

Performance Practice in Afrobeat Music of Fela Anikulapo Kuti

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ARTICLE INFO

Available Online August 2013

Key words:

ABSTRACT

Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the creator of Afrobeat genre was an accomplished performer in every sense of the word. His creative ingenuity was evident in all the musical and extra-musical exertions that went into the production of Afrobeat. This paper therefore examines the performance practices of Fela Anikulapo Kuti. It further examines the audience participation in performance process and the importance of the 'yabis' used by Fela in communicating his political ideologies. The instrumental ensemble play a significant role in Fela's performances. It will discuss the ensembles used in afrobeat performances and how it has helped in interpreting Fela's African Musical ideologies in concrete terms. In collating relevant data for the study, the interview method was adopted by the researcher. This involved collecting information on Fela's performance from former members of his band, as well as a critical analysis of Several videos of his performances. Ultimately, this paper establishes the concept of Fela's performance as a total theatre, highlighting the effect of music, dance and visual effects in his performances.

1. Introduction

Over the years, there has been increase interest in the in depth analysis of performance practice in popular music. This is borne from the fact that popular music has transcended the terrain of just mere entertainment genre. It is believed that scholarly inquisition into some of the typologies will unravel the unique qualities embedded in them. Afrobeat is one typical popular music genre that has enjoyed such in-depth research by scholars over the years. The music genre was created and popularised within Africa and beyond by Fela Anikulapo Kuti. It has enjoyed a robust intellectual discourse from political, psychological, musicological, and philosophical angles. However, one unique feature of the music is in the adoption of the total theatre concept in performance.

A performance event is regarded as a privileged locus for the examination of locally situated musical and cultural meanings, where sound and behaviour can be analysed together as constitutive of a larger whole (Stone, 1982:23). In the same vein, performance practice has been defined as the sub discipline of musicology that studies performance (Bowen). For an objective assessment of a person's performance on stage, there must be an in-depth performance analysis which does not only deal with how the music sounds, but it also considers performance attitudes, gesture, social context, and audience response. Like other performance events in the world, we will see how the emergence of meanings of the onstage performance events are subjected to the varied and often conflicting agendas of participants, and how meanings are negotiated in response to multi-sensory experiences of musical sound and spectacle (Wallach, 2008:89). According to Taylor (1991:3) the performance provides the opportunity for the musicians to create social bonds with the audience. This constitutes an important, emotionally heightened arena where such interactions take place.

Fela's artistic practice is woven around all musical and extra-musical exertions that go into the production of Afrobeat. His deep absorption into the music both as a singer and performer on and off stage creates a deep sense of balance in the overall projection of the genre. This paper therefore investigates the performance concepts of Fela Anikulapo Kuti both as a singer and dramatis personae.

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2. Afrobeat and the concept of total theatre

As mentioned, the concept of Fela's performance was more of a total theatre. This concept involves some degree of improvisation, in which an artist draws upon dance, music and drama, customarily mixing these forms of expression (Kostelanetz, 2006). Other elements that a performer may incorporate include are shock, social criticism or protest, and audience involvement in the bid to pass the relevant message to the audience. It is common knowledge that music is a form of communication and a basis of interaction in the African societies (Ekpa, 2001). In all communities in Nigeria, drummers, singers and dancers interact to enact a multi-media network of artistic relationships, with elements like costume, scenery, and make-up (Omojola, 2006). The strength of such total theatre performance derives from the fullness and expressive coherence of each unit to bring into the artistic pool its unique structural, semiotic and aesthetic qualities. Apart from the electrifying music and artistic orchestration, the perception of Fela's audience was equally rooted in dance and drama. Hence Fela found Afrobeat music as a medium of expression for all levels of the arts, making it distinct from other musical genres of his time.

