AJAJA GBARA ENI¹:
EXPLORING CITIZEN
REBELLION IN POST-COLONIAL
NIGERIA

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¹ Fighting Oppression/Liberation Struggles
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INTRODUCTION

The decolonization and independence of African nations was welcomed with great joy, fanfare and hopes for a bright future. However, citizens of these newly independent nations quickly realized that their independent nations contained characteristics of the former colonial administration. Such was the case in post-colonial Nigeria, where citizens noticed various inconsistencies in government structures and policies and therefore mounted a series of rebellions against the state.

This paper therefore seeks to examine citizen rebellion in post-colonial Nigeria using Fela as the primary case study. The motivations, methods and outcomes of his rebellion will be assessed. In order to better understand the relationship between citizen and the Nigerian state, this paper will also assess governmental reaction to Fela’s rebellion. Examining citizen rebellion in post-colonial Nigeria affords readers the opportunity to explore the socio-political milieu of a post-colonial, independent West African nation, the impacts of colonialism and the role of civil society in shaping the political landscape of the nation. Therefore, the guiding question of this research is: How did Fela Kuti rebel against the Nigerian post-colonial state between 1977 and 1997 and what was the significance of employing those specific methods of resistance?

In order to better understand the research question posed, first of all, I seek to contextualize the origin, development, and challenges of the Nigerian post-colonial state. I will also explore the literature around general theories of resistance to the state, the nature of various resistance movements, their actors and the resistance models they employ. The review of existing literature provides a good knowledge base for which I will argue my claim that Fela employs a resistance model unique to the post-colonial Nigerian context.
This exploration is important as it gives us the opportunity to gain a more nuanced perspective about the reasons and strategies with which average citizens rebel against the post-colonial Nigerian state. In a relatively young democracy like Nigeria, understanding the expression of citizen dissatisfaction is important and it aids in understanding the nascent political culture of the nation and ways to strengthen it.

THE POST-COLONIAL AFRICAN PROJECT

Origins

Kofi Abrefa Busia argues that “Colonialism is important historically [and] it is impossible to understand our contemporary society without understanding its impact” (Busia, 1962, 51). The development of the African continent was not an exercise in isolation. Through a series of contacts and conquests with the Western world, a new idea of statehood was developed. Prior to this, pre-colonial Africa was described as the dark continent by explorers, convinced “they were bringing the light of civilization to a benighted people, lost in primitive barbarity”(Crowder 1968, 10). However, these ‘stateless’ societies developed complex political systems with “sophisticated forms of representation, justice and accountability …”(Crowder 1968, 10).

The Berlin conference of 1884-1885 which carved up Africa into European colonies was the beginning of the formation of the African nation-state project. With fixed boundaries and perceived systems of legitimacy such as the payment of taxes, the Europeans attempted to control the activities of their colonies. The European governance structure to a large extent shaped the characteristics of emerging African states and still play a defining, albeit largely detrimental role in the nature of the post-colonial project.
Challenges Facing The Post-Colonial African Project

Up until now, I have referred to the post-colonial African state as a ‘project’. Historian Alade Fawole asserts that African states are in fact “mere caricatures of the Westphalian state, hollow shells which...parade the outward trappings of sovereignty but which in reality remain little more than real colonies”(2018, ix). African states lack the “real institutions that characterize the modern state of the Westphalian tradition” (Fawole 2018, viii), exercising power arbitrarily with little to no semblance of accountability. Political scientist, Francis Fukuyama asserts that the state is “a central authority that can exercise a monopoly of legitimate force over its territory to keep the peace and enforce the law,” however these characteristics are lacking in many post-colonial African states and thus the term project (Fukuyama 2014, 3). The terminology ‘project’ implies an enterprise without a specific identity but which is still in its actualization and discovery phase.

The arbitrary division of pre-colonial Africa has also produced significant geographic challenges in post-colonial nations. Alex Thomson asserts that “these state boundaries rarely matched existing pre-colonial political, social or economic divisions [and] were arbitrary” (Thomson 2000, 6). This precipitated many ethnic, social and political conflicts threatening the stability of the African nation-state project. Fawole discusses the artificiality of the post-colonial project and states that “the forcible corraling of disparate ethnic groups .....without addressing and resolving the challenges of peaceful cohabitation in the new nation-state has been the bane of all so-called post-colonial states across Africa” (Fawole 2018, 102). Therefore, post-colonial ‘independent’ Nigeria faces a myriad of socio-economic issues as a result of this false integration. Fawole asserts that “Africa has lived this lie of being a post-colony for more than fifty years, but it is hollow and unsustainable” (2, viii).
The crisis of national identity is one of the most enduring struggles of the postcolonial project in Nigeria. Attempting to construct a national identity amongst distinctively different groups of people trapped within artificial borders was a herculean task. More often than not, the basic identities of ethnicity and lineage trump the falsely constructed Nigerian identity. In order to enforce a sense of a single national identity amongst the people, the government banned ethnic associations and languages and replaced them with ‘official’ national languages, which were often the language of the departing colonial power. All these were efforts to foster a single national identity as anything tribal was antithetical to the nation (Thomson 2004). Professor of Political Science at the University of Lagos, Dr. Esuola in discussing the identity crisis of peoples within Nigeria, asserted that “I am not Nigerian, I am Yoruba” (Esuola 2019). This sentiment is reiterated by Fawole who asserts that “the people who are today called Nigerians still fundamentally prefer to define themselves by either their ethnic affiliations first, which is the only identity that to them seems real and permanent…”(2018, 107). Chief Obafemi Awolowo asserted that “Nigeria is not a nation, it is a mere geographical expression” (Fawole 2018, 107).

In response to the problems that plagued the post-colonial Nigerian project, the government resorted to centralization as an answer because they believed that in “societies where national identities were fragile and resources scarce….a highly centralized state was appropriate” (Thomson 2004, 113). Structures that were supposed to encourage multi-party and pluralistic democratic structures were traded for a centralized system of governance which rested on the decisions of the executive. As a result, civil society participation was weakened and institutions were not given the room to express safe dissent or inform policy. Advice, policy, and information was generated without consultation and therefore led to to ill-informed decisions (Thomson 2004,
Consequently, the Nigerian government lost touch with their citizens which produced frustrated individuals ready to rebel against the state.

The character of many of independent post-colonial projects was predatory, violent, and rent-thirsty—all attributes inherited from the colonial regime. The wealthy, western-educated who invariably became the leaders of the nation—many of whom were supported by colonial masters—used “exactly the same coercive methods of governance (use of military, civil police…)” to intimidate opposition and consolidate their power (Fawole 2018, 26). Thus, the legitimacy of the state was called into question. These negative characteristics were not hidden from the public eye and brewed much frustration and to some extent disillusionment with the post-colonial African project.

Methodology

In order to effectively assess how Fela resisted the post-colonial Nigerian project and the significance of his resistance, this thesis employs an interdisciplinary approach. It draws from the disciplines of history, political theory, and ethnomusicology in an attempt to sufficiently answer the research question.

Firstly, the paper examines the roots of Fela’s rebellion: his family legacy, his Yoruba background and the political influences in his life. All these things shaped his ideas about citizenship, society, the state, and political resistance. I have divided Fela’s model of resistance into three areas: his role as a political philosopher, a political griot, and a political practitioner. Under each of these arms, I examine subcategories like language, political symbolism, performance and his political party as key ways in which he resisted the post-colonial Nigerian government. Each of these roles provides commentary on the nature of his resistance and its
significance within the Nigerian post-colonial state. Under each method of resistance, we are exposed to a different political approach employed by Fela Kuti.

The primary method of inquiry for this research is qualitative. This will require me to engage with both primary and secondary sources about Fela’s life. As part of my collection of primary data, I conducted field interviews in Ghana and Nigeria between December 2018 and January 2019. I had the opportunity to interact with Professor John Collins of the University of Ghana, Professor Sola Olorunyomi of the University of Ibadan, Dr. Olukayode Esuola of the University of Lagos, Seun Kuti, Fela’s youngest son, and some of Fela’s wives. These personal interviews provided a more nuanced perspective on Fela’s life and his process of developing a unique, Nigerian-specific model of rebellion. My analysis has also benefited from other primary sources such as archival recordings of Fela’s discussions on Nigerian politics, various performance recordings and recordings of Nigerian leaders reacting to Fela.

The writings of authors like Randall Grass, James Scott, Tejumola Olaniyan, Michael Veal, Carlos Moore and Trevor Schoonmaker amongst others have also been invaluable secondary sources for my analysis. The benefit of these secondary sources is the theoretical framing and the depth of insight they provide into post-colonial Nigerian politics, theories of resistance and Fela’s modes of political resistance. However, the consideration of Fela’s rebellion as a unique model is understudied which leaves a knowledge gap in the scholarship. This thesis therefore seeks to address this gap in knowledge by synthesizing various theories which situate Fela’s rebel politics in the context of the post-colonial Nigerian state.

In addressing this question, I claim that through Fela’s three-pronged model of resistance, he effectively resists the post-colonial Nigerian project and in doing so highlights the power of citizen activism in Nigeria and Africa as a whole.
CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Exploring Fela Kuti’s Resistance: Six Scholarly Perspectives

Globally, many post-colonial nations such as Brazil and Vietnam have been sites of citizen and political resistance. The frequency and widespread nature of rebellion against governments in Africa may be linked to the contrived and alien nature of the post-colonial project. The government’s alien political structure prompted episodes of violence in Nigeria especially surrounding national elections and a call for secession in between the mid 1960’s. These instabilities “underscored the fragility of the new post-colonial state,” and led to citizen dissatisfaction (Fawole 2018, 109).

