

African Agenda

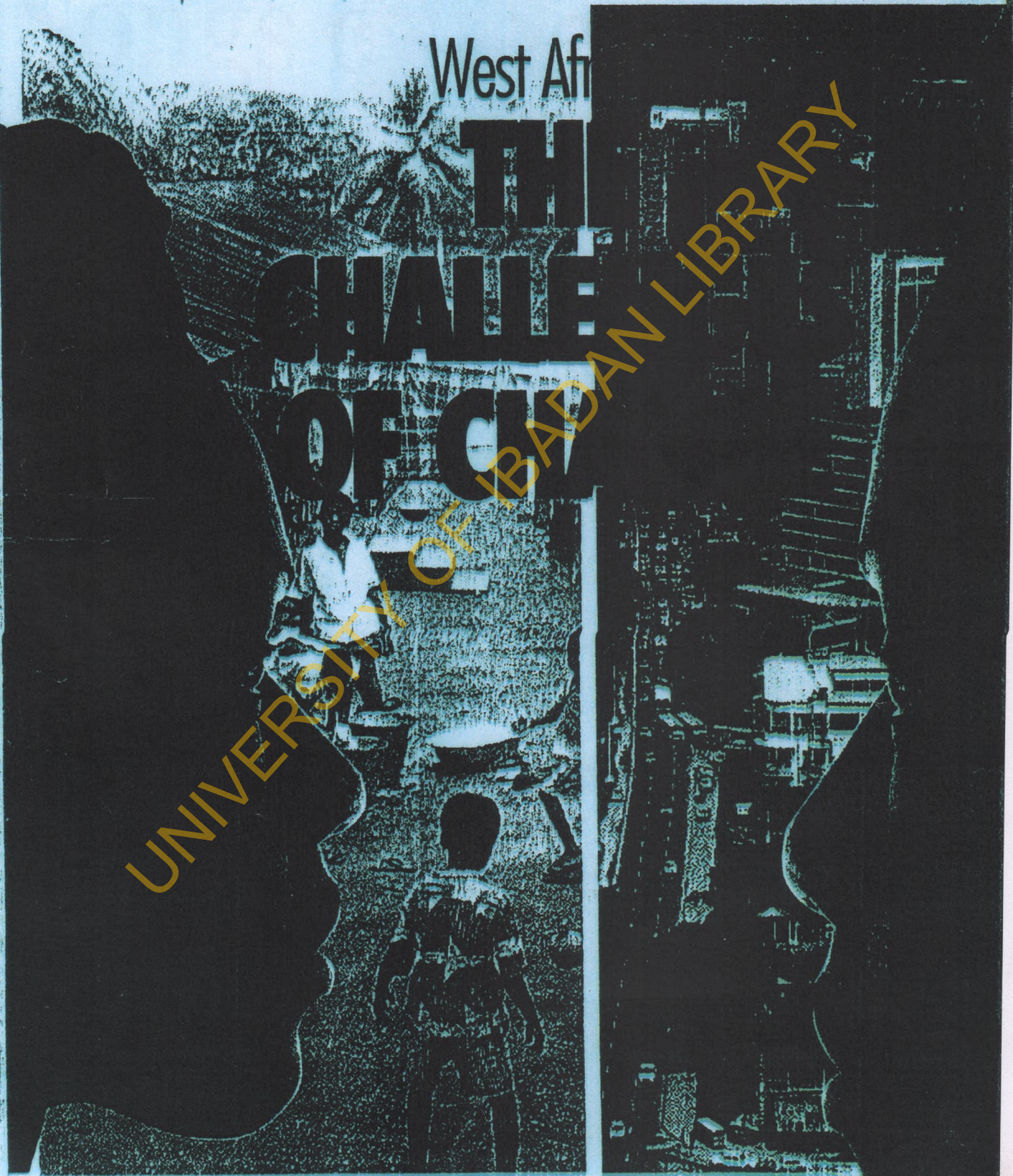
(11)

Vol 4 No.3 2001 1S\$ 5.00 GBE 3.00

West Afr

THE CHALLENGE OF CIVIL

UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN LIBRARY



Fela and Songs of the Leash

*Hopes of a better life after independence in Africa rapidly gave way to frustration and disillusionment among the population as the post independence elite bestrode the landscape with the air of internal colonisers. In reaction, some resigned themselves to their situation, others joined the new oppressors and a few resisted. Nigerian musician, Fela Anikulapo Kuti was among those, who with his life art, resisted and encouraged others to do so, writes SOLA OLORUNYOMI.**

The often-veiled setting of Fela's narrative is urban West Africa, even when Lagos serves as a symbol for both the sub-region, and the entire African continent.