3. Afrobeat Music

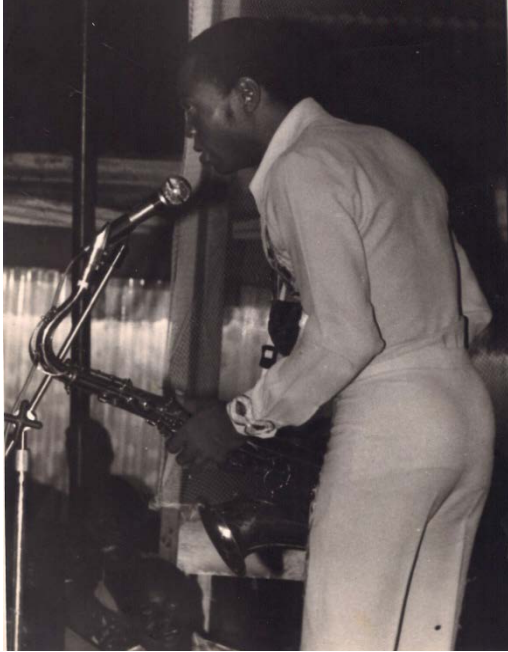
Afrobeat is first and foremost a music genre. In literal terms, Afrobeat is a coinage of two words; "Afro" and "Beat". The word "Afro" is the acronym of African organized sound while beat is a rhythmic counting pattern in relation to such music. Therefore, the word Afrobeat is the aphorism of organized African rhythmic pattern and social organization (Robinson, 2001). The definition of Afrobeat is well reflected in various books, journals, and conference proceedings (Omibiyi-Obidike, 1981; Akpabot, 1986; Collins, 2002). According to Akpabot (1986), Afrobeat is a fusion of conventional European dance band music with a rhythmic beat that entirely reflected new echoes of the Cuban music beat. Omibiyi-Obidike (1981) stressed that Afrobeat includes a variety of soul music, European roots and Indian reggae. She buttressed the fact that Fela's use of a variety of intricate rhythmic figurations, short melodic texture, sophisticated instrumental techniques, vocal and instrumental effects contributed to the emergence of this music genre. Collins (2002) on the other hand sees Afrobeat as Fela's interpretation of the fusion of African and Afro-American music, which dominated the music scene in the early sixties. From the political perspective, Oguigbe (2003) defined Afrobeat as an infectious musical genre which combines American funk and Jazz with traditional highlife to end up with a sound that doubled as a weapon of justice. In a study of music genres across the world, Potgieter (2003) defined a music genre as a category of musical works based on form, style and subject matter. Furthermore, she opined that this music typology may also be categorized by non-musical criteria such as geographical origin. It can also be said that a music genre (is defined by the techniques, the styles, the context and the themes (content, spirit). This definition qualifies Afrobeat as a music genre.

Afrobeat music can be described as a unique genre consisting of associations between the sound of the music and extra musical concepts. The different elements interlock to form a synthesis of the arts, with all contributing to the development of the performance. In Afrobeat, the songs do not exist only for their entertainment value, but develop story, mood, theme, communicating the arts through music. Through the music, emotions are better expressed with the complement of other areas in the performing arts. This ultimately makes the performance more effective, thus impacting the audience in a way so personal that they will be able to connect to the music and better understand it by all means. Music is often used as communication. Fela employed this medium to a higher degree in his compositions. Through the lyrics and musical sound, Fela was able to communicate mood or emotion. Fela began to use his music as a medium to speak on political issues and for many times, it was the beginning of the making of a legend that became fearless in the midst of oppression and dictatorship. His targets were corrupt politicians, soldiers, government officials and every individual that made life difficult for the ordinary Nigerian (Ìdòwú, 1986). Coker (2004) believed Fela's philosophy was unique in the sense that he was able to establish an entirely new genre of resistance. He stated further:

"Fela despised political corruption, imitateness, and the persecution of the masses. Self-identifying as an artist of the people, he managed to upset the ruling class of his own society and to cast a spell of reform on the elites of other societies".

Fela has said several times that his music is not for entertainment only- the Africa 70's musical vitality is that of a fighter. According to Ìdòwú (1986) Fela's music reflects the pace of the struggle and the

emancipation in some of the world's slum- the African slum. He concluded that his songs affirm the authentic African traditional culture and decry the present day degradation of black African culture and the ordinary people. Ultimately, the confluence of dance, theatre and its paraphernalia helps to a high degree in better interpretation of lyrics and subsequently transfers such to the waiting audience.