Fela Kuti, a prominent Nigerian musician and citizen activist also experienced a myriad of frustrations as he engaged with the Nigerian post-colonial project. He responded by mounting a series of strong and sustained resistances against the Nigerian government from 1970 up until his death in 1997. Employing a combination of traditional and more contemporary modes of resistance, Fela developed a hybrid framework that responded to issues within the Nigerian post-colonial context. This catapulted him into the limelight and made him an icon of citizen activism in an age of deeply fractured Nigerian politics. In order for us to critically examine this question of Fela Kuti’s methods of challenging the post-colonial state and its significance, it will benefit us to explore the literature around reasons for resistance movements and how resistance is expressed in various contexts.
Figure 1: Diagram showing Fela’s three-pronged model of political resistance

The model above shows the three-pronged resistance of Fela Kuti. Fela occupies a tripartite role as a political philosopher, a political griot and a political practitioner. The combination of these roles under a single resistance framework presents a unique model of resistance which was hitherto underutilized within the Nigerian post-colonial context. The uniqueness of this model is found in the synthesis of traditional forms of protest highlighted by the griotic tradition, in addition to Western forms of protest such as the political party. An assessment of the literature seeks to locate theories that point to how Fela resisted and the significance of his resistance against the post-colonial Nigerian government. In order to satisfy the demands of the question, I have divided my six schools of thoughts under two broad headings, Theories of Resistance and Forms of Resistance.
A: Theories of Resistance

Six schools of thought are worth considering in evaluating the reasons for rebellion in different social contexts.

1. Rational Choice Theory

The first theory is presented by German sociologist, Karl-Dieter Opp who posits the Rational Choice Theory (RCT) based off Mancur Olson’s seminal work, *The Logic of Collective Action*. The theory asserts that an individual or a group’s (henceforth, the subject) actions are based on factors that compel the subject to take some specific action (Opp 2009, 3). Opp argues however, that this theory is not as simple as influencing factors and the subject’s resultant actions. RCT, he claims, consists of the preference proposition, the constraints proposition and the utility-maximization proposition - all of which impact the subject’s actions in different ways.

The preference proposition asserts that the subjects goals and motives are conditions for the specific kind of behavior displayed. In this case, the subject may be described as being “goal-oriented” or in other words, “the individual’s interests are a determinant of his or her behavior” (Opp 2009, 3). Andrian and Apter weigh in on the RCT and discuss the idea that “subjective orientations--motives, perceptions, attitudes--influence that decision to participate in protest movements” (1995). This assertion contributes to the idea that an individual’s desires are the basis for any action, in this cases resistance action.

The constraints proposition on the other hand asserts that the subject's actions are in response to events or circumstances that prevent them from attaining their original goals (Opp, 2009, 3). Expressions of a subject’s discontent and frustration against the government is dependent
on the repercussions that might arise as a result of the action. Based on the structural and circumstantial constraints that exist within a given context, this theory helps us discern the reasons for the specific kinds of rebellion a subject engages in and the potential for other forms of resistance.

The third and final component of the RCT is the Utility-Maximization proposition which asserts that the subject makes a choice after evaluating the available options and eventually choosing the option with provides the maximum utility. This differs from the preference proposition as rather than focusing on the subject’s end goal, this proposition picks from the list of options that are already available to the subject.

Significant to the RCT is the centrality of the subject as opposed to the whole group. James Rule, in his work, *Theories of Civil Violence*, asserts that actions that are motivated by the RCT often seek to satisfy the interests of the individual person as opposed to the whole group (1988, 32). When the collective of individuals advocating for a cause grows excessively large and the likelihood of success is not determined by the presence of any one individual, it becomes irrational for any individual to participate. Rule argues that “if any action is unlikely to produce a sensible increment in gratification experienced by the individual, it would be irrational to engage in it” and thus the need for selective incentives that cater to the direct needs or wants of individuals (1988, 34).

Critics of this theory, however, claim that not all actions are done in order to produce ‘divisible gratification’ and many people are involved in collective actions where they do not see the tangible effect of individual participation. Examples of collective actions such as voting, enlisting in the army, and contributing to far-removed emergency relief situations challenge the RCT. However, it is important to consider that most of the examples given to have an indirect
connotation with the welfare of the subject involved, whether it be the fear of a collapsing democracy which encourages people to vote - a good example being the 2018 US midterm elections which recorded the highest voter turnout since 1966 (Domonoske 2018). Enlisting in the army in times of a national crisis may seem simply altruistic but the fear of war or personal harm to a subject makes it more likely for them to enlist. This therefore provides some legitimacy to the RCT theory of subject-centered motivation.

One of the primary factors that impacted Fela’s work as an anti-government activist was the physical abuse inflicted on his mother by the Nigerian government. After her death, the intensity of Fela’s resistance increased dramatically and was reflected in the kinds of resistances he staged. Notable amongst them was the presentation of a coffin in front of the military barracks in order to protest the killing of his innocent mother. Fela’s action of presenting the coffin in front of the barracks feeds into the preference position of the RCT as his actions were motivated by his desire to avenge his mother’s death.

The next session looks at the theories about the kinds of resistance that are employed.

B: Forms of Resistance

This section examines theories about some kinds of resistance that are employed. It is important to analyze the tools that are present in resistance theory as it gives us better understanding of Fela’s resistance practice.
1. Transgression as Resistance

Christina Foust posits our first kind of resistance: transgression as resistance. The first kind of resistance is transgression as resistance and this theory is posited by Christina Foust. Foust describes transgression as a form of resistance which involves actions that “oppose dominant powers which occupy preferred positions in hierarchies” and work to “instill new ways of interpreting the world, to challenge or replace those dominant powers” (Foust, 9). These resistance actions deconstruct the normal and are therefore responsible for the creation of alternative social hierarchies - economically, religiously and politically. The creation of alternative social modes upsets current social hierarchies and leads to an unwelcome reordering of social dynamics, which often benefited the elite. The relative ease with which social alternatives are created speaks to the fluidity and fragility of systems of power which are created to ensure conformity (Foust 2010, 4).

Transgressive resistance can be divided into two sub-schools: the first “changes historicity into organization to the point of transforming it into order and power” (Foust 2010, 6). This kind of transgressive action seeks to reform public consciousness and believes that working through institutions to gain power is the preferred approach. The second sub-school emphasizes the destruction of social order for the purposes of “cultural innovation,” which constitute immediate symbolic acts often unrecognizable as traditional typologies of change (Foust, 7). One of the significant acts of transgressive resistance which may occupy a subcategory of transgression is depression as resistance.

1.1. Depression as Resistance

Bruce Rogers-Vaughn argues that depression serves as resistance against the state of current affairs and works to reform public structures. Rogers-Vaughn defines depression as “a
refusal, a standing aside, directed toward a sociopolitical hegemony. It is, in other words, a political resistance. It is the despair that bears witness” (2013, 505). This specific definition of depression comes from Jesus’ assertion that, “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). Jesus’ statement was aimed at a Jewish audience who encountered socio-political inequalities, economic oppression and poverty under the Roman empire. It therefore stands to reason that this ‘mourning’ that Jesus describes is political and non-conforming and a direct response to the current issues of the state. Bonhoeffer corroborates this idea of transgressive mourning as the refusal to be in tune with the world or accommodate it standards (Bonhoeffer 1995, 108). Furthermore, Rogers-Vaughn points to the fact that although today’s oppressive systems may not resemble the imposing apparatus of the Roman empire, it works through neoliberalism and “the routine activities of international corporations and financial institutions” (Rogers-Vaughn 2013, 506). We are therefore exposed to the idea that this model of depression as resistance stems chiefly from the response to economic structures that exist and do harm.

Psychoanalyst Darian Leader claims that the ability to feel sad about issues, is a way of rebelling against what we are told to be and is a catalyst for action (Leader 2008). Fela Kuti commented on sadness in his work saying, “the work that has to be done in Africa for Africans to progress…it makes me sad” (Moore 2009, 260). Sorrow therefore, influenced Fela’s political activity and challenged him to work to ensure progress in Nigeria. Expressions of sorrow are reflected in some of his songs such as Shuffering and Smiling and Sorrow Tears and Blood.

Alex Thomson discusses the gulf between civil society and the state which leads to feelings of alienation amongst the citizenry which trigger anger and frustration (Thomson, 2004). He further asserts that the existence of these sentiments amongst the citizenry may lead to civil
unrest or political rebellion. Thomson’s assertions also add some legitimacy to the idea that depression is in fact a tool for political resistance.

Rogers-Vaughn asserts that “most people, and clinicians in particular, are quite aware that human beings can inwardly resist even when behaviorally compliant” (Rogers-Vaughn 2013, 505). This frames the discourse around depressive resistance as a largely internal struggle in which the soul is involved in resisting the state as opposed to notions of resistance as overt or explicit practices. This idea differs from other schools of thought thus making it more difficult to accept and less conventional. The challenge is how to empirically measure or ascertain the extent to which the political resistance that an individual exhibits is a result of the depression that they feel. Without isolating other incentives for political action, the claim that depression is linked to political resistance within individuals is difficult to assess.

2. Art as Resistance

Art can be used as a tool of resistance. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s assertion that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” suggests that poets and more broadly artists, are custodians and preservers of the moral and civil codes that guide the world (Mark, The Literary Encyclopedia). Their work acts as moral checks on politics and often provokes state resistance from the state. In discussing the conflict between art and the state, Kenyan author, Ngugi wa Thiongo, declares that “the performance space of the artist stands for openness; that of the state, for confinement. Art breaks down barriers between people; the state erects them” (Ngugi 1999, 9). Ngugi’s assertion reveals that art serves as a mode of resistance to state institutions.
David Jefferress argues that literature, and more generally the arts are the primary cultural means through which the colonial order is produced and therefore the only way to counter its effect are by the colonized writing themselves into existence (Jefferress 2003). This therefore characterizes postcolonial art as a resistance tool to European domination. The character of this art, however, exceeds the category of simply being an antithetical force to European ideology. Jefferress contends that “the political significance of so-called-post-colonial writing should not be limited to the way in which it responds to and challenges European forms…” (2003, 16). This form of art also challenges the systems of the post-colonial African project due to the fact these structures are offspring of the colonial enterprise. Artistic resistances include, but are not limited to forms such as abuse singing, cryptic poetry and the sometimes openly rebellious public displays of expression. The latter, however, was not always possible as the restrictions imposed by the Nigerian government did not permit any type of widespread and public opposition.

