



Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's 'Beast of No Nation': A Historical Discourse

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For Fela, music was not only a weapon but a means to change the world.¹ He was conscious of this and very much vigorously pursued it with all sense of devotion. Such was the nature of his music that Fela himself had once said he wanted to play music that would not only be meaningful but also stand the test of time. True to this day, most, if not all, of Fela's music have stood that "test" and in all, continues to elicit debate among a wide spectrum of society. Known for his pioneering efforts in creating the Afro-beat genre, Fela is considered as one of the most important music personalities to have emerged in post-independence Nigeria. Beyond this, he is best described as a legendary rebel, no doubt, with a cause, who at times wore an eccentric garb. He was perhaps the only musical figure of his generation who used music as a potent weapon and voice against tyranny, brutality and oppression. His fierce criticisms against the political class and on diverse issues of the day earned him constant rebuttal by the government. It is against this background and his brutal experiences in the hands of the Nigerian state that formed the crux of most of his protest music, *Beast of No Nation* not being an exception.

A song like *Beast of No Nation* is not uncommon in Fela's music corpus. This however, appear to be unique for two possible reasons. First, typical of Fela who was anti-system, especially at a time when yet another prison term was slammed on him, following charges of money laundering; it was expedient, therefore, to release a song critical of the way he was 'unfairly' treated by the law and state. Second, by the 1980s, global politics had taken a frightening turn and as Cold War tensions brewed, apartheid in South Africa heightened, the Arab-Israeli war further escalated while coups in Africa worsened. In all of these, the United Nations (UN) failed to act appropriately or even decisively. The twin-events, the latter which Fela followed dispassionately, possibly explain his decision to release the album, *Beast of No Nation*.

Following his release from prison in 1986, Fela released the '*Beast of No Nation*' to critical acclaim. The song came not only as a scathing criticism of the Nigerian military regime but was in response to the event surrounding his detention and prison experience. Specifically composed in themes which highlight, among other things, the characteristic brutal nature of military rule, human rights abuses, undemocratic nature of the UN and apartheid

¹ See Moore, Carlos. *Fela, Fela: this Bitch of a Life*. Allison and Busby, 1982, p. 257.

in South Africa, the ultimate aim of the song was to expose political figures and state/global institutions which for Fela represented repression and oppression. While the narratives in the *Beast of No Nation* was framed to show Fela's own frustrations with the Nigerian state *vis-à-vis* his caustic impression of the state of affairs of the global community, this paper contends that a number of issues raised in the song did not reflect the true account of what occurred during this period. The paper, therefore, examines the historical context through which the album was released and attempts a critique of some of the issues raised in it by Fela.

CONTEXT, MEANING, AND INTERPRETATION IN BEAST OF NO NATION

After his release from jail term in 1986, Fela released the album, *Beast of No Nation*. Aside the motives of the album stated above, it also came in response to other pressing demands. One, after his release, fans were eager to know the next song he had in mind like he had done with previous songs or to it put appropriately, they wanted to know more about his prison experiences. Two, having been jailed by the military, Fela decided to release a song to vent his anger on the former for unjustly incarcerating him on what was believed to be a 'false charge' and three, because a number of global events at the time was not in tune with what the UN stood for which Fela found purely as an unforgiving act of aggression by the powerful against the weak. In the event of these, it became imperative to release an album so critical as to meet these 'pressing demands'. These demands would therefore, form the nucleus of the album that came to be known as *Beast of No Nation*.

It would seem for Fela that his prison experience was not of much importance to narrate than the events that led to it. This is because in the album, he did not provide in clear details what transpired inside his prison cell. This could possibly have been deliberate because his prison experience was not as important as the sum total of what transpired between him and the Nigerian state which ultimately led to his incarceration. It could therefore, explain why Fela decided to divide his experiences into what he termed "inside" and "outside" worlds.² Interestingly, Fela had released songs like *Alagbon Close*, *Kalakuta Show* and *Expensive Shit*, all of which explains some of his past prison experiences.³ Hence, it wouldn't have been necessary to highlight them once again in the *Beast of No Nation*, since these appear as normal everyday experiences. Interestingly though, Fela would later admit elsewhere that his prison experience was more of a personal development, "bodily and spiritually" which he was no more afraid of and was willing to return to prison "if it's for something positive" (Disu 27).

Nothing could have been most excruciating for Fela than the ugly experiences in the "outside world" which he further summed as a "craze world". For him, a "craze world" was where the police, military, magistrate, court among other 'instruments of state' connived to find him guilty and ultimately jail him on false charges. The album was categorical in its criticisms of not only these state institutions which Fela saw as repressive, but also individuals who headed such state bureaucracies. It is here Fela came heavy on the government, describing specific figures with expletive tags. For many who are wont to know

² We take "inside world" to mean the sum total of Fela's experiences in prison and "outside world," all the events that culminated into Fela's 5-year prison sentence by the Nigerian state.

³ *Alagbon Close* most especially provides a graphic illustration of the brutality inside the infamous Alagbon Police Station in Lagos, Southwest Nigeria.