Fela performing at the African shrine, Ikeja Lagos. Courtesy, The Guardian Newspapers.

4. Dance in Afrobeat

Dance has been defined as a is a non-verbal means of communication which uses some of the humanly possible actions of the body selected from the gestures, bends, extensions, twist and turns(Oyortey,1983). It is equally a human movement that is formalized with such qualities as grace, elegance, and beauty, to the accompaniment of music or other rhythmic sounds, for thepurpose of telling a story(Van Camp, 1981).

Afrobeat music is never complete without the retinue of dancers who are mainly women. Apart of the addition of artistic varieties to the music, the dancers convey different meanings of the songs being performed. The dance does not exist as a separate art, but a part of the whole complex of Afrobeat performance. The dances are typically performed in African tradition. Every steps and moves represents the actual fundamentals and belief systems in that Fela stood for.



Fela and his dancers with Fela in a Black Power salute. Courtesy Jire Adarabierin Archives.

The movement is varied with some stamping on the floor with short steps that are ordered and legs moving to the pulse of the music. Each song has its own form of choreography. In “Zombie” we have a complex pattern of basic steps against seemingly independent movements of various parts of the body, which is combined simultaneously with hand and leg gestures. In Each step of the dance is rooted in the African tradition. However, in *Water no get enemy*, the dance steps are in simple movements with the swaying of the hands in interlocking sequences like that of the cult dance in Egbaland. The swaying of the hands depicts the gentle flowing water from a river. The importance attached to dance does not only lie in the scope it provides for the release of emotion stimulated by the music. It is also an avenue to tell a story that sometimes may be difficult to understand through oral communication. According to Nketia (1974) dance can also be used as a social and artistic medium of communication. He stressed further that it can convey thoughts or matters of personal or social importance through the choice of movements, posture and facial expressions. The aforementioned elements are captured in the dance retinue of Afrobeat band. The lyrics of the songs are expressed through appropriate dance vocabularies or symbolic gestures. An example is the rendition of *Teacher Don't Teach me Nonsense* where the dancers are holding a book and a pen with the book turned upside down.

5. The stage performance

The stage is set to accommodate the three sections of the band. The horns section is at the right, followed by the African ensemble directly at the back of the horns section. The guitar section is at the left wing of the stage with the trap set positioned at the middle directly facing Felá. The singers are positioned at the rear (right) followed by the dancers who file into the stage in a linear pattern before breaking into two groups; a part to the right and the other to the left wing of the stage. The movement of the dancers are uniform and graceful with expressions more at the hip of the body downwards. At other times, (depending on the intensity of the beat) we see the dancers kneeling down with both hands to the ground in synchronised movement. The movement is varied with some stamping on the floor with short steps that are ordered and legs moving to the pulse of the music. The singers on the other hand gently sway their body to the rhythm coming from the instruments in preparation for the cue from Felá who stands at the middle section of the stage where he directs the whole performance. The intensity of the music also deepens as Felá directs the band with his wave of hands and the swaying of his body and feet.

6. The Costumes

Closely related to the extra- musical features of Fela's performance are the costumes worn by the band. Fela's costumes were very creative and exploratory. They had certain features which were iconic and emblematic but never the same for all situations. At some times the male and female members of the band are costumed in orange colour soft cotton. At other times they are clad in other colours with a linear design and the map of Africa stamped on the outer edge of each trouser and shirt.



Felá in a rehearsal session with the Africa 70 band. Courtesy BiodunAdebiyi

Felá's outfit is usually a tight fitted slack trouser and a long sleeve shirt with a pair of local embroidery, with traditional chieftain shoes to match. The shirt would be removed midway on stage leaving a self-made bold neck chain round his neck. The chain signified protest against European and American slave traders who took Africans captive to America to work on sugar cane plantations. His face was painted with white, giving him the look of a witch doctor. The first outfit of the band was sewn by a tailor named Azaria from Northern Nigeria. Confirming this in an interview Femi AníkúlápòKútì, in 2007 stressed:

He designed the men's outfit with complex abstract symbols, evocative of Haitian art. Felá told him he wanted an African design that was very colourful. He also designed the women's outfit in a tight fitting manner, according to Felá's specification.

