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**RE- INVENTING FELA ANIKULAPO KUTI: RADICAL MUSICOLOGY AND  
POLITICAL EXPRESSIONISM, A DIALECTICAL INTERROGATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

Most African music explores folklores, histories and culture. They promote African ideas and ideologies and teach lessons and castigate offenders. African music is an exploration and exploitation of African culture, society, history and proverbial explorations; to tell tales, teach the young and old, divulge secrets, praise dignitaries and heroes, and divulge important coded information to the people. Music in Africa is a way of life; the man, his music, and society are synchronized to a point where you can barely understand one without a good understanding of the other. African and Nigerian music express the society; provide corrections and teach history and lessons. Some local dialectical conceptions are more realistic, sometimes with contradictory innocence as presentations become harsh enough to connote meanness and impact( i.e. elicit shame, enough to make the offender commit suicide or go into self-exile). This interesting dimension is taken to a higher spatial spiritual and international dimension by Fela, who was born in Africa; Nigeria, and trained in England. Fela, a mixture of Afro European trained entertainer, but with a rebellious opposition to European cultural domination, termed his musical genre afro beats or afro pop. A combination of the European jazz and African cultural musical innovations, Fela's music was one unique beauty in both composition and lesson and leaning. Fela's music castigated the military, opposed human rights violations and promoted African traditional religion. It was a pattern originated from Yoruba cultural musical practices of making music out of societal ills and histories, a way of repository Knowledge, castigating offenders, praising heroes and redefining politics and society. This paper interrogates the ethnomusicology of Fela's composition in redefining politics and society in Africa.

**KEYWORDS:** Fela Anikulapo, Dialectical Interrogation, Radical Musicology, Political Expressionism

**INTRODUCTION**

Fela Anikulapo, described by authors as a Nigerian multi-instrumentalist, musician, composer, pioneer of afrobeat musical genre and human right activist, and referred to as one of Africa's most challenging charismatic music performer, is noted to have impacted the socio-political environment of Nigeria and Africa for decades. Fela's musical genre entails Afrocentricity, highlife, musical activism, stage performance and song writing. Fela's musicology speaks in high dialectic tone of social protest. The decades between 1958 and 1997 popularized the defense of the oppressed and expressed an African ideal as opposed to colonialism, post-colonial domination, and political oppression. Historically,

radicalism in music was a battle against oppression in Europe and elsewhere. The invention of the Afrobeat by Fela created a vent to criticize, correct and project an expectation of ideal of African democracy. Historically, Fela was born into a family where activism and human right protection was an important agenda fought by his mother, Mrs Funmilayo Kuti and later his Brother Beko Ransome Kuti who led the campaign for democracy, A Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in Nigeria, defending human rights and political oppression. Fela defended the oppressed through his musical expressionism, a traditional mix of jazz and African lyrics which he termed Afrobeats.

A Scholar who participates in music is a musicologist; fela was trained in Europe and returned to Nigeria to produce a social construction that was a solution to the social problems of the day. Botchway (2014) argued that fela's ethnocentrism was the perfect response that frames musical traditions and movements through a socio-cultural lens –an anthropological study of music. Felas music, in addition to analyzing the elements and structures of music from around the world, also examines the cultural significance of musical composition and performance in the context of a community (Yoruba land), i.e in cultural context and within an historical period. Fela's phonograph is used as a means towards objectivity through a feedback system to produce music understood to influence ideas about life and society (Botchway, *ibid*). At an early age Fela experienced politics and music in a seamless combination (*ibid*). The social context of Felas music and art is described to elicit a distinct political meaning that appealed to the society in which he lived. Fela is described as a musician and activist, blending prop lyrics and dance rhythms as a medium for social protest (*ibid*). This paper interrogates the idea that Fela's music was a reinvention of Yoruba traditional ethno musicology. His musical practice also adopted the European musical forms and instrumentals to produce a blend that was unique and had international appeal. Felas music employed the African musical form of expressions to impact and challenge the ruling class, defending the poor. The paper insists this is a form of dialectic interrogation of African cultural thematic and an interesting ethno musical form. The paper is subsequently divided into; conceptual clarifications, African politics, music and expressionism, Fela in history, Fela Anikulapo's musicology and political expressionism: A dialectical interrogation and conclusion

