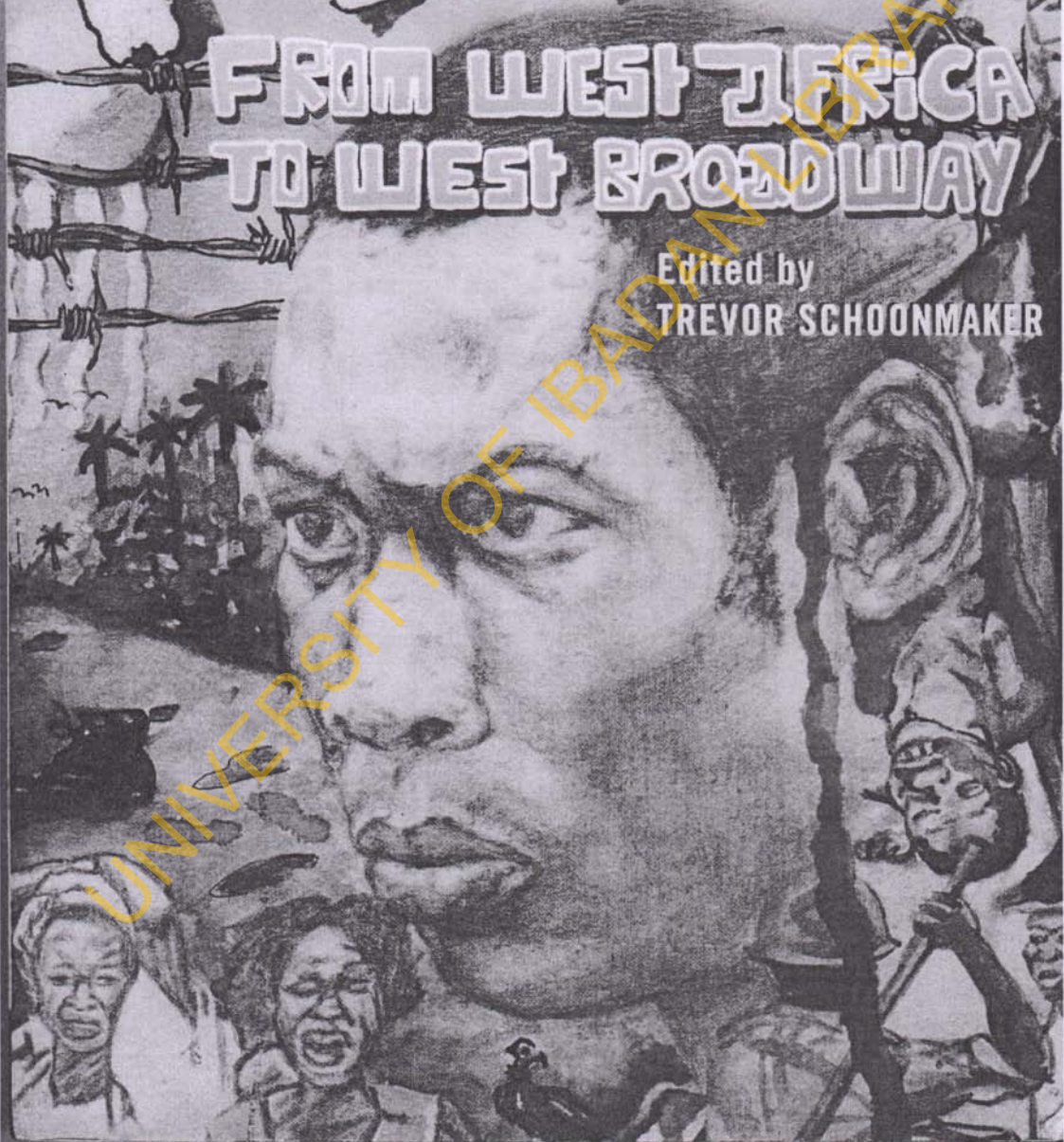


"Fela Anikulapo-Kuti was JAMES BROWN, HUEY NEWTON, RICK JAMES, BOB MARLEY, DUKE ELLINGTON and ODB all rolled up in one black African fist. The protest artist as a real live, awake and hungry human being. Africa's original rock superstar. The importance, vitality, and power of his work can not be overestimated. A pure blend of ancestry and modern marvel. If you don't know about Fela you surely need to find out now...!" —MOS DEF