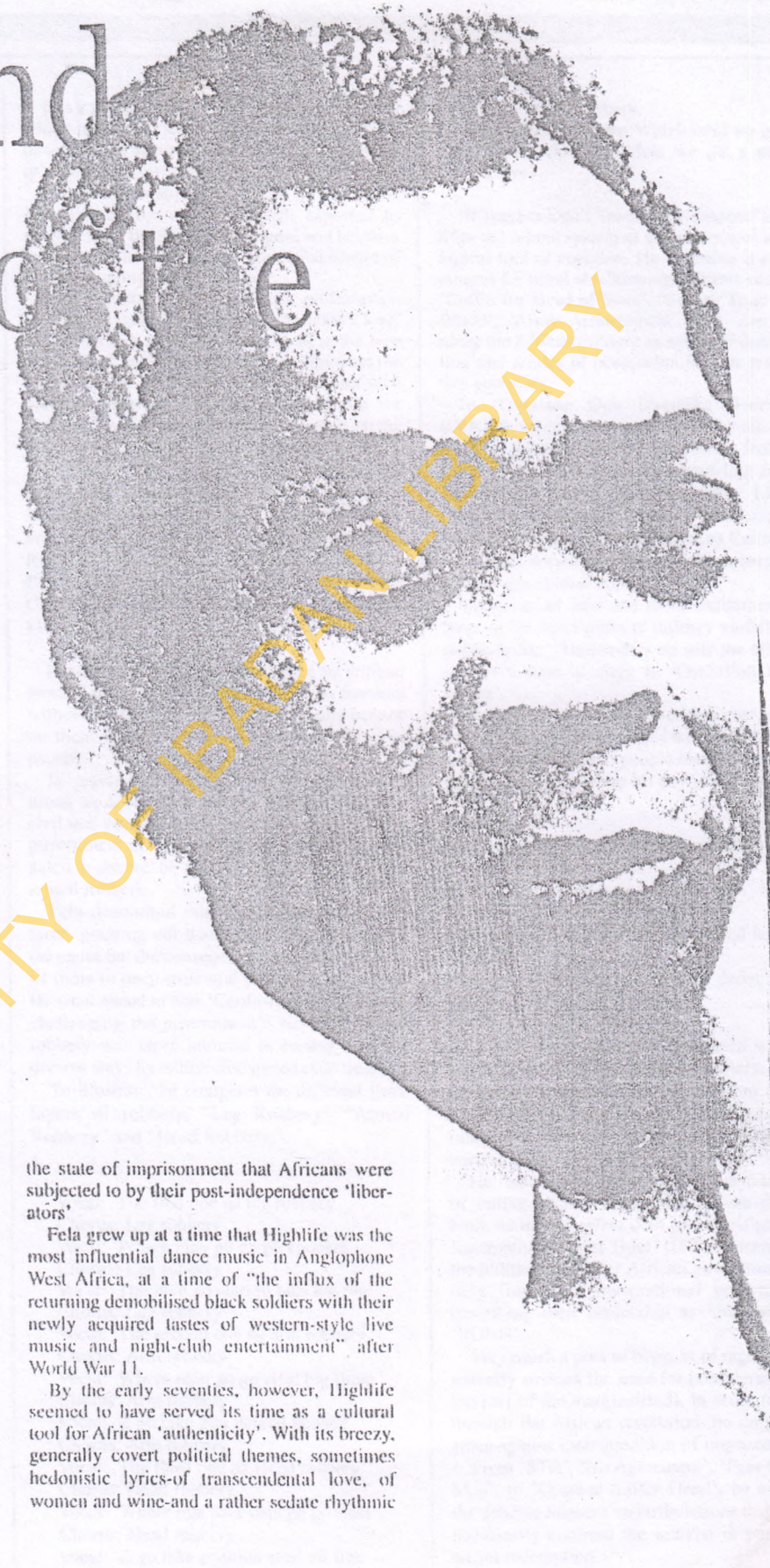
Fela's lyrics often highlight contrasting situations of power relations between the big man (Oga) and the marginalised. In between these two extremes are to be found diverse modes of coping, of acquiescence or, of resistance.

