

GLENDORA

Vol. 3 No. 2

AFRICAN QUARTERLY ON THE ARTS

review

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LAGOS

**A City is Like a Poem
The House Indifference Built
Theater in the Throes of Panic
Visual Culture in Lagos**



GLENDORA

AFRICAN QUARTERLY ON THE ARTS
review

Vol. 3 No. 2 2001

Editorial Director
Chaharlie Tejuos

Guest Editor
dele Jegede

Editors
Akin Adesokan
Sola Okunribido

Managing Editor
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Copy Editor
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Word Processing
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Wale Lagunju

Marketing/Advertising Director
Felix Abomiji

World wide web address:
<http://www.glendora-arts.com>

Web maintenance:
Net-on Systems, Lagos.

Glendora Review (ISSN 1118-146X) is published quarterly by Glendora International (Nigeria) Limited. Tel: Fax: Lagos 2692762 e-mail: 1052711@compuserve.com

CORRESPONDENCE

Africa

Glendora Review, 168, Awolowo Road, P. O. Box 50914, Soy, Lagos, Nigeria. Tel: 01 2692762

INTERNATIONAL

Glendora Review 16, Okafay Road, London E15 4BA, UK

DISTRIBUTION

North America: B. De Boer, 112 East Central st, Nutley, NJ 07110

Africa-Europe: Contact Toyin Tejuos, Glendora, P. O. Box 50914, Falmio, Lagos, Nigeria. Phone: 2692762 Fax: 2618909

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH: Fatai Rolling Dollar © Uche Irona
CONTENT PAGE ILLUSTRATION: Ghanokwu, Lem

Printed by: Rainbow Cards Ltd.

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Indifference
Built

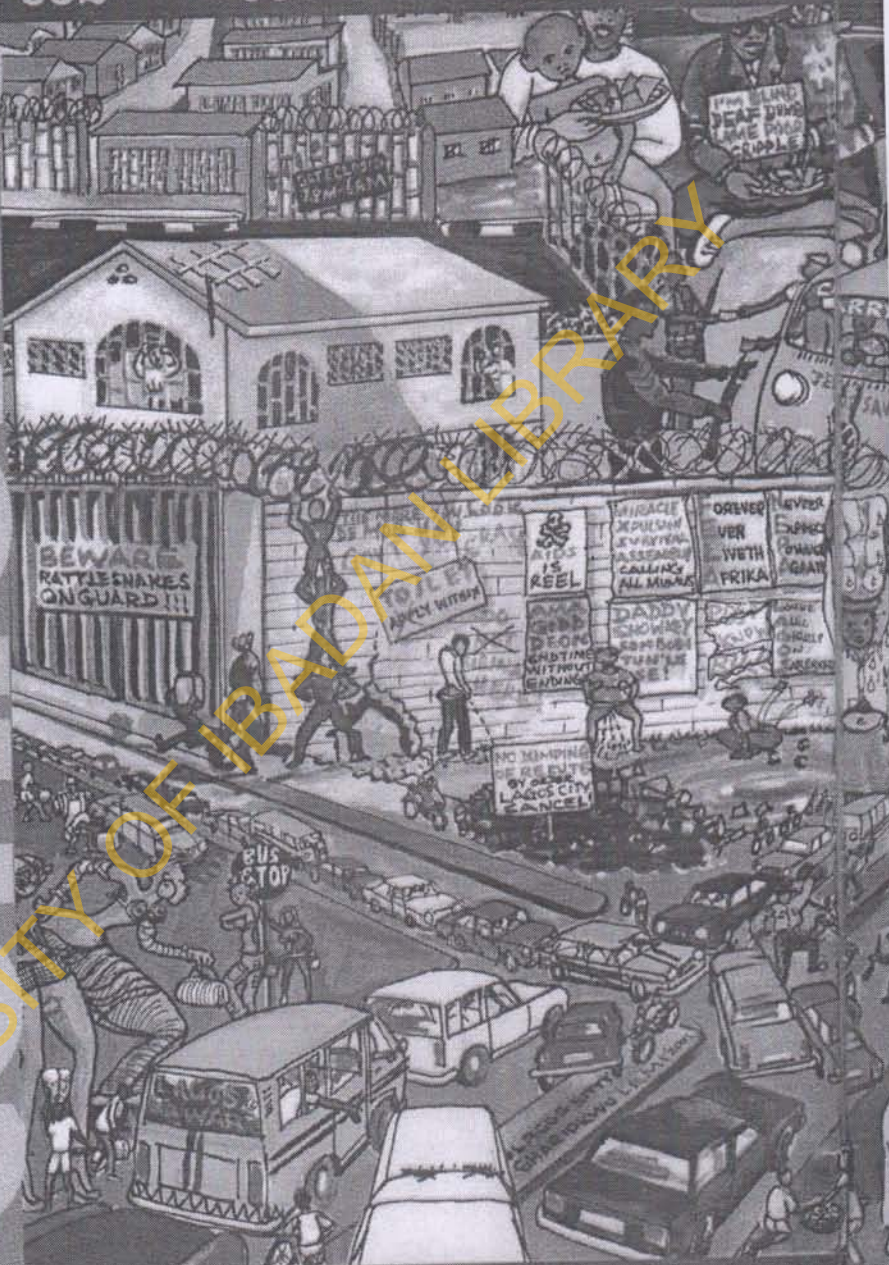
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Saturday night at the minstrel's

An overcast of cannabis

Another TOWNSHIP The night starts at the paraga joint.

