He goes on to describe how the people do not have water or electricity in their houses, face police and army brutality on the streets, and confront wicked, demanding bosses at work.

In "Shuffering and Shmiling", he employed choreography to depict the suffering of the masses and their helplessness as they struggle daily for survival. Choreography involves the mastery of specialized dance steps or other body movements and gestures that communicate

important messages, conjuring feelings of excitement, passion, or sadness. The dancers communicated brief and minimal scenes of “Shmiling” which were immediately overshadowed by long spells of “Shuffering”. The audience easily identified with the dramatic depiction on stage, either by applauding the period of “Shmiling” or rejecting the period of “Shuffering”. Fela’s dancers danced sensually, with intricate, elaborate movements of their bodies, legs, hips, and hands. They assumed different positions during stage performances, which, directed by Fela, depended on the storyline of the songs. Sometimes, Fela danced to the beat of the drum according to what emotion he wanted to evoke in the audience, which might include pity, angst, joy, and admiration.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that although Fela’s artistic form is music, theatre is an integral part of his creative engagement, and the success of his music can be attributed to its theatrical flavour. Theatre provides a suitable channel for the communication of mass-oriented ideologies because it makes use of artistic components, which the people can easily relate to and appreciate. Thus, we can argue that Fela’s Afrobeat music successfully penetrated politics with mass orientation due to its use of theatrical components. Therefore, there is a sense in which we can say that Fela embraced the resources of theatre to elevate his art. In that way, it contributes to the revival of theatre, which has waned over time due to the emergence of cinema, TV, and video. Live Musical performances can imitate Fela’s models for success. Indeed, the intersection of music and theatre could be beneficial to both art forms. Like Fela, other celebrated musicians in the world have also attained artistic success by exploring the resources of theatre to promote their music. In Nigeria, following in the footsteps of Fela, musicians like Burna Boy, Davido, Wizkid, Tiwa Savage, and Yemi Alade have all attained remarkable success having resorted to theatre, alongside the success of their studio-recorded songs. In a way, we can view Afrobeat music as a theatre-based artistic form, which can guarantee social penetration when it comes on stage as drama, thus aligning with Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed ideology.

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