

Analysis of Vocal Elements in Afrobeat Music of Fela Anikulapo Kuti

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Abstract

Fela Anikulapo Kuti has been adjured one of the best musician from the African continent with the Afrobeat genre. His use of Afrobeat as an instrument of revolution has been discussed in varied forms and shades. However, the issue of compositional elements in his music has been glossed over by many scholars over the years. This paper examines the compositional elements in selected songs of Fela Anikulapo Kuti with a view to understand the creative ingenuity of the musician. Through analytical lenses, the paper reveals some of the techniques employed by the musician which are germane to the study of African music. This will further generate intellectual interest in the minds of scholars who may wish to undertake such analysis of other genres of popular music in Africa.

Keywords: *Afrobeat, Compositional techniques, Popular Music, Genres, Pop culture*

Introduction

You cannot class my music like American Music; because...my music is in different songs with five movements... It is like a symphony but in the African sense. - Fela

Afrobeat Music derives its popularity and fame from the creative ingenuity of Fela Anikulapo Kuti. The beauty of the music is found in the unique configuration of its instrumental sound, textual context and social fusion. While Gillette (2002) described it as one of the best music genres to have evolved from the continent of Africa, Euba (1989) described it as a unique genre defined by a fusion of foreign

elements such as jazz, soul, rock and roll, funk, reggae, and Afro Cuban etc. into a socio-stylistic musical framework whose roots lie in traditional Yoruba music. It is an unarguable fact that Fela Anikulapo Kuti popularized Afrobeat. Notable scholars in Africa and beyond believe Fela's endowment with 'special instincts', a 'sacred fire', the ability to infer or apply theoretical constructs, and being nurtured in an appropriate environment contributed to the emergence and further development of the music (Graham, 1992; Floyd, 1995; Olorunyomi, 2005; Moore, 1982; Veal, 2004). The political intensity of his music as well as the intellectual orientation of the style relied significantly on a sophisticated compositional style in which foreign musical elements were woven with traditional African music to constitute a larger original form. This paper therefore investigates the elements inherent in the music in order to establish the structure, form and compositional techniques employed by Fela Anikulapo Kuti. This has become imperative when notable scholars like Omibiyi (1981) and Akpabot (1998) have advocated that African popular music should attract, to a very large extent, scholarly enquiries on analysis of its forms and styles. This paper therefore examines through the analytical lenses the vocal organization in Fela's Afrobeat as this will help in better appreciation of the forms and structure of the musical genre.

The Charismatic Face of Afrobeat Genre

In a study of music genres across the world, Potgieter (2003) defined a music genre as a category of musical works based on form, style and subject matter. Furthermore, she opined that this music typology may also be categorized by non-musical criteria such as geographical origin. According to Middleton (1999) a genre can be thought of as analogous to a discursive formation, in the sense that in such a formation, there is a vocabulary, types of syntactic unit, formal organization, characteristic themes, mode of address (who speaks to whom and after what fashion) and structure of feeling. It can also be said that a music genre (is defined by the techniques, the styles, the context and the themes (content, spirit). This definition qualifies Afrobeat as a music genre. However, several attempts have been made by scholars to define Afrobeat as a genre. According to Akpabot (1986), Afrobeat is a fusion of conventional European dance band music with a rhythmic beat that entirely reflected new echoes of the Cuban music beat. Omibiyi-Obidike (1981) stressed that Afrobeat

includes a variety of soul music, European roots and Indian reggae. She buttressed the fact that Felá's use of a variety of intricate rhythmic figurations, short melodic texture, sophisticated instrumental techniques, vocal and instrumental effects contributed to the emergence of this music genre. Collins (2002) on the other hand sees Afrobeat as Fela's interpretation of the fusion of African and Afro-American music, which dominated the music scene in the early sixties. From the political perspective, Oguigbe (2003) defined Afrobeat as an infectious musical genre which combines American funk and Jazz with traditional highlife to end up with a sound that doubled as a weapon of justice. Writing for the Washington Post, Plate (1997) described Afrobeat as the fusion of rock with African rhythms and popularized around the world by Felá Aníkúlápò Kútì. Veal (2004) sees the music as a fusion of stylistic elements drawn both from Felá's popular and traditional music culture, and from African-American popular styles, with heavy overtones of Afro-Latin music and modal jazz. From the aforementioned definitions, it is obvious that its uniqueness lies in the crystallization of foreign and local styles into a coherent and cross-cultural musical genre.

