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FELA: DEATH AND THE KING HORNSMAN

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In anticipation of controlling the crowd, the family had fixed a week day, Tuesday August 12, for the burial. But when they brought his corpse to the Tafawa Balewa Square for the lying-in-state a day earlier, over a million feet scrambled by to pay their last honour.



Fig. 1: Fela Anikulapo-Kuti lying in state at Tafawa Balewa Square

He was draped in his favourite orange colour and, it seemed, he was having his first peaceful sleep in 58 years.

While the guttural blare of the saxophone persisted at the far end of the expansive square, acolytes sprinkled his casket with the forbidden leaves of marijuana, for whose possession he was arrested and had just been released from detention a few weeks earlier. Some three hundred naira was also tucked into the coffin for contingency expenditures along the eternal way. The burial rites, while taking an unconventional mode, nevertheless resonated Africa-Yoruba 'cosmic vision'. Through their acts and symbolism, fans and acolytes, to a large extent,

were acting out a cultural script that affirmed the continuity of life after death and the possibility of dialogue with characters of the supersensible world.

After eleven hours of lying-in-state, the casket was taken to Fela's Gbemisola residence, but it had to endure a four hour traffic jam as citizens would not allow a free passage to the hearse. Later in the evening, the corpse was brought to the Africa Shrine on Pepple street, Ikeja, a suburb of Lagos. Worship rites start against the background of a dark and silent stage but figures in white wrappers, a symbol of the *Ogboni* cult, can be gleaned faintly from afar. Out of this silent night, comes the intermittent clacking of wooden rattles. These communicants of ancestral voyage clang away in the dark, first with the metal—sharp and intruding—then the conga follows. From the depth of the darkness, these figures yell:

Yeepaaariipaa, yeepaaariipaa

repeatedly, reminiscent of the mythical yelling of anguish by assistants of the Yoruba deity, Obatala, as a measure of guilt for having betrayed their master. This code, mythology teaches, has since then been adopted by worshippers of the Oro cult. It prefixes their ritual encounter and denotes a vow of commitment to a collective course—and a collective knowledge, the ethos of *awo*.

With the introduction of the brass section (no guitar, no piano or saxophone) and the energetic clapping of cymbals, the beat takes a faster pace, reaching a crescendo with the rising smoke of a burning wick tucked away in an inner cubicle housing the gods.

The ritual paraphenalia are a melange of diverse African ancestors ranging from the Benin mask to the sculpture of Patrice Lumumba and the portraits of Malcolm X, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (Fela's deceased mother) and Kwame Nkrumah; with these, there are also heroes of the sub-culture.

But something is amiss today: the inscriptions of Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder, and Ogun, the muse of creativity, deity of metallurgy and patron of the blacksmith. I recollect they were quite visible during Fela's last worship here. Are these signals of a new beginning, a foretaste of post-Fela afrobeat? This 'omission' may be partly explained by the oral nature of the liturgy at the Shrine, a factor that plays up the improvisational.

On this particular night, the limitation of the mnemonic becomes evident when Femi, the biological heir-apparent steps in. He skips (some suggest 'forgets') the preliminary divination motion, squats in a strange pose and revises the entire ritual order. Further still, he neither tastes the honey comb nor throws the cowrie shell, a process considered necessary to gain access to spiritual straits. So it is time to partake of the ritual sip of palmwine. He does just that but fails to pass the calabash to his siblings and Baba Ani via a cross diagonal handstretch. Fela had always insisted on this cross diagonal formation as a recreation of the traditional *orita*, the crossroads where ritual offering is generally placed.

Meanwhile, the smoke had enveloped the worship cubicle and it was homeward journey for a migrant soul. After all, the path had been cleared. Old faithfuls and habitués of the shrine break down in tears as pall bearers, wearing moodish grey

adire with black berets, arrive to carry off the raffia woven casket. *The entire hall takes the clenched fist black power salute.

By noon next day the body would be interred and Fela's daughter, Yeni, would be pleading with the throng of people: "I take Fela name beg you, make una no harrass innocent citizens, Fela could be angry o". A few weeks later a rash of deaths would ravage the household, snatching Soladegbin (Fela's daughter) and Fran Kuboye (his niece), and the population would interpret this in the context of *akufa* —implying drawn as fellow traveller in another's death.

Then there would be the need to 'properly' propitiate Fela's warring spirit, which was eventually carried out during the unveiling of the Fela mausoleum when nine Ifa priests, led by the paramount Apena of Lagos, Chief Nasiru Dosunmu, appeased the collaborative deities.



Fig. 2: Femi Anikulapo-Kuti appeasing the soul of his deceased father

With the pall bearers making their final round at the exit of the Africa Shrine, I gazed at the stage again and it was bereft of the chief priest. It was like returning to the stable without your favoured stallion. At this same spot a while back, I watched the frail frame blare away at his tenor saxophone, holding the audience spell-bound for a while. Then, the female dancers all tattooed and in raffia-type synthetic skirts would wriggle in, inviting thunderous applause from the crowd... Those were days when the mind would rove, pondering on the irony of this son of

the 'tribal' communalism of old however, his new society is a rallying point of radical pan-Africanism.



Fig. 4: Fela on stage at the African Shrine

was invariably playing medium for *Ogun*; while his preoccupation with mask dramaturgy and the celebration of the fire ether are to be found in *Sango* -the thunder god and progenitor of the *Egungun* mask. Then there is his sublime spirituality in herbal medication which is answerable largely to *Osanyin*.

But above all, Fela was the embodiment of *Esu*, trickster god and god of fate, undecidability and interpretation. In this sense, he was the Hermes of Africa and the black world of the latter part of the 20th century.

Fela uses the mask costume of spiritual powder (chalk) on his face as symbol of man conquering death. His communion with the ancestors is a sort of ritual device to negate absence and also affirm presence with these beginnings. This form merely complements the name Anikulapo-Kuti, a cultural signifier that refers to this concept of continuity. It is not just an ideational category for the Yoruba, it implies both sameness and difference. By the power of the mask you cannot die; when 'death' is eventually reckoned with, however, it is deemed to represent only an aspect of existence, one lives on in other forms, and could indeed reincarnate. Any wonder, therefore, that Fela aggregated this consciousness shortly before his demise. 'I am not dying, I am only going to the land of the spirits,' he had told siblings shortly before his death.

Abani Eda, the unfathomable, is a sobriquet fans invested in him, and he was to embody the features of a number of deities he worshipped. For his vanguardist role and, almost, dionysian excess, he