

What is the meaning of MUSIC

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SINCE his transition into the world of the dead on 2nd August 1997, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti has been the subject of discourse, the most engaging issue, in the Nigerian media. There is hardly any aspect of his life and music that has not been discussed. It is thus with fear and trembling that we venture to lend ours to the plethora of voices acclaiming, analysing, condemning and pronouncing eternal judgement on all that the man and his music stand for. It has to be done, if only for the sake of self-apprehension, for Fela speaks for us even if we superficially comprehend him or do not understand him at all. Part of the obfuscation of course could be traced to the language chosen by the music star to communicate his idea(s) and vision. A great art that is expressed in an ordinary language runs the risk of being undervalued. Perhaps a greater percentage of his audience would have taken Fela more seriously if he had not laced his music with lyrics that tend to detract from its significance and shift attention from the field of music where

he succeeded to the arena of politics where he failed. Yet it is the lyrics that capture the imagination of his fans, ideological fellow-travellers, and political sympathisers.

Joseph Conrad confessed that he was 'just a mere animal'² before his visit to the Congo, an account of which is provided in *Heart of Darkness*. Similarly Fela remarked that until he toured the United States he had not known himself. He discovered in America among African-Americans a revolution in artistic consciousness, an affirmation of their Blackness and cultural identity, a celebration of their African ancestry and history, and an alternative worldview predicated on the animist apprehension of life which sharply contrasts the White Western cosmology and scientific ontology. He appropriated the Black Power salute (upraised right fist), the political messages of the Pan-African Nationalists which resonated in the speeches of Malcolm X, the inchoate revolutionary thrusts of rap music which he called 'yabis', the tradition of protest music, and the values of individuality and originality in artistic creativity.

The animist worldview is an essentialist and totalist conception of life. The marriage of man and matter, matter and spirit, male and female, it perceives the perennial pairs of opposites imagistically as paradoxes and integrates them into an organic whole. Founded on the principle of natural dialectics, it is a mythic conception of the cosmos. Among its major components are a fertility myth, a cyclic concept of history and time, and a mode of existence that is communalistic and ritualistic. The three elements throw light on Fela's political philosophy, sexual life, and idea of music. The symbol that best illustrates the animist world apprehension is the cipher or the ouroboros (the tail-chewing creation snake) which is at once a figure of completeness (or fullness and nothingness). To be full is, like the Christian God, to desire and lack nothing. The figure could be used to explicate the traditional African conception of architecture, birth, death, marriage, music, organisation of work, space and time. The emphasis is placed on the collective and the cyclic. Everything - the sacred and the profane, the dead, the living, the unborn, planets, stars, animals, stones and vegetation - is circumscribed by the circle. Outside of the self-containing capsule, the womb of Mother-Nature, lies nothing and nothingness. Animism is an all-embracing vision of life. Hence Fela could call Berliners his brothers and sisters, in spite of Hitler's legacy of the racist ideology of Nazism. It was the non-acceptance of the Black in the world of the White people that led the former to embark on the quest for self-retrieval from the chaos of history and gave birth to the Harlem Renaissance, the Negritude Movement, and the Black Arts Movement which all had a tremendous impact on Fela's music and informed his political thought.

After four centuries of a futile struggle to appropriate

white values or be white, African-Americans turned their backs on White America and looked to Africa for inspiration, forms, concepts and styles in their culinary art, mode of dressing, hair-do, music, painting and writing. The consumption of soul foods became popular. As Ralph Ellison jocosely puts it through the unnamed protagonist of his novel *Invisible Man*, 'I yam what I am'³, a statement that fuses cuisine and cultural identity. Many African-Americans changed their names. Leroi Jones became Imamu Amiri Baraka. Malcolm X explained that the letter 'X' stood for his patronymic African name which had been lost in the course of history. That Fela dropped the English name Ransome and replaced it with Anikulapo, a Yoruba hunter's name, was in tune with the Black cultural revolution. It was the same cultural consideration that made the present writer substitute Olusegun for Moses his baptismal name. Marcus Garvey even conceived the idea of physically moving the Blacks back to Africa. The Black Muslims nursed the idea of the Nation of Islam, a nation that would be carved out of the United States of America in which African-Americans could live, work, and organise themselves as they deemed fit. The small Yoruba commune called Oyotunji in the United States is paradigmatic of the Black Muslims' vision.