Fela, using such tags was a typical attribute of his satirical writings, stage shows and musical performances. This was noticeable after his return from the US in the 70s, where in reaction to the military's continued stay in power, Fela's music appeared vocal and highly critical of the status quo. This would set the stage for his "Yabis music," as Michael Olatunji called it (26-46). He notes that Fela used this "new phenomenon" to ridicule the government of the day while government policies became subjects of derision. Matched with the satirical nature of this "Yabis session," Fela thereafter, starts with a sort of dialogue with members of his band or audience (32). It is interesting to state that aside the Yabis Sessions, Fela's live shows engaged in spiritual eccentricities and at the same time, intersected by political cum philosophical illuminations. This perhaps was done to engage the minds of the audience in ways as to expose them to the machinations of the military. In any case, before the actual performance, a form of traditional ceremony was performed where libation is poured, and sanctification made, to the ancestors or gods. This was then followed by "a stroll around and talk for twenty or thirty minutes" on the recent occurrence or trends of the day which include "the latest police attack or something the government was doing" (Van Pelt). Fela would then veer into the main song which often last for about an hour or a little less than that.

To prove his innocence, Fela had indicated that the judge who presided over his money-laundering trial had visited him while in prison to 'apologise'.⁴ This would, however, generate much sympathy for Fela and controversy at the same time. To provide a better grasp of what Fela meant in his description of outside world, he makes reference to the senseless killings of university students both at Ife and Zaria under the military regime.⁵ Fela had insisted that in the event of this perilous attack on the masses, where brutal repression was the order of the day; it could only mean the country was indeed, impervious. As noted above, Fela was more interested in happenings within his own country, following his release from prison where he highlighted some of them in the new album. By so doing, his experiences before his prison sentence remain germane for our understanding of his eventual path to prison and what occurred in it. For Fela, the outside world represented impunity which stood more as a rule than exception. If he could be jailed despite his innocence, Fela argued, no other description best fits except that it was a 'craze world'.

Not done, Fela unequivocally lampooned the most crucial policy of the military regime popularly referred to as War Against Indiscipline (WAI). The WAI was promulgated by the military at the time to tackle the hydra-headed monster of corruption and indiscipline which had eaten deep into the country.⁶ In a bid to curb indiscipline, the military used

⁴ Justice Gregory Okoro-Idogu who had jailed Fela came visiting a sick relative at the Maiduguri University Teaching Hospital Fela was similarly admitted. Having been informed that Fela was on the sick bed, he decided to commiserate with him. Much of what transpired between the pair remains in contention.

⁵ For the Zaria killings among others, see Sheppard Jr., Nathaniel. "Nigeria Imposes National Ban on Protest after College Riots." *Chicago Tribune*, 30 May 1986; Adebayo, P.F. "Students' Crisis: Dimension of Student-Police Relations in Nigeria." *Ilorin Journal of Education*, vol. 21, 2002, p. 75-82 and Akintola, Bukola. "The Perils of Protest: State Repression and Student Mobilization in Nigeria." *Encountering the Nigerian State*, edited by Adebani, Wale, and Ebenezer Obadare, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 104-111.

⁶ On the WAI, see Ugwuegbu, Denis Chima E. *Social Psychology and Social Change in Nigeria: A Systematic Evaluation of Government Social Policies and Programs*. iUniverse, 2011, pp. 132-134; May, Clifford D. "Nigeria's Discipline Campaign: Not Sparing the Rod." *The New York Times*, 10 Aug. 1984 and Agbaje, Adigun, and Jinmi Adisa, "Political Education and Public Policy in Nigeria: The War Against Indiscipline." *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1988, pp. 22-37.

derogatory terms to describe the mass of its 'unruly' population. This, Fela expressed, was not only abominable but outright condemnable. The import of Fela's argument stemmed from the fact that irrespective of the unruly attitude exhibited by the citizen, such appellations should not have been expressed. It presupposes that a government which identifies its people with such description should not only be condemned but also disconnected from it. Similarly, the global community which provides support for such regime should by extension consigned to the same fate.

It is important to mention here one of the reasons Fela used such strong expletive terms in the *Beast of No Nation*. The album, reactionary from all indications and typical of Fela, was, as a blistering commentary on the politics of the period, aimed at expressing his own frustrations and protest against injustice and the flagrant abuse of the rule of law by the government. Under a military regime, however good-intentioned, the tendency to engage in acts of tyranny, brutality and human rights abuses were not unlikely. This was not oblivious to Fela, having been a direct victim of such acts of military brutality in the past. Hence, under this stark reality, the song was quick to make use of such profane and expletive terms. It was against this backdrop that Fela took a swipe at the UN, questioning her idea of a democratic and united entity. The UN, according to Fela, was short of being addressed as a democratic institution because a few member states appear to arrogate more power to itself against the majority? Pointing emphatically at the huge disparity between the powers exercised by the Security Council and the National Assembly, Fela was concerned as to why the former ascribed for itself the "veto power" despite its minimal number and the latter none, despite its large representation. Throwing the gauntlet, Fela also questioned the rationale behind the conflict between Britain's Margaret Thatcher and Argentina over the Falkland Island, America's Ronald Reagan and Libya over the Berlin discotheque bombing, Israel and Lebanon over Israeli occupation of Lebanon and Iraq and Iran over the former's invasion of the latter, if truly the UN claimed to be united. Not even the destructive nature of the Cold War was spared Fela's criticisms of the UN. According to Fela, if the UN was set up to promote world peace, security and cooperation and prevent an escalation of war and conflict that had ravaged the global community in the first half of the 20th century, the above listed conflicts shouldn't have been encouraged. Paradoxically, each of these countries in conflict held membership status in the same UN whose objectives, among others, was to promote justice and peaceful settlement of conflict. Such a global body, Fela argued, could not claim to be united since the ultimate aim was to engage in proxy wars and conflict between and among member states. Similarly, Fela berated the veto policy of the UN Security Council where "one veto vote is equal to 92". Apart from making no practical sense, he argued, it was an undemocratic statute pursued by those with "animal sense" (Fela).

