



The State of Nigerian Nation: Is Fela also among the Prophets?

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Abstract

The objectives of this work are to look into the philosophies of Fela Anikulapo Kuti and analyse some of his recorded works, which tend towards the prophetic. It also interrogates the state of the Nigerian nation through the prism of prophetic critique, situating the music and activism of Fela Anikulapo Kuti within a discourse that questions whether he can be regarded as a prophet in the socio-political sense or not. In eliciting information, this work made use of discographies, books and journal articles to establish the analysis. Drawing on biblical and African conceptualisations of prophecy, the study exposed parallels between Fela's fearless denunciations of power and the prophetic tradition of truth-telling, moral correction, and advocacy for the marginalised. Ultimately, the study highlights the enduring relevance of Fela's prophetic imagination for rethinking governance, justice, and freedom in the Nigerian nation. His Afrobeat became both a cultural weapon and a form of social prophecy, exposing systemic injustice and envisioning alternative futures. It also noted that until the cultures and traditions of the Nigerian people are considered in the governance of the populace to a greater extent, while the Western systems are carefully well-thought-out, corruption and poor governance will still persist in the country.

Key terms: Africanism, colonialism, corruption, governance, ideologies.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian nation, often described as the “Giant of Africa,” occupies a strategic place on the continent in terms of population, economy, culture, and politics. Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has pursued the dream of building a united, peaceful, and prosperous society, but has been governed by corrupt leadership systems, which have caused a decline in the entire system. Also, the state of the nation today reflects a complex mixture of achievements and deep-seated challenges. To understand Nigeria’s current condition, one must examine its political climate, economy, security architecture, social conditions, infrastructure, and the overall outlook for the future.

However, the matter of the future cannot be ruled out completely. Prophecies of fortune and doom both follow a particular logic of cause and effect: because of 'A', 'B' will follow; thus, some prediction in some way or another is implied. Nevertheless, rather than straightforward descriptions of future events, the element of prediction is something that develops out of a present situation in which the divine plan, relating to matters in the future, is disclosed. Reading the signs in the present, the prophet (or the interpreter of the prophetic message) is able to make calculated projections of what may or may not happen in the (imminent) future. A popular opinion is that prophecy foretells the future. These are the things that are evidenced in the recorded tracks of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, positioning him as a musical prophet whose works have seen into the future.

The question in the title is carved from the Holy Bible, First Samuel chapter ten and verse eleven (1 Samuel 10:11). It was one of the signs to affirm the prediction that Saul, the son of Kish, was going to be made a king in Israel, even though he was not one of the prophets in Israel. In this sense, a prophet is someone who acts as a 'mouthpiece of a god'; a prophet is a human medium who is capable of receiving and transmitting a message from a deity, speaking of the present and projecting into the future (Nissinen, 2004). He also discussed that all prophecies have bearing on particular socio-historical circumstances, which shows that this divine-human communication is an event in the present, something that happens in the here and now. Rather than prognostication, prophecy pertains to the disclosure of a divine message which is important for the state of affairs in the present.

The biblical prophets were messengers of God who confronted injustice, corruption, and falsehood, calling nations back to righteousness. Fela Anikulapo Kuti, though not a religious prophet, functioned in a prophetic role through music, fearlessly speaking truth to the powers that be in Nigeria; by comparing Fela’s activism to the biblical prophetic tradition, we see parallels in their message, mission, and method.



Figure 1: Fela Anikulapo KUTI (Downloaded from Google Pictures on 18th July, 2023)

Short Biography of Fela Anikulapo KUTI

Fela Anikulapo Kuti was born into the family of Reverend Israel Oludotun Ransome Kuti and Fumilayo Ransome Kuti, who were both late, in Abeokuta on 5th June, 1938. He was a Nigerian Afrobeat music maestro who once lived in the Southwestern part of Nigeria, Lagos state precisely, until his death on August 2nd, 1997. He was a legend that dared the ruling government of his time in all capacities, using musical compositions as a weapon to oppose individuals in power and also confronting the powers that be, without fear. He stood to advocate the evolution of a grassroots and inclusive framework for genuine democracy, which is the literal subject of *Teacher don't teach me Nonsense* (1986), where the artist (Fela) focuses on the inability of the national elite to define a common understanding, as basic as an electoral principle, for its own self-perpetuation (Olorunyomi, 2005). This article then looks at the injustices of the leaders and also discusses Fela's works, exposing the ideologies of corruption in Nigeria, where the leaders want to do the same thing, the same way, perambulating, and yet expecting a different result.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Governance and Corruption

