

MUSIC AS A TOOL OF POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF FELA ANIKULAPO KUTI

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ABSTRACT

Music has been a significant tool of political activism in the world. Music tends to pass emotions, motivate and inspire political consciousness. This study examines the impact of music on political activism in Nigeria using Fela Anikulapo Kuti as a case study. The secondary method of data collection and analysis is adopted to gather information. The study presents that, indeed, music is a relevant tool of political activism. Music has been used to advocate political ideology and improve consciousness. Fela Anikulapo Kuti is an iconic political activist in Nigeria using music as a tool to lead his political activism

KEYWORDS Music, Political Activism, Afrobeat



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INTRODUCTION

Music has always been an integral part of every African society both past and present. It filters through every facet of the African society. It has its impacts in the cultural and socio-political stance of every African society. African music in the real sense is a ritual that illustrates the real quintessence and humanness in being of African origin as Cudjoe (1963) pointed out. Music and politics sound as two distinctly related concepts, however they do intersect often, especially in the African setting. Political activities in Nigeria and Africa is largely influenced by music, and music is also largely influenced by contemporary and prevailing political situations as we have seen in the musical lyrics of African artists such as Lucky Dube, Alpha Blondy and Fela Anikulapo Kuti over the years (Onyebadi, 2018).

Furthermore, music played a significant role in the mobilization of Africans to agitate for their freedom during the colonial and independent era. The history of intersection between African music and politics dates far back beyond the independent era as there are records of township music such as 'Marabi' in the

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1930s (Onyebadi). These songs were laced with implicit as well as explicit political messages against the apartheid system in South Africa during those years.

Although the basic role of music in influencing politics is well acknowledged in literature (Labinjo, 1982), only few Nigerian and African researchers have tried to explore how African artists use their music craft to influence or communicate political messages. This study will attempt to make additions and fill existing gaps in literature concerning the intersection between music and politics using the music of Fela Anikulapo as a case study

RESEARCH METHOD

The paper adopts an analytical study using secondary sources from reputed published materials such as books, thesis, local and international journals and articles. All the collected information is evaluated and interpreted using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The paper focuses on music as a tool of political activism in Nigeria using Fela Anikulapo Kuti as case study

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Theoretical Framework

This work will adopt the Framework for Activist Musician (FAM) which was described by (Hill, 2002). According to Hill, FAM evolved from works grounded in self-leadership and musician craft. This framework collectively explains the phenomenon of activist musician who engage in social change making use of their ability to evoke, enhance, and sustain social ties using their respected status as artist. This framework consists of elements such as an individual's self-concept, an individual's ability to express desirable behaviors, exercise social influence and execute motivational strategies.

Basically, FAM illustrates how activist musicians make use of their artistic skills and societal status to foster significant changes in the society. In other words, the FAM model illustrates how individual behavior and social influence can encourage other individuals to get involved in social change; hence the FAM model suggests that the ability of an individual to enact changes in the society is enriched through their music making involvement and status. All components of the FAM model work in harmony to depict the culmination of one's influence in leading others within social change and helps to comprehensively understand how the music making experience of the activist musician translate into their activist work (Hill).

Evolution of Nigerian Music

Music in Nigeria dates back to the pre-colonial era. As a result of the different languages and ethnic groups in Nigeria, the music scene in the country is very vast and diverse. In South-Western or Yoruba speaking region, music is as ancient as the Yoruba language itself. Kings in Yorubaland popularly known as Oba usually employs the services of musicians, drummers and historians (Waterman, 2000). While the historian recites the dynastic list of the past Kings and making various exaltation of the current King, the singer also sings the exaltation of the King while the drummer beat the drum to produce a grandeur of the Oba and his ancestors

(Waterman). The use of drums and playing of music in Yorubaland has been recorded as early as in 1830 by Richard Lander when he first visited a Yoruba palace (Adegbite, 1988).