On the evolution of Afrobeat, the works of Carlos Moore (1982), Idowu Mábínúorí (1986), Tam Fiofori (1997), Michael Veal (2000), Niyi Coker (2004) Tejumola Olaniyan (2004) and Solá Olórúnyomí (2005) provide tentative reference materials. The works of Coker (2004) and Moore (1982) traced the genealogy of Fela with the development of Afrobeat in various stages, starting from the early training he received from his father in Abeokuta to the music education he acquired at the Trinity school of music. Olórúnyomí (2005) traced the antecedent cultural and political contexts that shaped Fela's innovative Afrobeat music and performance. Veal (2000) on the other hand went down memory lane, detailing the musician's cultural and political practice, while also providing biographical information. Fiofori's essay (1997) also provided a historical appraisal of Felá's musical development and the evolution of Afrobeat. From the various definitions, it is clear that Afrobeat is a fusion of musical elements from various musical typologies. This, according to Potgieter (2003) is the fact that musical cultures are being influenced by each other in a modern and complex world.

General Structure of Afrobeat

A melody is series of single tones that add up to a recognizable whole. This recognizable whole or entire melody is a conglomeration of internal units and subdivisions, which share agreeable relationships in conformity with cultural specificity, or aesthetic needs (Ofosu; 2001). The melodies of Afrobeat often consist of two balanced phrases characterized by the use of short repetitive melo-rhythmic motifs. The repetition of melodic motifs and fragments as well as clear restatements of longer patterns in some of the works of Felá helps create unity, coherence, and variety. This is exemplified in **Beast of No Nation** with two balanced melo-rhythmic phrases as illustrated in the example below:

Music example 1

The image shows a musical staff for a solo part. The staff is in 4/4 time and contains a melodic line with various note values including quavers and semiquavers. Below the staff, the lyrics "Bas - ket mouth want start to lick a - gain o" are written in a stylized font. A large, curved line underlines the lyrics, indicating a phrase boundary.

The introduction of the music by the soloist is based on the main theme that is further developed throughout the piece as seen in bars 3 to 6 of the chorus section. Furthermore, the use of notes of shorter durational values like quavers and semiquavers continue to form the basis of melodic movement in the music as seen in bar 3 of example 2:

Music example 2

<p>Soloist</p>	<p>Singers</p>
<p>³</p>	

Afrobeat melodies are generally restricted to relatively wide and low range intervals usually short in length. The range of the melody taken from **Water no get enemy** in example 3 is within the ambit of a perfect fifth, from C (in bar 1) down to F (in bar 2).

Music Example 3

1	2	3

There are other compositions with wider ranges from the octave to the eleventh. The range of the melody taken from **Yellow Fever** is wide, the ambit of the tune being an eleventh in range, from F (in bar 6) to D (in bar 10). Excerpts below:

Music example 4

5
di-frent di-frentfi-ver nayinde di-frent di-frentfe-ver nayin
9
de di-frent di-frent fi-ver na yin de,

Melodic contour is the undulation and cascading of the melody. The contour of Afrobeat is characterized by two basic movements. The first is the pendulum like movement, swinging rapidly back and forth between high and low notes as shown below in the excerpt taken from **Yellow Fever**:

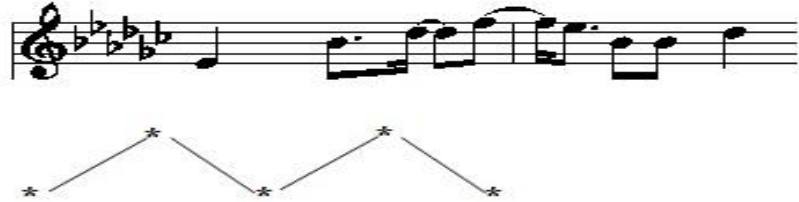
Music Example 5

Di-frent di-frent fi-ver nayin de



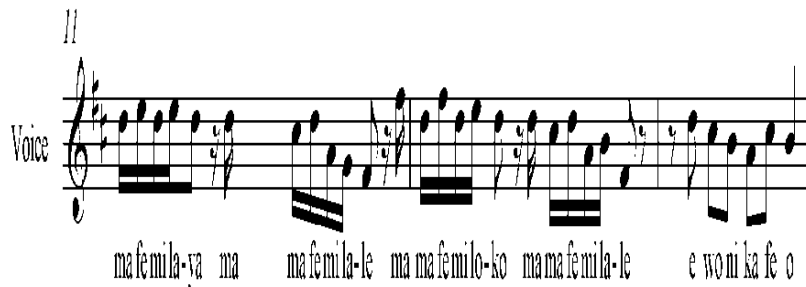
The second characteristic of melodic movement rises in a step not usually exceeding a 5th and followed by a gentle sloping down of tune, then another sudden rise and a sloping down and so on:

Music example 6



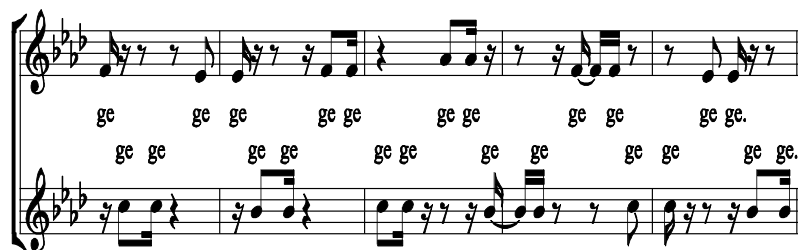
There are so many compositions of Felá's where elements of swing are found. An example is Abiara (Ex 7) where the middle bars (11-13) is characterized by the movement of the melody in upward and downward trend:

Music example 7



The melodies of Afrobeat also contain the use of truncation and melisma albeit in fragmental forms. Truncation is the cutting off or shortening of the melodic motif in a rhythmic perception:

Music example 8



Example 8 illustrates the element of truncation in bars 4 and 8 (**Army arrangement**) where the melodic fragment is cut short in the chorus. The mellismatic movement of melodies is prominent in bar 160 of **Yellow Fever** as seen in example 9 below:

Music example 9

160

yel-low fev-er, stu-pid thing, ye-ye thing
 you dey bleach, you dey bleach o, you debleach,

160

yel-low fev-er, stu-pid thing, ye-ye thing
 you dey bleach, you dey bleach o, you debleach,

A strong feature of Afrobeat melodies is the replication of a melodic phrase at higher or lower pitch levels called sequences. The first phrase is called the antecedent while the repeated phrase (second) is called the consequent as shown in the excerpt below:

Music example 10

Antecedent

Bas-ket mouth don o pen mouth a gain o.....

Consequent

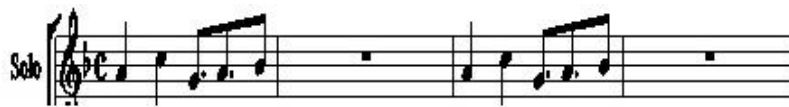


Bas-ket mouth don o pen mouth a gain o.....

In example 10, we find the first phrase (antecedent) being replicated by the second (consequent) at a higher level. The sequential duplication in example 34 taken from **Zombie** is seen in bars 1 and 2 of the music where the call from the solo is replicated by the chorus at a lower level:

Music example 11

Antecedent



Zom-bie o Zombie

Zom-bie o Zombie

Consequent



o Zombie

Zom-bie o Zombie

Zom-bie

Vocal Organization of Afrobeat Melodies

The vocal organization of Afrobeat music is characterized by the use of the call and response technique, quite often between the leader and the chorus section. The various forms of call and response identified in Afrobeat are call and response form with variation, the overlap, strophic, and antiphonal. In the call and the response form with

variation, the chorus repeats a fixed refrain in alternation with the lead singer who has more freedom to improvise as seen in example 12:

Music example 12

The musical score for Music example 12 consists of two staves. The top staff is labeled 'Solo' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Chorus'. Both staves are in C major and common time (C). The Solo part has a melody of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, followed by a rest, then G4, A4, B4, C5, followed by another rest. The Chorus part has a melody of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, followed by a rest, then G4, A4, B4, C5, followed by another rest. The lyrics 'Zom-bie O zom-bie' are written below the Solo staff, and 'Zom-bie O zom-bie' are written below the Chorus staff.

In bar 1, the call is made by the solo followed immediately by the response from the chorus section. There is however a variation of the theme by the soloist in bar 5 and 6.