The importance of art within the Nigerian, and more specifically, the Yoruba context cannot be underestimated. Traditional artforms functioned as entertainment, praise and critique in various aspects of Yoruba society. Their early access to western education made them the most educated group of people in colonial Nigeria and this led to the formation of an educated elite who became the vanguard of Nigerian nationalism. Fela, a politically active, English-educated, Yoruba man, employed the Yoruba tradition of anti-establishment musical rebellion in challenging the Nigerian government. Ethnomusicologist, Michael Veal says that Fela’s “voice came to be heard as the sound of rebellion itself [and] sent an unsettling message to the country’s military rulership” (Veal 2000, 126). This exposes us to the impact art has on the post-colonial Nigerian project.
3. Everyday Resistance

James Scott in his book “Weapons of the weak” posits another theory of resistance known as *everyday resistance*. This involves “the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents and interests from them” (1985, 29). With no ‘real’ power to fight back, Scott asserts that they resort to the “ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so forth” (1985, 29). These covert methods of resistance “require little or no coordination…and avoid direct symbolic confrontation with authority, ” Scott asserts. Rather, resisters employ normal, everyday practices that do not fit into the ideas around ‘traditional’ resistance.

Andrea Brighneti posits that ‘everyday resistance’ theory is better understood as “molecular phenomenon” as opposed to the overused narrative of resistance as large social aggregates. This molecular approach cautions against conceptualizing resistance as mass movements with obvious political outcomes. Rather, resistance can be as simple as an informally organized collective advocating for certain demands. These subtle practices known as hidden transcripts include jokes, oblique language, religious metaphors and gossip which push back against the existing social order, albeit more slowly. Brighneti also asserts that just because these forms of resistance are “externally compliant- or, when non-compliant, maintain a low profile and do not engage in symbolic confrontation” does not render their work ineffective (Brighneti, 62). Brighneti discusses the Janus-faced nature of this resistance as it can function in the private and public, official and unofficial settings, and onstage and offstage. Scott highlights the importance of numbers by asserting that “multiplied many thousand fold, such petty acts of resistance by
peasants may in the end make an utter shambles of the policies dreamed up by their would be superiors” (Scott 1985, 35).

Gossip for instance, is one of the most popular, yet disguised, acts of political resistance. In discussing the power of discourse in Africa, Kwesi Yankah asserts that everyday conversation in African settings is a mega genre which involves other verbal economies such as song and tale and not only restricted to talk. The fluidity and versatility of African communication lends itself to modes that potentially “register protest or disagreement or may lampoon or verbally assault [one another]” (Kwasi Yankah 1997, 55). Therefore, gossip constitutes a body of oral communication that protests social structures. Its power rests in the inability to trace its source and the ease with which it passes from one individual to another. Even when individuals are caught, the ease of disavowing responsibility as there is “no identifiable author, but scores of eager retailers who claim they are just passing on the news,” (Scott 1985, 142) makes this form of resistance more elusive.

Another form of verbal communication which features within everyday resistance is euphemism. This is a subtle way of describing an idea, often one of discontentment, within a power-laden situation in order to avoid any negative repercussions. This form of resistance protests political authority whilst posing minimum threat to one's “face integrity”, or societal status especially “where protest discourse is targeted at centers of power” (Yankah 1985, 55). Within the Nigerian context, a form of performative gossip which is known as yabis--a satirical piece which uses oblique communication to criticize the misdemeanors of society and aims to correct vices within the society-- was widely used by individuals including Fela Kuti (Olatunji 2007, 27). Apart from calling out societal ills, yabis also motivated the people to rebel against looting of the nation’s treasury, bribery and other oppressive systems of government (Olatunji 2007, 33). Michael Veal
argues that in using art to criticize the Nigerian post-colonial state, “no one--including political leaders or other powerful persons--is exempt from this type of criticism” (Veal 2000, 129).

Within the Nigerian post-colonial project, this argument seems to have some currency as the centralized system of state governance does not allow for open displays of political rebellion. I imagine even ‘foot-dragging’ an covert acts of rebellion in post-colonial Nigeria would have resulted in government crackdown on resisters.

On the other hand, scholars such as Hollander and Einwohner push back on this idea of everyday resistance asserting that “the term should be reserved for visible, collective acts that result in social change” and not groups of loosely organized acts which often do not produce immediate change (Hollander and Einwohner, 541). The question of intent and action as the threshold for measuring the integrity of political resistance is brought up in challenging Scott’s theory of everyday resistance. Whereas, to a large extent, the intentions and the effects of large, public movements can be observed, Onur Bilginer argues that “those who scrutinize day-to-day resistances have realized that intentions behind everyday resistance are not always followed by actions that look alike...”(2015, 8). Thus, Scott’s argument on everyday resistance is contested by highlighting the disparity between intention and observable, result-producing action.

4. Symbolic and Ideological Resistance

Another model of resistance is symbolic and ideological resistance which deals with the employment of symbols or representations of reality as a means of resisting the state. It is prefixed on the shared cultural and social images and narratives within the community, therefore the
employment of these images and symbols makes the resistance more poignant and impactful. James Scott discusses highlights the importance of this resistance by contending that individuals are “more enslaved at the level of ideas than at the level of behavior” and “elites control the ideological sectors of society… and can thereby engineer consent for their rule”(1985, 39). Scott asserts that the elites control the ideological sectors of society--culture, religion, education and media and often manipulate them to keep the citizens compliant. Leaders of the Nigeria sought to maintain “the symbolic miasma that blocks revolutionary thought” and as a result employed the ideological and symbolic structures in order to keep the citizenry compliant (Scott 1985, 39). As a result, ideological and symbolic resistance took on a new importance within the political project.

Symbolic and ideological resistance was more poignant in the Nigerian post-colonial project as open opposition against the largely intolerant, one-party or military government made it virtually impossible to rebel openly. Whereas the tools employed in everyday resistances were a conglomeration of mundane, commonplace actions against oppressive institutions, symbolic and ideological resistance employs culturally relevant elements which communicate important socio-political messages obliquely. This kind of resistance often requires a thoughtful selection of resistance elements in order to produce a desired reaction.

Fela resists the Nigerian project through symbolic representation. From his music which was replete with symbols criticizing the state, to his Kalakuta republic which functioned as an antithetical symbol the state and its conceptions of sovereignty, Fela attempted to reform colonial ideologies that existed in Nigeria. The language Fela sang in was also a symbol of political resistance which questioned the ideas of a single national identity and Nigeria’s continued ties to their colonial masters. John Collins asserts that “as Afrobeat emerged in its full pomp, pidgin became the most favored medium of communication, both inside and beyond Nigeria” (Collins
2015, 287). His use of pidgin—a synthesis between English and indigenous languages—was a call for a uniquely Nigerian parlance which involved the fusion of traditional languages and expression as well as English.

Andrea Bringhenti, argues that “resistance is neither a discourse nor a political symbol, but rather something one does with one’s own body, something one engages one’s body into” (Brighenti 2011, 59). This idea of resistance as being heavily reliant on the physical body is contested by Fela’s Kalakuta and much of the rhetoric he used which did not involve the use of the physical body. Nevertheless, bodily actions such as his marriage and the movements of his dancers amongst other things established the body as a site of rebellion within Fela’s rebellion practices.

4.1 Enactment and Symbolic resistance

Christina Foust also discusses symbolic resistance, albeit from a slightly different lens. Even though this school is classified under symbolic resistance, it foregrounds the body as the principal actor. This idea is known as the Enactment theory. In describing the way people resist, she claims that “they deploy the raw material of subjectivity and symbol, preferring poetic utterances to poetic rhetoric” which immediately highlights the shift from more traditional forms of protest to increasingly symbolic political protest (Foust 2010, 145). Enactment, which is the crux of Foust’s argument refers to “material acts and gestures which continually ...define the meanings, rules, and values” (Foust 2010, 145). This school of thought advances the claim that Enactment focuses on the body as a living site of protest as opposed to broad-based generalizations and theoretical ideas about societal issues. It highlights the fact that the “politics of enactment calls
attention to the experience of subjectivity as embodied rather than transcendental” (Jones, 1998 197). Performance therefore generates impacts by defying binaries, particularly the various divisions between the immediate (body, materiality, nature, concrete presence) and the mediated.

The breakdown of the dichotomies between real life and performance threatens social hierarchies and structures. Fela embraces this tradition as he served long hours of exciting musical performances whilst simultaneously producing rhetoric that denigrated the political project. The politicalness and performativity of Fela’s resistance are inseparable. Looking at his work in terms of enactment theory, we are exposed to hybridity of Fela’s work and the duality of protest and play, entertainment and education, revelry and rebellion - all of which confound social hierarchies and weaken governmental structures. The politico-performative body, therefore, becomes a site of resistance and struggle against the dominant power and therefore the most ideal way of dealing with it is the destruction of the body as a means of silencing rebellion and preventing further rebellion.

The limitations of this theory however is the emphasis it places on the body as tool of rebellion. The positionality of the politico-performative body as the site of rebellion implies that once the body is destroyed, the possibility of continued rebellion is destroyed.

