

## Fela “The Black President” as Grist to the Mill of the Black Power Movement in Africa

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### ABSTRACT

On November 23, 2009, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, who created the music genre afrobeat, was 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. His legendary status, in the realm of music, indubitably has outlived him. Fela was a social commentator, whose critical comments often made the government of his country persecute him. Moreover, he 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. This study, 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. It 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 that African/Black nationalism tradition and the nationalist sentiment of the African (Black)-American community of the U.S. in the 20th century.

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

## **Introduction**

The Black Power Movement (hereafter the BPM) started in the 1960s in the U.S. and came from a constellation of social organizations engineered by African Americans, but not entirely made up, in terms of membership, of them. It meant to project certain ideas and actions to promote the general interest and wellbeing of African Americans and all other people who considered themselves as Black and non-White. The BPM represented a people’s reaction to years of experience and suffering of racism, racial discrimination, and the notion of White supremacy in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> It was also a response to the Europe-led classical colonialism of Africa, the origin of the progenitors of African Americans, which had spawned the dominant global idea that, contrary to the African (known in colonial parlance as Negroid or Black), European (Caucasoid or White) ways, people, and creations were superior and positive. The BPM was nationalist because it identified the people it meant to serve and empower as a nation—a Black nation. Eventually, the BPM became internationalized as its ideas and influence transcended the borders of the African American community in the U.S. and also manifested in continental Africa. Some people facilitated the transfer and expansion of the BPM and its ideas. They believed that continental and diaspora Africans shared a common global problem of political and

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Cress Welsing’s (1991) study of symbols, racism, and White supremacy equates racism with “white supremacy” (p. i). She defines it as “the local and global power system structured and maintained by persons who classify themselves as white, whether consciously or subconsciously determined” (p. ii). Racism “consists of patterns of perception, logic, symbol formation, thought speech, action, and emotional response, as conducted simultaneously (by the structured power system of those who classify themselves as white), in all areas of people activity, (economics, education, entertainment, labour, law, politics, religion, sex, and war),” (p. ii) to prevent, what Welsing calls, “white genetic annihilation” (p. ii).

economic marginalization, racism, cultural alienation, and lack of pride due to the long years of White domination, which started with slavery and European classical colonialism and cultural imperialism. The introduction of the ideas of the BPM to Africa was a wider Pan-African enterprise to serve persons of the African/Black nation regardless of their geographical location.

### **Background to the Study**

Most existing works about the history of the BPM generally confine the broader development and spread of the idea of Black Power to the circle of African American advocates.<sup>2</sup> This study argues that the charismatic Nigerian musician Fela “Anikulapo” Kuti (hereafter Fela or Fela Kuti), through his career, songs, and the idea of “Blackism,” was key in expressing and rooting the ideas and movement of Black Power in Africa.<sup>3</sup> He, as a non-African American, therefore helped the development and internationalization of the BPM. This study suggests a reasoning that illuminates the meaning, importance, and contribution of the breadth of Fela’s intellectual vision, imagination, and artistic creativity in his work to the wider development of the BPM.

The story told here has an eye toward the broader (African global) context in which the general development of the BPM unfolded. Consequently, this study is a contribution to the production of significant knowledge about “glocal” Black Power ideology. “Glocal” simultaneously acknowledges Black Power’s global dispersal and adoption in other local contexts and its consumption and transformation.

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<sup>2</sup> There is an inexhaustible list of such works on the B.P.M. The interested reader can see old and new ones like Carmichael, 1971; Carmichael & Hamilton, 1992; Joseph, 2006, 2009, 2010; Ogbur, 2004; Ongiri, 2010; Woodard, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Anikulapo is a Yoruba word that translates as, “One who has death in his pouch.”

Moreover, as a work on Fela, this study, in terms of conceptual and analytical focus, makes a significant diversion from other extant studies and intellectual discourse on him. Scholarship in the fields of history, cultural studies, African studies, and music on Fela Kuti appears to have experienced such a boom.<sup>4</sup> However, none explicitly focuses on his immense contribution and advocacy efforts to bridge Africa, the Pan-African world, and the ideas of the BPM. Invariably the focus of such academic persuasions always seems to have been on the controversial musician-politician's personality, career, musical style, and legend. Olaniyan (2004) draws our attention to the fact that, since the 1980s, biography has been the rule and non-biographical studies on Fela are hard to come by (p. 4). Although Olaniyan initiates a major shift in the tradition, his work, which analyzes the intellectual density of Fela's music, does not conceptualize and analyze it in the context of the development of the Black Power idea and movement.

Major works from Moore (2009), Veal (2000), and Idowu (2009) are biographical, semi-biographical, and hagiographical, respectively (Olaniyan, 2004, pp. 3–4). An interesting feature in the works in this traditional trend is the stress on how the U.S.–based BPM influenced Fela, thus he is not strongly placed in a frame where he becomes an African and international proponent of the Black Power (Blackism) ideology and a converter of people to it. Veal's work (2000), which could be situated between a musical study and ethnography, posits that Fela operated and became famous with a populist ideology (p. 11). Fela's was the ideology of Black Power within the context of Pan-Africanism and it was big in relevance and of more intellectual substance and force to the general Black/African struggles for total self-emancipation.

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<sup>4</sup> I cite here a few works in that category: Coker, 2004; Collins, 2009; Idowu, 2009; Jaboro, 2009; Moore, 2009; Oikelome, 2008; Olaniyan, 2004; Schoonmaker, 2003; Veal, 2000.

When all the sides of Fela are discussed, including his social and political life and roles as a hero, populist, play boy, visionary, martyr, revolutionary, creator of an alternative subculture, and heir to a family's protest tradition, the story about his life would be incomplete if his functions as a proponent of the BPM are not examined. Any study, like this one, that does the latter enriches the narrative about Fela and adds new information about the key actors of the BPM. It transforms historical understanding of how the idea of Black Power affected everyday struggles of grassroots Black activists and expands historical comprehension about the global geography, organization, and political goals of the BPM.