TONI

Sola Olorunyomi

PA-RA-GA —three-syllable, nonsense word attempting to capture the tricky, triple pitch pattern — and cadence of its host community is where the lowliest of inhabitants of this boisterous city by the lagoon commence the night's revelry. The matron of the paraga joint is a fetish of sorts, recalling such incredulously distant names of returnee clients and customers to her liquor-clinic of instant cure. Her recipes—of a myriad herbal leaves soaked in spirit—promise a cure of illnesses as varied as asthma, bronchitis, pile, dysentery, fever, toothache, repressed libido, and low sperm count, just among others. The paraga joint is also host of the rumor mill, home of random knowledge, and

spurious experts. And, sure too, a leveler.

The night is long, and the road unsure; so, fellow writer, Akin Adeoya momentarily turns *tour guide* on this sixth week of my attempt to decipher Lagos's hidden musical night. The suspect herbal brew is taking its toll but, we manage to back out of Iwaya, a suburb of Yaba in Lagos. Our destination is the nearest *agidigbo* venue for a feel of traditional music, but none seemed to be in sight tonight. We'd hoped to observe local favorites like "Agbojimo" and "Opa-Ise." "Fuji will suffice," Akin reasons, and we make a detour to Yaba's main high streets, off Herbert Macaulay where two rival bands are already swooning far into the night. The audience seems unperturbed by the drizzle suddenly turned shower.

Relatively unknown, these bands are making tremendous effort to act scion to the established patrons of the *fuji* form: Sikiru Ayinde Barrister and Ayinla Kollington. The Lagos *fuji* is no doubt a distant cry from its religious origins. Then were (pronounced way-ray), some medley of the after-fast-hour jam sessions of Islamic youths, you could spend some

Rhythm-driven, and highly percussive, the fuji artsite's sense of approximating to Lagos's modernity is best seen in the transformation of the instrumental repertoire

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time listening to narratives of the Quran interlaced with moral foreboding. But that was a while ago, long before the era of the black gold. The oil boom changed all that. And with the emergence of patrons desirous of self-acknowledgement, with a fee to back it up, were's slide into secularity was assured. *Fuji* is its immediate offspring. Yet, *fuji* is highly indebted to a variety of earlier musical forms such as *apala*, *sakara* and even *waka*, of which their most known proponents are Yusuf Olatunji, Haruna Ishola, Ayinla Omowura and the earlier Salawa Abeni.

Rhythm-driven, and highly percussive, the *fuji* artsite's sense of approximating to Lagos's modernity is best seen in the transformation of the instrumental repertoire. The skin drum remains a dominant feature of the *fuji* band. Generally minimalist in its assortment, a little more investment in claves, maracas, the bell gong and slicks had sufficed. But the Lagos fan is highly discriminatory, short-tempered, with, just as well, a short attention span. The crest and trough of the city leaves him constantly anticipating the groove of the weekend. And the least he would take is a staid form, an expectation that has invariably turned the *fuji* artiste into a sweat merchant. Experimentation—and more experimentation—remains his

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* British Akabe came before Salawa Abeni

* Kasunn Adio came before Haruna Ishola.

only means of retaining relevance.

The *fuji* artiste has responded to this by gradually increasing and diversifying his range of instruments. The assured membranophone is suddenly yielding space to wind instruments and, though tentatively, the keyboard. But not just that; its compositional style has been substantially tinkered with in order to amalgamate other musical forms and sensibilities. Traditionally, the *fuji* artiste intuitively references the oral performer and his mode of narration. The reason would seem clear enough; both performer and style are fused in this tradition, thereby making the oral narrative *fuji*'s premier imaginative space. Hence, *fuji*'s internal structure, tenor and mood ingests this broad range of options from such forms as *oriki* (praise poetry), *ogede* (incantatory poetry) and *itan* (narrative).

Although, like juju music too, *fuji* "portrays a traditional hierarchy mitigated by the generosity of the wealthy," the patron worthy of praise poetry is however not just the politician and the wealthy. Neither is it simply the nouveau-riche. Beneficiaries of *fuji*'s praise poetry also include the neighborhood gang leader. Quite often, his underworld heroism is acknowledged, at least, as an appeasement to a subcultural deity who must ensure that the gig goes undisrupted. Which is precisely why the two performers tonight are attempting to out-compete each other. Yet, the language of gang adoration is far from being obvious. It is a coded transcript. The non-initiate like myself had only apprehended what seemed like mere sexual allusions as the band leader bles out: "hang it on", "press it hard", "stick it in", "yes, just stick to that and resistance can only be minimal". But otherwise? "Explode!" Akin, also reporter of the risqué, whispers to the effect that those are praises to the *alaye* (literally, owners of the earth). I soon discover that the earlier allusions had more to do with the contrasting situations of use of firearms by the gang.