5. Exit Strategy

Another school of thought about resistance is known as Exit strategy. Albert Hirschman discusses the exit strategy from an economic perspective by referencing the considerable damage the exit of customers has on the proper functioning of a business. He contends however, that the success of the exit strategy depends on the kind of customer that ‘exits’. Hirschman argues that
there has to be a mixture of alert and inert customers. Alert customers “provide the firm with a feedback mechanism which starts the effort at recuperation while the inert customers provide it with the time and dollar needed for this effort to come to fruition” (Hirschman 1970, 24). Hirschman posits that the actions of alert customers initiate a feedback loop: they express dissatisfaction against the system and threaten exit, this in turn increases competition within the system and eventually causes a change in the system. Whilst this process is ongoing, inert customers, who are generally more unaware of the challenges of the organization maintain a constant supply of monetary capital for the recuperation of the organization.

Within the political arena, Hirschman’s customers are citizens in a polity. Frustrated citizens employ the exit strategy which involves the physical, economical, psychological or emotional removal of oneself from state affairs. It may involve individuals migrating physically, subscribing to a new political ideology or calling for political self-determination. The establishment of the Kalakuta Republic, a symbolic state within the Federal state of Nigeria, with its own socio-political ethos, was one of the notable exit strategies Fela employed. The success of the exit strategy however, depends on the level of political consciousness or ‘alertness’ of citizens, which is often enhanced by one’s level of education. Ceteris Paribus, the more educated a person is, the greater their capacity to effectively engage the tools of rebellion to resist the post-colonial government. The weaponization of education as a mean of curbing citizen rebellion is a counter strategy against the exit option in some political societies. In post-colonial Nigeria where majority of the population did not have a high level of education, there was a lesser opportunity to rebel against governmental structures. However, Fela who was well educated, both academically and socially employed social and political tools in developing a framework for rebellion.
Emmanuel Aiyede also discusses the exit strategy although using the language of disengagement. Similar to exit, disengagement theory involves the “withdrawal from social power wherever it is exercised without consent and against one’s best interest” (2017, 1338). Aiyede discusses economic disengagement as a withdrawal from the state on account of instability and its dwindling resources. Economic disengagement involves the departure of citizens from the formal economy into the informal economy in which they undertake actions outside the purview of the official state economy. Aiyede asserts that as a result of the actions that constitute economic disengagement, “state laws, ordinances, judicial processes and the judicial system lose their credibility and noncompliance with laws becomes commonplace” which eventually creates a weak and ineffective systems of governance (Aiyede 2017, 1338).

I contend that the exit strategy is a privileged form of anti-government resistance as it demands that individuals explore an alternative to current socio-political structures. For many individuals, the option to exit uncomfortable situations is limited by physical and economic constraints which provide them no option but to remain in these uncomfortable situations. The departure from reality and the simultaneous creation of alternative socio-political realities is a luxury that only a few privileged are able to afford.

6. Voice Strategy

Hirschman also discusses the voice strategy which involves the attempt to “chang[e] the practices, policies, and outputs of the firm from which one buys or the organization to which one belongs” (1970, 30). In this case, the voice strategy involves actions of citizens which influence the political systems within the state. This strategy falls under the broad umbrella of engagement
strategies which involve the expression of displeasure through citizen mobilization against the state and its agencies (Aiyede 2017, 15). Most of Fela’s modes of resistance fall under the voice strategy as they were aimed at “changing, rather than escaping from, an objectionable state of affairs” (Hirschman 1970, 30). Actions that constitute the voice strategy function through direct individual or collective petitioning to government with the “intention of forcing a change in management” (Hirschman 1970, 30). It also involves actions and protests that are meant to mobilize public opinion and these can either be civil, uncivil or violent (Aiyede, 2017). Fela’s engagement strategies, although devoid of violence, included actions that directly confronted the Nigerian government in a manner that provoked a series of often violent responses. For many societies where exit is not an option, “the voice option is the only way dissatisfied customers can react” (Hirschman 1970, 33).

Although voice strategy is powerful tool that is necessary for the proper functioning of a democracy, Hirschman asserts that the voice strategy can be overdone and the “discontented customers or members could become so harassing that their protests would at some point hinder rather than help whatever efforts of recovery are undertaken” (Hirschman 1970, 31). The public nature of voice rebellion, as opposed to the exit strategy makes it more likely for citizen-government interaction to become tempestuous. This therefore suggests that individuals or groups who employ the voice strategy as political rebellion need to use it tactically in order to gain maximum benefit.
CHAPTER 2: ROOTS OF REBELLION

Fela Kuti’s resistance against the post-colonial Nigerian project cannot be effectively discussed without assessing his family, ethnic and political legacies as each of these were significant in influencing the various modes of resistance he employed. The influences that shaped Fela’s life and his ideas about the African struggle were varied and deeply impactful. From close family ties like Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, his mother who was an ardent political activist to well-known political figures like Kwame Nkrumah, first president of Ghana and even to the Black Panther movement in America, Fela’s political ideology was deep and multilayered. In order to gain a better appreciation of the eclectic nature of the influences which informed his resistance, this section will be divided into three parts: family influences, yoruba influences, and political influences.

Family Legacy

The influence of parents on children is undeniable and for Fela Kuti, one of the greatest influences in his life was his mother, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti (FRK). According to Emmanuel Babtunde, Yoruba tradition places emphasis on parents as the first teachers of a child. Yoruba proverbs such as “the mother is gold and the father is glass” suggest the unchangeable affection and influence mothers have on the child as opposed to the father within Yoruba culture (Babatunde 1992). This is seen in the central role FRK played in Fela’s development, socially, musically and politically. This however does not disparage the role Fela’s father, Reverend Israel Ransome Kuti played in his development.

Scholars of Fela such as LaRay Denzer assert that “Fela’s mother was the most important woman in his life” (2004, 113). FRK was an activist, a women’s organizer and one of the pioneers
in the struggle for women’s rights and national independence. According to Carlos Moore, Fela acknowledged that “something always made me sit with her [FRK] to listen to her...She started taking me around with her in the car to her campaign meetings...my mother was quite heavily political”(Moore 2009, 41-42). The formation of Fela’s revolutionary spirit was nurtured through the talks and observations that occurred between him and his mother from a tender age. FRK’s work as a women’s advocate and a member of the Abeokuta Women’s Union (AWU) --one of the most vocal groups against the colonial administration--placed her at the forefront of resistance politics in colonial Nigeria. It stands to reason that as a result of the close relationship between Fela and FRK, he was exposed to the antagonistic dynamic that existed between her and the colonial government which may have shaped his ideas on the relationship between citizen and state. Michael Veal further asserts that Fela “probably internalized an antagonism toward authority, distrust of the Nigerian ruling classes and a derisive wit, along with an early exposure to Marxist rhetoric, Nigerian nationalism and the ideology of Pan - Africanism” through his mother (2000, 18).

FRK’s resistance politics began rather early on in life. Her exposure to gross injustices against girls in colonial Nigeria such as being denied access to education, the implementation of unfair taxation and divorce laws catalysed in her a desire to reform the system (Shonekan 2009, 131). Supported by her husband, FRK dropped her Western name, Frances, for her Yoruba name, Funmilayo. She also discarded her Western clothes and donned traditional Yoruba attire as she led the AWU to protest the repressive policies of the colonial administration. FRK’s actions were antithetical to the cultural landscape as most women in colonial Nigeria did not possess the educational capacity to mobilize and resist the colonial administration and were thus “chronically exploited”, Labinjoh discusses (Labinjoh 1982, 123). The inability to resist did not come from a
place of incompetence rather, it was due to the fact that resistance politics with the colonial administration involved a lot of English written correspondence which these women were unable to decipher. Therefore, FRK’s ability to read and write English was helpful to women’s resistance in Nigeria. A testament to her strength and tenacity was her ability to lead the women to force the oba, the king, into exile in January 1949 as they believed he did not represent their best interests.

It is speculative and rather complicated to accurately prove direct causation in such qualitative research however in order to make the argument that Fela’s philosophy and ideas about resistance were inspired to a large extent by FRK, there is a need to draw parallels between his actions and that of FRK.

In describing his first attraction to politics, Fela recalls how his mother’s busy political engagements did not allow her time to punish him as much and therefore he “began liking politics” (Denzer 2004, 116). As a child, the association of the political with a happier, punishment-free life was significant as it drew him into the world of politics. Little did he know that the pain he avoided as a child on account of his mother’s political engagements would be meted out to him in greater measure when he eventually emerged on the Nigerian political scene. FRK’s actions of defiance and mass mobilization were crucial in sparking the flame of rebellion in Fela. One experience Denzer presents is how Fela recalled his mother putting on “shorts…, a man’s shirt, a beret and sandals… [as] her way of saying, ‘it takes a man to fight another man’” (2004, 116). This specific example of resistance against governmental authority and gender binaries is important as it may have established a precedent that fed into the symbolic resistance Fela so often employed. We find that FRK’s work of anti-government protest, destruction of social hierarchies and the use of the body as a site of protest, even in colonial Nigeria, is firmly grounded in the
symbolic resistance theories of James Scott and Christina Foust described earlier. It is therefore no surprise that Fela follows this deeply political and symbolic tradition he saw in his mother.

A pioneer at heart, FRK was the first woman to drive in Abeokuta, the first woman to gain a leadership position in the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) and the first African woman to visit the USSR and China and even meet with Mao Tse Tsung which was considered high treason according to British colonial regulations (Olorunyomi 2005, 26). FRK’s challenge of gender stereotypes also speaks to her trailblazing attitude. Yoruba society’s systems of patriarchy were exacerbated by “the inherently sexist attitudes of the British colonial officers…[which], led to an even greater worsening of women’s conditions” (Johnson, 149). Nevertheless, FRK defied these gender stereotypes and campaigned for change in colonial Nigeria. Her positionality as “an engineer of thoughtful and necessary social change” and her defiance of societal stereotypes and expectations were manifested in Fela’s life evidenced by his marriage to 27 women in one day - a culturally and religiously repudiated action in Nigeria (Shonekan 2009, 130).