### **Enter Fela and the Idea of “Blackism,” aka “Africanism”**

Fela (born on October 15, 1938, and named Olufela Olusegun Oludotun Ransome-Kuti) was a disciple of renowned Pan-Africanists, especially Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. Fela's idol, Kwame Nkrumah, who was inspired by the diaspora Pan-African efforts of W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and the Pan-African Conference of England in 1945, was indeed instrumental in rooting the Pan-African movement in Africa as a weapon for the destruction of colonialism during the 1940s.<sup>5</sup>

Fela, from the 1970s, viewed the BPM as an embodiment of a grand idea and attitude he referred to as “Blackism” or “Africanism,” although Fela did not originate the term. As early as 1965, Remi Fani-Kayode, a Nigerian lawyer, intellectual, and anti-colonialist, used the term Blackism and defined it in his booklet, *Blackism*, as a political concept “based on the fact that only Blackmen(women) can save the Blackman(woman) in the final analysis, and that a joint effort for the progress of the Blackman(woman) must be made together by all Blackmen(women) all over the world” (p. 13). Fani-Kayode asserted that the life blood of independent African states

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see Nkrumah, 1957, 1964.

is unity and Blackism was “the spiritual inner force that must compel union; Blackism is the mental force that would ensure that Black progress must depend on Black strength and Black bargaining power with the white world” (p. 34).

Fela deemed Blackism/Africanism as a “Force of the Mind”—an intellectual awareness that advocated the promotion of Afrocentric ways of life as a strategy to globally liberate Blacks/Africans from all forms of mental enslavement induced by the slave trades and colonialism.<sup>6</sup> It aimed to obliterate all forms of Black/African-on-Black/African oppression and all non-African cultural dominations that had aided neocolonialism in Africa. It meant to unite the international and continental Black/African community and instill in the Black/African person a sense of possibility and sharp creative imagination and capacity anchored on an intellect or psychology of pride in their “Black/African” being, culture, and creativity.

Fela’s notion of Blackism, which his musical career popularized, apparently shared the central ideas of unity, self-reliance, and cultural pride of Pan-Africanism with that of Fani-Kayode. From 1969 till his death in 1997, Fela became an uncompromising advocate of the BPM and endeavored to contextualize it in Africa. He made sense of its goals and promoted different shades of Black Power ideology through the popular art of music.

### **Fela’s Musical Journey: A Cursory Itinerary**

Fela’s artistic journey covered over three decades and his experiments can be categorized into four periods of musical innovation. From about 1962 to 1969, he experimented with highlife music of West Africa and ultimately created afrobeat. A fusion of jazz and highlife—two genres of Black music born in the Black community in the U.S. and Africa, respectively—afrobeat evolved out of Fela’s attempt to impress his fans with music that was more complex,

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<sup>6</sup> European and Arabic.

rhythmically driven, interesting, and spoke directly to the African's experience.<sup>7</sup> He gave his music a concrete political commitment during the 1970s. After being persecuted in 1974 and imprisoned by the military government of Nigeria, from 1975/76 he entered the third phase of his musical innovation and primarily directed his songs to chastise the military and corrupt governments in Nigeria and, by extension, Africa as unscrupulous brutes, agents of neocolonialism, and for being anti-human rights. The final period of his musical innovation was when he reordered his tunes into *yabis* and chants.<sup>8</sup>

Fela produced more than eighty albums containing about one hundred and fifty songs that were generally composed and sung in Nigerian Pidgin English and Yoruba and any of the local languages in Nigeria (Schoonmaker, 2003, p. 135). As a political and cultural commentator and Black Power activist, some of Fela's pro-human rights and anti-establishment in- and out-of-music articulations, and his non-conformist cultural demeanor, caused him to clash with the Nigerian governments. He described such governments as "Uncle Tom" neocolonial agents of greed and corruption and insensitive Gestapo-like regimes.<sup>9</sup> The BPM, of which Fela was a proponent, sprung from the varieties of African/Black nationalism and the nationalist sentiment of the African (Black) American community of the U.S. in the 20th century.

### **A Brief Introduction to the Anatomy of Black Nationalism in the U.S.**

The 20th century nationalist sentiment and goals of the Black community in the U.S., which produced the BPM, arose from a mixture of historical and some existing social conditions.

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<sup>7</sup> Afrobeat also had tinges of soul, funk, and African indigenous rhythms and percussive beats. See Coker, 2004; Moore, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> A Nigerian Pidgin word derived from the English "to yap at." *Yabis* connotes explicit abusive and insulting language. Fela directed such insults at individuals, groups, institutions, and governments that he believed were exploiting and dehumanizing the Black/African masses in Africa and across the globe.

<sup>9</sup> See Gegauff, 1982.

John Stuart Mill (1964) avers that “Identity of political antecedents; the possession of a national history, and a consequent community of recollections; collective pride and humiliation, pleasure and regret, connected with the same incidents of the past” are major creators of nationalist consciousness or movements among a people (as cited in Snyder, 1964, pp. 2–4). Beliefs that often characterize and bind nationalist movements include a perceived cultural affinity and commonalities in language and customs, historical origins, pride in cultural achievements and grief in tragedies, hope for the future, and hostility toward some outside hegemonic group. The African (Black) American community, whose members shared certain cultural, social, and historical features in varying amounts, fulfilled many of these characteristics. The common African origin or Blackness of the community gave its people a common history of oppression, restraint from practicing their original cultural systems, and denial of space to engage liberally in the culture of the White national majority. These situations of social inequality and racism naturally generated among American Blacks an overall sense and movement of nationhood and a comparable hostile attitude toward members of the national majority. Thus the Black nationalist movement generally was a vehicle to preach the hope for a better future and encourage the national minority—the Black community—to work to access some degree of political, social, cultural, educational, and economic self-determination, power, and liberty in the U.S.<sup>10</sup> Similar to the view of Hans Kohn (1944), this Black nationalism, in a social revolutionary manner, demanded equal opportunity for the oppressed minority in all social institutions in the U.S.

The nationalism that produced the BPM had some sentiments and orientations. According to Imamu Amiri Baraka (1971), it aimed to unite Blacks to achieve “power, Black Power, for Black people to control our own lives, to build our own cities, and re-create the glorious civilizations of our history” (p. 89), create racial solidarity (Bracey, Meier, & Rudwick, 1970, p.