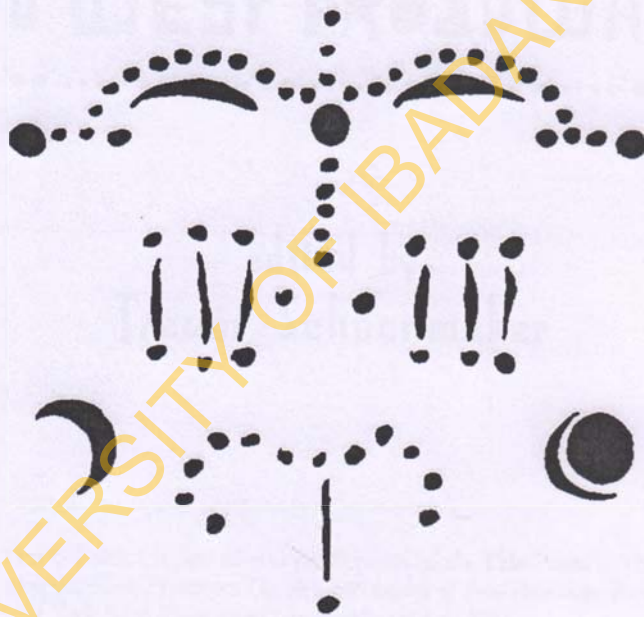
FELA

FROM WEST AFRICA TO WEST BROADWAY

Edited by
TREVOR SCHOONMAKER



Fela



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Fela:

FROM WEST AFRICA TO WEST BROADWAY

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edited by
Trevor Schoonmaker

This collection is one of two publications in the Fela Project. The other is: *Black President: The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti*. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003.

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FELA: FROM WEST AFRICA TO WEST BROADWAY

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table of contents



Acknowledgments

ix

Introduction	1
<i>Trevor Schoonmaker</i>	
The Father, the Sons, and the Holy Ghost	10
<i>Knox Robinson</i>	
African Who Sang and Saw Tomorrow	16
<i>Mabinuori Kayode Idowu, aka I. D.</i>	
Power Music, Electric Revival: Fela Kuti and the Influence of His Afrobeat on Hip-Hop and Dance Music	25
<i>Joseph Patel</i>	
Resurrection Shuffle	36
<i>Vivien Goldman</i>	
Interview	41
<i>Femi Anikulapo-Kuti and Jérôme Sandlarz</i>	
Producing Fela's Album Jackets	51
<i>Ghariokwu Lemi</i>	
Fela and the Black President Film: A Diary	55
<i>John Collins</i>	
Dis Fela Sef!—Fela in Lagos	78
<i>dele jegede</i>	
Thinking Africa: Afrobeat Aesthetic and the Dancing Queens	103
<i>Vivien Goldman</i>	
Fela, Women, Wives	111
<i>LaRay Denzer</i>	
School Days in Lagos—Fela, Lady, and “Acada” Girls	135
<i>Nkiru Nzegwu</i>	

Interview	149
<i>Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and Barney Hoskyns</i>	
On Whose Side are the <i>Orisa</i> (gods)?	157
<i>Sola Olorunyomi</i>	
<i>Roforofo Fight: Fela's Resistance of Domination</i>	172
<i>Yomi Durotoye</i>	
<i>Fela Timeline</i>	197
<i>Map of Nigeria</i>	203
<i>Index</i>	205

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On Whose Side are the Orisa (Gods)?



Sola Olorunyomi

The Afrobeat Is Born

 Fela Kuti's Afrobeat is culture and politics aesthetically realized in music. The performance is characterized by the creation of a liberal cultural space that allows for free discourse about society's fears, doubts, and inhibitions, be they governance, sex or the general feelings of restive youth.

Afrobeat is not simply a musical rhythm but a rhythm of social dissent achieved in song and lyric and also in cultural and political action. This powerful dual rhythm incorporates the diverse ideology of Fela's Kalakuta Republic commune and the creative excess of the Afrika Shrine nightspot. In these enclaves, Fela tried to live out some of his dreams—as far as national political authorities would tolerate them. These musical dreams were for him channels of communication as well as ways of creating distance from the homogenizing order of society.

Questioning Authority

The times when Fela contested hegemonic laws were diverse and not often obvious. By "law," I am referring to normative discursive practices

in general—and institutions that support them. This precarious terrain was Fela's turf. Fela's imagined universe, of which Africa was the epicenter, takes off from an idyllic renaissance Africa with a scribal culture. He makes this centered vision manifest in convention-fighting lyrics. Fela somewhat displaced the colonial African story and put in its place a grand, Africanist narrative that romanticized the continent's pre-colonial experience. Fela fought the law, but his regular battleground had less distinct boundaries and rules—his struggle became living outside and beyond the norm. So Fela started a communal residence and named it the "Kalakuta Republic." As was to be expected, he met with opposition. The Nigerian state and its related elite saw Fela's symbolic actions as representing a dangerous degree of freedom.