Fela emphasised the primacy of the indigenous in every aspect of his life. Culture, to him, is not just the superficialities or excrescences for which dilettanti mistake it. It does not end with dancing, singing, music, and the arts generally but includes the human and applied sciences, as well as the means of reproducing life, and the religion of a people. Till his death he upheld his firm belief in the grandeur, legitimacy and rootedness of the African culture(s): a way of life founded on the animist conception of the cosmos. No dread disease would make him renounce his faith in native medicine to seek help in Western medicine. That he apprenticed one of his daughters to a traditional medical practitioner was proof enough of his unshakeable faith in the efficacy of native medicine, the side effects of which he rightly judged to be less deleterious to the human body than those of Western medicine. He matched his beliefs with practice. His death is a sad commentary on the limitations of the colour-based ideology of Blackism, which is synonymous with Negritude. Had he accepted the fact that AIDS cuts across the colour line, he would have probably practised safe sex and not deluded himself that the syndrome is a gay or White man's affair. Many African-Americans and Black Jews allow the same false and negative thinking to influence their attitude to work in the United States. They perceive their refusal to work as freedom from exploitation by the white capitalists who monopolise the market economy and run the evil system. Rather than work, they depend on social welfare and food stamps and consequently live a low form of life on the fringe of society.

The policy of economic self-reliance or separate development is Fela's blueprint for the rapid realisation of the dream of a technological breakthrough in African countries. It was indeed

the strongest plank in the manifesto of his unregistered political party the *Movement of the People* (MOP). Economic cooperation with the West, the party thought, would only lead to the coopting of Africa into the evil world capitalist system and make the continent a perpetually unequal participant in world politics and world trade. Despite decades of economic cooperation with either the east or the West, there is not one African country that has achieved the miraculous feat of technological development. The policy of transfer of technology has been a barren and ineffectual one in Africa. It appears that self-reliance, as articulated by Fela, is the only strategy that can bring quick and meaningful development to African countries without loss of racial pride. The song 'Buy Africa' expresses the idea in very clear terms. The same economic consideration often led African-Americans to boycott White and Asian shops and support Black businesses by buying from Black Stores. If, as the song 'Black Man's Cry' puts it, colonialism is responsible for the poverty and suffering of the Black man today then it is reasonable to expect Africa's disengagement from all cultural relations that reproduce a colonial or neo-colonial arrangement on the continent as the solution to its problem of underdevelopment.

The Black Diaspora gave expression to the concept of the African Continuum and affirmed the concept of Negritude which Leopold Sedar Senghor defined as the sum total of all values that are Black and African. According to him, image and rhythm are the two fundamental features of African Style and Black aesthetics. Based on the rhythm of nature, the Negritude philosophy questions the linear concept of history and time and challenges the claims of White mythology to infallibility, superiority and universality. It affirms the principle of undecidability and punches holes in irrational knowledge on which Western metaphysics prides itself. Science, like every other human invention, it argues, is incomplete and paradoxical, for it is both creative and destructive to man and nature. It (science) fragments reality, disengages matter from spirit and breeds unbridled materialism, the bane of the contemporary capitalist world. No wonder then that Fela abhorred the acquisitive drive of the Nigerian political leadership and in symbolic gestures wrecked the image of opulence created by the group. By negating reason with emotion, Soyinka argues, Negritude itself falls into the trap of Western Manicheism which recognises a contradiction in all things but fails to work out a possible order of integration. Animism, like Negritude, leaves room for the element of chance and the unknowable. It deconstructs the materialistic vision by interrogating it with the spiritualist. Its conclusion neither foregrounds one nor displaces the other but affirms the truth of paradox as the essence of being. Hence it envisions social life as giving-and-receiving. Would the world ever be reconstructed on the animist-syncretist principle of give-and-take?

