

# Religion and the Political Afrobeat of Fela Anikulapo in Contemporary Africa

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**ABSTRACT:** Religion, as a universal phenomenon, is deeply rooted in cultural practices. Consequently, religious leaders and adherents use cultural arts like music to express religious thoughts in missions and related purposes. While most religious musicians leverage African cultural art to promote religious thoughts, secular singers like Fela Anikulapo use it as rebel art to challenge anomie in the political and religious spaces while shaping public opinion at the same time. This article, with the intent to focus more on the religious perspective, looks at some of Fela's most popular political afrobeat renditions which placed a lens of criticism on the association of Nigerian politicians and religious leaders. In his songs titled *International thief-thief*, *Authority stealing*, *Government of crooks*, *Who are you*, *Na fight o* and *Shuffling and smiling*, Fela challenged the alliances of religious and political leaders with colonial powers of his time and accused them of acquisitive venality through exploitations, money laundering and the abuse of religious titles among other issues. Although Fela is deceased, this article delineated the relevance of his political renditions in the current African religious ecosystems and emphasised the need to sustain the awakening created by Fela in the struggle to promote an egalitarian Africa.

**KEYWORDS:** Africa, neo-colonialism, philosophical consciencism, political leaders, religious leaders, Afrobeats

## Introduction

In an attempt to discuss how Fela Anikulapo used his rebel art to create religious and political consciousness, and to expose the collaboration between the political and religious elites in postcolonial and exploitative practices against the masses, this article has been structured to first provide background to Fela's political philosophy. Following his background, the article describes how his philosophy influenced and framed the lyrics of his music as a pro-masses weapon against colonialism, neo-colonialism and capitalism. The third section discusses the selected songs and how they addressed the collaborations of politicians, religious leaders and their colonial masters, to entrench the exploitation of the masses. Subsequently, the fourth section makes the argument that Fela sang like a man who saw tomorrow in the sense that the anomalies he challenged are still ongoing in African society. The last two sections provide a short critique of Fela's rebel art and conclusion.

## The background of Fela's political philosophy

Fela Anikulapo was never an island. He was a student of a primordial culture of moral and just inquiries into African community governance. Besides his mother, Kwame Nkrumah and Sandra Izsadore stood out as progenitors of Fela's sense of criticism of public governance, westernisation and arabisation of Africa's religion and politics. It must also be mentioned that Kwame Nkrumah was initiated into such thoughts by Marcus Garvey and Nnamdi Azikwe. While Nkrumah's school of thought had a significant influence on Fela's political afrobeat, it is imperative to mention that Fela is a product of a transgenerational influence of African philosophers; Nkrumah was highly influenced by Marcus Garvey, mentored by Nnamdi Azikiwe and he subsequently influenced Fela Anikulapo (Dodoo 2012, 78-92).

As a historian and political scientist, Dodoo (2012, 78-92) asserts that 'Kwame Nkrumah's mission and vision for Africa and the world' was a sum of rich Pan-African leaders' thoughts. He leveraged Julius Nyerere's thoughts on pan-Africanism and capitalism. As a student, Nkrumah also learnt the value of all humans whether Black, Coloured or White, in what his teacher titled 'the metaphor of the piano'. This metaphor influenced the idea behind his vision to unify Africa and the whole world while emphasising the relevance of Black people. Using the background that colonial masters enslaved Africa through capitalism, Dodoo argues that Nkrumah's task was to demolish colonial influence and reinstate the dignity of Africans. The idea was to restore the glory of the Black nations and allow Africa to contribute freely to the global community as both an equal player and partner. As far as Kwame was concerned, his assignment was to take up the challenge to change the narrative of what Frantz Fanon called the 'alienation disease of the Blacks' caused by colonialism and to confront the same in the spirit of pan-Africanism (Franz, 2002).

Drawing robust influence from Nnamdi Azikwe and Marcus Garvey, Nkrumah developed anti-capitalism and anti-colonialism philosophy around three themes namely socialism, neo-coloniality and African unity. He upheld the philosophy of social justice whereby the masses by default, should access the benefits of all resources of society to attend to the necessities of life. Such a concept was anathema to the colonial and neocolonial capitalisms which are built on non-communal participation in the ownership and benefits of nations' commonwealth. In further narration, Dodoo (2012, 90-92), reports how Nkrumah emphasised socioeconomic justice and realities vis-à-vis the eradication of poverty, illiteracy, ignorance and disease. He also emphasised expunging postcolonial mentality and leadership, using a 'one-party system' which may be an appropriate vehicle for socialism. Although not everyone agreed with Nkrumah's one-party system, he upheld that colonialism is the mother of capitalism, and neo-colonialism is its developing stage. As the socialists confronted the capitalists, the old pattern of naked exploitation was abandoned. However, neocolonialism became the new strain such that the local bourgeoisie emerged as extortioners of the former colonies. In the opinion of Nkrumah, socialism is the pathway to Africa's development while neocolonialism is the enemy of Africa's development. Thus, he concluded that anything that promotes the growth of socialism serves to frustrate neo-colonialism (Dodoo 2012, 90-92).