This penchant for innovation is seen in Fela’s ability to chart new paths in his music and societal norms. Fela was the first to develop the Afrobeat musical genre and export it outside the continent, first to form a republic within the Federal republic of Nigeria, and the first to marry 27 wives in a public ceremony. He defied the class symbols of his name, his western-education and the comforts of belonging to a middle class family and rather advocating for the concerns of the poor. Fela claimed in an interview with Barney Hoskyns that he was one of the first radical post-colonial radical and political Nigerian musicians which is a testament of his innovative spirit (Barney Hoskyns 2004, 150).
Music was another important point of influence that can be traced between FRK and Fela. FRK used music as a tool for political resistance and mobilization. Her commitment to music as a resistance tool was manifested in her personal collection of Egba protest music. The Abeokuta women “sang a number of explicitly abusive songs” against the colonial regime (Veal 2000, 32). As a form of resistance, FRK employed songs laden with sexual references and insults - a trend that is seen in Fela’s own music. This theme will be discussed further in subsequent chapters. It is therefore not an overextension to suggest that Fela’s ideas about musical protest were significantly shaped by his mother. In later chapters, I shall expand on how these ideas impacted Fela’s musical protest.

FRK herself asserted that, “[Fela] preaches Blackism and I myself have been preaching woman power. I believe he was picking it up from where I left it” (Denzer 2004, 118). This corroborates the idea of FRK as a major influence in Fela’s life. Labinjoh asserts that “her [FRK] activities were not only available to her son to utilize in interpreting social structure but also to emulate” (Labinjoh 1982, 123).

Yoruba Influences

Yoruba Political Influences

Another level of influence that impacted Fela’s political career was his Yoruba lineage. The Yoruba tradition featured a prominent series of resistances that had an impact on Fela’s political career. However, his political consciousness was both Yoruba-inspired and Western-inspired. His upbringing in a traditional Yoruba household combined with his exposure to Western
systems of political thought during his years in the United Kingdom and America, featured prominently in how he conceptualized politics in post-colonial Nigeria.

Born into the Yoruba ethnic group, specifically the Ègbá people, Fela inherited a rich history of Yoruba involvement in politics. According to Sola Olorunyomi, the Èbga, “quite early sought autonomy” and were involved in a series of battles to achieve independence from the Oyó Empire (Olorunyomi 2005, 25). They eventually attained independence, complete with a flag and a national anthem. This account reveals that even as far back as pre-colonial Nigeria, the Ègba desired self-determination. Preparation for and engagement in warfare was a distinct feature of the Yoruba political landscape and this warfare spirit led to the development of many Yoruba kingdoms (Falola and Akinyemi 2016, 340). It is therefore no surprise that this trait of independence and resistance politics was reflected distinctly in Fela’s life and his political career. Critics argue that ethnic heritage was not an automatic influencer in Fela’s political behavior, especially as his father, who was part of the Christian clergy did not encourage him to interact with his Yoruba tradition. Nevertheless, Sola Olorunyomi asserts, that “Fela would later reach back into this cultural antecedence much later in his musical and artistic career, and rework substantially traditional, even cultic, codes into his performance,” which signals a deliberate involvement of Yoruba cultural practices into Fela’s resistance work (Olorunyomi 2005, 25).

The current geopolitical demographic of the modern day Yoruba, especially within the densely populated city of Lagos, betrays their industrial spirit. According to the Encyclopedia of the Yoruba, Lagos is “Nigeria’s commercial nerve center…[and] it is predicted that by the year 2030, Lagos, will be one of the largest cities in the world, with a projected population of around twenty six million” (Falola and Akinyemi 2016, 68). Michael Veal asserts that Lagos, a predominantly Yoruba city, with its international exposure has made the city the focus of “major
musical innovation that continue[s] to the present” (Veal 2000, 12). The dynamic nature of this city finds its roots in Yoruba traditions of indomitability, innovation and sophistication which is corroborated by the assertion that “the Yorùbá are one of the most urbanized people groups on the African continent. For centuries they were known to live in complex, highly organized, and densely populated cities generally centered on the king’s palace” (Falola and Akinyemi 2016, 67). This socio-political dynamic of Lagos, coupled with its Yoruba history affected Fela’s consciousness and his work both musically and politically. Tejumola Olaniyan in discussing the importance of the Lagosian dynamic to the music and politics of Fela asserts that if Fela remained in the sleepy town of Abeokuta, “he perhaps would still have been a musician but a musician of a very different kind” (2004, 87). He points to the fact that “Abeokuta was much too small, too conservative in values, too homogenous in values and too provincial” to have developed the music and the rebellion of the Afrobeat, rather “only a postcolonial metropolis such as Lagos could have produced Fela” (Olaniyan 2004, 87).

Yoruba Pre-colonial Political Structures

According to Yoruba tradition, “a person’s identity is defined in terms of lineage, town and region of origin ....[and] not to know one's self as a social being is to be unable to engage appropriately with other persons” (Pemberton and Afolayan, 1996 24). In light of this, as Fela matured, he reached back into the cultural and political histories of his people to gain inspiration for his work. Yoruba pre-colonial political structures were important as they formed the basis for Fela’s ideas on government and power relations in society. The earliest myths of the Yoruba attest to the political order that existed within these ancient communities. Yoruba mythology tells the story of Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yoruba who descended from Obatala (God) and
established a political state at Ife. His descendants are said to have spread out and founded lesser kingdoms in surrounding areas, complete with their own kings, yet still paid homage to and recognize Ife as their political and cultural home (Falola and Heaton 2008, 23). These periphery states derived their legitimacy from a divine attachment to the center(Falola and Heaton 2008, 23). As early as the twelfth century, when the Yoruba kingdom was founded, there was a high political acumen that allowed them to organize into a federalized system of political governance. This indicates how deeply embedded political structure and organization are to Yoruba people. The most prominent recent political system of the Yoruba was the constitutional monarchy which constituted the ọba (King) at the top and assisted by several traditional chiefs (Falola and Akinyemi 2016, 274). This system varied slightly from clan to clan however the defining characteristic that run through all these political systems was the need to “safeguard against wanton political dictators” (Falola and Akinyemi 2016, 274). The values of accountability and representative government were so deeply embedded in Yoruba political thought that “no citizen is above the law or untouchable by the constitutional authorities of the Yorùbá nation-state” (Falola and Akinyemi 2016, 144). Fela asserted that Nigerian leaders “are just individualists, [and] they don't care about Africa,” an antithesis to the character of the Yoruba leaders (Barney Hoskyns interview 2003, 153). Even the ọba, the ruler of the Yoruba kingdom faced the threat of dethronement by his elders should he violate these political systems of transparency. Their commitment to accountability was reflected in the election of a dedicated individual, the Baṣórùn, responsible for ensuring the ọba stayed within his constitutional limits. The Baṣórùn acted as “a sort of ambivalent balance between the will of the ruled and the will of the ruler” (The Encyclopedia of the Yoruba 2016, 274). Yoruba political structures also paid attention to representation in decision making. Within the ọba’s elders was the Ịyálóde who was the head of the elite women, and the Ịyálájé who head of the market
women (Esuola 2019). This allowed for balance and a diversity of perspectives across gender and class lines.

This political model impacted Fela’s ideas about government structures and power relations especially amongst the Nigerian people. However, the kind of defunct political systems that Fela encountered in post-independence Nigeria was antithetical to what he had studied from Yoruba political structures. The values of accountability, representation and community were missing from Nigerian politics and Fela advocated for their inclusion within national politics. Another important influencing factor from the pre-colonial political structures of the Yoruba was the centrality of spirituality and art to Yoruba kingdoms. This was reflected by the divinity ascribed to the ooni of Ife who served as the spiritual head of all the Yoruba kingdoms and the production of archaeological renowned bronzes in Ife (Falola and Heaton 2008). This emphasis on art and spirituality featured prominently within Fela’s living spaces and even in his resistance.

So profound was the impact of these political structures combined with Fela’s Pan-Africanist ideal that he set up his own ‘republic’, the Kalakuta Republic, with the aim of “creating a place open to every African escaping persecution” (Moore 2009, 109). Kalakuta was an alternative society, devoid of the struggles and constraints of Nigerian society. Justin Labinjoh discusses the nature of communes and claims that they are “a concentrated expression of certain values” (Labinjoh 1982, 133) and Kalakuta was represented values like justice, accountability and pan-Africanism - values that Fela claimed were missing in post-colonial Nigeria. In subsequent chapters I will discuss how Fela’s systems of administration in Kalakuta were mirrored from Yoruba political structures.
The *Ebi*

One of the most profound ethnic influences that impacted Fela’s philosophy and his view of various modes of social organization, whether it be the family, the community, ethnic group or even the nation was the Yoruba concept of *ebi*. The concept of the *ebi* in its simplest form refers to “the basic socio-political unit of the Yoruba” (Falola and Akinyemi 2016, 274). Whilst the denotative meaning of the word makes references to the physical household that members of a family reside in, the connotative meaning, which was the thrust for some of Fela’s political ideology discusses the *ebi* as family beyond blood bonds. Therefore, an *ebi* can be made up of close family friends, common interest partners or individuals who for some reason are brought together under a single social, political or economic umbrella. Sola Olorunyomi in discussing the *ebi* asserts that “You are *ebi* by blood and you are also *ebi* not necessarily by blood; by shared concerns and by shared anxieties (Olorunyomi, 2019) He further likens the concept of *ebi* to an onion which has various layers to it but remains as a single onion.