In the South-Eastern or Igboland, music also dates back to the pre-colonial era. In the Igbo courts, the presence of a solo instrumentalist is of great importance. A popular example is the ‘oja’ player who is highly valuable to the Igwe (king) as well as other members of the community. The ‘oja’ player plays the oja tune to announce the arrival of the Igwe. The ‘oja’ is also played at Igbo traditional ceremonies such as funerals and bestowing of chieftaincy titles (Carter, 2021). Other ethnic groups such as the Hausa, Benin, Efik etc all have their traditional music which also dates back to the pre-colonial era.

However, Nigerian music has evolved massively from the era of traditional music to what is now regarded as popular music. Popular music in Nigeria has several genres such as Afrobeat, Hip-hop, Juju, and Highlife among others. A few decades before the independence in 1960, the prevailing genre of music in Nigeria was ‘Apala’ which was very popular particularly in the western part of the country where Haruna Isola a popular Apala artist dominated the music scene. Haruna Isola popularized the Apala music when he released his widely accepted album in 1960 titled “punctuality is the soul of business”, after which he released “oroki social club” later in that decade and became the first Nigerian to do international tours (Lasisi, 2012). Other artists such as Ayinla Omowura and Olatuni Yusuf also contributed to the extensive success of the Apala music in the 1960’s (Lasisi).

Another genre of music that shared the music scene with Apala was the ‘Highlife’ which was popularized by artists such as Chief Stephen Osita Osadebe, Dr. Victor Olaiya and Bobby Benson. Both genre of music were dominant in Nigeria and Africa since the late 1950’s till the 1970’s (Emielu, 2009). During the 1970’s more Nigerian artists started plying their trade in the Nigerian music industry, hence this era witnessed the introduction of various types of music genres such as Disco, Afrobeat, Rock, Fuji, and Juju.

Although Afrobeat originated from Ghana, it became popular in Nigeria through the works of Fela Anikulapo Kuti after the singer returned to Nigeria in 1967 to set up his Africa 70 music band (Grass, 1986). Also in this era, the Disco music was made popular by the Sahara all Stars from Jos. The Rock music grew in influence through the likes of TeeMac and the Backing Band. During the same decade, Alhaji Sikiru Ayinde Barrister pioneered the Fuji music, Tunde Nightingale pioneered the Juju music which was later extensively popularized through the works of King Sunny Ade, Fatai Rolling Dollars, Ebenezer Obey Fabiyi and Sir Shina Peters amongst others (Onyeji, 2005).

Between 1980 and 1990, the Fuji music dominated the music scene in Nigeria, although it was rivaled by the increasing popularity of the Reggae and Juju music (Onwuegbuna, 2015). Reggae music which was originally identified among Jamaicans started in Nigeria during the mid-80’s via the works of Majek Fashek who released Nigeria first reggae album in 1988 titled “prisoner of conscience”. The album contains the hit single “send down the rain’ which became a street anthem in the 1990s. Other artists who contributed to the growth of the Reggae

genre of music include Ras Kimono who released the album “under pressure” in 1989, Alex Zitto and Evelyn Ogoni amongst others (Onwuegburu).

The wide acceptance of Reggae, Fuji and Juju music during the 1990s can be attributed to the invention and popularity of radio stations which were able to air these songs in Nigeria. The arrival of the radio further increased the popularity of music in Nigeria and paved way for new artist to ply their trade in the music industry (Durodola, 2013). Hence, the following decade, 2000, witnessed a massive growth in the music industry and several new school artists started to build on the foundations laid by the earlier artists.

Ray power FM radio station was the first private radio station in Nigeria and commenced broadcasting in 1994. The first decade of the new millennium was marked as the era of Hip-hop and Pop music. This decade witnessed the emergence of Nigerian artists such as Olu Maintain, 2Face Idibia, Eedris Abdulkarim, Don Jazzy, D’banj, and Banky West among others. This decade was a time of revolution in the Nigerian industry as a result of international recognition gained by the Nigerian music industry during this decade.