The concept of a society of equal citizens, with equal access, even in its most cynical bourgeois sense, was disconcerting to the Nigerian state. When Fela brought his Afrobeat worship to the Afrika Shrine with a de-centered and dynamic liturgy, the state characteristically read mischief in his motive. Rather than the selective acquiescence of "The will of Allah" or the pacifism of "Turning the other cheek," the chief priest of worship (Fela) is riled in anger, as spokesperson of Africa's ancestors who have asked him to denounce the treachery of the post-independence elite.

Fela's actions were certainly controversial. By appearing in his underwear, though only within his residence,¹ and daring to suggest and remind one of the ordinariness of life, in a society where excessive clothing—and especially military histrionics—served the semiotics of power, he seemed to have been marked for extinction by the state. It became his career to defend his daring ways. He also smoked marijuana and encouraged society to acknowledge it as a medicinal Nigerian Natural Grass (NNG), and not Indian hemp. He thereby confounded the state's counsels, who, on checking their statute books, could not find any trace of such a phrase—Nigerian Natural Grass! This must be a queer one, they thought, an enigma, a corrupter of youth—such was the consensus among authorities.

Fela at the Shrine

I have consciously used the term "performance" in this essay because it captures an all-inclusive framework within which Fela's music is only a part, albeit a significant one, beside other instances of "stepping out of the



self," so to speak, through the nuances of the subtexts of dance, mime, gesture, costume and mask display—all of which add profound meaning and perspective to his song texts.

The central concern here is how Fela transposes earlier forms of aesthetic experience, and in what ways such transformations express a ruptured cultural continuum from folk aesthetic to popular aesthetic practices of urban, industrial life. If ritual, for instance, is steeped in improvisation, how do we recognize the ritual continuum when reconstituted in Fela's performance? An avant-garde mask performance is obliged to reenact, as Fela continually demonstrates, at least some aspects of its constitutive form.

My immediate suspicion is that Fela's performance is in part a derivative of masking forms, including the less sacred strand of *efe-gelede* performance traditions of the Egbado people.³ Although a *gelede* masker, as suggested by Babatunde Lawal, is not a spirit medium like the *egungun*, the *gelede* obviously has a generic relationship with the latter in the general sense of influence. It is this connection that Fela seems to show without suggesting that spiritism is *gelede's* essential character. Besides, with Fela, the *efe-gelede* aesthetic is merely an appropriated form, for indeed he deconstructs the *gelede* "aspiration for social order" by blessing reversal behavior in the context of an alternative cultural practice.³ In other words, the ritualistic and traditional notes of Fela's performances may be shrouded in masks and grandeur, but a fundamental spirit and folklore is nonetheless present. Fela's performance may seem a departure from the norm, but the derivations and inspirations from earlier forms are undeniably felt.

The process of deriving meaning from the mask is such that once the mask has been brought to the fore as the primary genre, as Harry Garuba notes, "a dramatic genre can then be constructed from its code."⁴ Garuba suggests that the mask in this sense serves as a crucial conceptual metaphor of African and black drama. The scenario captured below does not relate to Fela's outdoor performance; rather, the aesthetic pronouncements are most evident during his "Divination Night" and "Comprehensive Night" Saturday shows on Pepple Street. Fela's reenactment of ritual through song and drama is not an attempt to faithfully recapture those idioms in their pristine states; in Fela's treatment, they have been revised and transformed into modes of countercultural expressions of urban life.



Willy-nilly, they have been intercepted with the unavoidable playfulness that is associated with every instance of improvisation of ritual.

The active incorporation of an indigenous form of worship in Fela's performance predates the 1977 burning of his Kalakuta residence, along with his Afrika Shrine, both located at the Empire Hotel, off Agege Motor Road, in a suburb of Lagos. However, it wasn't until the Shrine moved to Pepple Street that a grandiose elaboration of the worship form for contesting normative religious practices took root.