The idea of an album like *Beast of No Nation*, as this paper notes, was a calculated reaction to a number of national and global dynamics. Fela was able to creatively fuse together each of these experiences to protest against world oppression and human rights abuses perpetrated by powerful states against weaker ones, on the one hand, and the inherent contradictions within the UN which fostered these acts of aggression, on the other hand. Remarkably, virtually all of Fela's songs capture most of these peculiarities and global trends which are more often than not used as album titles, album covers or song tracks. Similarly, the inspiration for the album title, *Beast of No Nation* was extracted from the June 1986 speech of President Pik Botha, the infamous leader of South Africa's apartheid regime.

Fela's use of invectives to describe certain political figures could be noted in the latter part of the song where he raised the burning issue of human rights. He described the

pursuit of human rights by the UN as *faux pas*. His argument was primed on the fact that human rights were the legitimate right of the individual and hence, cannot be given by a higher authority. In Fela's own words, human right was the "property" of an individual and therefore, the UN cannot "dash" the individual his own property. Giving the individual a right, Fela posits, which he or she rightly and naturally owns, could only be extended by those who have underlying motives.

Fela's constant use of diatribes in his music was not unknown to many but in *Beast of No Nation*, there was an apparent difference. This was because, having been reminded by his constituents that the use of polemics in his music was perhaps, the sole reason he was mostly hounded and jailed by the government, Fela in his defence argued that his use of the expletives and especially *Beast of No Nation* to symbolise political figures were not his own making but that of the South African apartheid leader, Botha who at the height of the anti-apartheid disturbances, and in response to the increasing act of civil disorder and agitation by the Black majority in that country, made a statement where he was famously quoted as saying "this uprising will bring out the beast in us". What this statement implied was that under a continued violent struggle against apartheid, the regime would similarly react through the use of force and brutal suppression to end the embarrassing disturbances and struggle.

Under the growing perceptible oppression and suppression against the Black majority in South Africa by the apartheid regime, permanent members of the Security Council which should have heavily sanctioned the errant regime provided it with even the most tacit support. This is evident in the reactions of Reagan and Thatcher who followed suit, albeit on a different pedestal, where they called for a "constructive engagement" (de Klerk) and "similar patience and persistence" (Thatcher) with the apartheid regime because "between apartheid and democracy, the known devil was preferable" (Evans). Similarly, Thatcher, in a brazen show of solidarity, was widely reported to have written to Botha in October 1985 with a promise "to continue fighting the good fight against sanctions" (McSmith). Following this, Fela argued that since there was an apparently undeniable and close relationship between Botha, Thatcher and Reagan, on the one hand, and other apartheid friendly nations, on the other hand, there was no justification in promoting human rights through the UN since each gave strong backing and supported the suppression of the basic human rights of majority Black South Africans. Since there existed a 'constructive engagement' with the apartheid regime rather than isolation and sanctions, it would appear that a high degree of acceptance and support for Botha's human rights abuses was embraced by Western leaders who Fela noted had same "animal" characteristics as Botha himself.

In the final analysis, Fela contends that as members of the UN and Security Council, Reagan and Thatcher, rather than help to promote justice and human rights for the Black peoples of South Africa turned a blind eye to their plight. As such, the UN and its apartheid sympathisers belonged to what Fela collectively termed 'Beast of No Nation'. What this means by implication is that the United Kingdom (UK), US and UN could not claim to champion human rights elsewhere having shown any reason or commitments whatsoever, in promoting same in apartheid South Africa, Argentina among other UN member countries bedevilled by conflict.

CONFRONTING THE PROBLEMATIC

By putting Fela's album into broader perspectives, we are here confronted with two problematic inquiries, both of which come with diagnoses. One, was the album meant to stir up sympathy for Fela based on the narratives rooted in it? Two, was Fela truly conversant with the global political interplay at the time to have claimed that the UN was undemocratic? In response to the first problematic, it would seem that the song, critical and politically profound as the messages were, did much to malign the government's decrees or laws on criminal offences, for example, such as money-laundering which Fela was appropriately accused of, even when it was clear to both the government and citizens that these decrees were part of efforts at salvaging the socio-economic and political malaise dwarfing the country's development at the time. This is because following the 1983 coup that ousted the civilian regime of President Shehu Shagari, former political office holders who had corruptly enriched themselves were discovered to have hoarded foreign currencies in their respective homes and private vaults⁷ while others laundered or smuggled them abroad.⁸ This would pose a serious economic and image problem for the new military regime which had swept into power under the mantra of fighting corruption and gross indiscipline in the system, hence the promulgation of a number of decrees or acts to usher in a new era in the country. One of such decrees was the Exchange Control (Anti Sabotage) Act of 1984.⁹ This Act was instrumental in the case that ultimately sentenced Fela to five years imprisonment.