These new school artists did moved Nigerian music to greater heights and set a new standard for music in Nigeria. Afrobeat which was pioneered by Fela in the 1990s started getting back on the scene in 2010, although as reformed sound and concept (Ajiola, 2020). The 2010 decade could be regarded as the decade of Afrobeats which is characterized by fast drumming and high tempo music, similar to what Fela did in the 1990s. This decade saw the emergence of global superstars such as Wizkid, Davido and Burnaboy who have several international recognitions and have performed on some of the biggest music stages in the world. Till date Afrobeat remains one of the dominant music genres in Nigeria as Nigerian music continues to dominate Africa and getting tremendous recognition from other continents.

Life of Fela Anikulapo Kuti

Fela Anikulapo Kuti can be described as a Nigeria singer, songwriter and instrumentalist who is popularly known for pioneering the Afrobeat music genre in Nigeria. He is also well known for infusing politically inclined messages in his song as way of fighting for human rights (Adu, 2020).

Fela Anikulapo’s musical genre is a mixture of highlife and Afrobeat. He was born on the 15th, October 1938 into the Ransome Kuti family. His family was well known for political activism as his mother Funmilayo Ransome Kuti and Brother Beko Ransome Kuti were well known for their leading the campaign for democracy (Johnson-Odium, 1996). After completing his secondary school education in Abeokuta, Fela went to the United Kingdom (UK) to study medicine, towing the path of his two other siblings, Beko Ransome Kuti and Olikoye Ransome Kuti, who were nationally renowned medical doctors.

However, Fela got to London, he decided to take up music rather than medicine and enrolled at the Trinity College of Music, London where he started to learn his music craft as an instrumentalist. While in London, Fela founded the KoolaLobitos band where they played a fusion of highlife and Jazz music (Shonekan, 2009). After Nigeria’s independence in 1960, he returned to the country as full fledged musician and reorganized the KoolaLobitos band.

In search of a new musical direction, Fela headed to Ghana in 1967 where he started working on the invention of Afrobeat (Howe, 1997). The Afrobeat is a blend of jazz, highlife, calypso, salsa, funk and traditional Yoruba music. In 1970, KoolaLobitos band was renamed as the Africa 70 group. The album “Zombie” became Fela and Africa 70 debut album (Howe). The lyrics of the song heavily criticized the then Nigerian military as the term ‘Zombie’ was used as a metaphor to describe the modus operandi of the Nigerian military. Despite the controversial lyrics and its imminent attack on the Nigerian government, the songs on the album gained enormous popularity among Nigerians and soon became household anthem all across the country. This infuriated the government which was headed by General Olusegun Obasanjo.

On the 18th of February, 1997, armed military men stormed Kalakuta Republic (Fela’s residence) beating the musician mercilessly and inflicting him with severe body injuries. His mother Funmilayo Ransome Kuti was also allegedly thrown outside the window causing her fatal injuries. The Kalakuta Republic was also razed destroying Fela’s studio and all the musical instruments therein. Fela’s mother, Funmilayo, eventually died as a result of the injuries she sustained during the assault (Pattison, 2016). After his mother’s death, Fela took his mother’s coffin to the Dodan barracks which was the residence of General Obasanjo, where he wrote the songs ‘unknown soldier’ and “coffin for the head of state” (Pattison). In 1978, the Zombie song was once again on the news as serious riot broke out while Fela was performing in Accra, Ghana. The riot led to the banning of Fela and his Africa 70 group from entering Ghana (Moore, 2011).

Amidst the controversy attached to his name, Fela started his own political party in 1979 and named it ‘Movement of the People’ (MOP) but the party did not survive for long as it was ridiculed with several confrontations from the then General Obasanjo government (Langley, 2010). During the 1983 civilian presidential elections, Fela nominated himself as presidential aspirant, but once again his actions were severely countered by the government and his candidature was eventually refused (Langley). Going back to music, Fela once again infuriated the government when he and the Africa 70 band released the 25minute album he titled “international thief thief” (ITT). Fela regrouped his team after the Accra riot and renamed them as Egypt 80. The new name he gave to the band was to help pass the message that the Egyptian civilization and everything that came with it belongs to the African continent (Grass).