Livid with anger at one of my questions in a 1992 interview, Fela responded that the Shrine was valid in spite of its peculiar countercultural circumstances and that all the basic elements of a worship experience were relived during his Divination Night:

Don't African mothers expose their bodies in the shrine when they wear small dress? Even you see their *oyan* (breasts) at the shrine? So, you don't know? Don't they have music at these shrines? Don't they also have music in their churches? [That] when you have ritual dance . . . ladies dance semi-nude? I say in our traditional shrines, don't they have naked ladies dancing? Don't you know about it? That in Africa, they dance bare-breasted at shrines? Sometimes self, the woman go completely naked? Oh, that is why I say you university people bore me.⁵

Myths and Rituals

This deviant worship style is one typical of the decade between 1987 and 1997. Formal ritual became a recreation of myth. Margaret Drewal captured this dynamism when she delineated a broad spectrum of ways in which improvisation can transform ritual through "psychic transformations or, of esoteric verses turned into narratives, spontaneous interpretations, recontextualization, drumming, dancing, chanting, parody, ruses, reconstitution of conventions and individual interventions into the ritual event."⁶ In the context of Yoruba rituals, for example, the basis for this self-renewal and reconstruction is built into the internal character of ritual's epistemology. This partly explains the survival of the Yoruba Orisa worship in the New World long after the Middle Passage. Besides, Orisa worship is not a body of necessarily coherent, uniform, and orthodox doctrine embedded as cultural practices; this flexibility informs the dictum of



ritual that says “Baa ri adan aa f’obe s’ebo”—implying that if we cannot get a bat for sacrifice, we could as well be content with using a similar bird. Taking a continental overview, Martin Chanock has argued persuasively that “religious practices have nowhere been permanent, uniform and unchanging and both they and the doctrines produced through practice have constantly been in flux.”⁷

In other words, attempts at representing one orthodoxy, both on its merit and above other competing forms, may be no more than an effort to impute a false sense of coherence and truth of a particular creed. A number of aphorisms in Yoruba culture further lend weight to this attitude, besides showing the essential self-deconstruction of the cultural practice. For a culture whose sense of hierarchy emphasizes age difference, the creation of Ile-Ife, its spiritual headquarters, is rendered thus:

Ogbo o pin si *bi kan
Omode gbon agba gbon l’aafi da Ile-Ife

*Knowledge is limitless
Ile-Ife is founded on the wisdom of the young and the elderly.*

In an explicit acknowledgment of the vicissitudes of life and the unstable character of casual “truth,” even the babalawo re-echoes the tradition by affirming that:

Bi oni tiri
Ola le ma ribe
Lo mu Babalawo d’Ifa Ororun

*As things are today
They may not be the same by tomorrow
This explains why the Babalawo consults the Ifa oracle every week.⁸*

And these are by no means occasional or chance remarks, for there are innumerable instances of other contexts, be they of gender or general power relations, in which the power of language to posit an alternative outlook is brought to the fore. In the ritual paraphernalia at the Shrine, the statuettes and other iconic representations of Yoruba mythological divinities and deities include Esu, trickster and divine interpreter; Sango, god of



thunder and progenitor of the egungun masquerade performance; Ogun, god of metallurgy and creativity and patron of the blacksmith; and Orisa Ibeji, a symbol of fertility and of twins. Also adorning the worship cubicle are portraits of black figures including Malcolm X, Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. There is also the Asante stool, a symbol from the Asante of Ghana. There are earthen mounds containing honey, a palm oil-soaked wick and cowry shells. Some kola nuts are placed in a covered calabash, while a keg of palm wine and three bottles of Gordon's Gin are tucked in a corner. A sacrificial fowl in the cubicle watches with distrust. The accompanying musical instruments, mainly percussion, for divination rites are the metal gong, occasionally interchanged with sticks, the bass drum and its set with cymbals. The cubicle is lighted with red, blue and green bulbs.

Rhythm, Trance and Sacrifice

Worship commences with the lighting of the wick by an acolyte; simultaneously, the ritual rhythm starts with an interlocking clanging of the metal gong and sticks. Then the bass drum and cymbals are unleashed in an upbeat and fast pace. For a while it is repetitive, with the metal gong defining the time, but suddenly takes a faster pace, reaching its crescendo just about the same time the rising smoke from the burning wick gets to a peak. At that moment, Fela emerges with a few votaries all masked with white powder on their faces. Like the other worshippers, he is not wearing any top.

The repetitive rhythm is maintained in the background with occasional sharp and intruding antiphonal trap-drum beats. Fela leads his fellow worshippers to the cubicle. He assumes a crouching position, picks up some cowry shells and lobes of kola nut, throws them on a tray, and begins to observe intently. His brows betray different moods, from anxiety and perplexity to elation and satisfaction. He takes a bite of the kola nut and dips his left hand into the honey mound for a taste. Some Gordon's Gin is sprinkled on the floor for deity appeasement, after which he empties the contents of the bottle in the four lit lamps. Infused with methanol, the flame rises, bathing the Chief Priest from torso up, but he does not move.