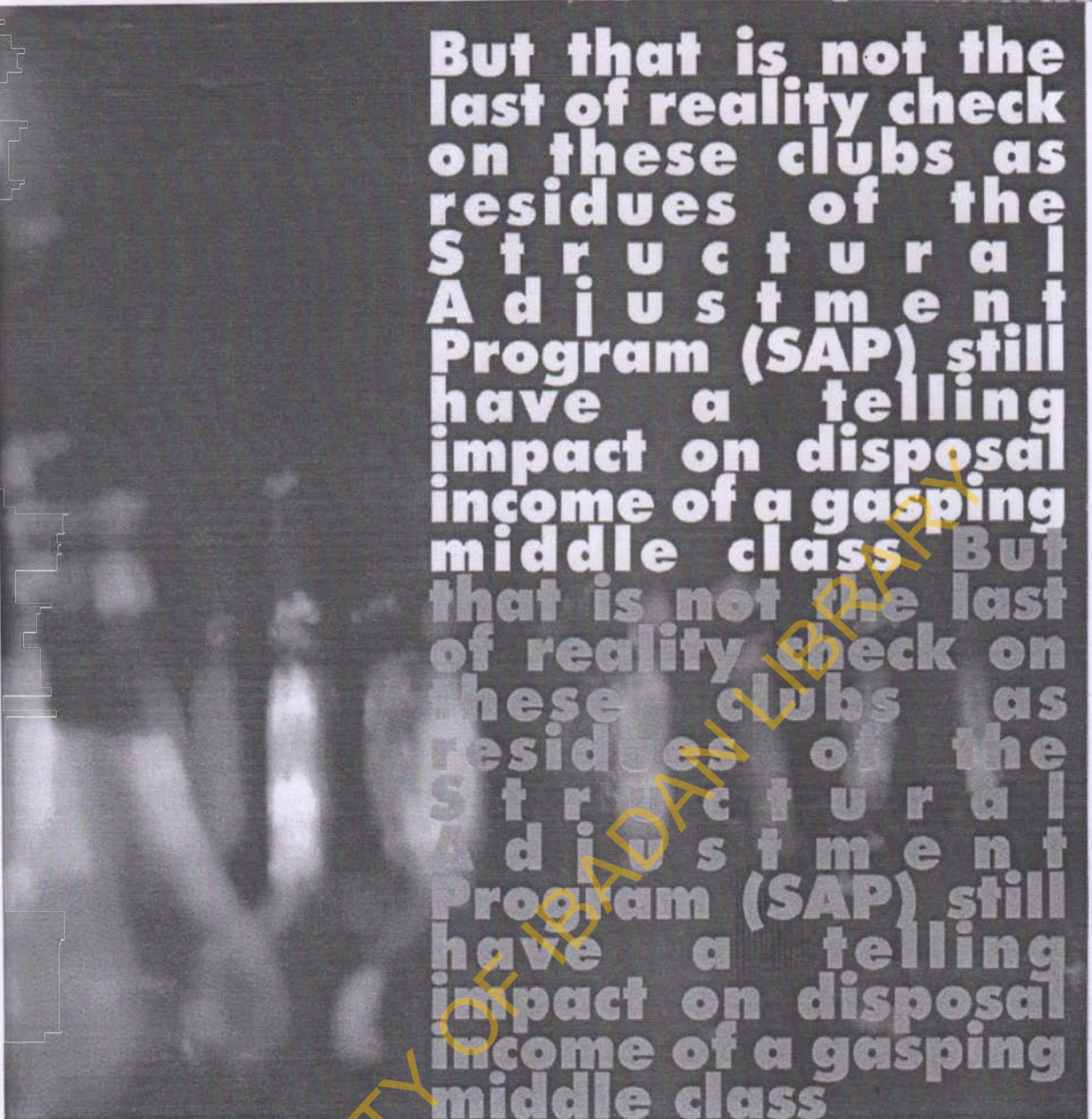
Fuji's essential syncretism admits of man, mammon, and God. Eager to expand his income space, the *fuji* artiste anticipates these disparate concerns and ensures that he fuses them all into his song. The artiste commences his performance with the traditional *ijuba* or homage, more often, these days, in Quranic references but too quickly veers into other acknowledgements, sometimes Christian in inspiration and at other times Orisa worship. He couples all this with sexual allegory and even social commentary. The *fuji* artiste remains the master of the fad. Nothing seems to escape his ubiquitous narrator. The latest gossip in the city—of some damsel who cheats on her date—finds accommodation in his composition, just as the nation's feat in the World Cup too. Beбето, the Brazilian football striker, becomes a synonym for restlessness, the *fuji* artiste having played a trick on the first syllable of his name in this game of playful distortion.