During the reign of General Muhammadu Buhari in 1983, Fela was arrested on the grounds of currency smuggling and jailed for twenty months after which he was granted amnesty by the General Ibrahim Babangida regime. In 1989, Fela and the Egypt 80 group released the anti-apartheid album titled “beast of no nation” which depicted the then US President Ronald Regan, UK Prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, and South African President, Pieter Williem Botha on its cover (Grass).

Fela continued to release music until he was charged for murder on the 25th, January 1993. He died on the 3rd, August 1997 from an illness which was rumored to be AIDS, but the artist widow insisted that her late husband did not die of AIDS (Schoonmaker, 2023). Even though he is dead, his music continues to thrive as it laid a solid foundation for Afrobeat that has become so popular today with top

Nigerian artists such as Wizkid, Burnaboy and Fireboy promoting the Afrobeat at the local and international level. Till date the Egypt 80 band led by Fela's youngest son is still very much active releasing the album "black times" in 2018.

Fela Anikulapo and Political Activism in Nigeria

Fela's ideology is a matrix of radical Black Nationalism that gave way to a much more expensive Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism, as well as a staunch support for the oppressed lower class that could be described as socialist in orientation and irrepressible libertarianism that frequently tries to be the anchor and articulator of the other two. Fela's support for the oppressed lower class was unwavering. He lived among them, brought their cries to national attention, witnessed their brutality in the hands of official lawlessness, and even shared their poverty (Olaniyan, 2004). Olaniyan also offers this aspect of Fela who is not born into the oppressed lower class as the epitome of class suicide in the world of actual struggle.

Fela's music style is known as Afrobeat, and it is a fusion of jazz, funk, psychedelic rock, and traditional West African chants and rhythms. Afrobeat is also distinguished by vocals and musical structure, as well as jazzy, funky sections. The endless groove, in which a base rhythm of drums, shekere, muted guitar, and bass guitar is repeated throughout the song, is also used.

Afrobeat philosophy, popularly known as "Felasophy" is defined by two basic political ideologies, Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism", which Fela preferred to call "Africanism." His radical black nationalism reflects these ideologies. Pan-Africanism is a philosophical creed based on the belief that peoples of African descent share common bonds, historical experiences and goals, and that they should therefore work together to achieve those goals. It generally refers to the promotion of political unity among African countries. It emphasizes continental unity and strong identification with anti-colonial struggles (Augustus Fisher, Soboyejo Oludemi & Babatunde Adebogun, 2022). This has included various Pan-African congresses from 1900 to the activities of figures such as Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912), Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), and W.E.D. Dubois (1868-1963), as well as the indefatigable George Padmore and his classic book, Pan Africanism or Communism (1956).

It should be noted, however, that the emphasis of Pan-Africanism was and continues to be political, specifically the struggle for independence from colonial rule, statehood, and beyond that, the development of institutions and techniques of effective governance aimed at advancing the interests of blacks in modernity.

Sekou Toure, the first President of Guinea and Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana are two legendary figures on the African continent. Radical intellectual activist and figures like Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon, and Walter Rodney served as Fela's direct shepherd. Throughout all of Fela's works, theme from Fanon's emphasis on the psychological subjection of Africans to European norms and values and his astute reading of the tragedy that the newly emerging class of post-independence African leaders would become prevalent. Rodney taught Fela about Africa's enormous contribution to European civilization in general and

to industrialization in particular through slavery and colonization. Being colonized has a devastating effect on a people and culture (Augustus, 2022).

A picture of Fela reading Rodney's classic book 'How Europe underdeveloped Africa, 1972' with what appears to be unwavering concentration appeared on the front cover of "VIP- Vagabonds in Power, 1979." We know where the rigorous conceptual and ideological support for such sentiments originated. Fela sang in "Parambulator" (1983) that "Oyinbo no teach us nothing/ na we open dem eyes/ na 500years slavery cause am" (Europeans did not teach us anything/ we civilized them with 500years of our slave labour).