To paint a clear picture of the events that led Fela into prison in 1984, it is instructive to state here that Nigeria, during the Second Republic, was on the brink of disaster. The display of arrogance and mind-bungling corruption by the ruling elites amidst socio-economic challenges made the emergence of the military imperative (Joseph; Falola and Ihonvbere; Achebe). The coup was in fact a welcome relief for a large section of the population, considering the persistent hardship many faced. By the time the coup leaders set to work, the country was discovered to have not only been plundered but acts of gross indiscipline overwhelmed all sectors of the economy. A thorough clean-up was, therefore, imperative, one which had to involve 'draconian' policies if not far-reaching reforms, should the country return to sanity. It was here Fela ran once again into trouble with the government and its laws.

Much has been said about Fela's 4 September 1984 proposed playing tour of the US. It was in fact, his first since 1969. The tour was however, cut short after Fela was approached by airport officials for having with him 1600 pounds as against the 100 pounds

⁷ *The New York Times* noted that \$56,000 and \$4.5 million were found in the residences of former Vice President, Alex Ekwueme and civilian governor of Kano State, Alhaji Sabo Bakin Zuwo, respectively. See, for example, "Buhari's New Government Recovers Stolen Millions from Ex-Ministers." *The New York Times*, 21 Jan. 1984 and "Buhari's Tribunal Jails Former Gov. Melford Okilo of Rivers State for 21 Years for having Foreign Accounts." *The New York Times*, 10 June 1984.

⁸ A typical example was the case of Minister of Transportation, Alhaji Umaru Dikko who fled to the UK and was almost hounded back to the country in a crater. See "Why we didn't Return Umaru Dikko's Loot - UK." *The Punch* [Lagos], 15 Aug. 2015.

⁹ The Exchange Control (Anti-Sabotage) Act of 1984 was a successor to The Foreign Exchange Anti-Sabotage Decree of 1977 which stipulated stiff penalties for offenders. This decree was in response to the foreign exchange malpractices and illegal currency markets operating across the country. The decree was promulgated alongside a special tribunal. See Hashim, Yahya, and Kate Meagher. *Cross-Border Trade and the Parallel Currency Market: Trade and Finance in the Context of Structural Adjustment*. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1999, p. 72.

Basic Travel Allowance stipulated by law. Confronted by immigration officials, Fela claimed that his 45 band member crew were entitled to 50 pounds each from the 1600 pounds, albeit by the time the said amount was divided by that number, it still didn't add up to a total of 1600 pounds. Fela was, hence, arrested and dragged to the Justice Gregory Okoro-Idogu led Exchange Control (Anti-Sabotage) Tribunal (assisted by two junior ranking military officers). While Fela's lawyer, Mr. Kanmi Isola Osobu agreed that he had broken the law under this Act, and having failed with the argument to use the moral turf, quickly put forward a ninety-point appeal for reconsideration to the Supreme Military Council, an appeal that failed on arrival (Concord Weekly 8).¹⁰ The question therefore: did Fela break the law? Legally, there was no doubt that he did under the Exchange Control (Anti-Sabotage) Act but when the charges against him are again scrutinised based on its merit, he was not. This is because, unlike former government officials who were charged and found guilty of 'illegitimate wealth acquisition' or 'money laundering', Fela's 1600 pounds was a legitimate earning and so, should have been weighed technically on that merit by the Tribunal. Failure to declare the said amount before the law for proper documentation and onward use before travelling, however, turned out to be Fela's albatross.¹¹ Majemite Jaboro provides us with a clear account on why Fela, despite having foreknowledge of the Act, failed to comply with the law. He noted that as part of Fela's entourage on the US tour was one Professor Hindu (Kwaku Addaie), a magician, spiritual guide and close confidant of Fela. Professor Hindu was highly revered and trusted by Fela such that when airport officials found the said amount on Fela, he called out silently to Professor Hindu to make the money vanish. Disobliging, Professor Hindu responded by claiming that he could not use his powers for personal motives.¹² Fela was visibly shocked since his intention to hold on to the money was to 'ridicule' and 'embarrass' the military government using Professor Hindu's knowledge of "magic to break the law" after which a press conference would be called to show "... he had beaten the regime with magic" (Jaboro).

We could, therefore, infer from the above that the Beast of No Nation, where Fela claimed he was unjustly "found guilty" and "jailed for five years", despite his innocence, was not only false based on the above stated facts but also misleading. This part of the album, despite the false narrative, was simply meant to whip up sentiments for Fela and ultimately to embarrass and cast the government in a bad light. Two of such sentiments are worthy of mention here. First is the account given by Rilwan "Showboy" Fagbemi, Fela's baritone saxophonist who observed in a 2012 interview that the money found on Fela was not his but that of Professor Hindu who had hidden it inside a coat and handed it to Fela during the passenger search at the airport. According to Rilwan, Professor Hindu had accosted Fela to intimate him of the money "in my coat" which he said had been brought in from Europe. Fela in turn collected the coat in the hope, based on self-recognition; he would be exempted from being searched. Rilwan averred that 8,600 pounds was discovered on Fela, an offense which was eventually used against him. He went on to point out the conspiracy between the police officer in charge of Fela's arrest and the Presidency, where the latter had requested

¹⁰ The Supreme Military Council, despite pressures to look into and reconsider Fela's case refused to compromise its stand, stating since the law was broken punishment should suffice.