Mehdi (2018, 537-543) discusses Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral's critique of colonialism. For Kwame, awakening to pan-Africanism and consciencism was the focal point where he called for radical change and reformation. Connecting Nkrumah's socialist philosophy to the discussion of religion, he was described as a 'non-denominational Christian and a Marxist socialist who has not found any contradiction between the two' (Nkrumah 1959, 10). Connecting it further, Mehdi (2018, 537-543) asserts that Nkrumah's consciencism contains three main religious thoughts: Traditional, Christian, and Islamic. Nkrumah constructed his ideology on hybridising the three religions under indigenous humanist African principles. He called the idea 'a philosophical conscience'. For him, the philosophy of conscience speaks about African socialism which encompasses indigenous African cultures where the ideal society is classless and egalitarian (Kwesi 2017, 185-198; Nkrumah 1967, 200-208; cf Borona 2018, 1-4; Awuni 2014; Mabovula 2011, 38-47). Summarily, Nkrumah's philosophical consciencism seeks to crush the class divide and embrace humane practices to accommodate the well-being of all humankind. This is exactly the foundation of Fela's sound of political afrobeat.

In Kwesi (2017, 185-198), the morality of Nkrumah's philosophical consciencism was clearer. Kwesi asserts that philosophical consciencism strives to defeat colonialism and imperialism, paralyse neo-colonialism, strengthen unity, and articulate the idea of national reconstruction and development. Meanwhile, in philosophical consciencism, religion was at the centre. Nkrumah (1964) believed that three religions with conflicting influences plague the conscience of African society; Christianity, Islam, and Traditional religion. Allowing them to

co-exist, racked the African society with malignant schizophrenia. Besides, inter-religious conflicts, Christianity, and Islam both conflict with African moral ideology which herald's communality and humanness. Consequently, philosophical consciencism is more heavily influenced by the characteristics of the Euro-Christian segment of the tripartite. Nkrumah calls out such Euro-Christian influences as 'evils' of colonialism and neocolonialism, framed by the ideas of feudalism, capitalism, and individualism. Such ideas are evils foreign to and conflicting with the communal, humane, and egalitarian values of African society (Nkrumah 1964, 74). Further, rather than exerting overbearing influences, Islamic and Euro-Christian practices should be subsumed into the African way of life. In other words, religions, whether foreign or local, ought to be contextualised to accommodate the larger society's way of life which is humane, communal, egalitarian, just and kind (Nkrumah 1964, 74). Thus, a philosophical statement is required to animate the harmonic process that will preserve the African way of life. Such a required statement is phrased by Nkrumah as philosophical consciencism. Therefore, he defined philosophical consciencism as 'The map in intellectual terms of the disposition of forces which will enable African society to digest the Western, Islamic and the Euro-Christian elements in Africa, and develop them in such a way that they fit into the African personality' (Nkrumah 1964, 104).

Further, Kwesi (2017, 185-187) delineates Nkrumah's three thoughts on Africa's journey from colonialism to national development as dialectical materialism, sociopolitical education, and great awareness of the impact of neo-colonialism among Africans. First, achieving independence from colonialism via philosophical consciencism requires an embrace of dialectical materialism. This means the social conflicts of social forces triggered by material needs must be tackled. This means that the unmet needs of different social groups fuel social conflict, and as such, need to be tackled. Philosophical consciencism suggests that in most, if not all colonial territories, there are dual forces in tension; positive and negative actions. The positive represents the revolutionary forces, coming together in seeking social justice to obliterate oligarchic exploitation and oppression. Whereas the negative action represents the reactionary forces furthering the agenda of colonialists to prolong colonial suppression and exploitation. The negative forces are composed of both the colonial powers (external) and the indigenous greedy African political and religious leaders who ensure colonial powers maintain political ties and by extension, colonial cultures within the colony. As long as these negative forces remain active, Nkrumah contended that the territory remains colonized. Consequently, the interests of the people are alienated and subjected to territorial invaders and by extension indigenous elites who strive to sustain the colonial culture in a post-colonial era. Conversely, as positive action prevails, the negative fails increasingly. While advocacy for the positive forces remains the wishes of African nations, Nkrumah in Kwesi (2017, 190-196) advised that zero negative action is hardly achievable, but it can and should be reduced to a negligible level as the positives prevail. At that level, he claimed, independence with all the humane, communal, and egalitarian benefits is attainable.

Nkrumah's warning was also imperative with the notion that colonialists may temporarily concede to the social pressure of the masses, but the negative actions may be rebranded and represented differently. Nkrumah asserted that it is like the negative action trying to play possum. Beating these insidious neo-colonial negative forces is only possible by awakening the conscience of the masses, and vivifying the consciousness and awareness of the people to the treacherous threats of neo-colonialism (Nkrumah 1964). This is the core idea of consciencism. The philosophy weaponizes the masses with an ideology to fight the negative forces of neocolonialism. This is why Fela took up his mastery of Afrobeat to fight the anomie of both political and religious leaders in Africa.