Fuji does not, however, exist in a vacuum. Both within and outside its shores, other musical forms are beginning to impact vigorously on it. The old masters like Ayinde Barrister and Kollington Ayinla have taken their bow since the last



© Kelechi Amadi-Obi.

decade and the stage is now set for the younger and obviously more experimental youths. KWAM 1 (Wasiu Ayinde) remains something like a link between the old and the new. Quite experimental too in his fusions, he nonetheless has contenders in the likes of Obesere (Abass Akande), Pasuma Wonder (Wasiu Alabi), and, to a lesser degree, Mr Johnson (Adewale Ayuba). Yet, in this dominantly Yoruba art form, there is Sonny T. from Nigeria's eastern parts. Four current albums by KWAM 1, Obesere, Pasuma, and Mr Johnson are undisputedly the most experimental in their individual efforts in contemporary fusion music. The two major influences are the African American rap tradition and *makossa* music, and this is most evident between KWAM 1's *Faze 3*, Obesere's *Overthrow*, Pasuma's *London Experience* and Mr Johnson's



But that is not the last of reality check on these clubs as residues of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) still have a telling impact on disposal income of a gasping middle class. But that is not the last of reality check on these clubs as residues of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) still have a telling impact on disposal income of a gasping middle class.

Turn Me On.

But then, I race ahead of my story. In a way, the demographic distribution of Lagos also impacts its music. Lagos remains an architectural nightmare. Divided by the Osa lagoon into the mainland and Island, the latter is further distinguished by another strip of island—the so-called highbrow Victoria Island but lately an elite slum intermittently ravaged by a rampaging Atlantic ocean. Indigenous islanders have a ready explanation: the gluttonous land-grabbing elite has in its unquenchable thirst for more displaced Olokun's shrine, thereby rendering the ocean bereft of its sanctuary of worship. The constant surge, therefore, is no more than a revanchist energy of the ocean god to protest man's meddlesomeness in nature's ways. Until the bulldozers

came calling a while ago, the coastline of Victoria Island was dotted by a medley of West African popular music kiosks, particularly at the Bar Beach end. Home to a multinational assemblage, the Bar Beach served diverse musical cultures ranging from soukous to highlife, afrobeat, juju, and the more contemporary makossa. Here also, as in the night clubs, is where the dance steps are practised out. Bands of youth race from the shore, grab their unfinished liquor and join the motley crowd in this quite frenzied motions. For a floorboard, they have the ocean's fine sand particles. Yet they attempt the latest slide recently espied on the South African *Channel O*. *Galala*, *fire dance*, *Wombolo*, and its most erotic variant, *wombolo viagra* become imperative poetry in motion.

They are not oblivious of the clubs down street, also on the same Victoria Island; only that the gates are worth their entire minimum wage. Never mind they are islanders too, but the island's downtown of Isale Eko. The musical and night culture of Victoria Island and Ikoyi, its twin island, can sometimes be quite similar in so far as night clubs are concerned. Ikoyi remains the saner part of the story of these islands, being home to some degree of the old industrial wealth and its bureaucratic elite. With your louvers down, on a random evening drive, you could eavesdrop on the notes of Mozart and Beethoven from the hedge fences, or even a thud on the grand piano. That means the old man is indoors brooding on a C Minor or a flat, but not the kids. He hasn't quite succeeded in culturally cloning his caste; and to find the blokes, you've got to go a little farther down the street.

Between the two islands you will find a boisterous night clubbing life. For sure there is *K's Place*, *The Dome*, *After Hours*, *Tavern*, *Club Tower* and the *Atlantic Bar*. The music in the past had attempted to replicate East London but locals can't afford an extended pretence, and so consumer pressure has finally won the day. Still quite a largely western pop environment, you can nonetheless be assured of some Latin infusion and Congolese music. But that is not the last of reality check on these clubs as residues of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) still have a telling impact on disposal income of a gasping middle class. The consequence of this is the new operational mode that tends to emphasize some measure of economy of scale. Now, at least since the last two years, admittance into some of these highbrows attract very little in the hope of being compensated by an exorbitant in-house sales.

Come to the mainland. "There is no Lagos without its mainland," was Akin's reassurance on one of our circuitous rounds. To sustain my interest, he had promised a rude encounter with a breathtaking stretch of musical options. But even here the mainland is distinguished, thanks to an ever-expanding city. The central part of the mainland includes Yaba, Surulere, Mushin, Anthony Village, Ikeja, Ilupeju, Palmgrove, Akoka; while the hinterland comprises the entire arc stretching eastwards just after Mile 2 and FESTAC through Egbeda and Akowonjo with the private developer's new layouts and their limited access roads.