¹¹ For a detailed account, see Denselow, Robin. "Nigeria's New President Muhammadu Buhari – the Man who Jailed Fela Kuti." *The Guardian* [Lagos], 01 Apr. 2015.

¹² Another narration claimed Professor Hindu promised to make the money vanish if Fela handed it to him. Hindu's magic did not only fail but the money eventually discovered on him by immigration control. See Collins, John. *Fela: Kalakuta Notes*. Wesleyan University Press, 2015, p. 129.

for Fela's immediate release "if you do not have anything incriminating against him". The Presidency, according to Rilwan, had expected to find Marijuana on Fela but later held on to the offense of money-laundering (Showboy). Though this account cannot be ignored, it somewhat contradicts Majemite's own account and several diverse accounts of what truly transpired at the airport. First, there are divergent views as to the exact amount found on Fela. Unlike Rilwan's view above, however, many agree the amount was 1,600 pounds. Second, who owned the money found on Fela? Again, many agree the money was a legitimate earning owned by Fela and withdrawn for use on the US tour. This again nullifies Rilwan's account. Third, could there have been a "conspiracy at the highest level" by the government to desperately jail Fela when in actual fact; it was obvious he had run afoul of the law? What is not in dispute in all of these accounts is that Fela had on him an amount that exceeded what the law stipulated and whether the government shielded key witnesses from testifying on his behalf as widely speculated or had easily played into the hands of a government that had wanted to nail him at all cost and on the slightest provocation, the fact remained that Fela broke the law, one whose penalties were not unknown to Fela himself and the general public. In essence, there couldn't have been such idea of a 'conspiracy' to jail him. Fourth, a commentary had suggested that "the technical nature of ... [Fela's] offence" coupled with the negligible amount concerned indicated that the Tribunal was "driven by the personal malice of someone highly placed in the...regime" (Howe 133). While the nature of the offence may have been 'technical' as the commentary suggests, it was unlikely to be 'driven by personal malice' as the writer suggested. This is because, a law was in place to tackle the challenge of currency trafficking, foreign exchange malpractices and illegal currency markets operating in the country. This law was altruistic in the sense that it was aimed at placing an embargo and stipulating stiff penalties on a few economic saboteurs whose illegal actions had put heavy pressures on the parallel market and economy.

Also, the laws were clear on such offences and Fela's impertinence for the law wouldn't have made any difference. The fact that the law was not unknown to Fela and that he deliberately broke it as pointed out in Majemite's account above, showed that the Tribunal was not acting out a script but following the due process of the law as enshrined under the Exchange Control (Anti-Sabotage) Act. Lastly, while we cannot rule out the possibility that vested powers within the military hierarchy would have wanted him jailed by all means necessary to keep him out of circulation, an attempt to circumvent the law, as Fela was always wont to do, was too much of a risk to take based on the above stated narrative.¹³

'FELA/OKORO-IDOGU AFFAIR' AND WAI: SETTING THE RECORDS STRAIGHT

Before we examine the second problematic, it is instructive to visit two salient points Fela raised in the album – his chance-meeting with Justice Okoro-Idogu in hospital where an

¹³ Majemite and Stan Plange's submissions have been taken as a valid fact of history based on the former's mutual and close encounter with Fela, first as the his personal assistant and second, as Shrine Priest. Majemite's seminal book, *The Ikoyi Prison Narratives: The Spiritualism and Political Philosophy of Fela*, has tried to put into proper perspective and lay bare the facts on some of the misrepresentations that has enveloped our thoughts on some of Fela's past actions, especially the issues around his incarceration between 1984 and 1986 and on the Fela/Okoro-Idogu affair. See Collins, John. *Fela: Kalakuta Notes*. Wesleyan University Press, 2015, p. 130.

'apology' was alleged to have been tendered and the nature of WAI programme of the military regime. This is vital if our understanding of the true events surrounding Fela's incarceration, and onward release, are to be fully enriched. It is also essential towards laying bare the facts and separating them from the slant narrative, part of which the album was embellished with.

While Fela refrained from elaborating much on his chance-meeting with Justice Okoro-Idogu at the hospital in the album, stating only that the latter had come to "beg" him, accounts have it that though the chance-meeting truly took place, what transpired was deliberately skewed and didn't reflect the true nature of the conversation both had in the course of the meeting. In fact, behind this plot to smear the reputation of the said Justice and build a certain emotive narrative around Fela's incarceration was Fela himself, the Nigerian media and Beko Ransome-Kuti (Beko hereinafter), Fela's younger medical doctor brother.¹⁴ Accounts showed that Justice Okoro-Idogu had visited a sick relative in a prison hospital where Fela too was coincidentally admitted. Having been notified by a chief warden that Fela who he had slammed a 5-year prison sentence was also in the same ward as his relative, the Justice decided to use the opportunity to meet with Fela and wish him 'quick recovery' only for this chance-meeting to be blown out of proportion. This was made possible, as noted above, by Fela, Beko and the sensationalist press, on the one hand, and Amnesty International and civil society groups, on the other hand, all of whom went on to embellish the chance-meeting. As indicated above, while it is true a chance-meeting took place between the two pairs, the said 'apology' tendered by Justice Okoro-Idogu as widely claimed by Fela in his album and ultimately ingrained by the press on the body politic, was not only false but blatantly misleading.¹⁵ This is because, following this chance-meeting, Fela falsely claimed to Beko that the Justice came to seek for forgiveness from him since according to the Justice, "I had the order to put you behind bars from above" and hence, apologise because "I was under pressure" (Cited in Moyer).

