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Introduction: "Abami Eda"

REPORTER: A Nigerian senator just told me: "If even only 5000 Nigerians started imitating Fela, it would soon be very chaotic here!"

FELA: No, it would be a revolution!

Quoted in MOORE AND KAMARA 1981

The date: a humid weekend night in the early 1990s. The scene: outside the Afrika Shrine nightclub in Ikeja, Lagos, Nigeria, home base of the legendary Nigerian musician Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and his thirty-piece orchestra, Egypt 80. Even though the ubiquitous, machine gun–toting soldiers of the Nigerian army have a well-deserved reputation for making the lives of ordinary civilians miserable, they are decidedly peripheral to tonight's scenario. The Shrine is understood to be Fela's autonomous zone, where his own anarchic, hedonistic law prevails.

The atmosphere is festive as the audience enters, a mixture of students, activists, rebels, criminals, music lovers, and even politicians, policemen, and soldiers arriving incognito. They make their way through the sea of traders hawking their goods by candlelight—snacks, drinks, cigarettes, and marijuana—as the sound of the Egypt 80 spills from inside the open-air club. After purchasing a ticket and being frisked for weapons at the doorway, audience members enter the interior of the Shrine, a semi-enclosed countercultural carnival of funky, political music, pot smoking, mysticism, and provocative dancing. Four fishnet-draped go-go cages, each containing a loosely clad female dancer grinding languorously, rise out of the smoky haze. A neon light in the shape of the African continent casts its red glow over the stage. In addition to more food, drink, and marijuana vendors, the rear of the club houses an actual shrine—a large altar containing religious objects and photos of Fela's Pan-Africanist political heroes, including Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, and Sekou Toure, and his late mother, Mrs. Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti.

The Egypt 80 band has been playing since midnight, warming up the crowd with classics from Fela's older recorded repertoire, such as "Trouble Sleep" (1972), "Why Blackman Dey Suffer" (1972), "Lady" (1972), "Water No Get Enemy" (1975), "Opposite People" (1975), "Sorrow, Tears and Blood" (1977), "Dog Eat Dog" (1977), "Beasts of No Nation" (1986), and bandleader/baritone saxophonist Lekan Animashaun's "Serere (Do Right)." The band is awaiting Fela's arrival, so these songs are sung by various band members, including Animashaun (known around the Shrine as "Baba Ani"), second baritone saxophonist Rilwan Fagbemi (known as "Showboy"), Fela's ten-year-old son Seun, and artist/musician Dede Mabiaku, whom Fela often referred to as his "adopted son."

Fela, the "Chief Priest of Shrine," finally arrives with his retinue around 2 A.M., to tumultuous applause. Dressed tonight in a tight purple jumpsuit stitched with traditional Yoruba symbols and shapes, he makes his way through the crowd to the stage and salutes his audience with the clenched-fist black power salute. He steps up to the mike and pauses, surveying the crowd with mischievous eyes while taking intermittent puffs from a flashlight-sized joint in his hand. Finally he speaks:

> Everybody say ye-ye!

The crowd roars in response, and Fela segues directly into the profane, no-holds-barred criticism of the country's leaders he has offered his audiences for the past two decades:

> Bro's and sisters, if you want to know how corrupt this country is, that word "corruption" has lost its meaning here!

Fela arches his eyebrows, thrusts his chest and stomach out, and marches around the stage in imitation of the arrogant and obese *ogas* (literally "bosses"), men of importance who parade their wealth around Lagos in the midst of suffering:

> "Yeah, I'm *corrupt*, man!"

The crowd bursts into laughter, and Fela continues his monologue:

> In fact, corruption has even become a *title* in this country! In Germany, they have *President* Kohl. In America, they have *President* Bush. In England they have *Prime Minister* Major. Here in Nigeria, we have *Corrupted* Babangida!

At the mention of their president, the audience shouts in deafening unison "Ole!" (Yoruba for "thief"). Fela switches into pidgin English and recounts an incident in which the president was snubbed by French president François Mitterand during a recent state visit:

> When Corrupted Babangida go for France, Mitterand no wan meet am. He go dey send a cultural minister. He go say Nigeria be nation of thieves. The man was disgraced. When he came back, the fucking army was kicking ass all over Nigeria! Na how many students dem kill fo' dat one?

The crowd roars in laughter and approval, the Shrine now rocking like a revivalist church:

> You see, bro's and sisters, I know dem. They are nothing but spirit beings. They are the same motherfuckers who sold Africans into slavery hundreds of years ago. In fact, the same spirit who controls Babangida controls Bush and Thatcher too. Everyone is here to play their same role again, and I want you all to know that tonight; Babangida, Obasanjo, Abiola, they have all been here before. That's why I call this time the era of "second slavery." They don't have to come here and take us by force—our leaders sell us up front. Everybody say ye-ye!