Save for such exceptions like the Nite-Shift and Leos, whose charges could be as high as five hundred Naira, night clubs on the mainland are less expensive. But they all invariably attempt to break even through exorbitant house sales. This musical taste here is, however, less Western pop as it is the life band and more often than not, juju and or fuji music. This is where the ubiquitous Daddy Showkey and his rancorous reggae form can randomly pop up into your unsuspecting night.

After driving on red for half an hour, we ended up at Wilfred's 68 on Adeniran Ogunsanya Street. The night was far spent, yet the medley was in active swing. Dipo Gato's Juju Makossa was on stand and, for the better part of his

performance, was revisiting popular songs and compositions of other juju bands, now with an accentuated tempo or a repose to allow for commentary of an improvised raconteur. The intrigue at Wilfred's is its ability to attract a highly segregated clientele, the average age bracket being between forty and sixty-five. Here, the business executive, film and writer commingle with the bus conductor. You also h fellow musicians visiting and the defining moment tonight is the arrival of Dele Taiwo, an accomplished younger generation juju musician. He starts by jamming with the resident band but, after a while, effectively takes over the band and turns round the entire night.

It's a June night and, again, the heavens are threatening a shower even as Dele Taiwo transforms the dancing crowd into a frenzy. At once improvisatory and formulaic in his musical references, the penchant is to ensure that everyone is on the dancing floor. Now and again he is applauded but the performer in him is not done yet. To avoid any moment of boredom he resorts to the theatrical by mimicking the dance steps of other well-known artists. Wilfred's success story has invariably transformed the night life of Adeniran Ogunsanya Street and its after-hour informal economy. Fast-food kiosks adorn the entire surrounding, just as much as the invasion of the seedy merchants of flesh.

Ayilara Street was most famed in the flesh-hawking trade until the incessant raid of the police enforced a migration. But even Ogunsanya Street is a far cry from the pace of Cousin T, clearly a zone for the pop. At any time you can be assured of at least three out-door bands with an astonishing breadth of musical variety ranging from reggae to juju and jazz. Perhaps with the exception of Fela Anikulapo's Afrika Shrine, Cousin T remains the most visible enclave of the diverse West African nationalities. In a way, the club, for them, serves more than a venue. It is also the site of a weekly ritual where they kill boredom, banter, and update on the latest events back home. Trying to make a sense out of all this, we withdraw to the far end of this expansive space. But suddenly there is a skirmish on the main street. The clatter reverberates and there is a surge at the gate. We take a look and discover a police van driving off.

"Now and again this happens," here is my pal trying to reassure me as we resume our talk. He continues, "you see, this is what pisses me off; how are you going to get a healthy night life when law enforcement agents simply take advantage of their privilege?" Wearing from the night's incessant hopping, I am nodding absent-mindedly as he continues. "I hate half measures, the world is made of day and night." Waxing between the philosophic and the rhetorical, he proclaims, "the night should be EX-PLORED," emphasizing every syllable. Akin opens up the night life of Lagos and takes me through its tricky labyrinths. "Mushin can be a dangerous spot," and he wasn't referring to the occasional flashes between factions of the Oodua People's Congress, an avowed socio-cultural group trying to reposition the Yoruba for an autonomous republic. For Akin, the Mushin neighborhood, with its cultural retentions, is only a flip side

Almost invariably, the poet engaging the city with this sense of nostalgic becomes messianic. He aligns with the proletariat and champions his cause—which is precisely where the motif of proletariat-hero-as-victim in Fela's works derives. Almost invariably, the poet engaging the city with this sense of nostalgia becomes messianic. He aligns with the proletariat and champions his cause—which is precisely where the motif of

of Isale-Eko even though the latter is on the island's downtown. He quickly narrates events of gang battles and truce and the occasional invasion of the area by law enforcement agents. But the real threat is its entire architecture that turns every alley into a cul-de-sac, a factor that has led to the mauling of innocent bystanders and fleeing citizens during the many moments of Mushin's nights (and days too) of rage.

Now I am wondering what we might have lost by not seeing the agidigbo players. And so we return to the subject on our drive back home, but not until making another futile effort through Ijire and Yabo's hidden streets to locate one. "For the agidigbo clientele," Akin starts, "they are usually unsophisticated."

"Unsophisticated?"

"Well, let me revise myself," he avers. "You could also find a lot of educated types in this gathering, people working in establishments. Yes, sometimes it may be difficult to define their clientele depending on which agidigbo joint you attend."

Much so than the fuji band, the agidigbo's repertoire is small. Basically, the rhythm section is agidigbo-driven. The agidigbo is made of a wooden box-like contraption with a hollow resonator activated by between four and six metal keys. This is backed with drums, *sekere* (maracas), *agogo* (metal gong), and with the more modern bands, a guitar. The lead singer is basically a raconteur detailing social observations with his commentaries, throwing in a banter here and there. He is also full of rude jokes and sleazy lines. The agidigbo event can also be distinctly paradoxical, at once familiar and exclusivist. The familiarity of its themes derives from the rewriting of a common history known to its most regular clientele and its host community. In this sense, the agidigbo develops an interpretive community that can readily respond to its calls.

