



# Fela Anikulapo Afrobeats Music as A Driving Force for Social Transformation

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## Abstract

This paper unravels the social transformation elements as embedded in Fela Anikulapo's Afro beats pop music compositions. A composer is a creative individual communicating personal, original, and unique thoughts with a distinctive style and a particularized point of view and expression. This concept of the creative composer has made music scholars place greater emphasis on creative individuality, originality, and freedom. While exercising his freedom, Fela's musical genre, being protest music, encompasses several correctional lyrics that stimulate the social ills and injustice in Nigeria. Several messages of awareness that stimulates the inspiration of didactic values were embodied in his music. Being a human right activist, his music naturally focuses on patriotism, freedom, egalitarian society, and overall Nigerian development. The central importance of his belief is freedom from the forces of colonialism and neocolonialism, while exposing him to risk. The significance and value of an idea or a work of art do not exist in pristine isolation; hence, the mixture of societal needs, aspirations, and Afro beats music. Therefore, this study employs a multidimensional approach in its methodology. The bibliography was used to source for data from journals, books, and discography of recorded albums. The study adopts textual analysis as its analytical strategy to describe and interpret Fela's pop music. The findings reveal an unbiased Fela's music as an agent of mass conscience and social transformation. Against this background, the significance is that the study challenged contemporary pop singers to emulate Fela's kind of popular music for the emancipation of Nigeria from her woes.

**Keywords:** Afro beats, Creativity, Fela Anikulapo, Pop Music and Social Transformation.

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## 1. Introduction

The potency of popular music as an agent of social emancipation and transformation has been of interest to music analysts and art critics for decades. This paper, therefore, focuses on the transformative role of Fela Anikulapo's Afro beats pop music genre and advocates for its engagement as a weapon for positive change, peace and development of Nigeria. The need for the transformative dimensions in Nigeria was borne out of the failure of all efforts to maintain sanity in the country. The role of popular music transient's leisure and entertainment but includes society, conscience and watchdog. Therefore, musical activities in Nigeria rest largely on a tri-level structure: music in the traditional society, the popular music industry and the formal music school structure. Generally, a pop musician has a role as a keeper of public conscience and social control. The pop musician guides the society, drawing, of course, from the collective traditional wisdom, pool of knowledge and social world views of the people.

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He foresees events like poetry and as an educator. Many of the social comments, moral codes and guides are couched in music and songs. A popular musician has a role; a place; and privileges as a member of the society to advocate for an egalitarian society.

Fela, being a positive social critic, made musical contributions that remain memorable and his prophetic pronouncements continue to haunt the Nigerian society. His music instilled patriotic and nationalistic feelings in the society and his lyrics helped in the control and articulation of government programme. In contending the ultimate value of Afro beats musical art of Fela; it is necessary for the listener to individualize and differentiate his musical contributions from his individual lifestyle. In the judgmental realm, many practicing pop musicians have allowed their personal indiscipline to override their excellence musical contributions. Therefore, listeners must distinguish between moral values and individual values for a great understanding of the Afro beats music. Moral values deal with what will probably be good or bad in humanity while individual values are concerned with experience as it relates to a soul.

Pop music is a mobile dynamic art and its understanding and enjoyment depends upon the perception of the listener. There are, however, differences of opinion in the affective responses of pop musical sound when compared with the practitioner of the sound. The matter is not so simple in understanding and enjoyment of Afro beats music, as music composed for struggle, it involves free mind set, sensitivity and intellect. For to comprehend the implications of Afro beats musical arts, it is necessary to understand the underpinning causer factors clearly, which include; corruption, lack of social amenities, chaotic society, bad environment, dishonesty and lack of trust. It is frequently noted that pop musical forms innovations always emanate from social, economic and political circumstances and tensions within the society, hence, it is partly for these reasons that enjoyment increases with familiarity. Hence, a society cannot be static, therefore, all human endeavors that contribute to her transformation is worthy of an academic scrutiny. Nigeria is blessed, or cursed; depending on which side of the coin we are looking at. The country is blessed with natural wealth around us but cursed with a great number of criminals, fraudulent people and corrupt leaders therein. It is worthy of note that Fela composed lyrics of great coherent, meaningful and well-thought-out music. According to Okafor (1989); pop music deals with familiar lyrics, themes and issues of the moment. It is understood and accepted by a lot of people not as a final solution to their problems but as a topical reflection, their sentiments and worldview.