Fela's contribution to world contemporary music had its immediate beginnings in then popular Highlife music but the breadth of Fela's compositional style, Afrobeat music, is deeply embedded in a myriad of traditional African rhythms and Jazz music. This broad musical latitude gave Fela, enough room to escape 'imprisonment' as well as comment on

the state of imprisonment that Africans were subjected to by their post-independence 'liberators'

Fela grew up at a time that Highlife was the most influential dance music in Anglophone West Africa, at a time of "the influx of the returning demobilised black soldiers with their newly acquired tastes of western-style live music and night-club entertainment" after World War II.

By the early seventies, however, Highlife seemed to have served its time as a cultural tool for African 'authenticity'. With its breezy, generally covert political themes, sometimes hedonistic lyrics-of transcendental love, of women and wine-and a rather sedate rhythmic



structure, Highlife was simply not positioned as the musical vehicle for the brewing post independence confrontation. The task had to be shouldered by a different musical genre.

That task eventually fell on Afrobeat. Unlike other popular musical forms then on the continent, Afrobeat carried with its lyrics, an ideological group expectation in response to post independence social and political life.

The impulse for this political response could be seen in the consistent disrespect for the rule of law by the new elite, an attitude that Fela read as deriving from the non-inclusive nature of constitution making in many African countries.

The situation was compounded by a patronage structure that privileged the patron (elite), to the detriment of the client (civil society).

In the first decade after independence, the politician played patron but this role was effectively usurped by the military from the mid-70s, although in Nigeria, the slide had begun from the first coup of 1966.

The military threw overboard federalism as a character of the Nigerian constitution, imposed a de facto unitary state, and paved the way for subsequent central governments to decimate opposition and pressure groups including trade unions, the students' movement, professional bodies and opposition parties.

Military rule in Nigeria was characterised by wanton violation of human rights, detention without trial, torture in police cell, indiscriminate killing, abduction and kidnapping, fanning of ethnic and religious embers.

Military hegemony was further entrenched through the sole control of the electronic media by the state, and even when by the mid-90s license was approved for private broadcast, allocation of frequencies went to perceived client figures under a strict regime of censorship.

It was in this atmosphere of a sonic censorship that Fela emerged with Afrobeat, first as a reformer and later as a counter-hegemonic activist/ artist.

A Game of Subversion

Fela's song-texts from the seventies describe contrasting features of imprisonment. The prison is the wall, the barb wire, the searchlight, the tower, as much as urban traffic chaos, architecture, and general siege mentality.

But the prison also plays a trick on its inventor; in order to foist a culture of acquiescence, the dictator's space shrinks and he becomes hostage to his own design.

In reliving this theme, Fela uses a traditional satirical mode of story telling. As in the griot tradition, he combines both the community's social history and his personal autobiography as a critical launch pad in the process of myth reading.

Pre-empting the opponent's rebuttal, for instance, the Yoruba poet first declaims himself, satirising his own background. Likewise Fela, in his song 'BONN', starts by referring to himself as "basket mouth," who is about to start "to leak again o." Through that self-exposure, he has weaned off a license of criticism both of his art and the message.

It is a potent, leveling performance mode with which traditional society ensured that figures of power got an accurate account of the community's feeling towards them.

Fela's satires suggest the need to thwart the role defined for the imprisoned, expected to emerge from the experience, a grim and helpless individual. He counters this with an aesthetic of laughter against the aggressor.

Fela's quotation of the Greek philosopher, George Mangakis on his album, 'Alagbon Close' "The man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny," is an example of how right from the album cover, he begins with his oppositional narrative. On the album cover of 'Coffin for Head of State', Fela incorporates rebuttals on the military and civilian regimes alike. He writes:

"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)

By the mid seventies, Fela began to critique general social decay and the license to freedom without obligation that African dictators bestow on their agents in order to brutalize the public psyche.

In reaction to the general lawlessness and urban violence that greeted the post Nigerian civil war years (starting from 1971), the military government of General Yakubu Gowon promulgated a decree of death penalty for convicted armed robbers.

Fela denounced this move in his public lectures, pointing out that armed robbery was not the cause but the consequence of a crisis that had its roots in deep structural inequality of society. He went ahead to wax 'Confusion Break Bones', challenging the government's view that armed robbery was more inimical to society than the diverse ways by which elite looted state treasury.