## **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS**

### **Dialectical Interrogation**

Method is discussed in the way human reason is used to produce knowledge. Popper (2004) insists that dialectics applies not only to philosophers and philosophy, but throughout the realm of human thought and enterprise, to science, technology, engineering, politics, (and addition mine) culture and society. A critical method for Marx is the historical dialectical method called Marxist dialectical method (*Ibid*). By Historical materialist dialectical method, Marx refers to the use of human reason to produce knowledge of human existence by seeing it as a historical process within a material reality, literally enabling an understanding of human social being as interrelated and contradictory as it

actually is (Basseches, 2005)). Such reason; dialectical method of reasoning is the means by which Marx produced his own critical thought (ibid). It is dialectical Basseches argued in agreement with Sautre (ibid) in that it is “the knowledge and comprehension of man (Sautre,1976,823, cited in Basseches) in other words, knowledge and the known, the subject and the object, are dialectically related and continue a circle that never ends but maybe adjusted in the process of repetition. He (ibid) concluded that the dialectical method of reasoning is the means by which Marx produced his own critical thought. In this work I conceptualized the idea that Fela’s conception of music was a revisit of African philosophy, enlisted in Yoruba philosophical thematic and also influenced by European cultural musical ideas. I argue that Fela was neither new nor alone in this practice (existing Yoruba musicians include Ologundudu). Other African musicians exist, especially within pan African conceptions). But Fela was uniquely talented and assertive in his presentations to impact his era and posterity.

### **Radical Musicology**

Music is found in every known culture, past and present, varying widely between times and places. Radicalism in music is also world historical (internet source). During the 20th c there was a huge increase on the variety of radical music that people had access to (ibid). Prior to the invention of mass market, twentieth century music was a historical organization of musical style in modern Europe and America. [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/20th\\_c](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/20th_c). In the 1970s African American hip hop musicians began to use the record turn table as a medium (ibid). New musicology is a term applied since the late 1980s to a wide variety of work emphasizing cultural study, analysis, and criticism of music, the internet source noted this could be based on feminist, gender studies, queer theory, or post- colonial theory, or work of Theodor. W. Adorno. Musicology-Wikipedia <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>>... The 20th century saw dramatic innovations in musical forms and styles. Composers and songwriters explored new forms and sounds that challenged the previously accepted rules of music of earlier period, such as the 1940s era music. New musical styles such as genre fusion e.g the fusion of jazz and rock music, the use of new electric, electronic and digital instruments and musical devices, were notable innovations of this era (ibid). In the 1980s, electronic dance music genre such as house music created largely with synthesizers and drums machines were new upcoming innovations. The ability to jet travel with band increased the spread of musical styles. Jerome khol, [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/20th\\_c\\_in\\_9.07](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/20th_c_in_music)

Ethno musicology focuses on the interpretation of musical genres, styles and performances of non-western peoples noted Wikipedia. It is further explained that there are four branches of the study of music. Ethnomusicology is music history, music theory, and systematic musicology. Radical musicology in Africa became more prominent in the wake of pan Africanist movements and the works of decolonization (ibid).

### **The African Conception of Musical Radicalism**

The African conception of radicalism in music is historical and philosophical. The Yorubas for example had philosophical ideas of Ori' the head, it is often said ori leleda, the head is the creator. Ori eni ni ngbeni, the head is the precursor of destiny. Ife is love and considered an important aspect of society, ife lakoja ofin, love is the perfection of the law. Toba lashe, is to say the king's word is divine. The Yoruba ideas of these philosophical notions are put into music for impartation. Music in Yorba land is a medium for information dissemination. It is an avenue to teach and educate the young, a source for inspiring soldiers and medium for political mobilization and castigation. (i.e. traditional and cultural; as noted in my earlier argument in this paper). This became even more prominent in the era of pan Africanism, colonialism and apartheid in Southern Africa. Pan Africanists were prompted by the unpalatable situation people of African descent in the Americas found themselves, such replications in other parts of the Caribbean and Africa, and its wildfire effect was not limited to any continent. The African nationalist movements were a direct child of this movement and the religious appropriations seen in ecclesiastical circles was called ethiopianism and African churches. This was a brand of African nationalism that was expressed through the church. Several radical music of the pan African ideals were produced through the efforts of Bob Marley, Lucky Dube and other Rastafarian musicians of that era and beyond. Radical music was the voice of defense for the oppressed and an opposition to political oppression of the masses. This continued in the post-independence era and became popular with musical forms, even in local linguistical presentations (e.g. Arogundudu, a Yoruba musician popular for criticism of the political class).