In more traditional times, the agidigbo player would

Tunde Kuboye © Segun Oshirekon

have fitted the role of the court poet. Its music is often woven around patron personalities. Its composition, quite often, is spontaneous. Add to this a sense of the farcical, and you would have captured the mood of the agidigbo. The lead singer takes a story line and keeps revising it and grafting the incidental to a basic formula. He takes a visitor to the show and turns him into a subject of the narration with slight modification, sometimes because the characterization needs to be altered. However, if you're desirous of meeting the old-time juju and traditional Yoruba musicians, you will need to visit the outskirts of Egbeda, Ikotun Egbe and the like. On the other hand, the more contemporary juju musicians like Wale Thompson, the new Paul Dairo, Dele Taiwo and Shina Peters can still be found in club houses within the metropolis and sometimes playing out-band. The outskirts remains the forte of the likes of Orlando Owoh, Emperor Peters and a host of the raves of the seventies and eighties. Perhaps, with the exception of a vigorous night club tradition, you will find all the other musical genres replicated in the Lagos outskirts.

Sometimes, though, the more experimental of the Lagos music environment gets less talked about. This is a zone peopled by the jazz highlife and afro traditions. Y.S. (Yinusa Akinbosu) of Fela's Egypt '80 band represents an important trend in this subgenre. Y.S.'s dexterity on the tenor saxophone and his capacity for syncopation continue to be the most singular attraction up till date. But more so for the media-shy Adeniji 'The Heavy Wind', who plays at BJs on Victoria Island. His six-track Ibadan album is replete with high percussive jazz with traditional resonance explicable only by a sensitivity to the direction of 'world music'. Kayode Olajide's "Art Café" playhouse in Ikeja's Oduduwa Crescent continues to be home to mainlanders of taste, and intruders—including members of the diplomatic corp—from the island. At other times, this tradition of music takes recourse only to the airwaves. A case in point is the multi-artist collection of Ede Gidi, and just as well produced by magic hand, Adegboyega Oyedele, who had also produced "The Heavy Wind" and Kayode Olajide with the Ikoyi culture house, Jazzhole. The social commitment of this genre's themes draws them closer to the Afrobeat tradition of Fela Anikulapo Kuti who, properly speaking, is the undisputed bard of Lagos.

Hostile City, Inhospitable Streets

The often veiled setting of Fela's lyrical space is urban West Africa, even when Lagos serves as a symbol for both the subregion and the entire African continent. The prevalent concerns of his lyrics are those often contrasting situations of power relations between the big Oga (boss) and the marginal, my people. In between these two extremes are to be found diverse modes of coping, of acquiescence or, on the other hand, of resistance with a large repertoire of subcultural linguistic codes. The vehicle for the transmission of his





Poets and other artists have always engaged the city once it emerged as a melting pot of various cultural topographies. The result is that a good number of literary city forms has emerged as a product of the human imagination: the heavenly city, the kingdom of the dead, the city of God, the city of man, the city of the plains attracting to itself presumably opposed images of the "sacred" and the "secular."



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alternative message was often indirect in the early stage but later became direct, quite akin to the discursive modes James Scott describes as the 'public' and 'hidden' transcripts. The 'public' transcript pertains to the nature of contesting power relations, which is resolved in favor of the status quo, while the 'hidden' transcript relates to forms of resistance to dominance in more subtle and oblique ways, which "insinuate a critique of power:" gesture, joke, humor, and parody.

Song lyrics that formed part of this early phase include *Monday Morning in Lagos*, *Water No Get Enemy*, *Alu Jon Jon Ki Jon*, and *When Trouble Sleep Yanga Wake Am* (better known by its chorus line, "Palava"), and the vehicle of the narrative transmission is undoubtedly in the hidden transcript. Numerous publications note the explosive rate at which the population of Lagos has grown within the last few decades—from less than 700,000 in the early sixties, for example, to nearly six million in the early nineties. The increasing crisis of urban growth, and especially the impact of rapid growth on children and youth who are exposed to the risk of street vending, is of concern to UNESCO. The emergence of the military class as political power brokers has only worsened the situation.