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<sup>10</sup> See Essien-Udom, 1962, p. 6.



xxvi), and group cohesion to protest against American hypocrisy and White nationalism (Redkey, 1969, p. 304). It intended to inspire Blacks to reevaluate and control themselves, their own organizations, and institutions and, according to Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) (1971), to resist oppression, achieve economic autonomy, and promote Pan-Africanism (pp. 206–208). Further were the objectives of Blacks affirming their unique African and African American traditions, values, and cultural heritage, having interest and pride in themselves and their race (Turner, 1969, pp. 26–27), hating and breaking White supremacy, and creating a sense of solidarity with the so-called third world (Breitman, 1967, pp. 55–56). This nationalism holistically projected three basic ideological elements and notions: (1) in order for Blacks to liberate themselves from oppression, some degree of political self-determination/autonomy was an essential requirement, (2) the oppressed could become powerful and strong if they united and created solidarity, and (3) pride in and rescue of African/Black cultural heritage were necessary persuasions to give cultural consciousness and centeredness to Blacks and save them from cultural alienation, marginalization, and ridicule in the world.

The key condition that gave rise to and sustained this nationalism and its product, the BPM, was oppression, i.e., the “colonization” of Black people in the U.S. The BPM was the Black community’s attempt to transcend the phase of agitation for civil rights to agitation for national (Black) liberation, with a corresponding realignment of social forces, from all forms of internal colonialism from White power. This was similar to the campaign of Africans in colonial territories in the second half of the 20th century to liberate themselves from Europe-controlled classical colonialism and neocolonialism on the continent.

Although African American and continental African masses existed in two different and separate geographical locations, the unfortunate experience of, and labors against, non-African

oppression/colonialism of Black people in Africa and the U.S. were essentially the same, as African Americans were oppressed under an internal White colonialism. Regardless of superficial differences between the internal colonialism in the U.S. and the externally controlled colonialism and neocolonialism of European or non-African powers in Africa, Blacks in the two geopolitical-cultural spaces were all oppressed “colonial” subjects. The character of colonialism and how it related to the two groups reveals that the concept, regardless of geographical location, could be applied cross-culturally. Generally, colonialism is the arrangement of the space of one power in the interest of another or the subordination of a people, nation, or country by another, in this case White power, for the administration of life chances of the subordinated group for the purposes of exploitation. Consequently, the concept is applicable to both internal colonialism and externally controlled colonialism or neocolonialism.

Colonialism is mainly characterized by the political domination and economic exploitation of one group by another. This marked the relations between Blacks and Whites in the U.S. from the time the African was enslaved in the New World. Highlighting the Black’s status as a colonized being, Martin Delany (1968) described the Black community as a “[colonized] nation within a [colonizing White] nation” and likened its status to “the Poles in Russia, the Hungarians in Austria, the Welsh, Irish, and Scotch [sic] in the British dominions” (p. 209). In the context(s) of the systems of classical colonialism and neocolonialism in Africa, the non-African (European) colonizers exploited the labor of the colonized for the exploitation of the raw material of the colony, exported them to feed industries in Europe and to be processed into finished goods, returned the goods and sold them at exorbitant prices to the colonized subjects, and exported the profits to Europe. In the context of the U.S., the Blacks, historically, served as a source of free and cheap labor for the White-controlled mother country. Their labor, after

slavery, was exported to White communities for salaries that gave them no equitable portion in the goods and services they produced and White-owned businesses in Black communities also transferred profit away.

Cruse (1968) described the Black community in the U.S. as a colonized and subjugated group, thus:

From the beginning, the American Negro has existed as a colonial being. His [/her] enslavement coincided with the colonial expansion of European powers and was nothing more or less than a condition of domestic colonialism. Instead of the United States establishing a colonial empire in Africa, it brought the colonial system home and installed it. ... When the Civil War broke up the slave system and the Negro was emancipated, he [/she] gained only partial freedom. Emancipation elevated him [/her] only to the position of a semi dependent man [/woman], not to that of an equal or independent being. (p. 76)

Comparatively, the “colonial” plights of the Black community in the U.S. and Africa, even as they were manifested in the 20th century, were similar and connected. “Black Power” therefore became an applicable ideological tool to fight classical colonial and neocolonial oppression in Africa.

### **“What Do We Want?”—The Genesis of the Black Power Movement**

The powerful catchphrase “Black Power,” which qualified a radical social, economic, cultural, and political agitation, as well as a liberation ideology, movement, and era, was first popularized by Stokely Carmichael and Willie “Mukasa Dada” Ricks. These were two African Americans who were organizers and spokespersons for the human rights advocacy group, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The phrase became popular when Carmichael declared, to an angered Black audience in 1966, that “This is the twenty-seventh time I have been arrested... I ain’t going to jail no more.... We want Black Power! ... What do we want? [We want Black Power]” (Jeffries, 2009, p. 187). The idea of Black Power was

exported and demonstrated outside the U.S. by proponents who believed in its global and Pan-African applicability in all spatial milieux where Blacks or people of African descent existed. A classic example of which was the raised arm and clenched fist salute (Black Power Salute) by African American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City.