Fela was educated in Europe. But had been born and raised in Yoruba land, Nigeria, where he later returned after his European school visit. As a Yoruba growing child, Fela must have inculcated some traditional conceptions as the socialization processes of training children comes from family and the environment. Fela therefore grew up to love and practice this Africanness. Music in Africa expressed moods of joy, sadness, victory, loss and other such emotions. African radical music is ageless and infused with the culture.

### **Political Expressionism**

The connection between music and politics, particularly political expression in song, has been seen in many cultures noted Wikipedia (ibid). it noted that although music influences political movements and rituals, it is not clear how or what extent general audiences relate to music on a political level, examples of national anthems, patriotic songs and political comparisms are songs used to portray a specific political message(ibid). Research evidence suggested that music education has sometimes been used for the ideological purpose of instilling nationalism in children and particularly during war, patriotic songs can escalate to inspire destructive jingoism. (Herbert and other, 2012)

The African idea of political expressionism (within my conceptualization and understanding in this

work) developed and metalized from the ancient African cultural practices and from the era of agitations against colonialism in Africa. In ancient African societies or tribal nations, such as the Yoruba, Tiv, Hausa Fulani, Benin, Itshekiri amongst others, musical political expressions were of relevant use for corrections and praise purposes. Kings were the custodian of politics and culture and perceived as spiritual overlords and the representatives of the ancestors and the gods. They were treated as such and with the relevant paraphernalia of office, part of which entailed the singing of praise to rouse the king in the morning. Such songs of praise entailed the eulogizing of his ancestors in the kingship lineage. Praises expressed his achievements especially as war monger and a dominant force in the geo political environ. When the king however commits an offence or has violated the taboos of the land, women sometimes are employed to sing songs of abuse around the town and even to the palace entrance to express the people's grievances. This is made worse at festivals, when the young and old are allowed indulging in this offensive songs to embarrass and force the king to abdicate the throne in shame. Other important personalities like chiefs also face the same faith at such festive (village festivals) celebrations and other citizens sometimes experience the same castigations in similar circumstances.

During the colonial agitations, African leaders, educated in Europe and the Americas inculcated the Pan African ideological spirit and started the movement for the independence of African states. Pan Africanism became a voice to express the spirit of agitation across Africa. This spirit grew to influence several aspects of society. Ethiopianism and the African churches were the religious expression of this ideological movements and songs by musicians across Africa and elsewhere also promoted these sentiments. The conflict with colonial domination in the domain of music was not limited to this era, as most African states began to experience military takeover of government a little while after independence. The brutality of military dictatorship invited the revival of a pre-colonial ethnomusicology, a practice of political protest songs to express misgivings against the leaders of the day. Several musicians like Bob Marley, Mariam Makeba of South Africa, expressed the spirit of protest and agitations in music. Fela Anikulapo was not left behind in creating a notch for himself in this category. The aim of these musicians was to affect a revolution in their societies. The actual impact in terms of achieving this might not be calculated a success in the case of Fela and even Bob Marley argued Eesuola (ibid). But from the built up popularity at the local, continental and international levels, one could conclude that their achievements were not without some impact. Political expressionism was not limited to music, as pan African leaders wrote books to promote this ideology and others. Independent agitations also found expressions in newspaper write-ups, novel writings, art works and other cultural presentations. In the era of military dictatorship, agitations were also rapt in journalistic writings further encouraging the expression of political agitations. Music however was an important point for these expressions because it has an insidious way of permeating the most unexpected minds. It is often said, music is the language of the soul. Musical expressions' inform and sometimes influence the society for a longer length of time than any other medium of

expressions. For instance, Felas music is post humus impactful and has been receiving awards and accolades across the globe.