This idea of the *ebi* was represented in the Kalakuta Republic which featured myriads of people from so many different parts of the African continent. Even before he officially married his 27 wives, he considered them as family rather than mere concubines, as some critics suggested. From his band members to visitors, everyone who encountered Fela in a meaningful way was a part of the Kalakuta family. His musical entourage, reportedly the biggest in the world constituted of various kinds of musicians and helpers, including an individual whose only duty was to carry Fela’s saxophone (Olorunyomi 2005, 19). Fela therefore lived out the concept of the *ebi* practically all through his life.

This idea percolated Fela’s political thought and therefore he resented the idea of colonial borders as he saw it as a tool used to destroy the *ebi*. The *ebi* was a microcosm of larger society,
therefore, in Fela’s opinion, anyone who threatened the *ebi* threatened the community social order, an act which was tantamount to treason within Yoruba society. Therefore, the actions of the colonial administration which sought to ossify these borders and thus further destroying the *ebi* was challenged by Fela. According to Fela’s philosophy, this idea of the *ebi* did not only relate to the Nigerian project, but was connected to the whole continent of Africa. This idea also found roots in Nkrumah’s vision of a United States of Africa.

The cognate linguistic elements found in various African languages were indication of a shared cultural heritage. However, the arbitrary division of the people groups into countries, separated many families and societies and this is seen in language similarities across different countries. Language constructions like ‘welcome’ and ‘I am coming’ in *Twi,*--the language of the Akan of Ghana--are translated as *Akwaaba* (Ah-kwaah-bah) and *meeba sesia* (mee-bah see-see-a) respectively whilst the Yoruba of Nigeria say *Kaabo* (Kaa-boh) and *Mo n bo nisisiyi* (mon-boh see-see). The striking semantic similarities amongst these linguistic patterns are indicative of the destruction of the *ebi*. He therefore saw the Nigerian post-colonial state as a direct affront to the *ebi.*

**Yoruba Musical Influences**

Yoruba musical structures played a significant role in Fela’s musical and political career. Randall Grass asserts that music and dance is a significant part of many African cultures including the Yoruba culture in which Fela was raised therefore it is no surprise that we find significant undercurrents of Yoruba musical patterns in Fela’s music (1986). However, the uniqueness of Fela’s music finds itself in the juxtaposition of Western musical styles such as jazz which the traditional Yoruba styles of music to create the Afrobeats genre.
The idea of music as a tool of political resistance according to Olukayode Esuola is rooted in the Yoruba idea of the interconnection between politics and music. According to Esuola, Ifa - the religion of the Yoruba people, has established a link between politics and music (Esuola, 2019). This belief system was adopted by Fela at which point he changed his music from being “very unpolitical”, to one that challenged corrupt systems of governance and called for social transformation. (Barney Hoskyns, 2004). This philosophy of music and politics was what inspired Fela to view and treat music as a weapon of protest.

Fela’s afrobeat music emerged into prominence after the birth of the post-colonial Nigerian state. Before afrobeat, highlife--another form of West African music--existed and contained “generally covert political themes, obsessively hedonistic lyrics...[was]simply not best positioned as the medium for the brewing post-independence confrontation, at least in Nigeria; it was a task that would have to be shouldered by Afrobeat, a subversive musical and cultural practice” (Olorunyomi 2005, 20). Therefore, the socio-political milieu of the time precipitated the development of Fela’s rebel art. Fela’s Afrobeat positioned him at the vanguard of artistic and political resistance and played a dual role of entertainment and correction.

Fela’s instrumentation was also inspired by Yoruba musical traditions. Steve Rhodes identified Fela’s bass drum rhythm as *Egbaesque* as “its roots [are] reminiscent of certain rhythms of the Orò cult” of the Egba people (Olorunyomi 2005, 28). Fela’s creative choices such as his popular call and response movement, his decision to play in the pentatonic scale or his musical chants such as ‘tere kúte’ or ‘joro jára joro,’ are derived directly from the music of the Egba people. Another defining feature of Fela's music was his emphasis on the ‘vocality’ of the music, even with the instruments. Therefore, his pieces were often lengthy and featured various instrumental solos in order to give the instruments ‘speaking’ time. His music reflected “the tonal character of
the African speech pattern” and therefore, he furnished his ensemble “with the power of a speech surrogate that serves as the ‘inner voices’” (Olorunyomi 2005, 28). The vocality of Fela’s performance style which involved embodying the role of the ‘Chief Priest’ and commenting about social issues with biting ridicule characterizes him as a political griot.

It is no surprise that the Fela’s Yoruba heritage played a central role in the development of his creative genius. The Yoruba, who were famously known for their creative prowess and artistic innovation are attributed with the creation of the Ife bronzes, terracotta structures, wood carving of religious cults and the colorful ornaments of Yoruba royalty (Vea 2000, 12). It is not therefore not far fetched to point Fela’s creative genius to the long history of Yoruba art.

**Political Influences**

Up until this point, we have looked at the family and Yoruba influences that shaped the Fela’s work. Fela also had interesting encounters and epiphanies that shaped his political ideas. The foundation of his political ideas, although inspired by his mother, also found roots in various thinkers like Franz Fanon and Walter Rodney and their works, *Wretched of the Earth* and *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* respectively (Olorunyomi 2005, 21). Been born just over a decade before Nigerian independence, Fela lived in the liminal space between bondage and freedom, dependence and independence and western domination and African nationalism and therefore, yearned for the taste of independence and the birth of a new African personality free from European domination.

Another source for Fela’s political inspiration was from founding fathers of African independence such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere.
Ideas about African socialism and the mental and economic liberation of the continent resonated deeply with Fela and he translated this into resistance work within the Nigerian context.

Fela’s trip to America in 1969 was a true turning point in his musical and political career. Yomi Durotoye points to the fact that Fela’s consciousness about race was awakened after interacting with the works of Malcolm X and seeing the work from interacting with the Black Panther Movement. Malcolm X’s biography was “a datemaker of his ideological initiation as a Pan-Africanist” (Olorunyomi, 2005 26) and after Fela read it, he exclaimed, “I wanted to be Malcolm X...everything about Africa started coming back to me” (Moore 2009, 85). Fela recounts that before he met Sanda Isidore, his soon-to-be girlfriend, he was not political at all (Moore 2009, 83). Sandra who was a member of the Black Power Movement--a group which advocated racial justice in America--exposed him even further to the politics of blackness, fraught race relations in America and her desire to (re)connect with her African roots. According to Sandra, “constant talking every night...over a period of six months” (Moore,95) and introducing him to black thinkers like Nikki Giovanni, Angela Davis, Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson and Nina Simone amongst others heralded the arrival of a politically conscious Fela (Durotoye 2003, 175). Fela himself confessed that Sandra “was the one who opened my eyes” (Moore 2009, 85), a testament to her strong political influence on Fela. His American political influences did not end with Sandra. The work of the Black Panther Movement against segregation and racial injustice impacted Fela’s ideas around citizen activism and anti-establishment politics. Yomi Durotoye provides insight to the two pronged approach of the Black Panther movement. The first, he asserts was “armed military resistance to brutality and oppression” whilst the other was cultural and psychological, addressing issues around the restoration of black pride in their history, culture and sense of self.
It is therefore plausible to say that the injustice Fela saw meted out against black people by the American governmental reminded him of the struggles of Nigerian citizens in post-colonial Nigeria. With his new found knowledge of blackism, it made sense to employ the tactics that he had seen the Black Power Movement and the panthers employ. He therefore transposed the ideas and revolutionary tactics of the panthers into Nigerian society as an attempt to recreate the freedom struggle that was ensuing in America (Labinjoh 1982, 119). His signature raised fist was influenced by the Black Panther struggle whose logo was a raised fist. Songs like Black Man’s Cry and Black Man Dey Suffer reflected the political phase Fela had entered into, although it was starkly reminiscent of American racial struggles often to the dissatisfaction of the audience whose experience of injustice and discrimination which stemmed more from ethnic cleavages as opposed to racial ones.

Fela’s trip to East Berlin at the height of the Cold War also impacted his political outlook and his opinion on Western liberal democracy. Anti-Communist propaganda had presented the Soviet Union as a repressive and politically unstable society so even Fela initially felt that “communist countries were dangerous for human beings” and there existed a possibility that you won’t come out after you went in. However Fela noted that those were the best ten days of his after which he changed his outlook on communism. Having been exposed to a different system of governance from the neocolonial liberal democracy that Fela had grown up in Nigeria with impacted his ideas about Western intervention in post-colonial societies. According to Duroyote, Fela would have been like any other highlife musician if he had not undergone this political awakening. Subsequent chapters will explore how these political influences played a role in his resistance work.
CHAPTER 3: THE STATE OF THE STATE

Having understood the roots of Fela’s resistance politics, it is important to analyze the social, economic and political context of Nigeria between the years of 1977-1997. This gives us a good understanding of how the Nigerian milieu impacted Fela’s resistance. The development of Fela’s resistance did not occur in isolation and I argue that the state of the Nigerian project within that period contributed significantly to Fela’s reasons for resistance, the extent to which he resisted and modes of resistance he employed.

Theoretical Framework

The Beginnings of Decolonization

The stirrings for independence within African colonies intensified post-WWII. The African soldiers noticed that they, alongside European soldiers faced similar difficulties in battle-sickness, loss and grief--and this upturned the social hierarchy which classified African individuals as colonial subjects and European individuals as masters. These soldiers “[who] had fought as part of British imperial forces in Burma, Singapore, East Africa and elsewhere against the oppression of Nazi Germany …became so politically radicalized that they had begun to yearn very seriously for freedom alongside and self-rule in their own homelands” (Fawole 2018, 38). Combined with the “agitations of Western-educated nationalists”, the Nigerian colonial government faced an imminent threat of collapse. Even though Fela was in the United Kingdom for school during this period, he was affected by the decolonization campaigns and political rhetoric from home. London, which was a “Pan-African melting pot” at the time attracted the regular visits of Ghanaian nationalist Kwame Nkrumah, who impacted Fela’s ideas around
revolutionary independence struggles and African unity. On many occasions, Fela referred to him as an inspiration and a source of pride (Veal 2000, 44).