The audience shouts "ye-ye!" punctuated with cries of "yab dem!" (abuse them).

> Bro's and sisters, I'm gonna play for you now, a thing we call M.A.S.S.—"Music Against Second Slavery."

Fela spins around and sternly surveys the orchestra members, who stare at him intently. Slowly, he begins to clap out the song's tempo to the band, wiggling his slender body to the rhythm. Though short in stature, he wields enormous authority onstage. A guitarist begins a serpentine single-note line, accompanied by a percussionist thumping out a thunderous rhythm atop an eight-foot traditional *ghedu* drum laid on its side. The audience indicates its growing excitement by yelling Fela's various nicknames in response: "Omo Iya Aje!" (son of a powerful woman [literally "witch"]), "Baba!" (father), "Abami Eda!" (strange one, or spirit being), "Chief Priest!" "Black President!" Fela raises his hands above his head and waves the percussionists and rhythm section in. Time itself seems to slowly shift along with the sticks and the *shekere* rattle, whose steady chirping frames an intricate tapestry of spacy rhythm. Stepping to his electric organ at center stage, Fela begins to improvise around the rhythm with greater and greater density. At the height of his solo, he waves in the ten-piece horn section, which enters dramatically, blaring the song's theme. With instrumental solos, featured dancers, and audience participation games, it will be another thirty minutes before Fela even begins to sing, but the audience is in delirious, swirling motion. Another night at the Afrika Shrine has begun.

Fela will perform from his arrival until dawn. This is partly in the tradition of Lagos nightlife, but it also results from more pragmatic considerations—Lagos is one of the world's most dangerous cities and travel is extremely ill-advised after dark. In keeping with his policy of only presenting unrecorded material in concert, Fela is playing a repertoire familiar only to regular attendants of the Shrine tonight.

"Chop and Clean Mouth Like Nothing Happened, Na New Name for Stealing" details the Nigerian economy's plundering by successive heads of state; "Country of Pain" bemoans the hardships of life in post–oil boom Nigeria; "Big Blind Country" uses the English blonde wigs worn by Nigerian judges and the hair straightening practiced by some African women as metaphors for the "artificial niceness" of the country's politicians; "Government of Crooks" details the siphoning of the country's oil wealth by corrupt politicians, bureaucrats, and soldiers; "Music Against Second Slavery" decries the impact of Islam on contemporary Nigerian politics and power relations; "Akunakuna, Senior Brother of Perambulator" criticizes government harassment of petty street traders and other participants in the country's informal economy; and "Pansa Pansa" is a defiant battle cry composed in the wake of the brutal 1977 army raid on Fela's Lagos compound, the "Kalakuta Republic."[1] Like most of his music since 1979, these are all lengthy, complex compositions, often lasting forty minutes or more.

On stage, Fela combines the autocratic bandleading style and dancing agility of James Brown, the mystical inclinations of Sun Ra, the polemicism of Malcolm X, and the harsh, insightful satire of Richard Pryor. Gliding gracefully around the stage in white face paint, which he says facilitates communication with the spirit world, he is not above interrupting the performance to harangue musicians, sound technicians, or audiences. However, the Egypt 80 band is in top form tonight, executing Fela's music with energy, clarity, and whiplash precision. On up-tempo numbers like "Government of Crooks" or "Country of Pain," Fela and the band play with an intensity that thoroughly possesses the Shrine audience. On slower, mid-tempo numbers like "Chop and Clean Mouth . . . ," Fela's highlife and funk roots are evident in the easy rhythmic flow of the percussion section; the chopping, stuttering guitars; and the blaring, syncopated horns. Above it all, Fela alternately jokes with the audience and spits out his political lyrics in angry, declamatory phrases darting between the shrill voices of the six-member female chorus and the guttural, baritone punctuations of the horn section. On "Government of Crooks," he sings about the government's complicity in the despoliation of southeastern Ogoniland by foreign oil companies, a state of affairs that had recently culminated in the state execution of Ogoni activist/playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa:

All of us know our country	All of us know our country
Plenty-plenty oil-e dey	There is plenty oil
Plenty things dey for Africa	Plenty resources in Africa
Petroleum is one of them	Petroleum is one of them
All di places that get di oil-o	All the places where oil lies
Now oil pollution for di place	Are spoiled with pollution
All the farms done soak with oil-o	The farms are soaked by oil leaks
All the villages don catch disease	The villages are rife with disease
Money done spoil di oil area	Money has ruined the oil areas
But some people inside government	But some people in government

Dem don become billionaires	Have become billionaires
Billionaires on top of oil-o	From oil wealth
and underhanded crookedness . . .	and underhanded crookedness . . .