The theoretical framework for this study is hinged on Adedeji's transformative musicology. Transformative musicology by Adedeji (2006) posits that the term 'transformation' is used to refer to positive change in spirit, mind and attitudes. This is entrenched in the regeneration of the human mind and spirit that would lead to thinking positively, pursuing good moral values and living right as against the engendering corruption, moral decadence, wickedness, cheating, inordinate pursuit of power and wealth, greed and falsehood. Fela's Afro pop music is a struggle against social vices and the world that need cleansing, healing or rebranding. Nigeria society is prevalence of evil and wickedness, politics of money and violence, selfishness, corruption, greed and inordinate affection for riches and power. Beside, Osuala (1982) explained that; a theory is an attempt at synthesizing and integrating empirical data for maximum classification and unification. Every individual has a number of personal theories based

on postulates and assumptions of varying degrees of adequacy and truth from which he makes deduction of various degrees crucial and of course of accuracy. Therefore, for a progressive music scholarship, the analysis of Fela's potent music allied with transformative musicology theory. The relevance of the theory in the analysis is powered in the several music albums that portrayed struggle, courage, criticisms, adventures, abuse, violence and pronouncement aimed at social transformation and emancipation.

## **2. Music and Social Transformation**

The concept of social transformation connotes changes and progressive appearance of a given society. A progressive society is the type that grows economically, politically, educationally, socially and very vibrant in all her human endeavors. Music is one of the society's weapons of offence and defense. In Nigeria, there are many pop songs which are of criticism, calumny, and abuse which the society accepts and musicians with the right words and the right composition are always strong favourites of the society. Popular music has a direct link with the society. Apart from the entertainment, also available is the song of moral, ethical content that conveyed societal value and worldviews. Next to the societal language is music, and the song is the most widely used oral medium of expression. Society manipulates music to give voice to their collective thoughts, actions and even spirituality. Okafor (1990) opined that; music might be a universal phenomenon, but different communities across different cultures give it different cultural definitions and the society use it to express their identity; their historical evolutions; the continuity of their being and the horizon for which they are set.

Fela's Afro beat is harbingers of social conscience. The Afro beat exponent was famous for his satires and his criticisms of the people in authority through music. What makes Fela's afro beat music great? It is a question that anyone deeply concerned with his art must attempt at least to answer? There are certain technical criteria for excellence in a piece of music such as; consistency of style, clarity of forms, subject focused and meaningful messages. Music is not a natural system or phenomenon; it is man-made and man-controlled, therefore Afro beats music is made by Fela Anikulapo Kuti as a weapon against oppression and a positive social transformation agent. The work of art, accordingly, is said to have its complete meaning within itself. Afro beats music is a great art that has remained stable and continues to awaken the spirit of freedom against the oppressor: this focuses on the crucial point of this paper. Furthermore, the importance of lyrics and messages, as an expression means, is vivid in Fela's use of Pidgin English. He made use of Pidgin English, Yoruba language and Standard English, in order to convey the message to the masses. The aesthetics of the music embedded is a careful mixture of pidgin and coded words. According to Ozah (2017) apart from the use of Pidgin English that is understood by the average Nigerian, Fela used other cultural codes, including non-linguistic expressions, and body gestures in articulating and communicating his message to the masses.

Fela was born on October 15, 1938 in Abeokuta, Ogun State. At the age of 19, Fela left Nigeria to study at the Trinity College of Music, London. He met and fell in love with Remi Taylor and both later got married in 1961. His career started in 1967 when he returned home from London with a degree in music as a trumpeter. In 1974, he branded his house "*Kalakuta Republic*" which according to him is a place opens to every Africans escaping persecution. On April 13, 1976, the Afro beat king changed his name from Fela Ransome-Kuti to Fela Anikulapo-

Kuti, which according to him literarily means the one who emanates greatness and *Anikulapo* connotes one who has subdued death. Fela Kuti’s Afro beat was developed from a fusion of African and Afro-American music. The lyrics were spoken, chanted or sung in Pidgin English or the Yoruba dialect. He transformed his band name from highlife rankers to *koola lobitos* band and Africa 70. The two earlier bands were playing jazz with African music but the name afro beat brought him to the limelight and recognition. The invention of Afrobeat in the 70’s involved mixing of African music played with the expression of jazz music. The following are the titles of Fela’s albums, date released and the messages the music passed across to the masses.