The centrality of Lagos in this scheme derives both from the fact of its developed working class and protest tradition

that dates back to late nineteenth century, and the fact of its being Fela's site of practice. Being home to early militants like Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Michael Imoudu and Mokwugo Okoye, from across the country, there could hardly be any more suitable setting for a political evangelical music such as Fela's. The Lagos of the seventies reflected the height of the oil boom opulence, and the decadence that was set in motion in the following decades by the mismanagement and ponderous bureaucratic style that the military institutionalized. Both government officials and members of the elite class displayed such conspicuous consumption (particularly between the regimes of General Yakubu Gowon, 1966-1975 and Alhaji Shehu Shagari, 1979-83) that Nigerians had hardly ever imagined prior to this time. Chauffeurs of government officials blew sirens past traffic hold-ups, ignored traffic lights when it ever worked. Convoys of government-owned Mercedes Benz cars sped past in utter violation of speed limit, as the business of strategic national planning was reduced to adhoc committees. And in one of such task force assignments, an army Colonel by the name Paul Tarfa became a household name and a scarecrow to erring drivers in Lagos. For months on end, along with his cohorts, he would wield horsewhips in the middle of traffic and whip the population silly, as a "means of resolving the perennial Lagos traffic problem."

Shortly after his residence was burnt, Fela released *Unknown Soldier*, and brought into focus this general injustice and the urban traffic situation. Maintaining an uncharacteristic distance of the third person narrator, the lyrics query the legitimacy of such military assault, asking:

Wetin dis Fela do?
Dis government e bad o
Fela talk about soldier
Wasting money for Festac
Fela talk about soldier
Flogging civilians for street

What has this Fela done?
This government is bad
Fela talks about the military government
Mismanaging funds for Festac
Fela talks about the military government
Flogging civilians in the street

Wetin dis Fela do?
What has this Fela done?

Dis government e bad o
This government is bad
Fela talk about soldier
Fela talks about the military government

Wasting money for Festac
Mismanaging funds for Festac

Fela talk about soldier
Fela talks about the military government

Flogging civilians for street
Flogging civilians in the street

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 emblematic of an elite that has lost initiative in shaping an enduring national perspective.

Motor dey come from east
Vehicles are coming from the east

Motor dey come from west
Vehicles are coming from the west

Motor dey come from north
Vehicles are coming from the north

Motor dey come from south
Vehicles are coming from the south

And policeman no dey for center
And there are no policemen in the center

Na confusion be dat o o
That certainly is confusion

Since then, none of the subsequent regimes has achieved a measure of planning for the city. By the time General Ibrahim Babangida introduced the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), with the dependent nature of the state and official corruption at its peak, all that was left of the city's industrial production base had disappeared. To this grim atmosphere, Fela had reacted to the acronym SAP as *Suck African People*. The city has always preoccupied Fela's aesthetic imagination, and he found urbanism an apt metaphor for describing contemporary contradictions. For him, urbanism serves as the impulse for transposition of those folk aesthetic forms which he reconfigures into the context of city life. Themes impelled by Lagos and themes on the city abound in albums like *Banfo*, *Abiara*, *Shakara*, *Lady*, *Trouble Sleep Yanga Wake Am (Palava)*, *Go Slow*, *Alagbon Close*, *Monday Morning in Lagos*, *Upside Down*, *Johnny Just Drop*, *Yellow Fever*, and *Zombie*.

Poets and other artists have always engaged the city once it emerged as a melting pot of various cultural topographies. The result is that a good number of literary city forms has emerged as a product of the human imagination: the heavenly city, the kingdom of the dead, the city of God, the city of man, the city of the plains attracting to itself presumably opposed images of the "sacred" and the "secular." Fela is not alone in equating the city to a negation of sublime spirituality. Stephen Spender had earlier noted that "ever since the industrial revolution, the poets, instead of regarding the cities as centers of civilization, have regarded them as destructive of the conditions of which the supreme achievements of poetry in the past were created." Other romantics generally withdrew from the city (Wordsworth and Coleridge) into the English countryside; Blake—into mysticism; or Byron and Shelley—into their individual interiority. In Fela's case, he simultaneously adored the rustic while also contesting the urban imaginative space with its own very registers. In this, he was spiritually in consonance with Niyi Osundare and Okot P'Bitek, two major African poets whose verses betray a suspicion of the city's ultimate intentions. He expressed the language of the new experience in a manner that romantics of the last century like Tennyson, Browning and Mathew Arnold did.

Almost invariably, the poet engaging the city with this sense of nostalgia becomes messianic. He aligns with the proletariat and champions his cause—which is precisely where the motif of proletariat-hero-as-victim in Fela's works derives. The proletariat is always,

going him way,
Going his way

the jeje way
on the gentle path

before,
then,

somebody come bring
some meddlesome folk interferes

original trouble.
with a fight

Hardly making a distinction between the working class and the urban poor, we find his lyrical advocacy fusing disparate concerns of the marginalized. Narrating the trivia that the disposable income of an average worker has come to, a situation that frustrates his every attempt to purchase a fan in the tropics, he concludes that *enjoyment can never come im way/ in Africa im father land*. There are other moments of aptly captured, but disturbing, images of the urban poor such as the anecdote of the emaciated worker who is wondering at the event of an earth tremor, unaware that the only tremor that there is is his weak and trembling legs that are no longer able to support him. The narrator calls his attention to the ailment:

Looku you
Mind you

No be ground dey shake
There is no earth tremor

Na your leg dey shake
It is your legs that are trembling

Much akin to Maxim Gorki's treatment of the city, particularly in *The Lower Depths*, Fela engages the urban space 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 states. Generally, his character type, even if a victim, is an unyielding and an interrogating subject, singing along with him — *No agreement today/ No agreement tomorrow/ Now/ Later/ Never and Ever*.