Overall, philosophical consciencism as a background to Fela's political afrobeat shows the connection between his music, political ideology and religion. It addresses the socio-economic issues that affect the rights of the masses as will later be described via his songs under

consideration. It delineates the involvement of the church in the expansion of the capitalists' activities and further states the involvement of indigenous Africans, including religious leaders, in neocolonialism. In Kwesi's validation of Nkrumah's thought, it was clear that if the church and mosque do not imbibe the African moral philosophy by being communal, egalitarian and putting the people first, they will only be an extension of capitalism and neocolonialism. This article will now discuss how Fela imbibes and runs with consciencism as a political Afrobeat philosopher.

### **From influence to framing the Afrobeat as a pro-masses weapon against colonialism**

Olufela 'Fela' Anikulapo was born in 1938, subsequently, the pain of coloniality was part of his life experience. Born into the family of an Anglican Priest, Reverend Israel and Funmilayo Ransome Kuti is a testament to Fela's religious background. At the age of sixteen, Fela began a journey to political consciousness with a club called 'Planless Society'; an organisation he pioneered (Moore 1982). Chief among his influencers was his mother; Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, an anti-colonial activist and Nigerian women's unionist (Veal, 2000). Her bravery in the political struggle against colonisation enticed Kwame Nkrumah who visited her in 1958 in Lagos, Nigeria. During his visit, Nkrumah met Fela. Subsequently, Fela became his mentee and embraced Nkrumah's philosophical consciencism (Moore 1982, 47). Additionally, Sandra Izsadore, an American friend, introduced Fela to the Black Panther Movement where he became familiar with the autobiography of Malcolm X, and related literature on civil rights. According to Fela 'Sandra gave me the education I wanted' (Moore 1982, 85; Olaniyan 2009, 48). The influence of Malcolm on him caused a social and psychological rebirth. As a result, Fela discovered the power of knowledge in overcoming systemic impoverishment, especially the use of religion to entrench the enslavement of the Blacks by the European Colonialists and American Capitalists. However, Fela rejected the 'unjust valourisation' of Islamic tenets to oppose the colonial actions (Olaniyan 2009, 49-50).

Consequently, the variety of influences baptised Fela with the capacity to speak truth to power whether local or international. He faulted Africa's democratisation process by the colonialists and capitalists as disguised hypocrisy abating the freedom of Africa. Fela mastered the art of advocacy for pan-African political and cultural relations, and unity (Olaniyan 2009, 51). Using his Afrobeat, Fela became the voice of the masses by confronting the anomie of different military regimes. Besides the political class, he accused and critiqued the religious leaders and their organisations on what he described as capitalists' approach to religious practices leading to the disenfranchisement of the masses. Olaniyan referred to him as,

A socio-political musician who used his music to intervene in injustice, corruption and pronounced judgements on the partisan social and institutional political arrangements of the society. Fela was strong on the moral question of the 'haves' and 'have nots' and he sympathises with the exploited. As a counter-culture figure, using his music satire, he confronted 'social disorderliness' and interpreted most of society's problems as rooted in general moral turpitude. Using his music satire, Fela called for 'moral rearmament' to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor (Olaniyan 2009, 51).

Furthermore, Fela raises moral questions on what he called the 'undue advantage' of the Nigerian clergies, the profiteering and exploitative nature of their practices and their elitist alliance with the political class (Daniel 2020).

Drawing from Nkrumah's philosophy of the ideal state as a post-colonial leader, Fela used his music to advocate an ideal African state, he wanted African cultural independence, Africa's unity under democratic governance and Africa's return to the primordial tradition of communalism as exemplified by African ancestors (Awuni 2014, iii; Veal 1995, 8-13). Fela's interests in the traditional way of life including the practice of religion was predicated on the fact that Christian and Islamic religions had colonial flairs. According to Palombit (1981, 2),

Fela upheld that both socio-political and religious forces constitute anti-progressive obstacles to socio-political and economic development in Africa. In his view, capitalism as a colonial culture and African communism are incompatible ideologies. The colonial masters saw Africa as a milking cow and territory to settle their differences. Like Nkrumah, Fela challenged the colonial culture and the neo-colonialist African leaders with songs like *International thief-thief* and *Authority stealing*. He confronted the use by multinationals such as BP, CFAO, Mobile, Total, and UAC among others, to promote foreign masters' interests against developing African economies.