Different symbols/images, institutions, and the popular action of political, economic, social, cultural, religious, and intellectual worth and force were utilized by proponents to advance Black Power ideas. These included the authoring of Afrocentric books on poetry, history, philosophy, and culture and the making of intellectual speeches on Black Power and African liberation theologies and strategies by Black nationalists like Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Bobby Seale, Albert B. Cleage, Jr., James H. Cone, Albert Clayton Powell, Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton, Maulana Karenga, Assata Shakur, Ella Baker, H. Rap Brown, and Imamu Amiri Baraka.<sup>11</sup> The symbol of the clenched and raised fist, the wearing of African cloth, such as the boubou and dashiki, the sporting of the Afro hairstyle, and Afrocentric fine art became items that propped the idea of Black Power. The advancement of Afrocentric religious ideas through institutions such as the Shrine of the Black Madonna, the setting up of Black revolutionary political parties, advocacy groups, and educational and cultural institutions, such as the Institute of the Black World, Center for Black Education, the Black Panther Party, Operation Connection, Black Freedom Movement, Freedom Now Party, US Organization, Congress of African People, League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Black Arts Movement, Black Women's United Front, and the Republic of New Africa, as well as popular riots, student sit-ins, and demonstrations were adopted by proponents of Black Power to promote their ideology. Moreover, music became one key intellectual and artistic tool that some African American musicians used to articulate Black Power views and maxims like "Black is beautiful" and "Say it

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<sup>11</sup> Powell was a congressman from Harlem and convened the first Black Power conference in 1966.

loud I am Black and proud.” Through the use of genres like jazz, soul, blues, and rap, artists, including James Brown, preached and inscribed the ideas of Black solidarity, cultural pride, and autonomy into the society and popular psyche of Blacks in the U.S.

Noticeably, music, especially afrobeat, first perfected by Fela and his band Koola Lobitos in the late 1960s, would be the vehicle that Fela would largely employ to promote the ideology of Black Power. The Black Power idea and movement served as Pan-African tools for the liberation of all Blacks/Africans from the domination of both foreign and African entities. Fela provided continental African support to the BPM, just as Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and Imamu Amiri Baraka gave African diaspora support to Africa’s liberation struggle and Pan-Africanism efforts, especially to those of Kwame Nkrumah, against colonialism, neocolonialism, and apartheid in South Africa.

### **Africa “Discovered” in America: The Los Angeles Connection and Fela’s Black Power Enterprise in Nigeria (Africa)**

Fela, in the 1960s, saw vestiges of classical colonialism and neocolonialism in full flight on the African continent. He deemed the continental African masses an oppressed people alienated from their culture through unbridled westernization, resulting in them being economically emasculated and shackled, socially disunited, and politically disempowered. He struggled against these misfortunes with the idea of Black Power until his death. His innovative music making, which spans over thirty years, provides an opportunity to see how he contextualized the essences of Black Power and, unprecedentedly, consciously employed his popular art as a vehicle to produce a continental awareness and revolutionary consciousness about and toward such ideals. There were certain controversial cultural provocations in his

lifestyle, some of which were inspired by his experience in the American counterculture revolution in the 1960s. These included his habitual smoking of criminalized marijuana, marriage to 27 women concurrently, and free love philosophy, which gave him a reputation as a perceived phallogocentric misogynist. These controversies, however, do not constitute the foci of this paper.

Fela studied music at Trinity College of Music, returned to Nigeria in 1963, and worked for some time with the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. He left the corporation to concentrate on a career in music because his superiors did not approve of his unconventional use of the airwaves to lash out at corruption in Nigerian politics. After a short stint working in Ghana, he and the Koola Labitos took a trip to the U.S. in June 1969 and remained there, principally in Los Angeles, for about ten months. It was during this period that he became familiar with the rise of another radical phase of political consciousness and social organization among African Americans against the injustices of racism, police brutalization, and social marginalization by the White controlled political establishment, the BPM.

Fela comprehended the similarity between the prevailing situation of oppression of people of African descent in the U.S. and those on the African continent. He particularly realized the downgrading of the masses by colonial regimes, apartheid in South Africa, and neocolonial African governments. The social firmament of political agitation created by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, which were accompanied by positive defiance, fiery speeches, and rhetoric, and the production of protest literature and music by the Black masses, leaders, intellectuals, and artists further awakened Fela's burgeoning Black nationalist spirit and anti-oppression and -colonial political consciousness. As a musician, he chose to use music to articulate his nationalist views that were taking shape. Of course the U.S. had its share of Black

Power-inspired pro-protest and Black racial pride music makers, such as James Brown. The U.S. was, therefore, not the place for him to operate. He realized that the employment of such music of social awakening would be useful in fighting against the ills of colonialism and social injustice as well as excessive westernization in his own backyard in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. In addition, his African American lover, Sandra Smith (aka, Izsadore), was a follower of the Black Panther Party and very instrumental in informing Fela about the real issues and historical antecedents of slavery and racism that had inspired, shaped, and were undergirding the African American struggles in the U.S. She also exposed him to different protest literature of African American intellectuals, including the autobiography of Malcolm X. These solidified Fela's conviction that Black redemption and pride in self, society, and creativity should be awakened (Radio Shrine Id, 2011). In other words, he found his "Africa-ness" in the U.S.

Fela knew that he was an illegal alien in the U.S. and could not stay to endure the suffering of the Black masses or a humiliating deportation to Nigeria. Having connected with Black Power militants, he started to share the dream and ideas of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (Moore, 2009, p. 11). Inspired by people like Malcolm X, he hoped to be an international Black Power hero and champion. Social injustices, Black-on-Black political oppression, economic marginalization of the masses (underclass) in the midst of the oil boom, and mental slavery were prevalent in his home of Nigeria, which were all things he believed he could commit himself to fighting against. Consequently, he returned to Nigeria in March 1970 and changed the name of his band to Nigeria 70 to give it a nationalist character. Filled with Black Power militant notions and new radical socio-political ideas, Fela was ready to initiate his section of the Black Power struggle in Africa. He therefore sought to adapt his African American

vision and Black Power concepts to his African surroundings, a surrounding that did not generally understand the African American vision.

Although Malcolm X visited Nigeria during his 1964/65 African tour and expounded Pan-Africanist ideas and motives of the Black struggles in the U.S. to African government officials, academics, and university students, such as those of Ibadan, the Black Power seed that Malcolm X planted in Nigeria had not matured among the masses by 1970. Furthermore, James Brown, whose music had some Black Power themes, visited Nigeria during his tour of West Africa in December 1970, but his short stay in Lagos did not really disseminate the idea of Black Power, especially among the masses, the way Fela did from the 1970s.