Nuclear physics confirms in our day the verity of the animist worldview. Having broken down matter to the limit beyond which it is impossible to proceed without being subjective, the nuclear physicist loses all certitudes and accepts the principle of unpredictability. A purely objective knowledge of matter becomes impossible because the very attempt to observe, or experiment on, matter disturbs it and makes it unstable. Thus matter behaves as if it had a will of its own and was a spirit being. Fela was no doubt sceptical of science and technology. He would rather Africans avoided the mistakes made in Europe and America as tragic consequences of the Industrial Revolution. He would want Africans to mediate technological creativity with humility, morality and spirituality, so that it would not lead to destruction and pollution of nature, bastardisation of culture, and degeneration of humanity. His conception of music as ritual and his bold attempt to spiritualise it are instructive in this respect. The ritualising of music and spiritualising of science are geared towards bridging the gulf of transition between one human face and another, between one temporal phase and another, between divinity and humanity, and between man and nature and towards ensuring continuity of life. Continuity for the Yoruba, Wole Soyinka wrote, operates both through the cyclic concept of time and the animist interfusion of all matter and consciousness.¹⁴ 'The principle of the African continuum', according to Richard A. Long in his essay 'Black Studies: International Dimensions', is that historically radiating from the black Core, the Black peoples of the world have carried with them modes of dealing with and symbolising experience, modes discovered and refined through millennia in Africa itself, and that these tactical and symbolic modes constitute a viable nexus of Black culture, one of the major traditions of humanity.¹⁵

Black revolutionaries adopted as a liberation strategy the mechanism of image-inversion. All the Black images that had hitherto been given negative connotations by the White race in order to control the Black people were refurbished, turned inside out and made positive. In contrast, all White images were deemed evil and condemned as metaphors for a life-denying life, a soulless mode of existence. James Brown the godfather of soul music encapsulated the Blacks' expression of self-esteem and self-identity in the song 'Say it Loud, I'm Black and Proud' which became the slogan for the Black revolution. He is reputed to be the first African-American to graft his music on the indigenous African rhythm. To have 'soul' is to brim over with energy and vitality, to be genial, natural and spontaneous, to have faith in human possibility and live life fully. Fela had soul and exuded sex.

The search by the New World Blacks went on in all areas of human life, including sex. Fela's sexual life had a historical and mythical basis. He lived and loved as if to force the fertility myth, an affirmation of the principle of continuity, growth and human reproduction, and the myth of Black hypersexuality, to

assume the status of a historical fact. He not only had an active and robust sexual life but married twenty-seven wives on the same day! His denunciation of marriage as a hindering human contrivance was an afterthought. The truth of the matter is that Fela felt betrayed by his wives' acts of infidelity while he was in prison and so despaired of the institution. In any case, he agonised over the fact that a couple of years after the epic marriage none of the twenty-seven wives gave birth and promised to see a herbalist. In the animist African world the main purpose of marriage is biological reproduction and perpetuation of the race. In contrast, the White people put emphasis on love. The concept of love had no central place in pre-marital relationships in pre-colonial Africa. Neither did it become a strong social force in Europe until the emergence of the troubadour tradition about the eleventh century. Fela's honest declaration that he did not believe in love should be taken as a commentary on the practice of polygamy in traditional African society. The concept of love has meaning only in monogamy, for it is humanly impossible for a man with many wives to share his love equally among them, and love is a balancing principle, the law or lore of equity.

Fela used the medium of music to preach or struggle for the liberation of the Blacks wherever they might be found on the surface of the earth. He tried to realise as best as he could his dream of the ideal republic in his home the 'Kalakuta Republic,' a refuge of the waifs and strays, over which he presided and in which he practised the communal mode of existence advocated in his public lectures. Examining his political philosophy from the orthodox Marxist class perspective could be useful but inevitably lead to a cul-de-sac. The reason is simply that Fela saw every White person as a direct or indirect beneficiary of the colonial exploitation of the human and material resources of Africa. As Conrad puts it in *Heart of Darkness*, 'All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz',⁶ the supreme exemplification of the White imperialist and conquistador. The fact that White racism is on the rise in the world, especially in Britain, France, Germany and the United States, justifies his stand on the race question. Frantz Fanon admonished us in *The Wretched of the Earth* that 'Marxist analysis should be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem' to incorporate the colour dimension.⁷ Despite the delusion of self-governance, most African countries are still largely colonial in their politico-economic relations with the West. The collapse of socialism would not allow us to add the East. W.E.B. DuBois rightly asserted in *The Souls of Black Folk* that 'the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the colour-line'.⁸