Fela found a deep contrast between the accumulation of wealth for the neo-colonialists and the deplorable conditions and environments of the African people. Through his political Afrobeat lamentations, Fela expressed the fact that disease, hunger, oppression, and poverty among others in Africa are direct results of colonial activities (Awuni 2014, 16; Alimi and Opeyemi 2013, 74-79). Concomitantly, Awuni (2014, 29) asserts that seeing this unjust situation, Fela became an African freedom fighter using Nkrumah's philosophical consciencism. After 1973, Fela's music took on a political tune and became an African conscience sound, not to entertain but to fix what Awuni calls 'complexities and contradictions' of post-colonial Nigeria and Africa (2014, 32). To achieve such a mission, a music shrine called the *Kalakuta Republic* was established to symbolise the need for an independent republic and for the proclamation of political, socio-economical and cultural freedom for Africans (Awuni 2014, 32).

### **Fela's confrontation of politics and religion in his political Afrobeat**

In Fela's song titled *Government of crooks*, he confronted the complicity of the Nigerian government in polluting and exploiting the oil-rich Ogoni land and the subsequent murder of Ken Saro Wiwa, who opposed the unjust acts of the colonial masters (Veal 2000, 4). Fela invoked the blueprint of philosophical consciencism in his rendition to voice his opinion that Africa's revolution must reflect in the environment and conditions of the African people. He used several music satires to challenge the unjust plundering of Africa's wealth by both foreign capitalists and their indigenous proteges. He composed tracks like *International thief-thief* and *Amen amen amen*, to expose and challenge some indigenous neo-capitalists including former presidents and related political leaders like Olusegun Obasanjo, Sani Abacha and M.K.O Abiola of Nigeria; Mobutu Seseko of the Democratic Republic of Congo; and Blaise Campaore of Burkina Faso, among others. Like his mentor, Nkrumah, Fela vehemently rejected capitalism as a system of production because of its exploitative nature to human ideal conditions and demanded its reconciliation with communalism; an African system that accommodates a high degree of classlessness, egalitarianism and humanitarianism (Palombit 1981, 2; Awuni 2014, 41).

In his song titled *Shuffling and Shmilling* which will be discussed in detail in the next section, he condemned the exploitation of church adherents (masses) by opulent clergies who leveraged their spiritual authority to extort their followers and amass wealth. In other songs titled *Who are you* and *Na fight o*, Fela did not spare religious leaders, he called them 'aiders of capitalism' and representatives of foreign colonial masters using the capitalists' philosophy in religious practices. Importantly, Fela was indifferent to religion until he discovered the neo-colonial approach. During his trip to America in 1970, he became aware of the religious anomie and turned antagonist to Christianity and Islam. Olaniyan (2009, 88-89) delineated three grounds upon which Fela opposed Christianity and Islam. First, they are foreign religions. Second, they easily procure undeserved advantages. Third, they are founded on submissive theologies; a culture synonymous with the colonialists' enslavement system.

In the first instance, Fela's position was that pan-Africanism should be prioritized over foreign religions. He argued that the idea that imported foreign religions should denigrate or shape African values, traditional religion and culture is unacceptable. In the account of Olaniyan (2009, 88-89), Fela argued that using religion as a tool of Europeanisation or

Arabisation of Africa is anti-pan-Africanist. As long as foreign religious and cultural coloniality cannot be acceptable to Arabs and Europeans in their land, the same should apply to Africans. If Arabs or Europeans are not worshipping and surrendering themselves to the dictates of African gods like ‘Ogun’ or ‘Obatala’, there is no justification for Christianity and Islamic religions to dominate the way of life of Africans (Olaniyan 2009, 88-89)<sup>1</sup>.

Secondly, given that Christianity and Islam are instruments of acquiring undeserved advantages, especially through religious titles like Bishops, Reverends, Imam, Alhajis or Alhajas (A post-Mecca pilgrimage title), these conferred titles open doors of undue advantages which allow exploitations of the masses. Consequently, these foreign religions promote economic competition and accumulation in desanctifying dependent capitalism. Simply put, Fela labelled Christianity and Islam as channels of capitalism in Africa (Olaniyan, 2009).

Thirdly, Fela described the religious philosophy responsible for the undeserved economic advantage as he opined that Christianity and Islam are founded on ‘submissive theologies’. These theologies allow easy and illogical submission of adherents to the dictates of religious leaders thereby opening wide doors for exploitation. Such exploitation is aptly described in the words of Olaniyan - ‘They dole out opium through the promise of paradise in heaven as solace for hard times on earth, whereas the priests jostle with soldiers or military regime dictators, businessmen and bureaucrats for the grand prize for acquisitive venality’ (Olaniyan 2009, 89). On account of the foreign and exploitative nature of both religions, Fela cautioned that since they do not subscribe to African culture, tradition or religion, Africans ought not to accept their submissive and exploitative theologies. Likewise, upon the fact that these foreign religions are leveraged by both religious priests and politicians for the exploitation of the masses, Fela queried the morality of the use of submissive theologies in Africa (Olaniyan 2009; Awuni 2014).