To illustrate, he compares the different three layers of robbery, "Leg Robbery," "Armed Robbery" and "Head Robbery:"

Vocal: The first one na leg robbery

Chorus: Leg robbery

Vocal: Where man go go pickpocket

Chorus: Leg robbery

Vocal: The man go start to take leg run

Chorus: Leg robbery

Vocal: The second one na arm robbery

Chorus: Arm robbery

Vocal: Where man go go steal big thing

Chorus: Arm robbery

Vocal: E go take gun defend himself

Chorus: Arm robbery

Vocal: The third one na Head robbery

Chorus: Head robbery

Vocal: Where oga pata-pata go go steal

Chorus: Head robbery

Vocal: E go take position steal all free

Chorus: Head robbery

Vocal: Free stealing na him policy

Chorus: Head robbery

Vocal: Head robbery. Which head we get e never steal, which president we get e never steal before?

'If Teacher Don't Teach Me Nonsense' identifies the school system as a non-physical ideological tool of coercion. He describes it as an outpost for mind conditioning. Albums such as 'Coffin for Head of State', 'Sorrow Tears and Blood', 'Army Arrangement', and 'Zombie' name the African military as agents of domination and armies of occupation in their respective countries.

In 'Overtake Don Overtake Overtake' (ODOO), he cautions against the easy allure of naming, whereby military institutions feed citizens with faddish and radical-sounding appellations. He cites examples from Libya- "Liberation Council", Liberia- "Redemption Council", and Zaire- "Revolutionary Council".

Slogans notwithstanding, the consequence is 'soldier go, soldier come'.

Imageries of rape and social defilement are basic to his description of military violation of public space. He ponders on why the military creates a state of siege in 'Confusion Break Bones'.

why dem like to burn di things wey cost money government fit sell to people wey no get money government fit sell to people cheape, cheape but na di burn burn, na im dey sweet dem pass

translation

why do they show preference for burning expensive (seized) goods government could sell same to low income earners government could auction the seized items to citizens but they (government) appear to derive joy in burning

Fela is unable to reconcile himself with the sadism that drives the Nigerian military, in particular, to destroy goods seized from traders (ostensibly for selling in non designated areas), rather than turn such goods over to charity or auction sale.

He rhetorically asks why they seem to revel in setting such products ablaze—na di burn burn, na im dey sweet dem pass! Fela posits in 'International Thief Thief' (ITT), however, that the military and other African governments are only fronts for transnational governments, describing their leadership as 'disguising' in 'BONN'.

Very much a poet of hope, as of rage, he consistently stresses the need for perseverance (on the part of the marginalised), in order to carry through the African revolution—the only guarantee against their condition of imprisonment.

From 'STB', 'No Agreement', 'Fear Not for Man', to 'Original Suffer Head', he explores the delicate nuances and tribulations that would necessarily confront the activist in pursuit of social redemption.

'STB' is a particularly deep introspection into those ever-present incentives for doubt in social activism, which delay emancipation day.

My people self dey fear too much/ We fear for di thing we no see
 We dey fear for di 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

We no want die/ We no want wound
 We no want quench/ We no want go
 I get one child/ Mama dey for house
 Papa dey for house/ I want build house
 I don build house/ I no want quench
 I Want enjoy/ I no wan go

So, policeman go slap your face you no go talk
 Army man go whip your yansh you go dey look like donkey

...Dem leave sorrow, tears and blood

[Translation]

My people seem to be too afraid/ Afraid even of non-visible things

Fearful of 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/ Always devising reasons to fear

We don't want to lose our lives/ Not wanting to be injured

Not wanting to die/ Not wanting to go (die)

Because: I've got an only child/ My mother is still alive

My father is still alive/ I desire to build a house

I've just built a house/ I don't want to die
 I wish to have some fun/ I don't want to go (die)

As a result, you are unable to reply when a police slaps you

The soldier also whips you but you can only look on like a donkey

In their aftermath, they leave sorrow, tears and blood

But the bard who must remain faithful to his art invariably gets in the way of entrenched interests. While succeeding Nigerian governments kept attacking Fela's Afrobeat practice, the state tried to promote other forms of music friendly to the status quo.

For instance, Juju music, which "portrays a traditional hierarchy mitigated by the generosity of the wealthy," was especially, promoted by the Nigerian authorities and local chieftains.