Table 1: Fela’s musical albums

S/No	Title of Albums	Date	Societal Focus/Messages
1.	Jeun kooku	1973	Gluttony and greed.
2.	Roforofo fight	1972	Dirty lifestyle.
3.	Shakara Olooje	1972	Fearless individual.
4.	Why Blackman dey suffer	1974	Social inequality.
5.	Everything Scatter	1975	Situation of confusion.
6.	Upside Down	1976	Situation of confusion
7.	Yellow Fever	1976	City girls who bleach their face, arms and leg.
8.	Stalemate	1977	Nigeria, at a crossroad.
9.	Zombie	1977	Thinking before action.
10.	Unknown soldier	1977	Brutal and ruthless invasion of kalakuta republic.
11.	Sorrow, tears, and blood.	1977	Metaphor of the Nigerian situation.
12.	Water No Get Enemy	1978	The importance of water.
13.	Suffering and smiling	1978	Abject poverty and ignorance.
14.	Vagabonds in Power	1979	Act of bad Governance
15.	Teacher Don’t Teach me Nonsense	1980	Disorganized society and corruption.
16.	International tief tief	1980	Mass embezzlement in Nigeria.
17.	Big Blind Country	1980	Lack of Education.
18.	Authority Stealing	1980	Act of stealing in Government.
19.	Coffin for Head of State	1980	Attack on the Head of State.
20.	Confusion	1981	Traffic jam on the street.
21.	Original Suffer head	1981	Agony of the masses
22.	Army arrangement	1985	Corruption in Nigeria.



23	Beast of no nation	1985	Uncertainty of Nigerian man
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Source: Anikulapo Kuti (1998), CD Best of FELA, Volume 1 and 2.

### 3. Analyses of Fela’s Music

A cursory look at the titles of the above sampled music shows that the entire music of *abami-eda*’ focused on struggle against the societal ills; ranging from the government, institution and even to individuals within the Nigerian society. Afro beat naturally evokes deep-rooted emotions from its fans. Afro beat of *abami eda* (weird person), Fela, the chief priest and *baba* of African shrine, took delight in condemning the Nigeria government. He detested anything that has to do with stealing, giving and taken of bribe which led to a struggle as shown in the following afro beat lyrics:

Coffin for the Head of State (in Pidgin English)

Them steal all the money,  
Them kill many students,  
Then burn many houses,  
Then burn my house too,  
Them kill my Mama...  
So I carry the coffin  
I waka waka waka...  
We go Obalende,  
We go Dodan barrack  
We reach them gate oo  
We put the coffin down...

He regarded these as exploitation, cheating, and injustice being extensively and commonly practiced and has been the bane to development in Nigeria. In his album titled ‘Army Arrangement’ condemned the suffering of African masses through the corruption that characterized the ruling government in Africa.

Suffer dey Africa (in Pidgin English)

Suffer dey Africa, pa pa ra pa  
I suffer dey, pa pa ra pa  
Condition dey e, pa pa ra pa  
Me I no say you be African Man  
And we dey suffer, pa pa ra pa  
Which condition you dey? I don’t know  
The condition me I dey, me I know  
My condition don reach make I act

According to Ogunde (2007); Fela soon became an avowed enemy of the ruling junta and their collaborators, notwithstanding threats and intimidation; he continued his criticism of military dictatorship and its imperialism such as the owners of multinational companies like Shell, ITT, and Mobil. Many people took Fela, during his lifetime, as people’s conscience. He has often acted according to social expectations and promptly too. His music vehemently



attacked indiscipline practiced by the employers, teachers and students, police and soldiers, ruled and the rulers, buyers and sellers, politicians and businessmen, privileged and the underprivileged. In the words of Ebo (2009); Fela's album (International Tief Tief, ITT) which is a pun on ITT (International Telecommunication Conglomerate) captured the classic case of foreign manipulation as noted in the following lyrics.

International Tief Tief, ITT (in Pidgin English)

Dem get one style wey dem de use  
dem go pick one African man  
dem go give million naira bribes  
to become one useless chief  
den gradually, gradually...  
dem go be friend...with journalist...  
Permanent secretary...head of state...  
dem go start oppression, confusion, corruption  
dem go start to steal money...  
International tief tief...ITT

The above lyrics condemned the activity of the explorers using Africans to steal and evacuate African natural resources to European nations. The highly placed influential people could have seen him as confronting and challenging the political authorities in Nigeria over social ills being committed. However, the masses regarded him as the conscience of the people who would never shy away from expressing himself. Fela always made his impact to reflect on the situations in Nigeria as sung in the following lyrics.

Sorrow, Tears and Blood (In Pidgin English)

My people self they fear too much  
We fear for the thing we no see  
We fear for the air around us  
We fear to fight for freedom  
We fear to fight for liberty  
We fear to fight for justice  
We fear to fight for happiness  
We always get reason to fear

He was always vocal, brave and singularly influenced several changes including the introduction of social justice programmes. The following extract from the album (Army Arrangement') is a testimony of his love for the masses of Nigeria: Army Arrangement (In Pidgin English)

Dem de see wetin de happen  
Dem de hear am too  
Few people dey fat with the big money  
The rest de hungiri  
Na wayo government we dey get



Fela worked tirelessly in pursuit of the promotion of African culture, and afro-beats instrumentation and general costume were deep rooted in African dress and languages. Thus Gbefwi (1977) notes; ‘for effect, Fela has adopted pidgin English in order to get across to the people. Besides, he also advocated for good governance, prudent management and promotion of African cultural practices and teachings, this fact was emphasized in the album Teacher don’t teach me nonsense.