### **Selected Fela’s Classic titles that challenged religious and political exploitation**

***Who are you and Na fight o***: The primary target of the songs titled *Who are you* and *Na fight o* were Imams and Pastors. The contents of the duo mock titled Reverends, Bishops, and Imams. Regarding Christianity, Fela called Cathedrals and related worship places ‘ideological centre for the spreading of European and American cultural and political awareness’ (Moore 1982, 81). In his claim, Christianity represents more capitalism and exploitation. Using the pope as an example, Fela thinks he has no business exporting his religion to Africa while twisting the intent which is religious exportation as helping Africans to discover God and experience salvation. Rather, if there are people in need of such help, it will certainly be those of the Western world. As Moore reports, Fela in his mockery-filled rendition challenged the pope in local parlance – ‘Make him repair him own country’ (Moore 1982, 77). In other words, the pope should help his own people and fix his own country through Christianity, not Africa. Fela’s call was predicated on the fact that the country of pope at the time was full of alcoholics, hardened criminals, pedophilias, rapists, robbers and thieves, among others (Moore 1982, 77). Consequently, with the pope’s country filled with these practices, he has nothing moral to offer Africa with his Western religion. In other words, Fela indirectly used the title of the song to query the pope’s help to Africans; who are you to teach us moral lessons through religion when your country is grossly immoral?

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<sup>1</sup> Fela referred to the Yoruba traditional deities (Ogun and Obátálá) in Nigeria. Firstly, Obátálá is the deity in charge of the creation of the human flesh in preparation for the life-giving action of the Almighty God known as ‘Olorun’, who later released breadth and life into the flesh created. Obátálá is perceived and adored as Olorun’s favourite among the deities and that is why most African Traditional Worshippers among the Yorubas call him the ‘Orisha Nla’ meaning the big diety (Obatala, n.d). Secondly, in the opinion of Oladipo (1988:89) the deity called Ogun complemented the task of human creation with the creation of human flesh (cf Idowu, 1962:87). According to Omolafe (1988:36), Ogun is fondly eulogised by devotees as “Ogun Alada meji; o nfi nkan sako, o nfi nkan yena”, meaning the custodian of two cutlasses; with one, he cultivates the farmland (productivity and supply), and with the other he clears the road (direction, security, and clarity). Ogun is revered as the master arts, the god of iron and steel and highly honoured among the Yoruba deities (Idowu, 1962:85, Peel, 1994:1; Mbiti, 1969).

Concomitantly, Fela took a swipe at Islam. He accused Arabians of raping Nigeria's economy every year of millions of dollars with a feel-good factor of pilgrimage to Mecca. In his opinion, all Nigerians get in return is 'sick pilgrims and brainwashed Africans' (Moore 1982, 83). Thus, it can be inferred, that some of these brainwashed religious adherents have become schizophrenic religious radicals and hallucinated robots terrorising Africa with deep-rooted religious tenets and teachings from the Arab world. With such implications, Fela then described both Christianity and Islam as agents of second slavery. Subsequently, he held a concert in Brooklyn, New York, where he performed M.A.S.S (Movement Against Second Slavery) to raise an alarm about the second slavery practices of foreign religions in Africa. The first session of the concert was dominated by the criticism of Islam where Fela rained down mockery on the prayer chants – *Allaaaaahu Akbar*, describing it as alien to the people of Africa (Olaniyan 2009, 90).

Fela in the second session of the concert took a punch on the word - *Alhaji*. He wonders why Nigerian Muslims chose to accommodate and take on the title after a visit to Mecca. With an understanding of the translation as an Islamic title conferred on religious pilgrims, Fela adopted the word 'Stranger' as the synonym. He then used his afrobeat and undermining voice to mock all government officials, businessmen, bureaucrats and military officers who took on the titles or accepted the religion; labelling them as 'Strangers' in their own country because of their affiliation with foreign religious identity and culture. He echoed a question with his electrifying afrobeat - How can a country ever develop when it is ruled by strangers? (Olaniyan 2009, 91). Besides Fela's rebel rendition against Islamic titles and the African bearers, he challenged the post-pilgrimage title of Christianity called JP (Jerusalem Pilgrimage). Fela insisted there was nothing to be proud of in bearing foreign titles in Africa, rather it suggests identity crises among African elites and adherents of foreign religions.

In the same Brooklyn performance, Fela blamed the negative impacts of Christianity and Islam on African governments and political leaders. He argued that they practically sold the continent cheap to Europe and Arabia for an era of second slavery. He further argued that the two religions were the pipelines of sowing division and war in Africa; a situation which led to easy access for the Europeans. By implication, Africa was divided by religion, ruled and exploited by colonialists along with their missionary counterparts. These practices were repeated by African political and religious leaders in what Fela called a second slavery project (Olaniyan 2009, 90). Therefore, Fela called African government officials and religious leaders 'strangers' because they adopted post-colonial practices to sustain poverty, injustice and the oppression of the masses. These foreign and exploitative practices are alien to the African spirit and primordial culture of communalism and humanitarianism. Fela then used his political afrobeat to raise the consciousness of the masses to demand cutting off the umbilical cord connecting the colonial culture and African religious and political leaders.