### **AFRICAN POLITICS, MUSIC AND EXPRESSIONISM**

Most African music explores folklores, histories and culture. They promote African ideas and ideologies and teach lessons and castigate offenders. African music is an exploration of African culture, society, history and proverbial explorations; to tell tales, teach the young and old, divulge secrets, praise dignitaries, and divulge important coded information to the people; celebrate the achievement of kings and heroes (war, cultural and village heroes etc.) for example a beautiful lady could be praised in songs for her beauty; a thief however is also castigated for his inhuman habits; hostile war faring villages use songs to abuse and denigrate the enemy village, for example, Ayetoro, the writers village in the ancient times sang thus, Eda, ogogo, an ke meranko an kew mo niyan, this is to say, the Edas' (a nearby remote village) were stupid or foolish and could not differentiate between man and animals.

while historical repositories are transmuted through songs. Music in Africa is a way of life; the man and his music are synchronized to a point where you can barely understand one without a good understanding of the other. African and Nigerian music express the society; provide corrections and teach history and lessons. For example Ebenezer Obey in Ko Sogbon te le da, explored the tale of a wise man who attempted to satisfy the whole world but failed woefully and concluded that no wisdom nor attitude can fully satisfy humanity. Sola Allyson Obaniyi's song, ife, bi eji owuro, depicts the Yoruba philosophy about love and the practice of loving in Yoruba cultural environ. Victor Uwaifo's mamiwater –mermaid- was sung to praise and express the existence of the water goddess, and many more across Africa. Across Nigeria, either it is in Hausa land, Igbo culture, Ibibio, Itshekiri and Tiv among others, Nigerian songs depict culture, tell stories of reality and the mystic, propagate cultural proverbial, train the young and old insidiously, and provide entertainment.

This interesting dimension is taken to a higher spatial spiritual and international dimension by Fela, who was born in Africa; Nigeria, and trained in England. Fela, a mixture of Afro European trained entertainer, but with a rebellious opposition to European cultural domination, termed his musical genre afro beats or afro pop. A combination of the European jazz and African cultural musical innovations, felas music was one unique beauty in both composition and lesson and leaning.

Felas music castigated the military, opposed human rights violations and promoted African traditional religion. It was a pattern originated from Yoruba cultural musical practices of making music out of societal ills and histories, a way of repository Knowledge, castigating offenders, praising heroes and redefining politics. Historically, Africa's ethnic groups in their locality sang songs of praises or abuse at festivals to rebuke a king or chief or important personality in the community, songs of praise were



expressed to eulogize, provide political support, encomium, or edification. Such songs are used during festivals and ceremonies, at the burial of great men and to generally entertain while providing important information to the community. For example, the talking drum beats, *Tonibadan ba ku ta ni o joye*, if the king of Ibadan dies who will become the next king, this is a philosophical food for thought and not taken at face value. Social castigations at village festival reveal private dirty jokes about dignitaries, example, *Ayeni osiye, Ayeni osiye*, that is *Ayeni* the promiscuous, this is to publicly debase the personality, to castigate and curb his future escapades. Interestingly, such musical traditions are common in Africa and specifically in southwest Nigeria, the home to Fela Anikulapo Kuti. It is no surprise that Fela, trained abroad and returned to combine the European musical features of jazz and highlife with African folklore, creating a unique brand which he referred to as afrobeat. Fela was able to achieve his political castigations and social corrective through this musicology, and for decades and beyond his death impacted the African and international scene as the activist, political spokesman and voice of the oppressed (De-Valera and Botchway, 2015). For the 20th century Fela stood as a colossus, in African musical expressionism, providing a necessary succor to oppressions of the military dictatorship era. De-Valera and Botchway (2015) recorded the posthumous celebration of Fela on November 23, 2009.

Fela Anikulapo Kuti, who created the music genre afrobeat, was posthumously celebrated by Broadway with a production called *FELA!*, produced by “Jay-Z,” Will Smith, and Jada Pinkett-Smith. Patrons of music and performing arts, who thronged the venue, paid homage to the memory, person, and life of the talented composer, singer, and instrumentalist who died in 1997. It is correct to say that Fela’s legendary status, in the realm of music, indubitably has outlived him (ibid).