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's critique of governance and corruption in Nigeria was grounded in his belief that the country's political elite perpetuated systemic exploitation through "Authority Stealing," a term he used to describe the scale and impunity of elite corruption. In songs such as *Authority Stealing* (1980), *Coffin for Head of State* (1980), and *Beasts of No Nation* (1989), Fela illustrated how political leaders diverted public resources, engaged in human rights abuses, and maintained structures that marginalised the masses while enriching themselves (Olaniyan, 2004). For example, in authority stealing precisely, Fela emphasised how people in power were syphoning government funds with boldness and authority at the expense of the masses.

Also, in 'Beast of no Nation', he emphasised that Nigeria's governance crisis was inseparable from the culture of impunity fostered by successive military regimes, which he condemned for their authoritarianism and disregard for true democratic accountability (Veal, 2000). By portraying corruption as both a moral and structural problem, Fela framed Nigeria's political instability as the outcome of institutional failures that eroded public trust and hindered national development, which has made Nigeria suffer inside plenty (Moore, 2009).

Economic Challenges

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's reflections on Nigeria's economic challenges were deeply influenced by his critique of corruption, mismanagement, and neo-colonial economic structures that, in his view, perpetuated national underdevelopment and corrupt leaders. Through songs such as *Colonial Mentality* (1977) and *International Thief Thief (ITT)* (1979), Fela argued that Nigeria's economic crises were the result of an elite class that collaborated with multinational corporations and foreign governments to exploit national resources for personal enrichment (Veal, 2000). He emphasised that economic hardship—manifested in widespread poverty, inflation, and inadequate public services—was inseparable from political corruption and the prioritisation of foreign interests over the welfare of Nigerian citizens (Olaniyan, 2004). Olaniyan also expressed these from Fela's critique on the position of Nigeria's economic instability as a structural problem rooted in both internal governance. Olorunyomi (2003) and Moore (2009) also express Fela's dissatisfaction with the failures and global economic inequalities of Nigeria.

Security and Social Cohesion

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's critique of security and social cohesion in Nigeria was rooted in his condemnation of state violence and institutional repression, which he argued were central drivers of social fragmentation. Through works such as *Zombie* (1976) and *Beasts of No Nation* (1989), Fela exposed how militarisation, police brutality, and the suppression of dissent eroded public trust and undermined national unity (Olaniyan, 2004). He emphasised that genuine security could only emerge from transparent governance, respect for human rights, and equitable socio-political structures (Veal, 2000). By framing social cohesion as dependent on justice and civic dignity, which were lacking or absolutely absent in Nigerian governance, Fela positioned Nigeria's instability as a consequence of leadership practices that alienated citizens and weakened shared identity (Moore, 2009).

3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Social Issues

In the light of the governance and corruption, economic challenges, security, and social cohesion, which all came as a result of the bad governance of the nation, whose greatest strength lies in its people. With over 250 ethnic groups and multiple religions, the nation is a tapestry of cultures and traditions (Falola, 2020). However, these diversities and multiplicities have also been sources of tension, especially when manipulated for political or economic gain. Ethnic rivalries, religious intolerance, and regional inequalities continue to threaten national unity.

Education and healthcare, two pillars of human development, face serious shortcomings. Public schools and universities are underfunded, leading to frequent strikes and declining quality of education (Adebanwi, 2021). The healthcare system remains inadequate, pushing many Nigerians to seek treatment abroad when possible. The result is a cycle of underdevelopment, as young people struggle to acquire the skills needed to compete globally, and the nation faces a "brain drain" of professionals leaving in search of better opportunities.

Who are Prophets?