He grabs the fowl and rips it at the neck with bare hands. He stands up gradually with the fowl, raises it slightly above his head and opens his mouth to start sucking the dripping blood. His body is covered with



sweat; his eyes, thunder-shot, are glittering; his teeth, blood-red, are grating. He merely glares into space, momentarily suspended in the middle of nowhere. He is seemingly attempting to move but somehow restrained by what the rest of us cannot see. His biceps are enlarged in this mimetic struggle to break off; his head gradually drops to the right and he starts to chant or mumble, but it is still incomprehensible.

With unsteady steps, he moves to the right of the cubicle and picks up a shredded canvas that has been soaked in water. Gripping it with two hands, he swirls it round, moving backwards some seven steps but with head thrust forward and eyes intent on the deities. He repeats this motion and then replaces the canvas. He finally pours some palm wine into a calabash and takes a sip, after which he gradually seems to gain consciousness of his immediate surroundings.

The remaining content and an extra calabash are handed over to the libation assistant, who receives the content in a diagonal cross-hand stretch, takes a sip and then goes upstage with the two calabashes of palm wine to "feed" the remaining members of the band. Back on stage, Fela is handed a nine-centimeter joint of marijuana. He takes a long drag, as if it is some oxygen survival dose. He emits the smoke in one cloud-cluster and his head momentarily disappears into it. He emerges to start prophesying: his aura is of one who has just returned from a distant journey. Is this worship or performance; is this ritual or play?

Questions such as the ones posed above on the dramatic experience have indeed preoccupied the attention of earlier critics like Ossie Enekwe, who suggests that:

Function determines the nature of drama in every culture. In fifth century B.C. Greece, for instance, poetry was central to drama because for the Greeks it was the most desirable and perfect art form. In Asia and Africa, on the other hand, mime and music are of the essence in the theatre. While the mainstream European theatre is syllogistic in form, the Asian and African theatres are ritualistic. In Greek tragedy where moral rhetoric is emphasized, the moral order must be reflected by the order of events—"the right of the story."⁹

Enekwe goes a step further to suggest that, "A ritual can become entertainment once it is outside its original context or when the belief that sustains it has lost its potency."¹⁰ Posing the question of the character



of Fela's performance as an either-or situation amounts to creating an artificial dichotomy, one that can only yield a binary mindset incapable of appreciating textual conflation. The validity and continuity of ritual need not be based always on its efficacy. Inherent in this practice is an internal mechanism for explaining ritual success or failure based on the twin factors of eternal hope and belief in a causal agency. There is always a "reason" or "cause" for a failed ritual, a burden that is invariably borne by a ritual scapegoat. This point can be illustrated with a 1996 ritual slippage at the Shrine. On that occasion, Fela reached out for a fowl, as he had always done, and severed its head, but there was hardly any blood dripping down. Confounded, the ritual assistant sent for another one, but the experience replayed itself in a similar fashion. This was the last occasion a fowl was sacrificed at the Shrine, but that was not all.

This event was considered ominous enough for Fela to further appease the warring deities shortly after Divination Night. Joined by fellow worshippers, they headed towards the crossroads between Pepple Street and the Ikeja intersection and according to Dare Jejeleko, an acolyte and resident of Kalakuta:

Fela come make etutu, chant some incantation, turn the chicken round and round above his head, and come flung am away. I think you understand? After this, he come start to walk towards the car to go home, but he no look back at the etutu.

Fela made a ritual propitiation, chanted some incantation, swirled the fowl over his head and flung it away. I hope you understand? After this, he walked toward the car without glancing backwards.¹¹

When I returned to Jejeleko shortly after Fela's death, he had an explanation for the slippage. He still did not think the event was merely accidental. Rather, for him, the event ought to have been apprehended as a ritual foreboding delivered by Africa's ancestors, who were warning the country, through Fela, of the final clampdown on the opposition by General Sanni Abacha's regime. When I called his attention to the fact that the regime had already jailed several opposition figures before the event, he simply went on to the second explanation—the fact that the event was also a signal from the ancestors to Fela to come home and rest. Concluding, he added:

!!!

You know sey Fela no fit just die like dat, the spirit must to show am for eyes korokoro. Dat is why when Fela just dey laugh and shake him head for stage, we no know say him don see idán for face . . . aaah Abami himself!

You know that Fela couldn't just have died without the spirits forewarning him. That was why Fela shook his head and smiled on stage, we didn't know that he was actually communicating with these spirits . . . aaah the unfathomable himself?