### **Talking the Talk and Walking the Walk: Putting the Idea of Black Power/Blackism into Action in Nigeria (Africa)**

According to Veal (2000), Fela and his band greeted the audience of their first performance in Nigeria with the Black Power salute, but the crowd, staring back without responding, clearly, showed that they were oblivious about what the performers were trying to signify (p. 80).<sup>12</sup> From 1971, Fela developed a stronger conviction that his responsibility, even by divine arrangement, was to promote Black Power (Blackism) to encourage racial and cultural pride among Nigerians and Africans as a whole and awaken their consciousness to dismantle the negative realities of colonialism for their total emancipation. Blackism and Pan-Africanism, Fela believed, was in the mind, subconsciously, of the Nigerian and African masses and asserted that “they (masses) know they have to be African” (Gegauff, 1982). He claimed that that dormant knowledge must be awakened, a duty to which he claimed he had to contribute (Gegauff, 1982).

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<sup>12</sup> See also Olaniyan, 2004, p. 42.



Fela, in Lagos, started to reconfigure his music, lifestyle, and personal space(s) to exude ideas of Blackism. For example, he renamed his band Africa 70 to reflect a Pan-African orientation and changed it again in 1981 to Egypt 80 to suggest and proudly celebrate the fact that the ancient Egyptian civilization was African (Veal, 2000, p. 175). He composed and sung his burgeoning afrobeat songs, which his mother also encouraged him to do, in Yoruba or Nigerian Pidgin English to celebrate African linguistic creativity and so they would be easily understood by non-Yoruba speaking Nigerians and Africans (Radio Shrine Id, 2011).<sup>13</sup> The name of his night club, Afrospot, where he performed live to his audience, was changed to Afrika Shrine and the interior decorated with the names and statues of Yoruba *orisha* (deities), such as Shango, Ogun, and Ifa. Such deities were also found in African spiritual traditions like Candomble, Santeria, and Vodun in the Americas and other parts of the African diaspora. Furthermore, the interior of the Afrika Shrine was adorned with symbols of African spirituality and rituals and pictures and names of renowned living and dead African personalities and ancestors to give it a sacred ambience and to celebrate African indigenous spirituality.

His Afrika Shrine became a place where radical Black nationalist, political, and cultural ideas about the sordid history of slavery, atrocities of colonialism and apartheid, evils of racism in the U.S., good practices and beliefs in indigenous African knowledge systems, and corruption, social injustices, and mismanagement from the Nigerian government officials and most governments in Africa were discussed by the numerous clients who went there to entertain themselves and philosophize at the same time. Afrocentric books on different subject matters were also sold there. This entertainment cum education venue also became Fela's site for the delivery of his public extempore speeches and inflammatory *yabis* about social themes and

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<sup>13</sup> Fela also referred to his music as Africa Music. See Radio Shrine ID, 2011

issues related to Africa and the Black world.<sup>14</sup> These included racism, colonialism, civil wars, socio-political injustices, corruption of the ruling elites and exploitation of the masses by African and foreign interests in Africa, and Eurocentric Christianity and Arabocentric Islam, which he deemed enforced Western and Arabic cultural imperialism in Africa. Significantly, the venue was also a real shrine. It had an altar where Fela enacted, celebrated, and performed rites of Yoruba spirituality, such as ancestral and *orisha* veneration, to set a practical example of advocacy for Africans to return to indigenous African spirituality, rejuvenate his creative muse, and enable him to channel and inscribe his spiritually charged artistic energy into his live musical performances (Veal, 2000, p. 175).

The all-participatory ambience of his Afrika Shrine and Fela's passion for Africa served as driving forces that made the club a place of philosophizing and learning for the masses. The controversial yet important lectures, cultural acts, and good music that occurred there, Fela's fame as an unbending African cultural revolutionary, and his charisma as a proponent of Black Power attracted people of all walks of life. His music, which came to have political messages, became "a social commentary of the consciousness and the dehumanisation of Africa and the Blackman(woman)" (Oladipo-Ola, 2011, p. 11).

In explaining why his music primarily took a political trajectory, and not one of love, he disclosed that, "I use politics in my music. That is the only way a wider audience will get acquainted with the real issues. It makes sense culturally as well. In Africa we don't really sing about love. We sing about happenings and [comment on societal issues]. That is the tradition" (as cited in Veal, 2000, p. 81). Fela deemed his music as a primary tool to communicate educative ideas and informative visions to people of African descent for them to consciously struggle to initiate positive socio-political and cultural changes in their lives to achieve

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<sup>14</sup> For example, see Olatunji, 2007.

empowerment and self-development (Hawkins, 2011). The clients of the shrine and listeners of Fela included the young and adventurous who, identifying with the suffering of “the sufferheads,” i.e., the Black/African masses, wanted to hear the message of social change. Children of Nigerian elites, foreign diplomats, and dignitaries, political leftists, radical intellectuals, and students were also clients (Veal, 2000, p. 126).

In his quest to advance his radical views on politics and culture to a larger audience, Fela started to write a column, “Chief Priest Say,” in some Nigerian newspapers in the 1970s. He mentored the Young African Pioneers (YAP), a radical Pan-African and political advocacy group, and established a printing press to publish and publicize their ideas and activities. Knowing that his uncompromising stance and popularity among the awakening masses was antagonizing some powerful politicians in the country, Fela built a fence around his family house, called it the Kalakuta “Rascals” Republic, and declared it an independent state as a sign of defiance to his ideological antagonists. Fela then continued to advance his ideas about Blackism. He criticized most of the politically and economically powerful elements in Nigeria, and other African countries, for serving or acting locally in the interests of neocolonizers and multinational companies to acquire their power and deprive the masses of dignity. He criticized foreign powers, especially the U.S. and England, for continuing to undertake neocolonialist activities in Africa. Fela rhetorically asked, “What has America [and Europe] done to Africa that is bad?” He answered, “... Bringing in arms, dividing the people, wrong knowledge, bringing Christianity, bringing Jesus Christ, turning the people’s minds upside down, bringing in fertilizers, doing shit, wanting to bring Western civilization here (Africa). America and England (the West) trying to brainwash Africans. You are the colonialists, you are the slave riders!” (Gegauff, 1982).