The singers and dancers are adorned in a typical African way with different colours used to paint various designs on their faces and bodies. Their waists are adorned with beads and ornament of various kinds. The costumes of the dancers also include skimpy skirts and brassieres with ribbons tied around their waists and legs, dancing bare footed. The uniform of the singers were more of skirts and blouses made of linen. Their hairstyles are also beautifully decorated with multi-coloured beads. The dance costumes are designed to enrich the visual aesthetics of the performance.

7. The audience

The role of the audience is crucial to the success of any Afrobeat performance. The process of ongoing interpretation involves all the participants (audience inclusive) in a performance situation. On the social and individual dimensions of musical performance, Okpewho (2003) observed:

“...The physical sensation of sounds not only activates feelings; it also activates links with others who feel. In an instant, the sound of music can create bonds of shared responses that are as deep and intimate as they are broad and universal...Experiencing music together leaves the personal, individual, and interior domain un-violated. At the same time, the experience becomes public, shared, and exterior”.

According to Okpewho, the performer is one member of a society of which his audience is only a random portion. She remarked further that the reason why the audience is able to participate in the performance is that there is no division whatsoever between the singer’s appreciation of the “world” of the songs and their own. Such a view of total harmony between Felá and the audience is seen in all Afrobeat performances. The audience participation in the music is significant in the sense that they know the images that Felá is portraying. Felá sought in a variety of ways to involve the audience in his production as active participants. This is seen in his talk segment called the *Yabis*.

Yabis is one major style employed in getting the attention of the audience through dialogue. The precise meaning of the word ‘yab’ in urban south west Nigerian pidgin English is to roast, criticise, or abuse. However, its connotation has been given a much wider definition by Olaniyan (2004) and Olórunyomí (2005). According to Olaniyan (2004) it is to expose one’s wrong doing in public, to discomfit, humiliate and deconstruct. This form of interaction is vital to the musician as it afforded him the opportunity of getting information on the happenings around, thereby preparing grounds for his next musical concepts. Fela is both a story teller and a narrative singer and this is brought to the fore in his yabis sessions with stories; narrative complete with charged scenarios, vivid characters and dramatic conflicts. Commenting on the yabis segment of Felá’s performances at the shrine, Olórunyomí (2005) observed:

“...during this time, he (Felá) reveals more prophecies and makes more social comments. His audience does not necessarily agree with all of his observations, and in such instance members exercise their right of dissent”.

This results in an interactive session between the audience and Felá which; eventually gives him an opportunity to judge their mood and get feed-back on his own political practice. Corroborating this in an interview this researcher had with Seyi Akinnibosun, he stressed:

“...Comedy, for so many years has been creating some waves. But Fela had been in it for so long. Fela, a poet indeed, cleverly coined his comedy style ‘Yabis’. Really his ‘Yabis’ is one of the line-up programmes of entertainments that run side by side with that of music. Without this aspect, his audience might lose their focus. He had hundreds of coinages like ‘BBC (Big Blind Country), BONN (Beast of no Nation), NNG as (Nigerian Natural Grass). “Them Go Crazy” interpreted as Democracy. ‘Cracy’ was made ‘CRAZY’, Demo changed to ‘Them go’. In fact Fela excelled in this aspect, ‘a comedian of all times, ‘Yabis’ remains a tonic for his grassroots audience.”

An example is the yabis session on the incident that happened in the health sector in 1989 when two people allegedly died after taking a dose of Paracetamol. Excerpt below:

Felá: Everybody say ye ye!

Audience: Ye ye!

Felá: Some of you I’m sure must have watched television tonight and you discovered that some brothers and sisters used Oyinbo medicine and died.

Audience: Abamieda! Speak on!

Felá: Thank you. The point I want to bring out of it is that if it were to be a “babalawo”⁴ that told a pregnant woman to come and take some leaves, no be the man take am, he just tell am make she go take the leaves and after taking it the woman had problems, the “babalawo” will be in jail by now but because it’s Oyinbo medicine.....

Audience: Colomentality!

Felá: So if you want to kill your enemy you can just go to the hospital. Tell the doctor to prescribe and invite the man that he’s not well.