Canonic imitation may occur in responsorial or antiphonal sections of Afrobeat melodies as a result of the repetition of the first phrase or the introduction of new melodic material in the form of a refrain. The latter may involve a contrasting section or a completion of the original melody. Furthermore, some responses may be longer in length than the call. The variation may also shift to the chorus with the response becoming longer in length than the call. This is seen in bars 20 to 22 of example 13:

Music example 13

The musical score for Music example 13 shows bars 20, 21, and 22. The top staff is labeled 'Solo' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Chorus'. Both staves are in C major and common time (C). The Solo part has a melody of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, followed by a rest, then G4, A4, B4, C5, followed by a rest, then G4, A4, B4, C5, followed by a rest. The Chorus part has a melody of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, followed by a rest, then G4, A4, B4, C5, followed by a rest, then G4, A4, B4, C5, followed by a rest. The lyrics 'Go and kill', 'go and die', and 'go and quench' are written below the Solo staff, and 'Jo ro ja na jo ro', 'Jo ro ja na jo ro', and 'Jo ro ja na' are written below the Chorus staff.

In some instances, the lead singer sings a few notes and the chorus joins along in a repetitive format. This is found at the end of the music like the excerpt from “**Beasts of no Nation**” where the call in bar 1 is followed by the long response in bars 2 to 5:

Music example 14

Call *Response*

No bad so - ci - e - ty

Beast of No Na - tion E - gbe - ke - gbe

Beast of No Na - tion O - tu - ru gbe - ke

Overlapping choral antiphony and responsorial singing are principal types of Afrobeat vocal arrangements. This is evident in **Yellow Fever** (Ex. 15) where overlapping is consistently applied in varied forms:

Music example 15

94

udeybleach a - fri - can lo - ver - er u dey bleacho u deybleach ni siyehyeh

u dey - bleach o u deybleach you de bleach o

The call and response format is sometimes based on the use of nonsensical words derived from the Yorùbá tonal language. This is seen in **Beast of No Nation** (Ex. 18):

Music example 18

SOLO
O fe se lu O fe se lu

CHORUS
A ya ka ta A ya ka ta

Harmony

Several harmonic techniques employed in Afrobeat include, poly-melody, parallel harmony, triadic harmony and polarity. The application of parallel harmony in two parts is seen in an excerpt taken from **Follow follow** as shown in example 19:

Music example 19

fol - low fol - low make you o - pen eye, if you dey fol - low fol - low make you

fol - low fol - low, fol - low fol - low fol - low fol - low,

The parallel thirds is employed in the harmony of the chorus section from bars 38, 41 and 45. Sometimes, the added part is above the melody. This is seen in **Suffering and Smiling** (example 20). The melody is shown with the arrow:

Music example 20

15

suf-fer for world, en-joy for heav-en chris-tian go dey yab by's spi-rit
 A - men, a - men a - men,

There is also the application of triadic harmony in “**Teacher Don’t Teach me Nonsense**” and **Sorrows, Tears and Blood**. The treatment of the harmony in Teacher Don’t Teach me Nonsense (bar 128 and 129) is triadic in nature. Other harmonic features in this example are the application of the pedal point with the stretched notes in the aforementioned bars and the harmonic parallelism in seconds (bars 124 and 126) and fourths as seen in bars 123, 125 and 127 of example 21:

Music example 21

121

dey for the sa-mu ca-te-go-ri, not the same ca-te-go-ri

124

o not the same ca-te-go-ri o not the

127

same ca-te-go-ri o

12

Due to the improvisational techniques employed by the solo, there is always a stretch into the chorus part by the soloist which results in overlapping of parts and a spontaneous harmony usually in thirds. This is found in excerpts of **Follow Follow** where there is the treatment of spontaneous harmony in thirds with the presence of G, B, and D in bar 38 of example 22:

Music example 22

38

fol - low fol - low make you o - pen eye, if you dey fol - low fol - low make you

fol - low fol - low, fol - low fol - low fol - low fol - low,

A striking feature of Afrobeat harmony is the frequent use of polarity in the music. An example is found in **Army arrangement** where the solo and the chorus operate on melodies that are diametrically opposed and yet complementing to each other:

Music example 23

15

ry you do - dy go - po - lie sta - bin you di - e wrong - fid - ly ee - ee, ee - ee, ee - ee, ee - ee, ee - ee, ee - ee

Voc. 1

ee - ee, ee - ee, ee - ee, ee - ee, ee - ee, ee - ee, ee - ee, ee - ee

Elements like polytonal, multi-movement themes encompassing and choral singing are used as compositional techniques in some of the music as seen in **Just like that**, the arrangement of the song is in four parts with the upper and lower part singing in unison while the middle part operates in parallel thirds, thus creating a contrapuntal device in the section as illustrated below:

Music example 24

10

Just like that Just like that Till you go shou ti O just like that Just like that Just like that

Just like that Just like that Till you go shou ti O just like that Just like that Just like that

The use of ostinato and suspension is evident in bars 14 to 17 of the excerpt from **I.T.T.** where the note of the first chord (bar 15) is held into the second chord (bar 17):

Music example 25

14

well We li we lle o Well well Well well well well well well well well

well Well well - - - - well well

well Well well - - - - well well

The music is also strengthened with the weaving of the dense, moody texture of the guitars with the Keyboard playing a counter harmony line to the rhythm of the guitars as seen in excerpt from **Coffin for the Head of State**:

Music example 26

The image displays a musical score for three instruments: two guitars and a bass. The score is organized into two systems. The first system consists of three staves: the top staff is labeled 'Gtr. 1', the middle staff is labeled 'Bass', and the bottom staff is unlabeled. The second system also consists of three staves: the top staff is labeled 'Gtr. 2', the middle staff is unlabeled, and the bottom staff is unlabeled. The music is written in a 2/4 time signature. The first system shows the bass line and the first guitar line starting in bar 6. The second system shows the second guitar line and the keyboard part (represented by the bottom staff) starting in bar 6. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and chord symbols.

The music starts with the bass and the first guitar line in bar 6 with the first guitar providing an ostinati accompaniment in an alternating melodic sequence in harmony with the bass line. The second guitar comes in as a counter to the bass and the first guitar in an offbeat rhythm utilizing the sixth chord followed by a chromatic discord thereby complementing the other instruments in the harmonic progression. The chordal progression of the music in the first stylistic period (1964-1969) was based on the tonic dominant chord cycle and the cyclic tonal harmonic progressions that continuously revolve around the primary triad. An example is excerpts from **A kò pé** with the chord built on a compound E flat structure:

Music example 27

Voice *A ko pe A ko pe Bo-bo to fi nsa-ko si mi Bo-bo'o-to ko - to.*
 5
 Voice *— ko - to — ko - to — ko - to — ko - to — ko - to*

In **Aya manager** (example 28), this harmonic progression often makes use of the raised supertonic and minor seventh in embellishing devices:

Music example 28

Voice *Wonnikowas'a-ya wa o-lo-hunoni s'a-ya wa e fi s'i-le o, e fi s'i-le o, —*
 5
e fi s'i-le o — e fi s'i-le ko-lo s'a-ya ma-na-ger o, Bi o s'a-ya wa ko-lo
 9

Felá also utilized the one-cord vamps with contrasting variations at thematic sections, an element typical of funk music. This is found in all his compositions from the second to the fourth stylistic periods (1970-1997). The example below is the one chord vamp on which **Jeun K'o ku** is based:

Ex. 46



Conclusion

The paper has attempted a compositional analysis of Afrobeat music in order to identify the elements embedded in the works of Felá Aníkúlápò Kútì. From the analysis of the music, we see an attempt at reflecting the African modal character of the melodies used in the pieces. The compositional techniques employed in the works are majorly of African origin with a fusion of Music from the western tradition. It is therefore safe to conclude that Afrobeat is an African music genre juxtaposed with western musical elements.

Discography

- Yellow Fever (1972) Barclay Records/Wrasse/MCA Universal
- Army arrangement (1985) Barclay Records/Wrasse/MCA Universal
- Zombie (1976) Barclay Records/Wrasse/MCA Universal
- Beast of No Nation *Beasts of No Nation (Just like That)* (1989) Barclay Records/Wrasse/MCA Universal
- Mister follow follow (1976) in *Zombie* Barclay Records/Wrasse/MCA Universal
- Teacher Don't Teach me Nonsense (1986) Barclay Records/Wrasse/MCA Universal
- Sorrows, Tears and Blood (1977) Barclay Records/Wrasse/MCA Universal
- I.T.T (*International Thief Thief*) Part 1 & 2 (1980) paired with *Original Sufferhead* Barclay Records/Wrasse/MCA Universal
- Coffin for the Head of State (1980) Barclay Records/Wrasse/MCA Universal
- A kò pé/Aya manager/Jeun K'o ku (1967) The Highlife Jazz Band

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