**Newfound Independence**

The dawn of independence, for many freedom fighters and colonized peoples, who would later become citizens of the newly independent Nigeria, was a promise of a better life, compared to what they had experienced under the British colonial rule. Nigeria gained independence on 1st October 1960 and Carl Levan discusses the “conspiracy of optimism” which the Nigerian population found themselves in. The Nigerian federal government “allocated £1.75 M for independence celebrations and £100,000 to each of the three regions…” - an indication of the level of revelry and excitement that characterized Nigeria in the independence period (Bourne 2015, 88). In light independence expenses, Levan’s characterization of the First Republic as a period in which “realism was brushed aside in favor of lofty aspirations and grand plans” gains even more currency. Even though independence celebrations were warranted and to a large extent understood, it seems superfluous that a new ‘nation’ with the herculean task of uniting a deeply divided people and providing vast amounts of infrastructure will spend such exorbitant amounts on a single celebration. More puzzling is the fact that there was a lot of fanfare over a country that would never live up to its expectations. Dr Esuola of the University of Lagos, in discussing the fate of Nigeria employs the metaphor of child development as a commentary on the life cycle of the state. He quips, “is it every child that is born into this life that will get into maturity, get married, go to school, have children? No! Nations have been created, nations have broken”(Esuola 2019). Dr. Eesuola’s assertion indicates that based on the problematic and inherently fragile colonial apparatus Nigeria was built on, it is bound for dissolution. He contends that “Nigeria cannot exist,
it has to be destroyed and refabricated” into a state structure that is organic and truly representative of Nigeria’s history and culture.

The state structures inherited by the Nigerian government, including the Westminster model of governance, was based on the British model and contributed significantly to the problems that arose post-independence (Okafor 2006, 5). Fawole contends that “Africans were thus bequeathed a democratic system constructed on an authoritarian foundation which could not function efficiently even if the succeeding elites had the willingness to make it work” (Fawole 2018, 41). These structures were inherently authoritarian and did not contribute to the development of the democratic system in Nigeria. Even though the departing British colonial authorities enacted legal reforms in 1950 to adequately prepare ‘Nigerians’ for independence, the structural problems of low literacy rates, poor infrastructure, huge inequalities alongside a lack of a strong national identity plagued the post-colonial project (Levan 2015, 57). Flags were raised and anthems composed but the essence of the colonial state had not changed significantly. Nigeria’s independence was more in terms of “appearance than substance as African elites merely replaced their departed former white masters in the same system that had severely alienated the people and exhibited no responsibility toward them” (Fawole 2018, 41).

Nigerian leaders were not oblivious to these problems but the speed of decolonization and need of African leaders to be in charge did not allow “the time nor the motivation to develop whole new concepts about the method of national political organization” (Herbst 2000, 100). The effects of the colonial apparatus were manifested in the attempted secession and creation of a new Biafran state in 1966 which marked the beginning of a series of political unrests. The oscillation of the Nigerian political structure between democratic rule and military autocratic rule reveals the inconsistency that characterized the Nigerian post-colonial project. These lapses in political
continuity gave rise to inadequate infrastructural development, corruption and a lack of governmental accountability.

Character of the State

Shortly after independence, a series of coups d’état flung the country into political instability which was a radical departure from the romantic vision of post-colonial Nigeria. Richard Bourne states that “the honeymoon joy of independence was the prologue to a deepening crisis” in Nigeria, a future the cheering crowds at Independence had not foreseen (2015, 94). The economic struggles of many post-colonial African projects, including Nigeria, has given rise to the term ‘collapsed states’ which refer to countries that are unable to “perform the basic functions required to politically sustain a community of people” (Ahluwalia 2001, 53). Failed states, according to William Zartman cannot maintain law and order, cannot maintain legitimacy and is unable to conduct public affairs (1997, 5). All these characteristics featured to some extent in the Nigerian case.

The challenges the nation faced were multi-layered and complex. The Nigerian political project seemed to be on the brink of collapse as it dealt with a “dysfunctional federation” precipitated by ethnic cleavages and threatened by the possibility of a military coup, and secession from disagreeing political entities (Bourne 2015, 100). In addition, the economy lacked the capacity to “deliver real benefits to the increasingly educated labor force” and this led to a general strike in May 1964 (Bourne 2015, 106). These challenges rocked the Nigerian ship, threatening an abrupt halt, just after a few years after disembarkation.

Colin Leyes labels Nigeria as ‘The African Tragedy’ in which the post-colonial project is unable to deliver ‘development’ and is therefore seen as an “a perversion, [and] an abnormality ”
(Ahluwalia 2001, 54). Like a mature child, unable to perform basic bodily functions, the Nigerian post-colonial project has relegated its duties of development to “foreign institutions and agencies [which] map out its future” (Ahluwalia 2001, 54). Foreign development recommendations and suggestions such as the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) of 1986 have “eroded sovereignty in Africa” (Ahluwalia 2001, 54). The indirect control of African states by western development institutions is indication of the African neo-colonial dependency.

**FEATURES OF THE POST-COLONIAL NIGERIAN PROJECT**

1. **Nigerian Bullet Democracy**

   Amongst the many things that characterize the post-colonial Nigerian project, the instability of government and political structures is at the top of the list. Nigeria’s political landscape has seen various kinds of governments: civilian, military and quasi-democratic, with military governments occupying a prominent place in Nigeria’s history. The root of all political instability can be linked to leadership and Franz Fanon presents a scathing critique of postcolonial leaders. He asserts that,

   “before independence, the leader generally embodies the aspirations of the people for independence, political liberty and national dignity. But as soon as the independence is declared, far from embodying in concrete form the needs of the people in what touches bread, land and the restoration of the country to the sacred hands of the people, the leader will reveal his inner purpose: to become the general president of that company of profiteers impatient for their returns” (Fanon 1963, 134)

   Many leaders of post-colonial Nigeria desired to enrich themselves at the expense of the country, and therefore used any means necessary including the violent seizure and maintenance of power.
Leaders of post-colonial nations, often elite Africans, are mere replacements of colonial authorities, and thus exhibit no responsibility towards the citizens, severely alienating them in the process (Fawole 2018). Therefore, for Nigeria that has theoretically enjoyed national sovereignty and ‘independence’ for fifty-nine years (1960-2019), the fact that 29 years have been characterized by military rule is an indication of the political instability and the struggle for power that exists between them. Since 1960, there have only been five peaceful, democratic transitions between Nigerian governments, an abysmal figure for a democratic nation. The widespread violence that characterized elections, fueled by the proliferation and use of firearms are all indicative of a ‘bullet democracy’. Victor Okafor highlights the bullet over the ballot as the main *modus operandi* in post-colonial Nigerian politics, a situation whose costs far outweighed the benefits. The attempted secession of Biafra is an example of bullet democracy in post-colonial Nigeria, a situation in which between one and three million died and another three million were displaced (Bourne 2015, 124).

The fact that the response to calls for Igbo self-determination was a brutal massacre of ‘citizens’ as opposed to other bloodless methods like a referendum is indication of the violent character of post-colonial Nigerian politics.

Nigeria’s colonial legacy, to a large extent, impacted the decision-making process within the Biafran war. Nigeria which is a conglomerate of disparate ethnic groups, under the umbrella of nationhood battled desperately to keep the country together as proof to the outside world that the Nigerian project could work. The actions of Nigerian leaders in choosing to sacrifice multitudes of citizens as opposed to finding a practical and amicable settlement is indicative of the deep impact of colonial legacy that exists. In response to the Biafra question, President Nyerere of Tanzania, a firm believer in the unity of post-independence nations, asserted that “once a large number of people of any such political unit stop believing that the State is theirs and that the
Government is their instrument, then the unit is no longer viable” (Mwakikagile 2001, 155) The Organization of African Unity (OAU), however, which was evidently more concerned about keeping up the appearance of stability and was unwilling to negotiate the cumbersome, yet beneficial process of border restructuring, called the war an “internal affair” (Herbst 2000, 107).

Another way the colonial legacy influenced and contributed to the violent nature of the Nigerian post-colonial project was through imitation or colonial mimicry. Nigerian leaders who had observed the authoritarian manner of British colonial rule that allowed for no local participation and crushed every sign of resistance with armed intimidation followed in similar fashion. The Gowon-led Nigerian government could not allow Biafra to secede, because they feared it would cause a domino effect of other secessions, just like the independence revolutions has caused a domino effect in sub-saharan Africa. It is, therefore, no surprise that Biafran war was characterized with such huge excesses.

The “economic prosperity and national tranquility” of any nation rests on its ability to sustain political stability (Okafor 2006, 30). Therefore, even with Nigeria’s flourishing oil economy, its growth was stunted by the political instability that ravaged the country. One of the main issues challenges to development was ethnic tensions that existed within Nigeria. I will explore the effects of these ethnic tensions in the next sub-chapter.
Figure 2: Visual Representation of Nigeria’s Political Timeline from 1960-Present

- First Republic led by Tafawa Balewa (1960-1965)
  - Ousted by a coup d'etat organized by General Aguiyi Ironsi

- Second Republic led by Shehu Shagari (1979-1983)
  - Ousted by a coup led by General Buhari

- Third Republic led by General Babangida (1992 - 1993)
  - The period between the end of a republic and another was often characterized by military takeovers

- Fourth Republic led by Ojegun Obasanjo (1999 - Present)

Figure 2 details the various republics since Nigerian independence. The presence of military takeovers is indicative of Nigeria’s bullet democracy discussed above.