Audience: Suppose the man say Im well

Felá: Een, you insist that he should see the doctor because he's not well. The man will go there and the Oyinbo man give him injection and he will die. They will say naoyinbo man kill am.

Audience: (Laughter and shouts of Abamieda!)

Felá: One stupid man showed his dirty stupid face on the T.V this evening. He called himself your health minister

Audience: But he's your brother now.

Felá: My brother! Is he your own brother? I'm not talking about OlikoyeRansomeKuti. Dat one na my brother. But we are talking about the health minister of this country.

Audience: Ha! Abamieda!

Felá: Let me tell the mistake the people who did Paracetamol must have made. Dem for come consult our babalawos instead of consulting professors. I was at his (Olíkóyè's) back when he started telling everybody how they make paracetamol and when he finished people clapped and was saying this man is a genius. He had this very high I.Q and also know many things. Yet na de paracetamolweydem make kill person. Everybody say ye ye!

Audience: (Roaring laughter) Ye Ye!!!! Felá, who killed Dele Giwa?

Felá: Na Baba

Audience: Who be Baba?

Felá: Na baba now! But if you put gida for am, na you sabi

Audience: B-A-B-A-N-G-I-D-A!

Felá: Everybody say ye ye!

Audience: Ye ye!



Thousands of Fela's supporters listening to his "yabis" during his show at the national stadium Lagos. 1986. Photo by Monday Emomi. Courtesy The Guardian Newspaper.

8. The musical instruments

Musical instruments form an indispensable part of any musical performance. These instruments come in various shapes and sizes, depending on their usage. According to Nketia (1974:92) the instrumental resources at the disposal of performers in Africa are not only of local origin, but also include those that have been integrated into the musical life of their communities. This was true of Felá's band with his effective combination of Nigerian traditional musical instruments with foreign instruments. The western instruments are made up of the horns sections, the strings and the percussion. This follows a typical ensembles classification as stated below:

Classification	Instruments
Horns sections	Alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, baritone saxophone, bass saxophone, trumpet, bugle, trombone
Strings sections	Bass guitar, lead guitar
Traditional musical instruments Percussion section	Congas, Tap drum
Keyboard section	Organ, keyboard instrument
Traditional Musical Instruments	Drums, metal gong, Gourd rattle and wooden clappers.

The saxophone has become an integral part of Afrobeat instrumental ensemble. However, Felá started playing the trumpet before the saxophone. This was due to the fact that a member of his band playing the saxophone at some point stopped coming to rehearsal. In order to fill the void, he started learning the saxophone and eventually became an expert on the instrument.



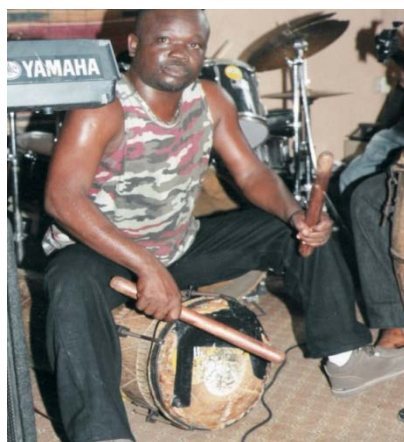
The brass section of the Egypt 80 band. Photo by researcher

8.1 Traditional musical instruments used in Fela's performance

Fela made use of several musical instruments from his home state in Western Nigeria. They are listed as follows:

1. The Àkúba drum

The Àkúba is a single headed conically shaped membrane drum, played, either uprightly or sideways. It is often played either with both hands or with two big sticks. The drum provides a heavy guttural tone to the bass section of the drum section



A member of Fela's band playing the Akuba Drum. Courtesy Egypt 80 Band

2. The African conga

The African conga drums are replicas of the standard conga. They are a set of three drums, semi cylindrical with slight narrowing at the tail end and covered by a membrane. The smallness of frame and narrow cavity account for the light quality of sound and high range of musical notes produced. Playing is normally done with both hands while standing. A prominent feature of the drum section of Afrobeat, the instrument is played only by Fela.