Biblical contextualisation of the prophets requires understanding them as God's appointed messengers who spoke into specific historical and cultural settings, while also addressing timeless truths about justice, faithfulness, and hope. Their messages challenge both ancient Israel and modern societies to align with God's covenant purposes. Ultimately, the prophetic tradition finds its climax in Christ, the fulfilment of God's promises and the embodiment of divine truth.

In many African societies, while the word *prophet* is not always used, there are prophetic figures who play similar roles to biblical and Islamic prophets. They are often diviners, seers, visionaries, or priests who mediate between the spiritual and human worlds. Fela Anikulapo Kuti, though a musician, composed and sang in the ways and manners of the prophets and the prophetic, correcting vices and many social and political injustices of his time within the ruling military government and political bureaucrats.

X-Raying Fela Anikulapo Kuti

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti (1938–1997) occupies a legendary position in African and global music history. Known as the pioneer of Afrobeat, Fela combined traditional African rhythms, jazz, highlife, funk, and political lyricism to forge a powerful musical tradition that transcended entertainment (Veal, 2000). His artistry, activism, and unconventional lifestyle made him both controversial and revered, ensuring his place as a

musical icon whose influence continues to resonate across generations, resonating his artistic innovations, political engagement, cultural identity, and global legacy. Beyond its sonic appeal, Fela's music functioned as a medium of political critique. He famously described his music as a "weapon" against oppression. In postcolonial Nigeria, marked by military coups, corruption, and social inequality, Fela used Afrobeat to expose the failures of leadership. Songs such as *Zombie* (1976) mocked the Nigerian military's blind obedience, while *Sorrow, Tears, and Blood* (1977) lamented state violence (Moore, 1982). His lyrical content was unapologetically confrontational, giving voice to the frustrations of ordinary Nigerians while challenging political elites. This fusion of music and activism distinguished Fela as more than a performer—he became a prophetic figure, using art to contest power (Olaniyan, 2004).

Fela's Cultural Identity and Pan Africanism

Fela also projected himself as a custodian of African identity. Rejecting Western cultural domination, he embraced traditional Yoruba spirituality, decorated his domain with African posh, and celebrated African languages through his songs, which often combined English with Pidgin and Yoruba (Oikelome, 2014). His philosophy of Pan-Africanism drew inspiration from thinkers such as Kwame Nkrumah and Marcus Garvey, emphasising African unity and self-determination (Collins, 2009). Through his music and lifestyle, Fela symbolised a reclaiming of African pride in the face of neo-colonial influence. His Lagos-based performance space, the *Kalakuta Republic*, functioned as a cultural commune that embodied his ideals of freedom, resistance, and cultural authenticity. His legacy extends beyond music into theatre and film, with productions like *FELA!* on Broadway highlighting his cultural impact (Akinwumi, 2012). Today, Afrobeat has evolved into Afro-fusion and Afrobeats, genres that dominate global music charts while carrying echoes of Fela's pioneering spirit. His defiance of musical conventions and political oppression has made him a lasting symbol of artistic resistance.

Fela Anikulapo Kuti as a Prophet

The concept of prophecy has often been associated with religious figures in biblical traditions, but in a broader sense, prophets can be understood as individuals who interpret the social, political, and moral conditions of their time while warning against the impending consequences of injustice. Fela Anikulapo-Kuti occupies such a position in modern African cultural history. He stands tall as a prophet by situating his music within the prophetic tradition, analysing his critique of leadership, his articulation of societal truth, and his role in mobilising popular consciousness.

Prophets are often characterised by their ability to "speak truth to power" and to challenge dominant systems of oppression (Brueggemann, 2001). In biblical contexts, prophets denounced corruption and called communities to repentance. Similarly, in African contexts, cultural prophets often take on the role of social commentators, activists, and visionaries (Ukpokolo, 2010). Fela's prophetic voice was not expressed through a pulpit but through Afrobeat music, which combined artistry with political urgency. His songs became modern-day "oracles" that revealed the failures of governance and demanded justice for the oppressed.

