

# Visual N

## Lemi Ghariokwu on the Afrobeat Tradition

by Sola Olorunyomi

# of Dissent Soundscape

### BEYOND THE USE OF THE sound track as a medium

of communication, Afrobeat music has also been extended via a discursive tradition on album jackets and sleeves, in the same manner that oral performance ingests into itself diverse artistic idioms ranging from the aural to the visual. Although designed by different artists over the period, what is now associated with the typical Fela album sleeve-look is the body of works created by Lemi Ghariokwu between 1974 and 1990 which, undoubtedly, constitutes a corpus on their own merit. A cross between illustration and cartoon, a basic feature of these jackets is their diverse narrative pattern on the one hand and, almost, a direct extension of the social realism of the

song text.

Since Fela Kuti (foremost Afrobeat artist) authorizes the form, there emerged a constant dialogue between him and the fine artist (Lemi Ghariokwu), and between the latter and the general context of Afrobeat performance, which is then transferred into pictorial representation in this relay order. A sample of such authorization is the inscription on the album jacket of *ODOO* which reads: "This painting has been sanctified by our ancestors to support the Movement Against Second Slavery (MASS)." And on how the sleeves are finally produced, this is the fine artist's testimony on a 1974 album, *Alagbon Close*:

*Having listened ardently to the numerous recounting of the harrowing experience from the man him-*

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self and been privy to the various stages of composing the new tune, it was a *fait accompli*.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after this, he continues:

*The next two album covers No Bread and Kalakuta Show followed in tow of Fela's vitriolic statement on vinyl. My No Bread was an elaborate oil painting, a mélange of social ills plaguing a developing nation fuelled by the then recently introduced Udoji Bursary Awards for public workers—a fall-out of the oil-boom to volume. 'Mr. Inflation is in town' was one of the warnings in the painting.<sup>2</sup>*

A quotation on *Alagbon Close* cover, of the Greek philosopher—George Mangakis, "The man dies in all who keep

silent in the face of tyranny" —is an example of how an album sleeve is transformed into an intertextual site for oppositional narrative. On the album cover of *Coffin for Head of State*, Fela incorporates rebuttals on the military and civilian elite from his 'MOP Message', as part of a collage of newspaper cuttings, claiming that:

"It is twenty-one years now since our so called independence. Today, we have no water, no light, no food, and house to hide our heads under...WELL TO AN INGLORIOUS CORRUPT MILITARY REGIME, WHICH CHANGES TO A MORE RETROGRESSIVE CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT." (Emphasis, Fela's.)

Complementary to the general mood of his song texts,





Monkey Banana, cover album, inside sleeve

the basic feature of representation is pictorial realism: the pictures and illustrations 'show' and 'name' names in a rare iconicity of resemblance. The sense of resemblance could be specific, as the portraits of Nigerian Heads of State since independence in *CBB*, who are recognizable and known; or general, as the female features of *Yellow Fever*, which though has no specific personal reference, capture without abstraction. As often, however, the pictorial characterization is hardly generic.

The illustrations may occasionally depict, simultaneously, a multiple time-spatial category. In *ODOO*, for instance, we find the prevalence of a mythic ambience buttressed by a perspective which recedes into a rustic and romantic setting, at once enchanting and magical. In combination with the perspective, the 'realism' of this mythic space is achieved with a sublime color choice in the background, which is meant to celebrate traditional African values. This background reflects a gentle blue sky, from which interlocking hills jut out into a lush, green environment. The landscape sprawls into a podium, where it is hugged to a stop by a giant piano with which it achieves harmony of nature and man. Fela is in front of the piano (in repressed smile) with his 'queens', in the background, donning traditional Yorùbá attire. Right below the podium and immediately before members of the 'Egypt '80 Band' is a pre-historic-like brook on which a saxophone

and flowers are floating. The dimension and perspective reflect an ambience of the romantic, as the authorizing agency of the sonic in which, it appears, the artist is well pleased.

In *Original Suffer Head*, we find a gradual slide from the predominantly mythic discourse of *ODOO* into a mytho-historical context. Aspects of the historical are 'indicted', it seems, through contrast with evidences hewn from the mythic universe, and there is a fusion of the other-worldly with the here and now. It is with *JJD* that the artist moves us closer to a historical representation, with more familiar symbols and icons.

Illustrated by the 'Poatsan Arts Trade Ltd. in Lagos, the dominant colors of *Original* are red, yellow and green, the conceptual colors of the African continent in Rastafarian imagination. The predominant yellow color to the right side of the illustration is probably used to capture the glitter of opulence radiated by images of profligacy and wealth—luxury cars, fashionable high-rises, an airplane and a private jet.