He advised African countries to stop serving foreign interests and develop Black/African resources instead of depending on foreign powers. He also preached that African people should abandon the “conquering” and non-African religions, especially Christianity and Islam, since they were instruments of enslaving the minds of Africans. He insisted that the African, through his/her African self and study of his/her people’s culture and knowledge—“knowledge which has been passed down in the family of home”—should return to the spiritual beliefs and practices of indigenous Africa for religious and spiritual enlightenment. Such enlightenment, he charged, could not be given by “artificial” religions like Christianity and Islam (Gegauff, 1982). His return to African spirituality was not only a cultural provocation to the churches and mosques in Africa, but an intellectual move in his search for a deeper African identity and centeredness (Gegauff, 1982). His rebellious stance antagonized some powerful elements in Nigeria and also most Christians and Muslims. Furthermore, it got him into trouble with the majority of governments in Nigeria, especially the several ruling military juntas, which led to arrests, incarcerations, and beatings by the police and military on a numerous occasions.

His first brush with trouble came in 1974 when he was arrested for possession of marijuana, but lack of substantial evidence, after the police failed to find traces of the substance in his excrement, led to his discharge. He recounted his victory over the police and shameful embarrassment of the government in his song “Expensive Shit” (1974/75), which was also when he, with the line “Me I be Fela I be Black Power Man” (I am Fela I support Black Power), categorically stated that he was a proponent of the idea and movement of Black Power. His song “Alagbon Close” (1974) also mocked the criminal investigation division headquarters in Lagos, where he was incarcerated for possessing an illegal narcotic substance. In fact, Fela’s charismatic anti-establishment image and lifestyle as a proponent of Black Power grew through the years. In

the 1970s he became the vice chairman of the Nigerian Association of Playwrights, Writers, and Artists and chairman of the Afro-Youth Movement and encouraged those creative artists to pursue a healthier development and celebration of African and Black creativity and art. By preaching the need for and how to achieve national and personal development, freedom, cultural awareness, mass mobilization, and revolution, Fela informed many lives with the militant and Afrocentric message in his music that, according to John Collins, “Everywhere he [Fela] goes, people stop what they are doing, shout his name, and give the black power salute” (as cited in Veal, 2000, p. 126).

The touting of the idea of Blackism/Africanism, his open articulation of pro-Black Power ideas in his music, as well as his anti-colonial rebel-radical-prophet personae became some of the key factors that inspired a movement among some students, artists, and intellectuals in Nigeria. This movement, called Blackism, was created around 1977 and championed Pan-Africanism and Negritude, intellectual and cultural radicalism, physical militancy, research and participation in African indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices, and special rites of passage.<sup>15</sup> Seeking the progress of Africa and her peoples in the diaspora, the movement aimed to reestablish pride in Black history and prevent all acts that tarnished the image of members of the Black/African nation. It also promoted the notion that Black consciousness and spirituality and an African personality were necessary tools to direct the Black/African mind and body toward Black realism and determinism.

Fela suffered other arrests and harassment at the hands of the police and military in 1975. He concluded that the two coercive arms of the state were made up of unintelligent “zombies” who obeyed orders “to move, kill or die.” It was also in 1975 that he changed his name from

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<sup>15</sup> All members were to be followers of the notion of Afrocentricity and, as their constitution stipulated, they were to have a strong passion for African things, such as African clothes, food, and music, and to promote African culture.

Ransome to Anikulapo (Olaniyan, 2004, p. 80) to satirize that his persecutors—ruling elites and military—could not kill him and, second, to eliminate a non-African name—a slave label—from his identity as an African (Gegauff, 1982). He believed that it was wise to get rid of any non-African name he had borne because bearing such a name was antithetical to his African identity and the spirit of the message of Black Power and Blackism/Africanism. Implying that non-African names borne by Africans alienated them from the culture, he mentioned that he was first born in 1935, but his spirit did not stay on earth and he died as a baby because his father, who was a Protestant minister, asked a German missionary to name him Hildegart. That act by his parents was a rejection of his spirit, which had come to earth to talk about “Blackism and Africanism, the plight of my people.” His spirit, therefore, “went to the land of spirits” (died) because he did not want to bear the name of conquerors because “I wasn’t Hildegart! ... It wasn’t for a Whiteman to give me a name...” (Moore, 2009, p. 29). This path of name changing, which persons like Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks similarly travelled when they took the African names of Kwame Ture and Makussa Dada, respectively, definitely was one of Fela’s ways of conveying a Black Power idea to his targeted audience and community, to transcend some unproductive colonial vestiges, to celebrate Black/African cultural values, and to see beauty in themselves and African creations.<sup>16</sup>

After clashing with the Nigerian military/police in 1974/75, Fela satirized them, and by extension all repressive military/police establishments in Africa, in his hit song “Zombie” in 1977, just when Nigeria was receiving a lot of international delegates to attend the Festival of Black Arts and Culture in Lagos. This caricature of the mentality of the army and police, again, invited a brutal attack on Fela and residents of the Kalakuta Republic. The police and military

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<sup>16</sup> Kwame Ture represents the compounding of a Ghanaian name, Kwame, and a Guinean name, Ture (Toure). It was taken from Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Sekou Ture, the radical Pan-African and president of Guinea. Makussa Dada is the agglutination of two Ugandan names, i.e., Makussa and Dada, as in the name, Idi Amin Dada.

invaded the residence, destroyed many items therein, beat the “citizens,” including Fela’s ailing mother who sustained injuries that later killed her, and desecrated the “sacred” ritual objects in the shrine of Fela.<sup>17</sup>

### **In Search of Political Power: The botched attempt of Fela to become the elected President of Nigeria.**

Fela, in 1978, reckoned that acquiring political power, in Nigeria, was necessary since this would serve as a catalyst for the growth of Blackism and his quest for a political and cultural revolution in Africa. Indeed, he thought that he could use such political power from the most populous and one of the richest countries in Africa to sacrifice the sovereignty of Nigeria and use its resources to advance the Pan-Africanist agenda of creating a free and powerful United States of Africa.