***Shuffering and shmilling: The profiteering businessmen of God:*** Olaniyan (2009, 91-93) asserts that the best of Fela's commentary on Islam and Christianity is in his classic rendition titled *Shuffering and shmilling*. In the classic, Fela, with his highest pitch, described Christian and Muslim leaders as profiteering men of God. He referred to them as capitalists' religious leaders. His moral rejection of the popularity of hunger, poverty, and oppression amid plenty, diverted to the advantage of the foreign and indigenous bourgeoisie reflected the same approach while condemning the exploitation of church adherents (masses) by opulent clergies who leveraged their spiritual authority to extort their followers and amass wealth.

The song exposed crooked and hypocritical religious practices forced on adherents by the leaders. A segment of the performance unapologetically addressed gullible masses who subscribe to the decisions of religious charlatans and conjurers. The lyrics were introduced with the chorus *Suffer-suffer for world*. Although the song mocks the religious claims that it is in perfect order for Christians to suffer here on earth in preparation for eternal enjoyment afterlife,

it sends a strong message to gullible masses that accepting earthly suffering as a norm was a major self-inflicted contribution to suffering in the midst of plenty. He continued by emphasising that when the masses voluntarily depend on the church and mosque, they become exploited. Echoing down his second point, he re-emphasised the phrase *Suffer-suffer* to state the fact that ‘Christians will fool you and Moslems will dupe you’ (Olaniyan 2009, 1-93).

Subsequent to these claims, Fela began awakening the consciousness of the masses to the opulent lifestyle of religious leaders who claim that suffering is good for the masses while they enjoy wealth here on earth. Fela exposes these double standards by admonishing the masses to take off the veil in their faces to see the luxurious lifestyles of religious leaders. Archbishops live lavishly in comfort, Popes are soaked up in richness, Imams groove in abundance and great grandeur. Further, Fela juxtaposed these splendours of religious leaders with their foreign and colonial masters; Archbishops live in London, the Pope in Rome, Imams in Mecca, while Africans struggle with adapting to an inhabitable environment, poverty, oppression and related sufferings (Olaniyan 2009, 91-93). On the account of the international exposure of the religious leaders, Fela accused them of money laundering; a practice which identifies with the clause ‘profiteering business men of God’. As they enjoyed international travels to London, Rome, and Mecca, they moved cash along, making their journeys and pilgrimages transactional. Contrarily, they fed their followers with opium, manipulating their minds to comprehend and be comfortable with earthly sufferings, while focusing on heaven as their reward.

In the following line of the lyrics, a bigger picture of the suffering of the masses was painted. In Fela’s claim, religious leaders travelled around the world while the working masses remained in Nigeria and by extension Africa, struggling daily in buses and taxis to make ends meet. The masses have no choice but to use all of their energy labouring for the capitalists every day while receiving ridiculously low pay packages that kept them in abject penury. These working masses are constantly harassed and abused by law enforcement agencies like the Police and Army (in military junter). After working all day, running home to be comforted makes little or no sense; especially when there is no water to freshen up and no electricity to create some form of relaxation for the tired body. In the midst of these shameful and dehumanising conditions, religious leaders enjoy opulence alongside the foreign or local neo-capitalists among which are the elected or military government officials.

### **Contemporary Africa through the lens of Fela’s classic songs on religion**

The songs *Who are you*, *Na fight o* and *Shuffering and shmilling*, place a searchlight on religious leaders in Africa, especially Nigeria. They reveal the anomie of religious commodification, deception, manipulation, exploitation and extortion. These practices were prevalent at the time Fela performed these songs. It is reasonable to expect that there would have been a significant change since his death on 2 August 1997, but sadly, it appears he saw the future while singing because the situation of the masses in Africa and their exploitation by the religious leaders and political elites persists. The three categories of exploiters in Fela’s music, namely, Christian clergies, Muslim Imams, Alhajis and Alhajas, and the political elite in government, continue to serve as foreign heads gatekeepers, by promoting the interest of their overseas masters while the masses in Africa wallow in abject penury (Olaniyan 2009, 96-98).

Viewing Africa today through the lens of Fela’s political afrobeat, the religious and political events remind the public of Fela’s activism in the past. Currently, there remains a huge socio-economic gap and unequal justice system between the political and religious elites and the masses. Africa still has stupendously wealthy political and religious leaders while the followers are continuously buried in abject penury. An example is the contemporary socio-economic inequality between White and Black people in post-apartheid South Africa. From land ownership to the control of economic and educational systems, post-colonialism still dominates the African experience. As Fela asserted in an earlier discussion, African leaders are



as bad as their colonial masters. Today, African leaders cannot be said to be better off in running the affairs of religious organisations and government.