This is contrasted to the scenes of poverty and squalor below. Here, indeed, is a story of Africa's poor and the urban ghetto, with its citizens literally chained, a sight reminiscent of the chain gang of the slave trade era. This pictorial narrative of the album's theme centrally features a map of Africa dressed in black, an interesting irony in view of its intended signifier of darkness, uncertainty—even doom. But this is not even a regular map; it is also a face which wears a look of misery and





melancholy. Tears of blood cascade down her cheeks, presumably on account of the state of affairs around her.

This African mask head is burdened by numerous problems, including economic deprivation, symbolized by the 'UNESCO' aid attached to it. The depiction of power outage and water scarcity testify to the story of general collapse. Strapped on Mr. Africa's shoulders is a barrel of petroleum spilling away, typical of the culture of waste for which the Nigerian, nay African, public service has become known.

The sense of desecration in blindfolding the FESTAC mask is made visible by the feeling of sacredness reflected from the mask's background with a halo of red and yellow glitter. Re-invoking a constant theme of the lyrics, the mask has actually been blindfolded by a Christian-Islamic alliance symbolized with the cross and the crescent.

Yet, another polemic has been flagged off on the same cover as official policy is somewhat critiqued as 'Mr. Billionaire Rice Importer', overfed and in a rather arrogant posture, doles out money to the beggarly army of the jobless whose votes he buys. His political party is the 'Nazi Party of Uselessness', and the ballot boxes wear the Nigerian national colors: green-white-green. Beside this opulence we find coffins of dead government policies. However, on the side of the masses we find Fela's notable saxophone, ostensibly blaring the message of hope.

The 1977 caricature of *Johnny Just Drop (JJD)* is a particularly successful intervention in pictorial cultural criticism. With a profuse use of vibrant colors, now emblematic of Fela's album sleeves, we are confronted with a narrative directed at deriding the African 'been to'. The 'been to' in the Nigerian context is a cultural pervert; he has traveled to the center nations—at times only for a brief period but returns with airs of superiority over his folks. At other times though, a 'been to' has stayed far too long to remember the basic social code of conduct of the community he or she left.

It is this hybrid consciousness that the *JJD* story tells. This anti-hero literally drops with the aid of the parachute to his ancestral home (later revealed through name tags), but everything about his appearance points him out as a stranger. He is dressed in a western double-breasted suit, socks, heavy boots and a bowler hat to match on a very sunny day! The lure is toward the farcical, which is revealed through his tie, draping to his knees, and his profuse sweat.

In response, the crowd gathered around him stares

in consternation, derision and even pity symbolized by Johnny, a character with a transient, derisive identity. Judging by his forlorn look, he might as well have dropped from the airplane overhead, and it is instructive to note the verb 'drop', used in the context.

In contrast to Johnny, all the other characters here, indicative of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria, are clad in indigenous dress which are well suited for the climate. The hope which the vibrancy of their color choice radiates can only be contrasted to the drab gray and sullen blackness of Johnny's imposed style. The flip side continues the narrative of Johnny's drop from an 'Oferssee Hairways', a linguistic violence committed against the norm—'Overseas Airways', to indicate the general Afrobeat practice of ribald distortion. He is eventually unmasked as his briefcase bursts open mid-air, and his real names are revealed: Ogunmodede; Chibuzor; Abubakar, names from three of Nigeria's major ethnic groups: Yorùbá, Igbo and Hausa; Johnny, after all, is only but an impostor, a *follow follow man!* Occasionally, as in this case too, words complement the picture in order to enhance better comprehension and this is how this text is concluded with the artist's comment on the album cover:

*The JJD man is commonsight. He has been to London, he has been to New York, Paris, Tokyo, Hamburg, what have you? He is proud about it! In the hot baking sun, he is the only African man in suit and tie...he is the youngster in smoked denim faded jeans, he is also in high 'guaranteed' platform shoes. He is the alien in his country, his motherland! Wait until his 'slangs' and fonetics! In a nutshell, he is what I have painted on this album cover. He has just dropped.*<sup>3</sup>

By and large, this is a pictorial representation of dissent, of the contest of values between dominance and marginality. And, with a style that buttresses the disjunction of elite policy—through a frugal use of generic characterization, and extensive asymmetric form—what we invariably find is a pictorial extension of Fela's lyrical temperament. This temperament is at once contestatory and declamatory of views deemed to be tilting the continent in the direction of 'second slavery',<sup>4</sup> and a dependent political economy.<sup>GR</sup>

## Notes

1. Cite Lemni Ghariokwu in *Glendora Review: African Quarterly on the Arts*. (Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 054)
2. *Ibid.* p. 055.
3. See detail on album jacket of the same title.
4. This is how Fela describes the neo-colonial condition; he subsequently formed the Movement Against Second Slavery (MASS) as a way of raising awareness around the theme.