Fela's Music as Prophecy of Nigerian Nationhood

Fela described his music as a "weapon" (Olaniyan, 2004), and in this sense, his Afrobeat compositions functioned as prophetic texts. In *Zombie* (1976), he condemned the military's blind obedience, likening soldiers to lifeless beings controlled by their commanders. He openly criticised Nigeria's government for

no improvement, saying that they go around in the same position with no real evidence of true governance. He sang about that in *Perambulator* (1983):

Perambulator (Text)

| | |
|---|---------------------------|
| Call: Perm—bu—lator | Response: Perambulator |
| Call: Perm—bu—lator | Response: Perambulator |
| Call: He must to turn turn right Turn right for nothing | Response: Turn turn left |
| Call: He must to turn turn left Turn left for nothing | Response: Turn turn left |
| Call: He must to turn to go turn to go for nothing | Response: Turn to go |
| Call: He must to come come down Come down for nothing | Response: Come come down |
| Call: He must to turn turn round Turn round for nothing | Response: Turn turn round |
| Call: If you look the man well na the same place he dey go | Response: Same same place |
| Call: Perm—bu—lator | Response: Perambulator |
| Call: Perm—bu—lator | Response: Perambulator |

Fela, in this song track, describe Nigeria's situation as perambulating. This is a situation where Nigeria maintain a workless policy being operated in the same way and expects a different result. Also, the repetition of the same people, whether in military or civilian roles, governs the people for many years, which Fela described as perambulating. Perambulating is a term used for people walking about with no particular scope or target, hence the situation of leadership in Nigeria.

In *Sorrow, Tears, and Blood* (1977), he warned of the destructive consequences of state violence, echoing biblical laments about injustice. In *Coffin for Head of State* (1981), he directly challenged religious and political hypocrisy. Like ancient prophets, Fela employed vivid imagery, metaphor, and satire to critique oppression and to announce the inevitable downfall of corrupt systems.

Fela's prophetic role was particularly pronounced in his critique of Nigeria's postcolonial leadership. He consistently denounced military dictatorships, corruption, and neocolonial exploitation. His philosophy of "Africanism" positioned him as a cultural prophet calling for a return to indigenous values and authentic African identity (Collins, 2009). Much like prophets in the Hebrew Bible, who stood against kings and elites, Fela confronted leaders at great personal cost, enduring arrests, beatings, and the destruction of his commune, the Kalakuta Republic (Moore, 1982). His suffering, far from silencing him, only deepened his prophetic image in the eyes of the people.

His critiques of corruption, police brutality, and economic mismanagement remain relevant in contemporary Nigeria. Modern artists such as Seun Kuti, Femi Kuti, and Burna Boy continue his prophetic tradition, using music as a tool of political commentary (Oikelome, 2014). Beyond music, Fela's prophetic stance has inspired social movements, theatre adaptations like *FELA!* on Broadway, and academic debates on the role of cultural prophets in postcolonial societies.

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This work has revealed a man who lived as a musical prophet, political rebel, and cultural icon. He used Afrobeat not just for entertainment but as a weapon against injustice, echoing the prophetic tradition of truth-telling. Though controversial in his lifestyle, his message of resistance and hope continues to resonate in Nigeria and across the world. Fela remains a timeless voice reminding Africa of the power of truth, justice, and freedom.

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti can be understood as a prophet in the African cultural-political context. Through Afrobeat, he diagnosed Nigeria's moral decay, condemned corrupt leadership, and called for a society grounded in justice and authenticity. His fearless defiance, moral vision, and symbolic acts mirror the biblical prophetic tradition, while his enduring influence affirms his role as a prophetic voice for Africa and the world. Fela thus transcends the category of "musical icon" to become a cultural prophet whose message of resistance and liberation continues to resonate. In many of his recorded tracks, many of the issues raised by him transcend his death and still resonate in everyday life in Nigeria. "Is Fela also among the prophets?"

Recommendations: The Prophetics provide a framework for confronting Nigeria's pressing issues—corruption, injustice, insecurity, and moral decline—while also offering hope for restoration. Just as biblical prophets spoke truth to their generation, Nigeria today needs prophetic voices such as Fela, musicians, who, as leaders, religious figures, intellectuals, artists, and ordinary citizens, call the nation back to justice, righteousness, and unity under God.

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