Furthermore, Fela was very clear on the use of Christianity and Islam over the years to drain Africa's economy by collecting millions of dollars through the pilgrimage to Mecca and Jerusalem. Some of the Mecca pilgrims earlier referred to as 'manipulated and brainwashed' may be the advocates of fundamentalism or religious radicalization; those who seek to impose on their African communities, Arabian culture of Islam and related ways of life. Today, some of the radicalized groups like Boko Haram, Alshabab and ISWAP have continued to take orders from their Arab radical masters to not only recruit young Africans but to also inflict pain on African communities. Such Arabisation via Islamic radicalisation has its fingers in regions like Kenya and Tanzania (National Defense University Press 2015; Vittori and Bremer 2009; United States Institute of Peace 2003); Mali (Council on Foreign Relations 2015); Sudan and Somalia (Klobucista, Masters and Aly Sergie 2022); South Africa (France24 2023); Congo, Uganda and Rwanda (Weiss et al. 2023). According to the United States' 116 Congress Hearing on 17 December 2019, the radicalised networks of Islamic terrorists and their affiliates now operate in all of sub-Saharan Africa; West, East, Central, and Southern Africa. As of the time of this congress report, they have conducted operations in approximately 17 sub-Saharan African countries (United States Government Publishing Office 2019; cf. Centre for Preventive Action 2023; Gardner 2020). Such metamorphosis of religious radicalisation and desacralising implications have continued to terrorise and divide our nations and continent. Indeed, what Fela confronted still stares us in the face and reminds us of the tunes of his afrobeat in contemporary Africa. On account of the international exposure of the religious leaders, Fela accused them of money laundering; a practice which identifies with the clause 'profiteering businessmen of God'. Current issues after Fela's demise still remind us of his songs. For example, money laundering, drugs and arms trafficking, among others, still persist in the religious setting. In recent times, pastors have been caught participating in arms trafficking and money laundering (The Will 2014). Islamic leaders and groups are accused by financial crime agencies of funding Jihadist agenda in Nigeria. Thus, Fela's claims are still evident in contemporary Africa. Just to mention a few, Prophet Uebert Angel's braggadocious claim on diplomatic privilege in connection with money laundering fits Fela's claim. In the report of Mokoena (2023), a comprehensive investigation into money laundering implicated Uebert. Further, the Aljazeera Investigative Unit (AIU), alleged that Uebert claimed 'He could use his diplomatic cover to carry large volumes of dirty cash into Zimbabwe as part of a laundering operation and gold smuggling' (AIU 2023). Both Mokoena and AIU reports, allegedly show that Prophet Uebert remains a member of Gold Mafia shell companies operating in Africa and beyond. This further confirms that when Fela accused religious leaders of alliances with political leaders to share acquisitive venality, he was like a political afrobeat prophet seeing this situation ahead of time. Religious leaders having diplomatic privileges to transact businesses is a sign of the alliance between the elitist religious leaders and their political counterparts.

Additionally, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in Nigeria, recently reported the case of Apostle Theophilus Oloche in Ebonyi State, who was arrested and charged on the account of fake money grants and laundering (AriseNews 2024). In South Africa, Mothala (2020) reports that four people including a popular Prophet were arrested for fraud and money laundering. Another prophet with diplomatic privilege, Bushiri, who hails from Malawi and had established a ministry in South Africa was arrested for money laundering (News24 n.d.). Likewise, Mdakane (2023) relates the case of corruption and money laundering activities raised against Reverend Ndumiso Ncombo, the Senior leader of the Central Methodist Church in Johannesburg. Another example is the charge made against Pastor Ezekiel in Kenya for having a money laundering connection (Nation 2023). From the Islamic perspective, EFCC had indicted religious leaders and sects of complicity in money laundering activities for the purpose of funding terrorism in Nigeria (Sanusi 2024; cf. Erezi 2024). Correspondingly, the

Federal Court of Appeals in the United Arab Emirates jailed six Nigerians for transferring \$782,000 from Dubai to the Boko Haram organisation in Nigeria, and among them is a Nigerian government official who sponsored Boko Haram with the money belonging to the government (Campbell 2020; cf. Igwe 2021). With these examples, the contents of Fela's Afrobeat remain evident in current neo-colonial religious practices in Africa.

Fela has joined his ancestors, but his songs remain alive in the prevailing African circumstances. The more Fela sang, the more there was public awareness and pressure on religious and political leaders. This is the core achievement of Fela's political afrobeat: awakening the consciousness of the masses with the intent to rise against the negative forces of neo-colonisation, especially the union of political and religious leaders in entrenching acquisitive venality. It is then critical to encourage a revisit or improvement of religious and political awareness to increase the demand for African egalitarian and communal philosophies in socio-economic, political and religious ecosystems in Africa. Fela's afrobeat emphasises classlessness and egalitarianism. Wrapped in the ideology of Fela's political afrobeat, today's activists, heralds of justice in the religious and political spaces must rise and increase their doggedness to challenge religious and political leaders in order to strengthen the war against neo-colonial practices and bridge the divide between the elites and the masses. In what Fela called national reconstruction as discussed earlier, the need to call for the reconstruction of leadership styles and approaches to governance in both the political and religious ecosystems in Africa is imperative. The civil organisations, socio-political activists, religious organisations and related stakeholders in addition to the general public, must improve on Fela's watchdog practices, constantly raising the alarm and ensuring intense pressure on the religious and political elite until change is evident in Africa.