Songs like 'Black Man's Cry', 'ITT' (International Thief Thief), 'Beast of No Nation', 'No Agreement', 'Shuffering and Shmiling' which are frontal attacks on Western imperialism in all its diverse manifestations, on its local agents in Africa, the so-called comprador class, and on Europe-American politico-

economic hegemony over the rest of the world and which appear to look at problems confronting the wretched of the earth from the Marxist class perspective would be better understood if inscribed within the global struggle of the Black people against White domination. It is important to stress that Fela does not speak for the oppressed White worker who, by the mere virtue of being White, partakes of the fruits of centuries of oppression of the Black World and enjoys privileges that are denied the Black worker. It is such privileges that put a wedge between the Black worker and the White worker in the United States and make cooperation and unity between them impossible. Long before the fall of socialism and the end of the Cold War prominent African-American members of the Black Panthers Party like Eldridge Cleaver and Stokely Carmichael and a dyed-in-the-wool Marxist like Richard Wright had shifted emphasis away from the concept of racial integration to self-determination and Black nationalism in the United States. A class analysis would distort the musician's message. We refused to accept Bassey Ita's judgement in *Jazz in Nigeria* that the Fela of the Koola Labito's days is 'a singer of trash'.⁹ 'Ololufe', 'Lai Se', 'Mi o Mo', and 'Ajo' ('Iya mi o se o!') which explore eternal themes of filial and sexual love, betrayal, crime and punishment generated by the eternal love triangle, treachery and motherhood will definitely outlast 'ITT', 'Coffin for Head of State' and 'Go Slow' which treat period themes.

Fela considered the day his house (Kalakuta Republic) was burnt down by Nigerian soldiers as his saddest. The event no doubt put a question mark on his racial ideology and sharpened his understanding of the nature of evil - it wears no colour. The soldiers who committed the atrocity were merely unthinking tools in the hands of the then ruling military junta. Abusive and educative, the song 'Zombie' is in Fela's large political design an attempt to raise the consciousness of the culprits. It is unfortunate that Fela passed on without resolving the class-colour dilemma. His untimely death denies us the privilege of knowing how he would have resolved the crisis of consciousness that confronted him some seven years before his death. Would he, like Leopold Sedar Senghor, for example, have gone beyond ancestor worship and resolved the race problem in favour of the Christian precept of love, or would he have persisted in perceiving the world from the narrow perspective of racial politics? The paramountcy of his political preoccupation had definitely become a 'given' in his art towards the end of his life and, as expected, had adversely affected the quality of his music. The message was increasingly privileged over the music that made him world famous. Would he have reversed the situation and once again repeated the feat achieved with his African '70 band? So many ifs, but one thing is certain, his increasing spirituality is a clear evidence of his dissatisfaction with the nightmare that is history and the deceit that is politics.

He returned to Nigeria after his eye-opening tour of the

United States to begin the quest for the substructure of African music upon which to construct his architectonics. The search led him to discover the ritual character of African music, its antiphonal style, and the centrality of a polyvalent syncopated rhythm. That he called himself a chief priest and worshipped his ancestors at the African Shrine before every performance would convince the most hardened sceptic that he conceived of music as a ritual. Ancestor worship derives from the African animist worldview. As a religious concept, ritual is any sacred ceremony performed on a regular basis to guarantee the continuity of life. Performed by the living, it provokes the resources of munificent nature and causes the dead to return and bless the living. The dead, like sown seeds, are reborn as new babies. As an element of style, ritual connotes the use of repetition and variation to build up a rich rhythm.