As a proponent of Black Power who had a Pan-African orientation, Fela, like Kwame Nkrumah, believed that sound continental development planning could only be attained in Africa to serve the general interests of Blacks if the whole continent became one federally united democratic country. He, thus, posited that, as continental Africans, “We should not limit our area of belonging to that small enclave cut out for us at the Berlin Conference 1884–85. Africa has to open her doors to every Black man in the world. White people... [and] European Parliament... take care of their interests... instead of Africans doing it for ourselves, we go about copying foreign values, cultural concepts which permanently endear us to the whole world... as certified slaves” (as cited in Moore, 2009, p. 150). He, therefore, thought that he could rely on his popularity with the masses and the YAP in Nigeria to set up a political party and to contest for the presidency of Nigeria and work for continental integration.

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<sup>17</sup> See Collins, 2009.

The military junta of the time, under the direction of the head of state, General Olusegun Obasanjo, lifted the ban on political activity in Nigeria and Fela formed his party the Movement of the People (MOP) in 1978 and ran for president. Fela inscribed Black Power ideas and symbols into his party such as patterning the party's flag colors and logo, which consisted of a clenched fist on a background of red, black and green, on those of the BPM. The MOP's four key objectives that exuded some Black Power orientations were (i) to establish cultural pride among people of African descent, (ii) to fight against corruption and remove all forms of oppression, (iii) to establish democratic and civilian rule and government, and (iv) to encourage research into traditional African culture and systems like medicine (Veal, 2000, p. 169). Moreover, the MOP adopted Nkrumahism and African socialism as supporting ideologies. However, the military junta, which Fela had continued to criticize, and the Federal Electoral Commission, which was overseeing the transition of Nigerian politics from a military regime to a civilian government, claimed that the MOP did not meet the necessary guidelines and, therefore, invalidated Fela's candidacy. Fela believed that whether in the capacity as Nigeria's president, a position he said the corrupt foreign and local elites in Nigeria did not want him to occupy because of their greed, or as a musician, he had the "right knowledge" to give to Black people to achieve true self development (Gegauff, 1982).

Although, Fela continued to dream of becoming the president of Nigeria someday, it never became a reality. What did continue, however, was his music and its primary emphasis on the achievement of international Black/African human and cultural dignity and economic and political self-reliance; the restoration of an affirmed Black/African mind, personality, and identity; and the revival of constructive indigenous African worldviews, human values, and communalism to unite the African family and defend its cultural, economic, and political



interests from globalization, privatization, and all forces of colonialism and neocolonialism. Appalled by how the various military governments in Nigeria trampled on the human rights of the people and how the military-led Nigerian federal government brutalized and killed Igbos who wanted to secede during the Biafra War (Nigerian Civil War) in the 1960s, Fela also directed his music against all forms of military governments in Africa. He opposed oppressive African governments, whom he said were tyrannical because they were neocolonial representatives. He claimed that he understood that racism was the reason why colonial regimes, foreign companies, and a repressive policy like apartheid exploited and oppressed Blacks/Africans. What he could not understand was why some African leaders and governments oppressed their Black/African relatives and pillaged Africa's resources—plundering he referred to as *Authority Stealing* (1980) (Gegauff, 1982). Appreciably, Fela's Black Power struggle, which manifested ideas and messages in intellectual responses, arguments by refutation, and rhetoric of defiance, in his songs, writings, and *yabis*, were therefore directed against both non-Black/-African and Black/African forms of oppression and exploitation of the wider international and continental Black/African family.

**“... Buy Africa”, “... I Deh Talk about Black Power...”<sup>18</sup> and Others: A “Mixtape” of Some of Fela's Teacher-Rebel Songs**

Fearlessly, Fela utilized his music to stress the international and similar character of the Black person's struggle and common destiny in the African personality and to link Black people globally with his struggle for a greater Africa (Veal, 2000, p. 12). For example his song, “Buy Africa” (c. 1971) sought to urge Black and African economic power by encouraging Africans to produce and patronize Black/African products. In the 1970s, he and his band admonished their

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<sup>18</sup> This is a line from Fela's song “Water no get enemy,” which was released in 1975.

Black/African listeners to promote “love, peace, and unity for Africa. Be proud and do your thing. Fight if you have to. But only for Africa. This for you to remember”

(as cited in Veal, 2000, p. 84).

His songs “Blackman’s Cry” (1970) and “Why Black Man Dey Suffer” (1971), which became political anthems for the masses, and “Beggar’s (Lament) Song” (1971) expressed his support for the poor and challenged the culturally sanctioned, boundless accumulation of the upper class (Veal, 2000, p. 87). Songs like “Na Fight O” (1971) and “Shuffring and Shmiling” (1977/78) disputed the legitimacy of Christianity and Islam in Africa—religions he deemed tools that supported the infamous Euro-American and Arab enslavement and sale of Africans. He derided them as colonialists, brainwashing to Africans, and exploitative and foreign to the African psyches and cultural landscape.

In culture, including language, Fela questioned the wisdom of the over adoption and excessive use of colonialist language(s) by governments in Africa. In “Big Blind Country” he satirically posited, “In... Nigeria, na Oyibo language we speak, Government style be say, Oyibo ting one better past,” which literally translates as, “In Nigeria we prefer to speak the Whiteman’s (European/non-African) language(s). The governments believe that European (Western/non-African) things are better.” He was convinced that the wider development of African languages for reflecting, articulating, and finding solutions to Black/African problems was key to giving true and effective emancipation to the continent and people from colonialism and neocolonialism. It is because of this conviction that he adopted Yoruba in his songs. Pidgin English created by African creativity became a more convenient lingua franca to transmit his messages to the masses in Nigeria and the anglophone parts of the African diaspora. He loathed seeing continental Africans in the post-colonial era over-copying the cultures, from dress and

grooming standards to governance systems, of the colonial powers. He felt that such unbridled imitation gave the impression and confirmed the racist stereotype that the African stood in need of “civilization” from the colonizers.

Moreover, the common practice whereby some mentally enslaved and self-loathing diaspora and continental Africans bleached their skin and straightened their hair to acquire a skin color and hair texture similar to the European irritated him. Consequently, he espoused Black Power ideas of Black cultural pride and development and the notion that Black is beautiful in songs like “Gentleman” (1973), “Mr. Grammatology-Lisationalism Is the Boss” (1976), “Mr. Follow Follow” (1976/77), “Johnny Just Drop” (1977), and “Yellow Fever” (1976). Such compositions lampooned this embarrassment of many Blacks/Africans and addressed this state of cultural and self-alienation.