De-Valera and Botchway (ibid) acknowledged Fela as a social commentator, whose critical comments often made the government of Nigeria persecute him. To this duo, Fela advocated for a political, cultural, economic, and social renaissance of Africa and people of African descent and encouraged, through his music style and lyrical composition, and non-musical speeches, the idea of Blackism, which fundamentally corresponded with the nationalist ideological sentiments that the Black Power Movement, in the U.S., had projected from the 1960s onward (ibid). This study interrogates the idea that Fela was a musicologist per excellence, creating a musical composition that was undoubtedly African, classically and culturally domiciled in its Africanness and pushing forward the beauty of African traditions, but beautifully inculcating a European tint. It is relevant here to re-emphasize that, in the pre-colonial Africa, music was used to correct social malaise and increase or reduce the tempo in war and peace amongst other usages. It is proverbially said, *ija de ,lorin dowe*, the song is the precursor of the battle, it is ipso facto derivable therefore, that song in the African culture was intertwined with the society, a seemingly interwoven seamlessness that symbolized what Africa and Africanness was in their totality. Now let us take a bird eye view of Fela’s autobiography.

## FELA IN HISTORY

Olufela Olusegun Oludotun Ransome-Kuti was born into a middle class family in Nigeria. Fela Kuti has been variedly described as a musician, composer and activist. His mother was a feminist activist and his father became the first president of the Nigerian Union of Teachers, he was also a catechist to European missionaries, while both of Fela's brothers became famous Nigerian medical doctors. Fela (like his brothers) was sent to London to study medicine but decided to study music instead at the Trinity College of Music. It is noted that at the Trinity College of Music, Fela formed the band Koola Lobitos, playing a style of music that he later named afrobeat. Fela was highly gifted, a multi-instrumentalist who played the saxophone, keyboards, trumpet, drums, and guitar. A composer, and talented singer and a highly energetic live performer, Fela illuminated the musical world of activism in the Nigerian and African stage. His lengthy songs of which most were over ten minutes long were backed up by a consistent groove of drums and bass, a style which heavily influenced the genre of hip-hop (internet sourced,23/3 /19). In 1961, Fela married Remilekun Remi Taylor. They had three children, Femi, Yeni and Sola. Later in his life, Fela became a strong believer in polygamy, and married dozens of women. In 1963, Fela moved back to Nigeria, re-formed Koola Lobitos and in 1969, Fela took the band to the United States. It was in the United States that Fela discovered the Black Power movement which heavily influenced his music and political views, he soon after renamed the band Nigeria '70. Fela and his band, now renamed Afrika '70, returned to Nigeria. He then formed the Kalakuta Republic. Kalakuta Republic was the communal compound that housed Fela's family, band members, and recording studio; it had a free health clinic, and recording facility. Fela declared this compound independent from the Nigerian government. As popular as Fela's music had become in Nigeria and elsewhere, it was also very unpopular with the ruling government, and raids on the Kalakuta Republic were frequent. In 1977 Fela and the Afrika '70 released the hit album *Zombie*, an attack on Nigerian soldiers using the zombie metaphor to describe the methods of the Nigerian military. The album was a hit but infuriated the government, setting off a vicious attack against the Kalakuta Republic, during which one thousand soldiers attacked the compound. In the 1970s and 1980s, Nigerian musician Fela Kuti was widely known as a critic of Nigeria's military government and a number of his songs included political elements (ibid). From 1976 he was detained on at least five occasions. In 1977 his house was burned down and members of his family seriously injured when several hundred soldiers arrested him at his home (ibid). A year later Fela formed his own political party, which he called Movement of the People. In 1979 he put himself forward for President in Nigeria's first elections for more than a decade but his candidature was refused. Fela attempted to run for Nigerian President several times, but was never allowed to. (Culled from- An Unidentified Authour, Internet Source, Fela Kuti pdf- Adobe Reader, Accessed on 23rd May 2019).

Fela Kuti as musician and political activist in Nigeria during the 1970s and 1980s, writing and performing songs with political messages and was on numerous occasions detained and harassed by the authorities and in 1984 he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. (Source, amnesty online



document). Amnesty International began campaigning for his release and many fans of his music from around the world contacted Amnesty International to find out how they could help. He was released from prison in 1986, and that year played at a series of benefit concerts for Amnesty International in the USA (ibid).