Besides hostile governmental action, Afrobeat also encountered corporate intrigue from Decca, a recording label, over Fela's radical lyrics.

Fela's clash with the Establishment began when soldiers razed his residence, Kalakuta Republic, to the ground on February 18, 1977, ostensibly because he failed to release to marauding soldiers a youngster who had fled

into the sanctuary of Kalakuta Republic after a scuffle with them.

Six months later, in a classic sonic censorship alliance between transnational, corporate interest and the domestic comprador bourgeoisie class, Fela received a letter dated August 1 from Decca, complaining about certain aspects of his composition. Signed by one D.G. Bennett, manager for Decca (West Africa), it reads:

'Our London Headquarters has advised us to get you to correct 'STB', 'Colonial Mentality', 'Observation', and 'Frustration of My Lady', by removing the objectionable words. They will be happy to wax and release the two records if words like "POLICE BEATING A WOMAN AND SOLDIERS ASSAULTING PEOPLE, and A JUDGE WEARING WIG AND GOWN AND SENTENCING HIS BROTHERS TO JAIL are removed from STB.'"

Fela objected to this dictation, went ahead to release the album, and thus signaled the birth of his own label—Kalakuta Records—with 'STB' and 'Colonial Mentality' as its first vinyl.

There were other forms of radical music censorship, more veiled but equally as pervasive in the course of Fela's musical advocacy. There were instances of hurriedly canceled contracts by agents who were pressurized to deny space for the expression of Afrobeat; there were barefaced roguish occupation of outdoor venues of performance or the boarding of the 'African Shrine' by government agents, even in defiance of court orders. Rather than be cowed, Fela would retort in his traditional sarcasm: how can a government of renters appreciate hard labour; how can a government claiming to reduce unemployment be depriving a community of artists its legitimate means of income?

It is however in 'CBB' that the most graphic illustration of urban traffic chaos is given, not just as a literal event but also as a metonym of environmental imprisonment.

Motor dey come from east
 Motor dey come from west
 Motor dey come from north
 Motor dey come from south
 And policeman no dey for centre
 Na confusion be dat o o

Fela engages the city in a manner that brings to the fore its inhabitants, not as peripheral, shadowy figures but as victims of its alienation who, however, are bent on repositioning themselves to alter their state. Generally, his character type, even if a victim, is an unyielding and interrogating subject, singing along with him.

According to Fela, the city as presently designed, suffocates—not just physically but also psychologically.

In 'Go Slow', where individual and collective space is denied, arising from chaotic urban planning that has left in its wake an unbearable environment both for living and reflection:

Lorry dey for your front
 Tipper dey for your back

Motorcycle dey for your right
 Helicopter dey fly fly for your top o
 You self don dey for cell

There is a lorry ahead of you
 There is a tipper behind you
 A helicopter is hovering over your head
 You are already entrapped in a cell

Dictators also become victims of the state of siege they unleash on society (by becoming prisoners of their own creation), as happens in the president's entourage described in 'MOP':

One police go follow am
 Hundred police go follow am
 Riot police go follow am

(One police follows him
 A hundred police will follow him
 Riot police will follow him)

The city in other words imprisons, just as the much-touted "outside world" (public domain) of 'BONN', is only another lure to the leash, hence the query:

No be outside police dey?
 No be outside soja dey ?
 No be outside court dem dey?
 No be outside magistrate dey..?
 No be outside dem kill dem students...?
 Soweto, Zaria and Ife?
 No be outside all dis dey happen?

The affirmation is eventually given by the chorus: 'Na craze world', (it is a crazy world), implying the extent to which the public sphere has been circumscribed in spite of the presumption of living in a free ('outside') world.

Fela stretches language to the limit through his re-coining of standard acronyms and words in order to subvert hegemonic constructs. During performances he would either heighten the trivial into a grotesque, laughable proportion, or deflate presumed formal categories such that they are removed of their larger-than-life image and re-cloaked in their ordinary, human dimensions.

In a country where citizens dread the military uniform, Fela, in 'Fear Not For Man', emboldens the margin to deride it:

Uniform na cloth
 Na tailor dey sew am

(Like other clothes) A military uniform is made of threads
 (And just as well) sewn by a tailor

In a way the soldier is imprisoned in clothes sewn by the 'marginalised' tailor.

* *Sola Olorunmyomi is a Nigerian literary critic.*