Accounts at the time, nevertheless, observed that the idea of an 'apology' allegedly tendered by the Justice was manipulated by Fela in conjunction with Beko to whip up popular support for the former's cause and expedite action on his release. Incidentally, Beko who had been misled into believing that the Justice had "promised to get [Fela] released", following a change of government, quickly "called a press conference and swore to affidavits" that the Justice had apologised to Fela. The ultimate aim, according to Stan Plange, was to 'blackmail' the new government into believing that the Justice had visited Fela in prison solely to apologise and say it wasn't his (the Justice) intention but that of the previous government to convict Fela.¹⁶

¹⁴ The Newsweek magazine was one of the major print media outlets at the time which aggressively reported, and wrote extensively, on Fela's incarceration. Led by two reporters, Olojede and Soji Omotunde, both spearheaded a story that uncovered the 'charade' that led to Fela's imprisonment which, based on the intensity of their reportage, fast-tracked Fela's pardon and release by the Babangida regime in 1986. See *NewsWatch* [Lagos], vol. 11, no. 1-13, 1990, p. 37.

¹⁵ Majemite Jaboro, Fela's Personal Assistant and Shrine Priest in an interview informed me that from a conversation he had with Fela in prison in 1993, Fela made it known that "Justice Okoro-Idogu *never apologised!*" [Emphasis mine].

¹⁶ The Ghanaian musician, Stan Plange visited Fela soon after his release and related this incident. See Collins, John. *Fela: Kalakuta Notes*. Wesleyan University Press, 2015, p. 130.

Majemite, however, interestingly submits that, “With a *skilful manipulation of the Nigerian Press*, the drums began to beat louder for Fela’s release” (74). It was on this premise that the next regime was pressured into looking at Fela’s ‘unfair’ trial, having been tagged a *Prisoner of Conscience* by Amnesty International¹⁷ under a heavy campaign started by Beko and civil society groups for his release. It must interest us to know that the next regime, before the pressure to release Fela was heaped on it, set up a Commission of Inquiry into Fela’s arrest, conviction and imprisonment. Though the Commission’s findings were never published, it nevertheless discovered no wrong doing on the part of the earlier Tribunal and hence, rejected a pardon for Fela as the previous regime had similarly done at the time of his conviction (Moore).

However, in a bid to obtain political mileage and garner support from the populace, the new regime capitulated to this ‘blackmail’ and eventually released Fela. Consequently, all those who had risked their career in defence of the Justice and swore under oath that he never apologised to Fela were summarily dismissed from the civil service.¹⁸ Justice Okoro-Idogu, on the other hand, following Fela’s release on 24 April 1986, was prematurely retired by the Armed Forces’ Ruling Council based on Fela’s spurious allegation that was never substantiated by any court of competent jurisdiction (*Nigeria Releasing Pop Idol from Jail*; African Contemporary Record 117). The wrongful and untimely retirement of the Justice was hastened by a hysterically sensationalist press who in their several failed attempts to force the government’s hands into releasing Fela through disparaging editorials and news reports, misled not only the public about the hospital chance-meeting and the so called fictitious “apology” tendered by the Justice but also used it as a tool to build around a revisionist narrative with which has sadly remained ingrained on the collective psyche of Nigerians and body politic of the world till date.¹⁹ Regrettably too, this skewed narrative has continued to play a huge role in the corruption discourse against the Nigerian judiciary which points Justice Okoro-Idogu’s action or judgement against Fela as scandalous and the former a rogue and corrupt jurist who was used by the military to manipulate and subvert the course of justice²⁰ even when it was apparent he was a victim of a scheming press²¹ and appeared to have been locked between an intricate web of Machiavellian political exigency (Bello 106-107).

¹⁷ For the campaign to release Fela, see Fela Kuti, PoC, Nigeria. Amnesty International.

¹⁸ These, alongside Justice Okoro-Idogu, include the hospital Chief Warden, low-level wardens, clerical staff and the Chief Superintendent of Prisons named Goji.

¹⁹ A Washington Post report, like several other international and local newspapers, maintain this narrative, using agnostic terms like ‘alleged’ in order to breathe life into a ‘mythical apology’ tendered to Fela without necessarily providing facts to back up such ‘alleged’ report. See, for example, Moyer, Justin Wm. “Muhammad Buhari vs. Fela Kuti: Nigeria’s New President-Elect Once Jailed a Music Icon.” *The Washington Post*, 01 Apr. 2015. Also, Bolawole, Bolanle. “...And the CJN erred!” *Nigerian Tribune*, 26 July 2015.

²⁰ A *Newswatch* magazine report had cynically said: “Okoro-Idogu must ask the gods why it was so arranged by them that the judge [Okoro-Idogu] and the judged [Fela] should fall sick and seek medical help at the same hospital at the same time. Such coincidence used to be the stuff of fiction.” See *Newswatch* [Lagos], vol. 3, 1986, p. 38.

²¹ The Newsweek magazine is reputed to have championed this misleading narrative through three cover stories, the first of which was written by Dele Olojede in the 21 Apr. 1986 issue of the magazine. For more on these cover stories, see *Newswatch* [Lagos], vol. 3, 1986, pp. 9, 11 and 38.

