Chapter 2
It Isn’t All About “Authority”: Deconstructing Fela Anikulapo-Kuti’s Political Messaging Against “Follow-Follow” Citizenry

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ABSTRACT
Fela Anikulapo-Kuti died in 1997, but his name remains prominent in the annals of Africa’s music giants. He used his brand of music, Afrobeat, to chastise and condemn Africa’s leaders and the elite for misgoverning the masses and enriching themselves through all forms of corruption and looting the national treasury. Fela, however, was equally critical about Africans whose unassertiveness appeared to embolden their leaders to continue embarking on the flagrant mismanagement of their countries. So, while most of Fela’s music was about Africa’s inept leadership, and most research about his political messaging reflect his penchant to challenge authorities, this chapter explores his exhortation to African masses to rise and challenge their leaders as that was the only viable way to halt the systemic decay in the continent. Through textual analysis of his music and the way he framed his messages, it is clear that Fela also saw change in the continent coming from people rising and confronting their leaders, not just condemning them without supporting their words with action.

INTRODUCTION
Fela Anikulapo-Kuti’s imprint on weaponizing music to challenge political leadership in Africa and canvass for social change in the continent is arguably undiminished in spite of his death in 1997. Upon his demise, a New York Times article described him as a “band leader who combined pulsating Afro-beat rhythms and scathing pidgin English lyrics to goad Nigeria’s leaders and denounce their authoritarian regimes…..(he) had been Africa’s most famous musician and his country’s foremost political dissident.”

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Prior to being acclaimed as an African music icon and irrepressible voice of dissent, Fela underwent a form of self-cleansing in readiness for the mission he had envisioned for himself. Out went his original last name, Ransome-Kuti, which he characterized as meaningless and a remnant and reminder of British colonialism; and in came Anikulapo-Kuti which, in his native Yoruba language, literally translates to he who carries death in his pouch and, therefore, cannot die (Carroll, 2013; Olaniyan, 2001). Although a graduate of the London Trinity School of Music where he studied music history, classical music, piano and composition, Fela boldly Africanized his music from jazz to Afrobeat and continuously renamed his band until he settled for Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and Egypt ‘80 (Dosunmu, 2010).

Fela lived and died a committed political iconoclast and constant irritant to the political leadership in Nigeria and by extension Africa, over what he regarded as the systemic decay in his country occasioned by flagrant corruption, maladministration and docile citizenry. He also used his music to fight against what he determined to be a conspiracy by international capitalism and its local African collaborators to perpetuate underdevelopment in the continent. Although the son of a Christian pastor, he was a renegade and staunch believer in his African roots and culture. Not surprisingly, on February 20, 1978 he married twenty-seven wives in one wedding ceremony. The brides were female dancers and chorus ladies he called “queens” in his musical band. Fela habitually and openly smoked Indian hemp (marijuana), popularly known locally as Igbo, in defiance of authorities. He considered it medicinal and of African origin.

A number of studies with various thematic emphases have been done on this African music legend. These include Labinjo (1982) who examined Fela in the context of protest music in Nigeria; Grass’ (1986) presentation of Fela as an Afrobeat music rebel; Fairfax (1993), who examined his contribution to music as a form of cultural revival in West Africa; and Oikelome’s (2009) focus on the stylistic character of Fela’s highlife jazz music. Most studies about Fela substantially address his rebellious nature and lampooning the political leaders in Nigeria and Africa. Nonetheless, it is plausible to argue that Fela was not all about challenging political leadership. He also admonished his compatriots and Africans in general for being unassertive in the face of rampant systemic corruption, and not questioning their leaders’ flagrant ineptitude and bad governance. Some of his songs such as Mr. Follow Follow, Shufering and Shmiling and Teacher Don’t Teach Me Nonsense addressed these issues.

This chapter is therefore devoted to deconstructing Fela’s tirade against people he irreverently described as Mr. Follow Follow because they did not have the guts to question the massive corruption and endemic maladministration by people in authority. However, this should not be construed as an attempt to deemphasize the primacy of Fela’s musical crusade against the political leadership and retrogressive governments of his era. This study is about Fela’s messaging against the citizens’ submissiveness and unassertiveness that inadvertently help to sustain the Vagabonds In Power (another title of one of his songs). It offers a perspective that is hardly addressed in studies about Fela and his political agitation through Afrobeat music.

Fela released numerous albums and a variety of songs in his career, from the time he was employed as a producer by the national broadcast station (Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation, NBC) upon completion of his music education in England and formed his little known jazz band, Fela Ransome-Kuti Quintet (Dosunmu, 2010), to when he died in 1997. Nonetheless, the primary focus in this chapter is on the songs with subtle or manifest political messaging about the dangers of having politically docile citizens. Even then, only eleven songs in Fela’s vast musical repertoire were selected as a purposive sample for analysis.

This chapter utilized textual analysis as its method and framing as its foundational theory.
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