Beside Jejeleko, most Kalakuta residents also share this view and are quick to point out several instances where ritual's efficacy had assisted them to thwart unwholesome designs of state policy against their Republic. The event of the slippage did not stop the continuation of ritual worship at the Shrine; it continued, albeit in a modified and self-renewed form. This appears consistent with the manner in which religious groups attempt to contain new experiences. There is a similarity here with how the hippies of the early seventies explained away their inability to make the physical structure of the American White House collapse after weeks of levitation, or how the spiritual is substituted for the material by religious groups in order to resolve the experiential.

The moment of *ègùn* (trance possession) transforms the player in a ritual drama, who may take up features of the deity being celebrated. Even when the context of ritual is altered, residues of its origin may remain. This lingering is apparent among commuter drivers in Yoruba land, who, in an attempt to recreate the bacchanalian ambience of their patron deity, Ògun, drive *exuberantly* during the deity's festivals. I inquired from Baba Bogunbe, the babalawo in charge of Ifa Osemeji Shrine in Ibadan, if there was no safer way the drivers could conduct their celebration, and his reply was, "ewu Ogun ni wan wo"—"they have donned Ogun's toga": aspects of such carryover actively inform the ritual practice at the Afrika Shrine.

Time Warp

In analyzing the ritual process, it is essential to keep in mind that folk aesthetic form is what is being transformed into a multi-ethnic, multinational, urban context here—with its rippling changes in meaning and figural devices. A number of West African performance traditions foreground the practice just described. However, it is the *eŋe-gelede* practice of



the Egbdo-Yoruba that is most prevalent, serving, more or less, as its authorizing metaphor. *Efe* and *gelede* are intertwined. *Efe* is primarily a satirical form, and it is the high point of the *bolajo* season when the *gelede* masquerade makes an outing. According to Lawal, during the *gelede* performance, the *elefe* (humorist) prays for the collective well-being of the society and satirizes social misfits in the community. He "represents the collective voice of the people . . . and can even ridicule the *Oba* (king) of the town during his performance with no fear of reprisal."¹² Noting that it is more elaborate than *gelede*, Benedict Ibitokun further suggests that *efe* relates more to the liturgical and could, like *gelede*, emphasize the fustian, hilarious and grotesque.¹³ The term *efe* itself refers, first, to the mask; second, to the mask's songs, poems and actions; and third, to the entire concert.¹⁴ An additional contemporary usage of *efe* is to equate it with a joke. *Gelede*, on the other hand, is essentially a female mask primarily concerned with the ethics of guaranteeing social peace and order.

Participants in a ritual, in the words of Edmund Leach, share "communicative experiences through many different sensory channels simultaneously . . . verbal, musical, choreographic and visual-aesthetic 'dimensions' are all likely to form components of the total message."¹⁵ This experience is particularly true of the *efe-gelede* event, as well as of the carnivalesque atmosphere of the Afrika Shrine. Apart from the songs, which were always pouring forth as a background refrain in an *efe* performance, a visual countenance is added to the carnival with the display of the mask. The *akunbe* or *amuti* plays the painter, and *arugi* (wood carrier) refers to the masker. The *efe* is also a site for a ribald encounter, where what in normal day-to-day expression would be considered obscene is allowed free play. The *efe* of Ilaro, according to Lawal, when paying homage to *Fèsù*, a divine messenger, describes the latter as "the one with the big penis and big scrotum." At other times it tells allegorical stories. As with all Yoruba masks, it gives preeminence to the "mothers," a term not quite captured by the English "witch."

Either in their traditional context or in Fela's reinterpretation of this tradition, ritual symbols are deeply embedded in cultural knowledge. Going through the ritual motions of the Afrika Shrine just described, it would be noticed that the impact of the repetitive clanging here, as in many traditional forms of worship, is largely invocative—a device by which elements of the ethereal world are invited into ritual proceedings. As in many other religious experiences, this sort of repeti-



tiveness momentarily numbs a ritual agent and prepares him or her for trance possession.

A Divination Night performance exhibits several dimensions of time. Time present, past and future enter into dialogue and compete for attention. This is evident in the display of ancestral masks, which trigger this dialogue with the past, and graffiti, which compel one to acknowledge the present. Through their simultaneous evocation of several dimensions of time—realized in the frozen narratives of these figural sculptures of condensed myths, current discourses and a power to predict—the masks suggest a multimedia event. Even in their supposed inert state, they create a visual discourse and an aural testimony through their acolyte to uncover their concealed messages. Of these qualities of the mask, Harry Garuba notes:

The mask play itself often exercises an anarchic force upon our perceptions, breaking down our compartmentalizing categories by being able to move uninhibited between reality and ritual, the referential and the semiotic.¹⁶

This practice finds eloquent affirmation particularly in the West African theatrical tradition, an aspect of which has found its way into the black diaspora. At the literary level, an aesthetic continuum has been demonstrated by Garuba through Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, and Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*.¹⁷ Time-space is "fused" and "expanded" quite dramatically in these works. Garuba further notes that their staging eschews the linear, Aristotelian, unified plot structure based on causality. Space-time is ruptured, as we find in Soyinka's *A Dance*, whose world alternates between a world of the living and the dead. Characters in Walcott's *Dream* step out of socially acknowledged realities into the supersensible world; in this sense, they affirm the validity of a cultural continuum.