Fela continued to make music with his new group Egypt '80. His album outputs slowed in the 1990s, and eventually he stopped releasing albums altogether. Rumors were also spreading that he was suffering from an illness for which he was refusing treatment. On August 3, 1997 Fela's brother, Olikoye Ransome-Kuti, already a prominent AIDS activist announced his younger brother's death a day earlier from Kaposi's sarcoma brought on by AIDS (Culled from- An Unidentified Author, Internet Source, Fela Kuti pdf- Adobe Reader, Accessed on 23rd May 2019).

### **FELA ANIKULAPO'S MUSICOLOGY AND POLITICAL EXPRESSIONISM: A DIALECTICAL INTERROGATION.**

The invention of the Afrobeat by Fela created a vent to criticize, correct and project an expectation of ideal of African democracy. Some local dialectical conceptions are more realistic, sometimes with contradictory innocence as presentations become hash enough to connote meanness and impactful enough to elicit shame (enough to make the offender commit suicide or go into self-exile).

De-Valera and Botchway (2015) stepping away from the traditional biography and Hermeneutics of Fela as a prodigy of music, harsh critic of Nigeria's nation politics, and an enigmatic phallogocentric, discusses him and his musical career as bridges for the Black Power Movement to Africa. These authors further examines Fela as a charismatic continental African who, as a proponent of the empowerment of the diaspora and continental African community, advocated key ideas and sentiments of the Black Power Movement in Africa—a movement that took its genesis from the varieties of the African/Black nationalism tradition and the nationalist sentiment of the African (Black)-American community of the U.S. in the 20th century. (Black Diaspora Review 4(1) winter 2014:4).

Fela was able to achieve his political castigations and social corrective though this musicology, and for decades and beyond his death impacted the African and international scene as the activist, political spokesman and voice of the oppressed. Fela has been severally criticized. Some claim he did not sing jazz. Others believe he was more Afrocentric and anti-European, that is kind of Pan Africanist in outlook. Ethnocentricity therefore is believed to show more or be expressed in Fela's productions. Interestingly, a man cannot be separated from his society. The society creates the man, with socio cultural, religious and environmental inputs. Psychologists claim that what a man would be and become is formed in the first decade and a half of his life. Academic attainments and school socialization processes will have some input, which usually are shaped based on the structure that had been put in place earlier. It is the argument of this paper therefore that Fela's radicalism in music was

generated from family background of activism, educational and environmental impacts (from Yoruba land, his nativity) and from Europe and further promoted by training and experiences. The socio cultural background, the trend of a background of pan Africanism and colonial struggles persisted and a resurgence of anti-military and human right activism in his musical carrier emerged in later years.

“I No Be Gentleman at All oo, I Be Afrikaman, Original...”—Fela Anikulapo Kuti,  
“Gentleman”

### CONCLUSION

This paper argues that Fela revisited the Yoruba musical forms in ethnomusicology, and created a new type of radical music that inculcated the European musical forms to produce a new version referred to as afro pop. Fela’s music, it is argued in this paper was ethnomusicology per excellence and was unique enough to create a vent in the world of music beyond his death. It is emphasized that most African music explores folklores, histories and culture. They promote African ideas and ideologies and teach lessons and castigate offenders. The paper explains that African music is an exploration and exploitation of African culture, society, history and proverbial explorations; to tell tales, teach the young and old, divulge secrets, praise dignitaries and heroes, and divulge important coded information to the people. African and Nigerian music express the society; provide corrections and teach history and lessons. Some local dialectical conceptions it is argued herein are more realistic, sometimes with contradictory innocence as presentations become harsh enough to connote meanness and impact. This interesting dimension is here used to explain the work of Fela, who took Yoruba musicology to a higher spatial spiritual and international dimension. Fela was a mixture of Afro European trained entertainer, but with a rebellious opposition to European cultural domination. A combination of the European jazz and African cultural musical innovations, Fela’s music was one unique beauty in both composition and lesson and leaning. Fela’s music is further argued to have castigated the military, opposed human rights violations and promoted African traditional religion and as argued in this paper it was a pattern originated from Yoruba cultural musical practices of making music out of societal ills and histories. His (Fela) music castigated the military and provided a voice of opposition to human right violations, herein the paper concludes was the Yoruba philosophy and musical forms eulogized. This paper interrogates the ethnomusicology of Fela’s composition in redefining politics and society in Africa.

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