To the charge of the repetitious nature of the rhythmic quality of his music, Fela responded that the criticism was a homage to African music, the recognition of its defining element. The single distinction made by Malcolm X between African-American jazz and White American jazz is that the former has got the swing, which is traceable to its polyvalent rhythm. Duke Ellington says it all in his song entitled 'It Don't Pay If the Swing Ain't There.' The animist concept of rhythm was originally derived from the observation of nature. Natural phenomena and processes like sunrise and sunset, phases of the moon, the ebb and flow of the tides, the cycle of birth-death-and-rebirth, the seasons, the menstrual cycle have a circular design and infuse into the animist an acute sense of the cyclic rhythm upon which a fertility or vegetation myth, a world ontology and a moral order, are constructed. 'Black music', as characterised by Ben Sidran in *Black Talk*, 'is a kind of 'ritualisation', or imitation of nature, which can channel black aggression toward constructive and creative ends.'¹⁰

The polyrhythmic nature of Black music is equally traceable to the constituent elements of the oral culture like spontaneity and improvisation. Black music is not played according to laid down rules and rigid conventions (the scores). Asked to blow a single note of tenor 'paan' by Mrs. Cunningham-Wilson his music teacher at Trinity College, Fela added a little flourish to the note and blew 'paan...paan...paan.' Chume responded exactly in the same creative way to his White music teacher's instruction in Wole Soyinka's *Jero's Metamorphosis*.¹² Black musicians make their instruments sing or swing. Both the horn and rhythm sections swing their instruments in Fela's music. His music technique is undoubtedly eclectic. According to Bassey Ita, 'Fela Ransome-Kuti's is a hybrid of African rhythm, European harmony and Afro-American jazz.'¹³ Fela blended vari-

ous modes like Blues, highlife, Jazz and Soul which all have African roots to create an authentic form that he initially labelled 'Afrobeat' and later identified simply as classical African music. It is not uncommon to hear echoes of Agidigbo, Apala, Juju, and Sakara chords and rhythms in his music. A few members of his band had at one time or the other played the Yoruba musical forms mentioned above. The animist of course is a syncretist who normally would not like to exclude any cultural production from his world order as long as the give-and-take principle is not thereby violated.

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's legacy lies in his successful attempt to use his knowledge of classical European music to fashion a new brand of music from several indigenous African forms. If music-wise he lives forever, as we all wish, it is because he built his music on the primal rhythms. Wherever it is played, it would quicken in the auditors a profound feeling of natural piety and sympathy and make them move their limbs, for it speaks the language of the earth in an idiom that is essentially animist. Erotic songs like 'Na Poi', 'Open and Close', 'E Gbe Mi o' and 'Beautiful Dancer' which are condemned by some politically inclined commentators as pornographic junk are best interpreted as part of the ritual scheme to wake the seeds of life in us and induce nature to release to us its hoarded gifts. They celebrate life in poetic terms and in the best pop tradition, especially the first two which are heavily onomatopoeic; and animism is a life-affirming worldview. As he prophetically puts it in 'Eko Ile', the quester has wandered in foreign lands, specifically in Europe and America, and returned home to attain his bourne. **GR**

Notes

1. The essay is imaged as a homage to Fela, a patron of the Watu Wazuri Movement of which I was a member at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), Ife-Ife, Nigeria.
2. Cited by Gerald Jean-Aubry. *The Sea Dreamer: A Definitive Biography of Joseph Conrad*. Trans. Helen Sebba, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1957. p.175.
3. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1965. p.215.
4. Wole Soyinka. *The Fourth Stage. Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976. p.145.
5. Richard A. Long. *Black Studies: International Dimensions. New Black voices*. Ed. Abraham Chapman. New York and Toronto: Mentor, 1972. p.424.
6. Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1973. p.71.
7. Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1967. p.30.
8. W.E.B. DuBois. *The Forethought. The Souls of Black Folk*. London: Longman, 1965. p.vi.
9. Bassey Ita. *Jazz in Nigeria*. Calabar: Atiaya Communications, 1984. p.62.
10. Ben Sidran. *Black Talk*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971. p.61.
11. See '...a musical deviant, says teacher.' *Guardian on Saturday*. Lagos Vol. 14. No. 6, 846 (Saturday, August 9, 1997) 18.
12. Wole Soyinka. *Jero's Metamorphosis. The Jero Plays*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1973. pp. 62-67.
13. Ita, p.60.