The structure of performance at the Afrika Shrine also exhibits a unique time-space with different, progressive segments such as dance (actual and virtual) time and ritual (virtual and actual) time. Divination Night can hardly adhere to a set time, also because of the improvisational character of performance. Divination Night does not quite have a beginning, middle or an end in the strict sense. The night's performance "starts" with an intermission, and "starts" again with Fela's first number, then there is



the ritual interlude after which Fela talks about “starting” the show properly. Yet, after the finale, Fela talks about having a “short break,” which suggests that the day’s performance is concluded, while also affirming the continuity of the musical form.

The ritual paraphernalia and cosmic players represented at the Afrika Shrine denote a specific layer of ritual participation in a mode similar to Ifa divination practice. However, in spite of its attempt to achieve determinacy through numerical combinations (an explanatory penchant also noted of the Pythagoreans of ancient Greece) the Ifa corpus exhibits an interesting ambivalence: its determinacy is unstable. Ifa’s narrative verses contain suggestions of textual instability and plurality of meaning, a factor that has tremendously aided its process of reconstitution without losing relevance over the period. It is precisely this potential that Fela seized upon to redirect the energies of the gods, dragging them in to do his battles and the battles of other victims of dominant powers, which are found in his diverse narrative texts. This phenomenon of man “making” and reconstructing God is prevalent in West Africa; Karin Barber notes this attitude of the Yoruba toward their Orisa:

Relations between humans and Orisa are in some sense a projection of relations between people in society . . . if the Yoruba see the Orisa’s power as being maintained and augmented by human attention, this is because they live in a kind of society where it is very clear that the human individual’s power depends in the long run on the attention and acknowledgment of his fellow man.¹⁸

Fela’s ritual assemblage obviously falls short of a *babalawo*’s repertoire (a *babalawo* is not just a diviner but also an oracular priest of Ifa, the primeval diviner), but approximates to other lower rungs of divination practices, such as those of the Onisekun and the Adahunse. But Fela did not set out in the first place to faithfully recreate any such structure; it was just sufficient if his practice testified to an alternative outlook in a society where both the colonial and post-independence elite denigrated indigenous worship forms. He was only too content if his practice achieved, or at least encouraged, an opposing discourse.

Absent from this unorthodox worship are the Ifa sacred nuts (*ikin Ifa*) and a staff for tapping the divination tray (*iroke*), two important items for a



babalawo. The four divinities chosen by Fela for this countercultural worship are of both aesthetic and ideological significance. Esu, for instance, is a preeminent player in Yoruba cosmic drama, particularly because while others are invoked, it is appeased. While the other divinities are not essential to every divination, Esu is—which explains why it is first appeased (as Fela also does) before proceeding with a ritual event. This also stems from the fact that Esu is a potential spanner in the works. Aside from its legendary tricky, multivocal and polysemic attributes, Esu is also the keeper of *ase*—utterance-efficacy—which is to say that which enables what is appeased or invoked to come to pass.

While the palm wine in the two calabashes that Fela hands over to other votaries may symbolize the bacchanalian diet of Ogun, the diagonal cross-formation in handing them over has greater bearing to Esu, whose favorite abode is the crossroads. One of his verses of praise testifies to this: *Esu onilé orita*; that is, “Esu of the crossroads.” What better setting to commit mischief by the legendary trickster! Nicholas Ajimele, a band member and one of the libation bearers, explained that the diagonal cross-hand stretch was also meant to denote the crossroads, as the point where ritual offerings are placed and expected to be dispersed in order to be efficacious.

The Shrine Alive

During rituals, Fela performed with and interpreted the dialogues of characters in the ritual text in a manner that is similar to Esu’s capacity for role conflation. These are roles that cast him as both performer and critic in the mould of the traditional *griot*.