On "Movement Against Second Slavery," he takes his most insulting potshots at the country's military government while subtly reprising his famous song "Zombie," which precipitated a brutal military attack on his compound fifteen years earlier:

FELA: Now come look our president	*FELA:* Now, look at our president
CHORUS: Zombie! (repeats after every line)	*CHORUS:* Zombie!
FELA: Na soldier, him be president	*FELA:* A soldier is president
He say he want to travel	He says he wants to travel
Travel on a state visit to France	Travel on a state visit to France
Na so him go,	And so he went,
He go Paris-o	He went to Paris
And when he reach there nko	And when he reached his destination
Na ordinary minister meet am	He was met by an ordinary minister
White man go dey tell-e dem:	The white man told him:
"We don tire for soldier	"We are tired of soldiers
Soldier cannot be president	A soldier cannot be president
It just be like robbery"	It's just like armed robbery"
Like armed robber come meet you for house	Like an armed robber coming to your house
The armed robber come take over your house–	The armed robber will take over your house–
Chop all your food	Eat all your food
Fuck all your wives	Fuck all your wives
Take all your money	Take all your money
Hen! Na so soldier government be-o . . .	Hmm! This is what a military government means . . .

Reflecting Fela's feeling that his music was as much for education as it was for dancing and entertainment, the Shrine audience enjoyed the music in various ways. Tuesday night audiences tended toward reflection; while some danced singly or in pairs, most enjoyed the music from their seats, listening intently to Fela's lyrics and freely offering responses or rebuttals to his comments. On these nights, the smell of Indian hemp mixed with the pulse of the hypnotic afrobeat in the thick tropical air, and the Shrine took on the ambience of a psychedelic town meeting held in a dance hall. Friday was mainly a dance night, with the house

packed and people on their feet from the time Egypt 80 took the stage until dawn—laughing, cheering, and singing along with Fela's every line. Saturday—when Fela presented his "Comprehensive Show" complete with the Egypt 80 dancers and an enormous, ritual conical "cigar" presumably filled with marijuana and various native herbs—was also mainly a dance night, with the most diverse audience of the week; listeners traveled from all over Lagos and beyond to enjoy the music. For some attendees, a visit to the Shrine, with its marijuana smoking, go-go dancers, and antigovernment lyrics, was an act of social rebellion in itself. Others came to engage, examine, or debate Fela's political philosophy. Still other visitors were content merely to enjoy the music, irrespective of its political sentiments. Each show concluded at dawn with Fela pausing before the shrine in the rear of the building. With intense flames leaping into the air, the "Chief Priest of Shrine" paused—flanked by two young male attendants—to salute his ancestors and Pan-Africanist heroes, before returning home as the rest of Lagos awakened with the dawn.

This book represents the fruition of more than ten years of critical and recreational listening, musical performance, academic research, traveling, and collecting. My interest in Fela dates to 1983, when I was introduced to his music by a fellow musician while a jazz composition and arranging student at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. Having grown up in an environment in which I was surrounded by various genres of African-American music, I was immediately struck by Fela's music because it seemed to recontextualize and extend musical ideas which were meaningful to me. In Fela's music, I recognized unmistakable echoes of diasporic African musical innovators and styles: James Brown, John Coltrane, modal jazz, big-band jazz, funk, rhythm-and-blues, and salsa. At the same time, I recognized an overall spirit and use of many musical devices I associated with West African music: tightly woven rhythm patterns, vocal chants, call-and-response choruses, and an overall percussive approach to articulation, among others. Compositionally, I admired Fela's ability to compose a seemingly endless series of complex, catchy groove patterns, chorus lines, and horn riffs. Compositions rarely clocked in at less than fifteen minutes, with sections allotted for scored ensemble passages, jazz-styled solo improvisations, choral singing, and the vocal song proper, which itself comprised a number of movements. In his fashioning of a long-form highlife-funk-jazz fusion called "afrobeat," he had countered the commercialism dictating that songs be restricted to three-minute formats that were, in cultural context, insufficient for satisfying dancing or reflective listening. More generally, I was inspired by the way Fela had refashioned many conventions of recent African-American music within a West African cultural context, and by the awareness of Pan-African identity and musical practice that implicitly underlay this process.

Of course, no introduction to the world of Fela would be complete without the mythology that inevitably accompanies the music: the musician who created his own countercultural enclave in the heart of Lagos, married twenty-seven women in one day, made a career of criticizing his country's leaders in song, survived numerous attacks by the Nigerian authorities (and whose mother died as a result of one such attack), publicly smoked marijuana in a country where people are sentenced to lengthy prison terms for the most minor of such infractions, and