The African conga

3. The Agogo (Metal gong)

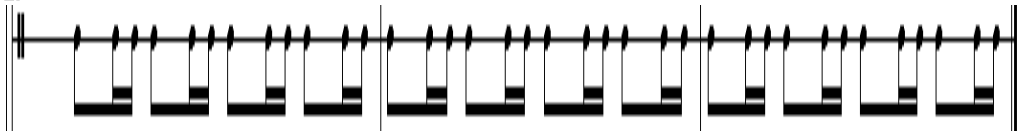
This instrument belongs to the category of directly struck idiophone. It is constructed by blacksmiths from molten iron, which is heated and moulded to a conical shape with an elongated handle. The Yorubas have varieties of bells ranging from single to double, triple and quadruple metal gongs. The agogo is held with the left hand and struck with a stick beater with the right hand either from a sitting or standing position. The common bell used in Afrobeat is the double bell:





The Agogo (Double bell)

4. Sekere (gourd rattle)

The sèkèrè belongs to the category of shaken idiophone and is functionally a primary rattle. It is a gourd around which a net is hung and knitted by cowry. The instrument is hand held at the neck of the gourd and shaken as well as struck with the palm of the other hand to control the rhythm. Three variations of the rhythm are identified in Afrobeat songs:

1. 

2. 

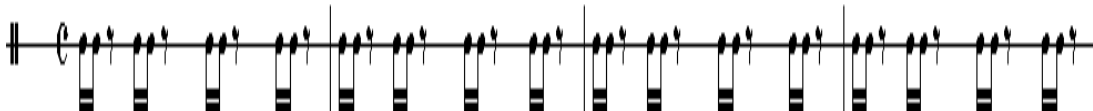
3. 



Sekere (Gourd rattle)

5. Wooden clapper

The wooden clapper is made from a flat piece of wood with a small slit in the middle. The instrument is beaten with a stick to produce sound. The common rhythmic pattern found in Fela's music is represented below:





Wooden clapper

The African traditional musical instruments sometimes create a scene similar to that of a traditional cult ritual possession found in his native Egba land. This is evident in Fela's use of percussion-dominated rhythms that bears the semblance of religious possession dances. The song starts with the playing of intricate African rhythms on the traditional musical instruments. The frenzy of the event is further heightened at the middle of the performance, with Felá playing the African drums with a higher intensity, followed by ecstatic shouts from the back-up singers. The song ended with the drum rhythm in a subdued tempo.

Felawas a deep routed orchestrator. His creative ingenuity lied in his ability to create an African identity from the array of musical instruments used in the genre. His studio recordings reveal the predominant use of western instruments. Yet, the sound coming from the arrangements leaves no one in doubt as to the authentic African identity in his production.

9. The Aesthetic Function of African Musical Instruments

The musical instruments provide aesthetic and also serve as objects of beauty during performances. This is in tandem with the point made by Nketia (1982:27) that the visual aspect of performances in Africa is manifested in the decoration of musical instruments. He observed that the visual display extended to the musical instruments like the artistic configuration of the drums. There are some instruments in Afrobeat ensembles that are decorated with designs and carvings that portray artistic aesthetics of African people. An example is Felá's tenor saxophone decorated with cowries and shells.



Fela's tenor saxophone decorated with cowry shells.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion revealed the distinct characteristic of Afrobeat ensemble and harmonious blending of all the parts in producing a qualitative performance. In this section, several musical instruments used in Afrobeat ensemble were classified with specific reference to the European and African musical instruments. While certain instruments function as lead or principal instruments, others play a subordinate role as accompanying instruments. The solo instruments in the ensemble include the saxophone, organ, and the drums. The horns sections are used for enriching the texture of the music while the drums emphasise its rhythmic aspect or articulate its pulse structure. While all other instruments play stipulated rhythms, the drum is always at liberty to extemporise on the given rhythm. While recognising the complete entity of Afrobeat as a music genre, Felá had nonetheless remained attached to the traditional conception of the genre as an integral part of the larger complex of African music, which included elements of dance, drama, mime, visual and theatre. For him, therefore, the songs, as part of the larger complex, were first and foremost a dynamic vehicle for the communication of his message.

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