Fela's allyship with the oppressed lower class is another aspect of Fela's ideology. He lived among them and proclaimed their sound to the nation. After his ten months journey from America, he could no longer bring himself to sing about love, even though he did not belong to them by birth from a mother who was one of the very few women in the world to win the Lenin Peace Prize. He found his own voice by turning to the lower class, which always put him at odds with the Nigerian government. His unrelenting liberalism, which advocates for thought and action, is also present. In the sense that he took this to mean that he was free to do anything including smoking marijuana, which he assumed was not supposed to be a crime or the fact that many young girls lived in his household especially since he did not kidnap any of them.

This has been cited by many analyst of Fela's life and times as the downfall and flaws of his ideology. One of his most well known song which claimed to understand the struggle for equality between African men and women as being infected by westernization, also reveals his flaws. The song, "lady" promotes an African domesticity in which the African man rules supreme over the African woman.

However, Olaniyan (2004) argues that Fela's music, ideologies and way of life were successful in introducing to young people brand-new, rebellious, and impatient ideas that completely erased any love of the state from their hearts and minds. With his straightforward deconstructive insights, sardonic humor, and exhilarating sounds, he inspired young people to view the state as fundamentally unjust, self-serving, dictatorial, even unpatriotic and un-African, and to view many of its policies as utterly illogical.

He specifically used the example of the military regime under President Obasanjo, which was widely regarded as having destroyed the lives of the entire nation. Furthermore, Olaniyan agrees that Fela is an iconic figure who began genuine and outspoken political activism in Nigeria and paved the way for additional activist acts by giving rise to the nation's first socially conscious and tenacious generation. According to Olaniyan, many of Fela's fans who were then students went on to become fearless journalists, educators, civil rights attorneys, and social activists who served as the backbone of resistance to the dreadful dictators like General Ibrahim Babangida and General Sani Abacha, as well as Obasanjo second election as President

CONCLUSION

Overuse of repetition makes people lose control over their thoughts. The use of rhythmic repetition is a strategy used by musicians who want to promote a particular moral code. The powers of music include all of these and more. According to Austin Maro Emielu (2009), the contribution that music makes to youth empowerment is the clearest example of political activism through music. On the grounds that “a professionalized music industry will midwife institutionalization of specialized sectors, which will become the engine for growth, development, and empowerment for youths with interest in the music industry,” he argues in support of this claim.

He emphasizes the value of the Nigerian music industry, which, if fully developed, could displace crude oil as the foundation of Nigeria’s economy. He goes on to say that “popular music can be utilized as a genuine instrument for ideological change and mass reorientation. Popular music can also be used for a variety of purposes, including promoting government initiatives and policies, advertising goods, and serving as a social voice for the oppressed and disadvantaged masses, as demonstrated by Fela’s Afrobeat. The massive influx of feminine folk into popular music today represents yet another form of women empowerment, which has a major focus of feminist activists in recent history in the government, academia and other women’s right organization.

As political issues starts to permeate the lives of teens and young adults, society views listening to popular music as an important part of growing up. As a result, popular music’s customary conventions must change to reflect this shift in culture. The question then arises, why don’t we take advantage of this if it’s the custom for young people to carry music players around? By singing about them, you are bringing them into the political consciousness as a whole and inspiring participation in the political culture.

The case study used in this work, Fela Anikulapo Kuti’s Afrobeat, demonstrates to a large extent how politically charged music can become, because musicians can adopt Fela’s position as political preachers. His music promoted two important political ideologies: Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism, which helped create the nation’s first generation of socially engaged and unyielding youths. In addition, many of Fela’s supporters who were then students went on to become fearless journalists, educators, civil rights lawyers, and social activists who served as backbone of resistance to the dreadful dictatorial regimes in Nigeria.

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