### **Diametrical position**

It is important to slightly critique Fela's philosophical consciencism knowing that not everyone agrees that Fela made the right choice in confronting societal anomie as delineated in his songs. Three opinions were prevalent in the criticism of Fela. Firstly, according to Awuni (2014, 48-49), Fela ought to have adopted a critical stance or upheld the improved version of Nkrumahism. He ran his race on the initial, but weak and 'back to the jungle life' idea suggested by Nkrumah's political literature. This is because some earlier opposing schools of thought criticised Kwame Nkrumah for sponsoring a return to the past communal life of Africans; an anti-progressive way of life befitting only for the jungle. Later, Nkrumah was compelled to advance his thesis with a new paradigm of philosophical consciencism. Contrarily, Fela held onto the initial thoughts, and exposed himself to initial criticisms raised against his mentor (Nkrumah 1967, 205). Secondly, by dismissing Christianity and Islam, Fela made a woeful recommendation, as against the later position of Kwame Nkrumah who on the account of 'the metaphor of the piano', encouraged tolerance with Christianity and Islam, but conditional to embedding their practices into African egalitarian and communal philosophies. This may then imply that Fela acted and sang as an extremist in the school of philosophical consciencism. Thirdly, in a further argument of Awuni (2014, 58-60), Fela flouted communal norms via extreme and brassy exhibitions of hypersexuality and drug abuse (cannabis). Awuni (2014, 60) claims such habits distracted Fela's rational and consistent thoughts in religious and political ecosystems.

In response to the three opinions above, it is possible to disagree with Awuni on the accounts that (1) regardless of Fela's lack of transition to the updated Nkrumahism, the public bought into his presentations of Kwame because a music medium was used. This is evident in the popularity of his music and how the government went after him over time, knowing the level of influence he had on the masses and the subsequent pressure it placed on the elite. Even in a contemporary era, Africans have continued to use the slogans of Fela's political afrobeat, to accuse, critique and demand change in leadership. (2) Fusing the three religions has challenging complexities. Over the years, religious riots, unhealthy debates and the use of

religion as yardsticks in the choice of political leaders and offices sent a wrong signal to a healthy democracy in Africa, especially Nigeria. Likewise, the level of intolerance bred by Islam and Christianity on account of religious superiority shows a strong sign of complex fusion (Walker 2012). Thus, Fela's call for the rejection of the duo, may not be absolutely condemnable. (3) There is no scientific proof that sexual escapades and cannabis informed incoherent philosophy in Fela's political afro-beat and activism. The impact of his music is evidence that his thoughts were highly comprehended and accepted to be logical by the populace. Otherwise, the accusation will suggest that everyone who subscribed to Fela's school of thought may be equally dumb and illogical. Although Fela's habits may have had negative impacts on his health, longevity and the pursuit of Africa's freedom, it can be argued that cannabis may have aided his level of confidence and temerity, while confronting religion and politics in violative military regimes, where seemingly untouchable corrupt political and religious leaders exist.

## Conclusion

This article showed that Fela Anikulapo's afrobeat was founded on a strong primordial and humanistic African philosophy. It revealed that Fela's thoughts were the sum of those of his mother, Kwame Nkrumah, and several other pan-African philosophers. The article showed that Fela's rebel art was a phenomenon in challenging religious and political oppression forced on the masses by the religious and political elites of Africa. From his songs delineated, it was clear that Fela was an activist and a prophetic voice of conscience, challenging the elites while creating the revival of conscience such that the people no longer accept the religious opium which promotes the acclimatisation of suffering while awaiting heavenly rewards. The article further delineated how Fela was a prophet who saw the future. It discussed with current examples, Fela's deployment of political afrobeat to confront religious leaders' use of submissive theology in alliance with the political class in government, to achieve acquisitive venality and engender desacralizing activities bedevilling Africa. These include the extortion of religious adherents through manipulation, the conferment of religious titles leading to cheap submission to exploitations, money laundering and terrorism financing, among others. While the article acknowledged and discussed diametrical views on Fela's ideology and approach to debasing neo-colonialism and neo-capitalism, it dismissed the overriding importance of the criticism and upheld that national, continental, and global impacts of Fela's political afrobeat, are non-negligible in the scheme of things. In the end, his renditions were heralded, and stakeholders in contemporary Africa were encouraged to once again pick up Fela's political afro songs to re-ignite religious and political consciousness necessary to ignite courage, challenge the religious and political anomie confronting Africa's development as a communal and egalitarian society. As a last opinion, this article would like to put it on record that whether they are in the majority or minority, not all religious leaders (Christians and Muslims), and political leaders represent the groups addressed by Fela Anikulapo, even in this contemporary era.

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