By calling his performance venue a Shrine, Fela obviously intended it to be more than a nightclub; he anticipated it as a place of communal celebration and worship. Hence he prophesied, which according to George Thompson (1975), is a development of trance possession. Drewal suggests that chanting and drumming performed prior to the onset of possession-trance invoke the deity, bringing him into contact with the priest. The priest becomes possessed and starts to pronounce the will of the gods.¹⁹ The voice of the god(s) that we get to hear at the Afrika Shrine is a class-conscious one, and one that is unapologetic in its partisanship on behalf of marginalized classes, oppressed nationalities and even the aesthetic subculture.



The white (traditional chalk) powder face-masking of some band members and acolytes at the beginning of the worship relates to the symbol of man conquering death in Yoruba ritual drama,²⁰ while Fela's communion with the past is a sort of ritual device to affirm presence with the ancestors, deemed to be capable of intervening in the affairs of humans. This also somewhat complements Fela's last names—Anikulapo-Kuti, which mean "I have got death in my pouch," and "the one who never dies," respectively, cultural signifiers that refer to this same concept of continuity. For the Yoruba, it is not simply an ideational category. By associating his dance with a mode of worship, he plays *medium*; by intervening in dialogue with characters of the supernatural world, he plays *medium spirit*; but above all, he personifies *message ultra vires*, by virtue of transmitting to his audience his ritual journeys and encounters with the extraterrestrial.

Yet his ritual experience is also of an aesthetic value, in the sense that a central conception of traditional ritual is the possibility of using aesthetics to neutralize evil. No doubt, the dramatic canvas of the Afrika Shrine is wide and its figural devices deep.

In relation to ancestors, a gradual process of semiotic "overcoding" of Kwame Nkrumah began to take place, both at the Afrika Shrine and in Fela's lyrics, as Nkrumah came to be presented and identified as the most notable figure of all the other contemporary ancestors. What followed was his deification as a symbol of Africa's anticipated alternative. This is precisely what Soyinka does with the deity—Ogun—in his works by making him straddle the mythosphere like a colossus, so that Ogun begins to appear like the representative of the other deities. It is in this dual sense that the Shrine is home to both visible and invisible *dramatis personae*. But whatever form the cultural code of performance and composition might take, Fela's abiding aspiration was always to narrate and put the deities in the service of society's underdogs.

NOTES

1. He neither appeared this way in public nor on stage while performing, as is occasionally suggested in the popular media.
2. *Efe* (the name for both a mask and its accompanying performances and rituals, meaning "the joker") is the Yoruba satirical form which can be realized in informal situations as well as in more elaborate formal performance contexts; in the Egbado community, its formal agency is the all-female



- gelede* mask (primarily dedicated to the maternal principle in nature personified as *Iya Nla*, the Great Mother, aimed at promoting peace and social harmony). The *efe-gelede* ceremony is similar to the Egungun masquerade, but unlike the Egungun, it is not considered a spirit-being-on-earth.
3. This clarification is made by Babatunde Lawal in *The Gelede Spectacle: Art, Gender and Social Harmony in an African Culture* (London and Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), p. 271.
 4. Harry Garuba's "Mask and Meaning in Black Drama: Africa and the Diaspora" (Ph.D. thesis in the English Department of the University of Ibadan, April 8, 1988).
 5. This interview took place December 5, 1991, at Fela's No. 7 Gbemisola Street residence.
 6. Margaret Drewal in *Yorùbá Ritual: Play, Performance, Agency* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 27.
 7. See Martin Chanock's paper, "Justice and Rights in Context," delivered at the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, under the theme of "Cultural Transformations in Africa: Legal, Religious and Human Rights Issues," March 11-13, 1997, p. 5.
 8. The Yoruba have a five-day week.
 9. Ossie Enekwe, "Myth, Ritual and Drama in Igboland," in Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed., *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine Special Publication, 1981), p. 152.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
 11. Mr. Dare Jejeleko narrating the experience.
 12. Lawal, p. 83.
 13. B. M. Ibitokun's *Dance as Ritual Drama and Entertainment in the Gelede of the Ketu-Africa Yorùbá Sub-Group in West Africa* (Ile-Ife: OAU Press, 1993), pp. 20-21.
 14. Lawal, p. 113.
 15. See Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 41.
 16. Garuba, p. 207.
 17. *Ibid.*
 18. This is the overall tone of Karin Barber's "How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yorùbá Attitudes Towards the Orisa," in Roy Richard Grinker and Christopher B. Steiner, eds., *Perspective on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History and Representation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).
 19. See George Thompson's "Anatomy of Poetry" in David Craig, ed., *Marxists on Literature: An Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 73-74. See also Margaret Drewal, pp. 182-84.
 20. This is how members of the Egypt '80 Band interpret this device; a confirmation was also made by Pa Bogunbe of the Ifa Ose Meji Shrine in Ibadan.