On the other salient point, i.e. the WAI programme where Fela came heavy on the campaign, it should be noted that while Fela was categorical in his belief that the government should not have used disparaging terms against its own citizens, the use of those terms, once again, appear to have been deliberately taken out of context or misconstrued. The reason for this is not far-fetched. Taking a cursory look first, at the country as a whole and second, the past civilian government before it was ousted through a coup in 1983, it was common knowledge that the level of impunity that characterised, on the one hand, actions of politicians and government officials in public service and the mass of the people, on the other hand, had no doubt, reached an atrocious crescendo. Aside the unbridled acts of thievery and underhand dealings overtly perpetrated by the political class, gross indiscipline pervaded the polity. The civil service too had been affected by credibility and efficiency problems; the leadership of the country appeared irresponsive to troubling nationwide challenges while wanton disregard for the rule of law remained pervasive. The wide disconnect between the rulers and ruled was such that "collective and personal property; between state and society" as Ihonvbere and Shaw argued, appeared "very blurred" (106). What the government, therefore, tried to exhibit by expressing to the public the level of rot in the polity, was not different from what many knew as a common national malaise at the time. Chinua Achebe had described 'indiscipline' at the time as "the condition *per excellence* of contemporary Nigerian society" (27-36). Hence, the introduction of the WAI was a call for "self-discipline and leadership by example" and not in all intent, meant to disparage the mass of the people as claimed by Fela. Equally, the WAI was simply pursued to call the masses' attention to "important everyday manifestations of indiscipline" which had eroded the fabric of the country for long (*Buhari's Government Launches "War Against Indiscipline"*).

The above appeared to be the appalling situation throughout the country amidst citizen disillusionment such that it was only a matter of time before the military once again stepped in. Following the gross acts of indiscipline and to forestall further break down of law and order, coupled with the fact that the young officers who had assumed power were of a disciplined type, a number of decrees and policies were simultaneously promulgated, one of which was the WAI, an anti-corruption programme whose goal, among others, was to instil discipline and a sense of integrity among civil servants in an effort to drive professionalism in the bureaucracy. The WAI campaign was also extended to correct all kinds of small acts of indiscipline like late coming, failure to queue at public places, defecating in the open etc. It must further be emphasized that long before the Buhari regime came up with the WAI programme, the moral fabric of the country had been undermined by moral and socio-political malaise. To be sure, as far back as 1975, General Murtala Muhammed had observed that the state of affairs of the country since the end of the civil war was "characterised by indiscipline". While appealing to Nigerians that "the task ahead ... calls for sacrifice and self-discipline at all levels of society", the government warned that it would "not tolerate indiscipline" and "condone abuse of office."²² Similarly, successive governments ever since had observed the slide in morality among the populace and hence, took turn to effect what Foluke Ogunleye termed "a moral re-armament within the nation" (29-30). Just like in the 1970s where the government had called for an ethical revolution, the 1980s came with WAI as an attempt at moral correctness. Fela's claim, therefore, that the government had called its citizens disparaging names in its bid at moral and societal re-

²² See address by Murtala Muhammed on 30 July 1975, following the coup that toppled General Yakubu Gowon from power.

engineering, was not only misdirected but failed to grasp the underlying need behind government's attempt to moralise an undisciplined citizenry into embracing a culture of conformity, public morality, and social order.

Abundance of scholarly works exists on the WAI,²³ however, just as the name implies, it was, as earlier stated, strictly a war against the entrenched acts of impunity and indiscipline that characterised the Nigerian state. Realising that an undisciplined leadership breeds an unruly nation, the WAI aimed at building a society where law and order would be the bedrock of the state. It intended to establish a sense of patriotism on the country, respect for the rights of others and ultimately build a nation where talent rather than mediocrity, would be rewarded. Though earlier embraced by the masses, the WAI quickly became unpopular among a section of the country who termed it draconian and against all forms of human rights. A literature argued that despite the crackdown on peoples' behaviour, WAI did little to tackle the culture of corruption in high places (Smith 113). What this presupposes is that WAI, however noble intentioned, was only targeted at ordinary citizens while excluding the political and elite class. Fela's scathing criticism of the WAI is not surprising, if his treatment by the same military regime which had jailed him and implemented the campaign at the same time is anything to go by. However, given the time, and in comparison to where Nigeria finds herself today since the Buhari regime collapsed, coupled with the fact that if some of its programmes had been allowed to germinate, the WAI would perhaps have redefined the country and moved the people closer to the Nigeria they yearned for (Last). Daniel Smith's candid view since the WAI programme closed is apposite: "...in the decades since the War Against Indiscipline, ordinary people often speak nostalgically of the Buhari regime – part of a common discourse in which Nigerians view their society as deeply corrupt and themselves as disorderly people in need of iron-handed leadership" (113).

In essence, it would not have been a misnomer if the country's leadership appear to have viewed its citizen as undisciplined based on the circumstance of the time which formed part of why a programme of this nature was conceived. From the above, therefore, it is safe to say that part of the narrative in the *Beast of No Nation* which criticised the WAI was purely based on undue sentiments and not on the merit of the programme itself. The song did much to frame a misleading discourse on the citizens' collective psyche, most of which continue to shape negatively, albeit unconsciously, how citizens view the military's efforts at societal reforms.