Teacher don’t teach me nonsense (In Pidgin English)

Teacher, Teacher-O na the Lecturer be your name  
Teacher, Teacher-O na the Lecturer be the same  
Make-ee no teach-ee me again oh  
As soon teaching finished yes,  
Da thing-ee it gon die it dey o...  
Problem of inflation  
Problem of corruption of mismanagement  
Nothing we dey carry, all over Africa  
Na de latest one, na him de make me laugh  
Austerity, austerity, austerity

One of the most important uses of music is to transfer social values and morals. Afro beat music has sign posts which guided the people on their pilgrimage of life. Such values, transmitted through music, often stick and pass from generation to generation, and enter into the group unconsciously, but always producing the required results. His many incarcerations, detention and imprisonment by the Nigerian government did not, for once, deter him from his commitment to social crusade for justice. Another very interesting contribution of Fela was in the album ‘Shuffering and Shmilling’ thus;

Shuffering and Shmilling (In Pidgin English)

Then go reach bed, power no de  
Then go reach road, go-slow go come  
Then go reach road, police go slap  
Then go reach road, army go whip  
Then go look pocket, money no de  
Then go reach work, query ready.

The above lyrics captured the current state of our nation Nigeria so succinctly, however after decades, since his song, nothing has changed; in fact everything has worsened. Presently, to assess a regular supply of power seems to be beyond the reach of ordinary Nigerians who cannot afford a generator or the petrol to run it. The health of those who can afford generators fare no better as they live with noise pollution, the fire hazards and this has a long impact on the quality of health of Nigerians. Therefore, to make progress in the Country’s social transformation agenda, Nigeria needs a healthy society. In the popular music industry, the primary objectives are to make money and fame, but in addition, Fela Anikulapo contributed to the achievements of yet to be accomplished egalitarian Nigerian Society. This in essence, without any prejudice, is worthy of emulation by all and sundry.

#### 4. Conclusion

Fela Anikulapo Kuti, in his social transformation crusades, engineered by his social views, invariably led him into conflict with the powers-that-be. One interesting point to remember here is the ill-health of ‘*abami eda*, which he never bothered in the pursuit of his social crusade. Regrettably, most ‘Afro beaters’ after Fela do not toe his line; the music has been reduced to purely entertainment, fame and for pleasure only. The philosophy of Afrobeat is based on pan-African ideas and ideals and of course on African culture generally. The vitality of Afrobeat, at its inception, is that of the fighter and a reflection of the struggle for emancipation and degradation of African values. In view of the founding father’s philosophies, contemporary Afro beats music practitioners are admonished to follow his footsteps.

Today in Nigeria, there is a state of insecurity, unprecedented corruption, gross impunity and the alarming unemployment rate. If the transformation agenda cannot prosecute looters and the state of the nation is invisible and apparent for any Nigerian to see, what then are the reflections of contributions of the contemporary afrobeat music practitioners? The perplexity and confusion of the public are certainly not the results of the death of analysis and understanding of Afrobeat music, but most citizens are afraid to demand their right. In the various discussions of Afro beats music of “fearless *Abami Eda*”, artists, critics, and historians have described, developed theories and advocated philosophies. All this has produced some heat and considerable smoke, but very little light and almost zero achievements in the Nigerian society. The confusion engendered by multiplicity has persisted till date.

Furthermore, in contrast to Fela’s music, most of the contemporary pop singers dwell on immoral songs. Some of the noted modern-day reigning albums includes: *Kolabo; Yawuse; General pipe; Wa gba kondo; Ja si kanga di kanga; Kerewa; Free madness; Tu kiniyele; Do me I do you; Eni ko di chair mu ti ma fi setan; Skelobo; Importer and Exporter; Bomber to bomber; Orié foka sibe; Eyin boys e maa nawo lo*; and the latest is the ‘Saint Janet’ with a direct uncultured lyrics in her album; *Toko ba le laleju etc.* Without any iota of doubt, the listed titles of the so-called latest pop music cannot take the society to a greater height as it is being envisaged. While the youths are busy singing and dancing away their lives with unemployment, the adults are busy manipulating election results, corrupt practices in the high places, the assassination of the political opponent with poverty and hunger that pervaded the land.

Finally, having said that Afrobeat music is a symbol of African traditional culture and a metaphor of struggle against new colonial stages of Africanized African, the new Afro beaters and famous musicians should go back to the original philosophy behind the music. Their music lyrics should centre on the fight against injustice, corruption, a threat to human life, a war against assassination, a war against poverty, rape and unemployment. The latest Afrobeat followers should also strife for uncompromising but genuine vocal renditions which have the potency to fight for social transformation of Nigeria into an egalitarian society.



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