Furthermore, “Sorrow, Tears, and Blood” (1977) and “Army Arrangement” (1985) condemned the tradition of military political takeovers in Nigeria and Africa and the brutalization of the masses and those who opposed such unconstitutional governments. Songs like “Government of Crooks” dishonored the corrupt politicians and soldiers who plundered Nigeria’s oil money and by extension the natural resources of Africa, while “M.A.S.S. (Music Against Second Slavery)” and “Colonial Mentality” (1977) exposed and evaluated the negative impact of Islam on Nigerian (African) politics and power relations, the effect of slavery and neocolonialism, the looting of African people’s wealth by the neocolonial and neo-slavery African leaders, and their international counterparts and multinational companies. Finally, Fela, in one of his songs, “Vagabonds In Power” (1979), satirically changed the honorific acronym VIP (Very Important Person), borne by such corrupt African leaders, to “Vagabonds in Power.”

These compositions by Fela encouraged the masses to be vigilant and, in a revolutionary spirit and movement, to hold their leaders accountable for their sins of corruption, nepotism, cronyism, oppression, and connivance with foreign interests. In “I.T.T. (International Thief Thief)” (1979) Fela charged the Nigerian business mogul cum politician Moshood Abiola and Nigeria’s army ruler, General Olusegun Obasanjo, with thievery, calling them “International Thieves of Authority stealing” because they colluded with multinational companies to steal Nigeria’s oil money. He fearlessly deprecated the selfish activities of multinational companies in Nigeria and Africa, such as International Telephones and Telecommunications (I.T.T.), an American multi-national company, for bribing government officials and civil leaders for national contracts and exporting their commercial profit, obtained from the labor of Africans and resources in Africa.

Arguing in the song “Army Arrangement” that, “Few people dey fat with the money, the rest dey hungry” and “Men in foreign companies they carry our money go,” Fela, in “I.T.T.,” urged Nigerians and all Black/African masses, where and when applicable, to “do something about such nonsense” and to “one day deal with them [corrupt officials and plunders of Africa], well, well.” In a similar vein, “I.T.T.” and “Coffin for Head of State” (aka “Amen, Amen, Amen”) (1981) were also scathing criticisms of all African political or religious leaders who used their high offices in government and religions like Christianity and Islam to facilitate global international capitalism’s exploitation of the continent and Black/African masses of their resources, labor, money, and minds. The songs also cautioned the Black masses to be vigilant and rooted in their African cultural pride and values of spirituality, humanism, communalism, and egalitarianism in order to defeat such exploitations. Fela did not attack capitalism to favor Marxism or communism. He declared, “There are many ideologies in Africa that don’t belong

there. The capitalist and the communist systems have always regarded Africa as a milking cow and a territory to settle their own conflicts” (as cited in Palombit, 1981). He emphasized that all the foreign “isms,” including Marxism and Leninism, could not promote the interest of Blacks/Africans, especially those in Africa (Gegauff, 1982). The idea of Africanism, directed toward the creation and operationalizing of a progressive united international Black/African family and continent, was the key to raising the dignity of Blacks/Africans. On that reminder, he argued that, “Africa has to be united now to have any headway, but how that is going to happen is the great question.... We only need one good government. Straight and progressive clean government that knows what it is doing. No diplomacy, no compromises.... no Marxism... Leninists, no capitalism. Africanism, [that is what is needed]” (Gegauff, 1982).

## **Conclusion**

“Afrobeat will be one of the musics of the future”—Miles Davis

The qualities and directions of Black internationalism, militancy, and education in Fela’s music have popularized his image. His unwavering Afrophilia, resilient ability to survive persecution from the different forces he antagonized with his criticisms, his stance as a champion of the rights of the masses (a *Vox Populi*), and advocacy for Black (people’s) Power have brought him recognition in the eyes of his continental and international admirers and followers. Accordingly, he has earned different monikers of awe, honor, and mystique, such as “Baba” (Father), “Abami Eda” (Strange/Spirit Person), “Omo Iya Aje” (Child of a Powerful Witch), “the King [of Afrobeat],” and the “Black President.”

Fela was human and truly a man of the people. He lived, loved, and was loved, faced tribulations and non-recognition, and finally surrendered to death. His admirers and believers are

as diverse as his critics and adversaries. Nevertheless, this paper agrees with John Collins that Fela, regardless of his controversial lifestyle, did two remarkable things in his life. First, he was the main force behind afrobeat, which has gone international. Second, his unsurpassed resolute militancy, supported by his catalogue of anti-establishment songs dedicated to Black Power or empowerment of Black (African) people, Pan-Africanism, and the down-trodden Nigerian/African/Black sufferheads, took African popular music into the arena of political action (Collins, 2009b, pp. 149–150).

Whichever perspective one utilizes to examine Fela's efforts and contribution to the contextualization of the idea of Black Power in Africa, it is apparent that he and his music conveyed the BPM message of empowerment of peoples of African descent in a very forceful yet artistic way. His message was a solace to the oppressed African/Black people. It spoke to the longings of the victimized African/Black, while challenging satisfaction from the greed of the oppressors and vanity. It was a declaration for a conscious African/Black self-realization and actualization in the face of colonialism, victimization, and alienation. His was not a call for a revolution through arms and violence. It was an intellectually stimulated proclamation for mental liberation. He was a teacher-rebel, whose vision of a rehabilitated African personality and nation, which were empowered, free, and self-driven, moved him to espouse Black Power ideas. He preached that social transformation and true liberty for the African/Black nation starts with the individual's acknowledgement of and respect for his/her African/Black self, culture, and creative energy. The Black President's afrobeat "sound" and its militant Afrocentric messages of Black Power and protests sits as undisputed in the influential "teacher-rebel music" category as those of the legendary James Brown and Bob Marley. His work continues to live on as new and uplifting today and forever.

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