Having interrogated and clarified above some of the issues or narratives raised in the song, we should bear in mind that some of the misrepresentations in the album do not necessarily invalidate the message Fela, as he was wont to do, choose to pass across to listeners. In confronting the second problematic, we intend to identify if Fela understood the import of his claim that the UN was undemocratic? Well, when the intensity and dangerous dimension global conflicts occur today and in the decade since the end of the cold war is examined, we can aptly suggest that Fela was, after all, proved right with his succinct description of the UN as a disunited entity. Fela believed that the UN was undemocratic since it had become a tool used indiscriminately by the Security Council to either sanction unbending nations or back rogue states, depending on whose national interests such serves.

²³ See for example, Agbaje, Adigun and Jinmi Adisa, "Political Education and Public Policy in Nigeria: The War Against Indiscipline." *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, vol. 26, no. 1, p. 1988.

Fela was keen to know why the UN would cede overwhelming powers to the Security Council, leaving the General Assembly with little or no decision making power, if not that the UN was an undemocratic setup. The UN couldn't have been united, according to Fela, under a circumstance where the Security Council mostly took prejudiced positions on major international conflicts or chose to side with others even when they fall foul of international law.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, nevertheless, and rise of a unipolar world, the US and its allies have been at the forefront of engaging or supporting unnecessary conflicts where the leadership of such 'enemy', 'terrorist' or 'rogue' states as they are labelled by the West, are toppled or destabilised.²⁴ In all of this, the UN have not only failed in its responsibility to act or protect weaker states from a powerful hegemony but also prepared the ground for the Security Council to use its veto power indiscriminately, thereby installing puppet regimes or allowing rogue states fester, depending on whose interests these serve.

The *Beast of No Nation* would, no doubt, and perhaps, pass as one of Fela's most defining albums in the course of four decades in terms of its scathing exposé on discordant global issues of the time. No African artist of his generation had the artistry, deep knowledge and understanding of global politics than Fela who used trends in both national and global discourse to name album or track titles, album jackets or poke fun at institutions, political and private figures etc., mostly in a bid to bring out a strong point on issues pertaining to global injustice, oppression, state violence among others, most of which affects the common man. The album was not only detailed in terms of Fela's personal experience but also frank in its argument against issues that affect the global community. Each of these issues was not only interrogated in the album but put into proper perspective in line with the realities of the time. Brilliantly analysed, this part of the album appear unarguably to be about the only part Fela's position or view seemed obviously selfless.

At the time the album was released, full-blown conflicts and threats of war further escalated. None, however, was more impassioned for Fela than the violent turn apartheid took in South Africa where Botha had threatened to step up its violent and oppressive campaign against Black South Africans. It would be recalled that Botha had stoutly rejected the growing demands by the Black majority for freedom and release of Nelson Mandela at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle and civil-disobedience which led to uprising and upheavals. Botha would respond by declaring that further uprising "will bring out the beast in us". Within the context of this statement, Fela's argument was primed on the fact that under such repressive regime as that of Botha's apartheid South Africa, the UN should have been decisive enough to compel the US and UK to throw out its "constructive engagement" thesis in exchange for economic sanctions. Since Botha's excesses were accommodated by the US and UK governments, giving the former the much needed avenue for apartheid to fester, and to commit aggressions and violence against the people, the UN could therefore, not claim to be promoters of human rights even when its members encourage the abuse of the rights of others. In response, therefore, to the second problematic, we could say Fela did truly understand the global political interplay at the time which led to conflict among or between UN member states and hence, the reason for his critical reaction to them.

²⁴ Iraq and Afghanistan fall within this category. While the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein and the Taliban were forcefully removed from power respectively, both countries have seen sectarian violence grow with thousands of deaths recorded since a campaign by the US against Al-Qaeda and Iraq's accusation of stockpiling Weapons of Mass Destruction heightened.

CONCLUSION

Fela's *Beast of No Nation* which detailed his prison experience and the hoopla around it have not received much scholarly attention within the context of the facts on ground to counteract the ingrained narrative in the album. This paper has attempted to do so in the hope to set the records straight. Fela was no doubt a very popular figure among the masses and for the government, a divisive personality. It is therefore, understandable why each time he ran into trouble with the law or state, he was viewed by many as a prisoner of conscience or rebel with a cause. For these set of people, Fela could do no wrong as evidenced in the support given him among citizens during his trial and jail time. His grouse with the Buhari regime, as seen in the album, was really not based on the merit of principle but markedly on a personal vendetta and as this paper has shown, led to a number of casualties which today are yet to be rectified. Justice Okoro-Idogu's arbitrary removal, without recourse to any judicial process or redress, remains a pointer to government's recklessness which tends to discredit the judiciary at every turn. Incidentally, the press appeared to take undue advantage of the situation by pushing forward a false narrative for narcissist reasons. In any case, the *Beast of No Nation* serves as a reminder of the perilous period that characterised the 1980s in Nigeria and around the world. Its apt description of human rights abuses personified by the apartheid regime in collaboration with the US and UK governments easily provides a clearer understanding of how the UN failed in committing itself to combating racial discrimination. The album was also central in exposing the inherent hypocrisy with which the workings of the UN have always typified. Above all, it enriches us with a viable perception of, and brings us closer, to Fela's personal and persistent struggles with the Nigerian state, first, in the pursuit of social justice and second, as an artist who used his music to speak truth to power.

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