According to Fela, the city, as presently designed, suffocates, not just physically but also psychologically. In *ODOO*, he critiques the all-pervasive presence of the military in national life as psychological aggression meant to breed acquiescence by its sheer blackmail of dominance. This concept is expanded 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
There is a lorry ahead of you

Tipper dey for your back
There is a truck behind you

Motorcycle dey for your right
There is a motorbike on your right side

Helicopter dey fly fly for your top o
An helicopter is hovering over your head

You sef don dey for cell
You are already entrapped in a cell

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

One police go follow am
One police follows him

Hundred police go follow am
A hundred police will follow him

Riot police go follow am
Riot police will follow him

The theme is further intensified in *Akunakuna*,

He must get dispatch rider at any time
he must constantly be escorted by an outrider

Bazooka go drop for front at any time
[because] a bazooka can suddenly be dropped ahead

Long range tank must dey for back at any time
A long range tank must always be behind [the entourage]

The city, in other words, imprisons and, for him, imprisonment is not merely a physical expression but "every condition of the leash." Much later, the artist's persistence in reinventing an urban lore and creating alternative mores, deploying a language of resistance and contesting official 'truth' came to rub on the younger generation of Afrobeat musicians, especially in the Lagos environment. Even prior to Fela's death, evidence of appropriation of the form by cultural establishments had become manifest in the profile of the succeeding generation of Afrobeat artists. There is a sense in which this trend is inevitable owing to a cultural economy that dictates the necessity for the creation of a material basis and structure for the survival of the form. Someone had to pick the bill of the musical ensemble, its instruments and equipment, the club house and its overseas tours, which, invariably, turns out to be the corporate patrons or/and cultural institutions, including recording labels, and individual patrons whose briefs are primarily of a faddish

concern. The artist who shops for support from such quarters may find himself or herself inadvertently having to anticipate the concern and mood of these patrons. Fela's ability to resist the potential of art patrons foisting their preferences on him was accounted for primarily by the fact that, later in his career, he became his own patron, and this made it possible for him to retain the peculiar radical verve of his composition. After achieving this status, it was the cultural establishments that needed him to legitimate their projects.

The gradual slide of post-Fela Afrobeat into an elite art (as distinct from art music) is not always obvious, partly because the basic formulae are still retained in their rhythmic structure, costuming, choreography and, to some degree, the character of song text. Fela's conception of Afrobeat was, however, one of a cultural praxis through which he expressed a distinct aesthetic and ideological vision of art and life. What the more influential Nigerian proteges of the form—Femi Anikulapo-Kuti, Lagbaja, Dede Mabiaku, Kola Ogunkoya, Charly Boy, Dele Sosinmi, Tony Allen, Funso Ogundipe, and Juwon Ogungbe—have retained, with varying degrees of success, is more of the aesthetic, rather than the ideological aspects of the master, even though their nomenclatures are undoubtedly resonant of Fela's Afrobeat temperament.

Though the new age Afrobeat may sing an behalf of the masses and express a Pan-African yearning—at times in club houses with gate-taking far above the national minimum wage—it is neither "privileged" with a deviant republic which created a truly African micro-cosmopolis from which Fela

easily drew his vocabulary and allusion, nor is its social context the sort of idealism and zeitgeist of the sixties and seventies, which propelled the youth of Fela's generation to redemptive causes. More so, it is now a unipolar world, with the abiding influence of the intellectual African youth being determined more by Bill Gates and the stock exchange, than Frantz Fanon or Kwame Nkrumah. Besides, the era of the oil boom is over in Nigeria. And, like in many other African countries, the national currency has had to be devalued in excess of one hundred per cent, in spite of efforts to redress the slide through the creation, in the eighties, of a two-tier Foreign Exchange Market.

The new rallying call of the youth is not based on class alliance. Rather, it is informed by a creed of an ethical universal, sponsored by a rash of post-cold war Non-Governmental Organisations or other multilateral, even transnational institutions, some of which are set on a task of uniting the African and Western youth through the puff of tobacco and musical dance steps. The young Afrobeat artist, deprived of the traditional patron, has found himself inadvertently responding eagerly to sign on contracts with these agencies, perhaps, in order to offset the band's bill. With this, an apolitical attitude sets in, and is rationalized with the suggestion that Fela's self-sacrifice and persecution by the state has somewhat atoned for steps taken by these musical scions, such as renders superfluous the necessity to re-enact the ritual of the activist artist. The Afrobeat artist who aspires to transcend this role begins by reinvoking aspects of the Fela symbolism, both in form and content. GR

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