2. Ethnic Cleavages

One of the main features of the post-colonial Nigeria project is the multiplicity of its ethnic groupings and affiliations. To put things in perspective, the continent of Africa is home to thousands of ethnic groups (Africa, Britannica) and yet “Nigeria has the largest number of ethnic groups of any state in Africa,” with over a hundred different languages spoken and many more dialects - an indication of its vastly pluralist society (Campbell 2011, 4). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the probability of two random people belonging to different ethnic groups is 66 percent compared to the rest of the world which is 36 percent. (Englebert and Dunn 2013, 64). In Nigeria, there are three main ethnic groupings that occupy the majority population. These are the “North-dwelling Hausa, the southwest dwelling Yoruba and the southeast-resident Igbo” (Kew 2016, 74). The mere
fact that three ethnic groups are seen as dominant in such an ethnically pluralistic space engenders a high possibility for tension and conflict. The resource question further complicates the dynamic. Valuable oil reserves which are located predominantly in the Delta State are often a source of tension with other ethnic groups which may not be as naturally endowed.

According to Englebert and Dunn, there are three main theories that address the ethnic question in Africa. These are primordialism, constructivism and instrumentalism. Primordialism, views “ethnicity as a deep-rooted, ancestral, irreducible and part of one’s identity” (Englebert and Dunn 2013, 68). Per this theory, any other identities that compete with the ethnic consciousness of an individual will always be secondary. Therefore, national identities and labels such as ‘South African’, ‘Nigerian’ or even ‘African’ must give way to the fundamental ethnic identities of Zulu, Yoruba or Akan. The emphasis on ethnic identity over national identity impacts the way citizens view themselves. They feel a sense of belonging to the ethnic group over the nation and therefore have no concern for national issues.

Ethnic constructivism claims that ethnic identities are malleable and “can be inverted, constructed, or rendered more or less salient” (Englebert and Dunn 2013, 70). I argue that in order for this theory to exist, there must be an influencing factor, whether it be a person, an ideology or a political system. It therefore implies that the influencing system to a degree has some sort of power or authority over the ethnic grouping in order to shape their identities in a particular way. The malleability of ethnic identities is seen in the example of a Congolese individual for instance who “can stress his Chokwe identity at one point, privilege the broader Luanda cultural referent at another, highlight his Swahili language at yet another and finally present himself as Katangan, all the while displaying his Congolese nationalism” (Englebert and Dunn 2013, 74).
Finally, instrumentalism is made up of two dimensions which focus on leveraging ethnicity by political entrepreneurs and the use of ethnic groups as political coalitions. This theory preferences the utility of ethnic identification in gaining either special favors or certain political advantages such as jobs or contracts. It is often the case in multi-party democracies that political coalitions, for expediency, have some ethnic leanings or are ethnically inspired. Colonial authorities, for instance, placed emphasis on certain ethnic groups as not only social groupings but political entities which encouraged formal political responsibility and participation. All these are manifestations of the instrumentalist theory.

The immediacy with which independence took place in addition to the development of ‘Nigerian’ national institutions and structures did not allow Nigerians, many of whom subscribed to the primordialist theory of ethnicity, to come to terms with their newfound Nigerian identity. Claims by Awolowo, about Nigeria as “a mere geographical expression” and the word ‘Nigerian’ as a “merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not” reinforce this assertion (Awolowo, 50).

Allegiances to ethnic identities fueled tensions that found roots within the colonial systems. During the colonial period, the British, in a bid to keep the Northern ethnic groups subservient, ruled Northern ethnic groups through their Islamic caliphate system, which had significant religious and political influence on the people. It was on account of this that no Christian missionary activity was allowed in the north as it inadvertently threatened the British system of control. A corollary of this was the lack of technology and Western education, both of which were characteristic of Christian missionary activity. The Igbo, for instance, who had considerable contact with British missionaries and therefore “mastered Western business practices and
technology and became small traders and mechanics” and therefore were derogatorily referred to as “the Jews of West Africa” (Campbell 2011, 4).

The attachment individuals have to their ethnic identities over national, Nigerian identities cannot be understated. Referencing the Biafran secessionist attempt, Fawole contends that “these primordial identities are more permanent than the largely artificial and alien contraption called the nation-state” (Fawole 2018, 105). This disenchantment with the idea of the nation-state, was birthed from the colonial divide and rule policy that “ensured that Nigerians had no single unified position concerning their country and its fate” and therefore could not suddenly rally behind a single national Nigerian identity overnight (Fawole 2018, 108). Olukoshi discusses the government’s onerous task of “undertaking a rigorous process of nation-building, with the aim of welding their multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious countries into ‘one nation,’” a task that is still being worked out over fifty years after independence (Olukoshi 1996, 13).
CHAPTER 4: BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS; CIVIL ACTORS RESPONDING TO POLITICAL EROSION

A: Civil Society

One thing is evident and ubiquitous about Nigerian social culture is their rich associational life which has existed in pre-colonial and colonial settings. In post-colonial Nigeria, associations are formed around any and everything including age, gender, religion, and even football teams (Kew 2016). Whilst the formation of associations is not a novel development within human communities, the strong family-oriented ethos and networks that exist in Nigerian society promotes this associational dynamic even more. The concept of civil society in Nigeria is therefore not a new one as it manifests itself differently in pre-colonial and colonial societies. The Lockean theory characterizes the role of civil society as a check on the limits of the sovereign and as a “collective human entity capable of rendering its consent” with regard to issues that affected society (Young 1994, 219). Young asserts that “the essence of civil society lies in [its] relation to the state” (1994, 222), therefore, in order for civil society to exist, there ought to be at least, some semblance of a state structure that it can exist in relation to. There is a symbiotic relationship between both entities, each reliant on the other in order for it to develop. Young describes the role aptly when he says, “the state protects and provides while it dominates and extracts; civil society responds with exit, voice or loyalty” (1994, 222).

Ebenezer Obadare, presents a more localized approach to civil society in Nigeria. Civil society is a term used often by the media to describe “the incipient coalition that had emerged to challenge military rule and the individual social groupings that constituted this coalition” (Obadare 2016, 52). He argues, however, that the ideological underpinnings of Nigerian civil society were heavily influenced by American and European ideas around citizen engagement which fails to
recognize the existing culture of ethnic groups, that gathered around socio-political issues in the pre-colonial and colonial era. This cultural ethos contributed to the development of civil society in independent Nigeria. Therefore, even though civil society is not a new concept in the history of Nigerian politics, the discourse and the specific terminology of ‘civil society’ is what is novel.

The evolution of the civil society space within the Nigerian political arena was precipitated by the political and economic challenges that Nigerians faced during General Ibrahim Babangida’s regime. Having seized power in the 1985 coup, General Babangida introduced Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in an attempt produce a more healthy, and less oil-dependent economy (Obadare 2016, 50). The program had an overall negative effect on the country, especially the less wealthy. From low employment rates, high oil prices to the weakening of the Naira, the late 1980s was a period of economic depression for Nigerians. Citizens disaffection was evident as various anti-SAP riots broke out across the country. The government responded with a military crackdown on all those involved (Obadare 2016, 51).

These challenges incurred the displeasure of many citizens and led to the ‘activation’ of civil society organizations in Nigeria which advocated for more transparent and democratic structures. Community associations and interest groups formalized into entities that served as official ‘checks’ and balances on the power of the Nigerian government. The context in which civil society engaged the government was oppositional and this impacted the relationship between the Nigerian government and civil society groups. Another cause of tension between both entities was the different ideas each had about citizenship in the post-colonial state. Whereas the public felt certain rights and privileges had to be provided by the government, the government was reluctant in providing the necessary protections to citizens. Therefore, in order to understand the role of civil society better, it is important to explore the concept of citizenship in the post-colonial state.
Government and Citizenship

Dr. Olukayode Esuola points out that in the post-colonial project, citizens do not exist, only subjects or members of the public (Esuola 2019). This, he argues, is as a result of the degrading treatment meted out to citizens by the post-colonial Nigerian project. A “citizen is a stakeholder in a state [who has] rights to everything as declared by international associations” (Esuola). Some of these rights are the right to life, healthcare and education, all of which should be protected by the government, however, according to Esuola, the Nigerian state “kills you more than it protects your life.” He cites the 1999 Odi massacre under president Obasanjo and the 1980 Kaduna killings in which many harmless citizens were brutally murdered. Furthermore, the failure to provide basic amenities such as potable water, electricity or even good roads are potential dangers capable of killing the ‘citizen’ (Esuola 2019).

Fela Kuti, a civil rights activist and musician also weighed in on the discourse about Nigerian citizenship. In his song *Akunakuna, Senior Brother of Perambulator* in which he declares, “citizen no dey for Nigeria”² (Fela Kuti 1980s³). Fela addresses police brutality and indiscriminate treatment of citizens in Nigeria by singing, “police go arrest people for road wandering...[police] go start arrest people for selling in the morning.”⁴ It is impossible for there to be citizens in this system which actively seeks to destroy its citizens. He extrapolates the argument about citizenship by asserting that even General Buhari and Gen. Babangida, Nigerian heads of state in the 1980s, were not citizens. He describes their fear of death, as “anybody fit go quench him neck at anytime”⁵

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² There are no citizens in Nigeria
³ This was one of Fela’s unrecorded songs so the date of the composition is not accurate
⁴ The police would arrest people for wandering in the road and the police would arrest people for selling in the morning.
⁵ Anyone can kill him at anytime
and therefore “Bazooka must dey for front at anytime”\(^6\) (Fela Kuti 1980s). The reversal of roles between the endangered citizen and the unconcerned political authority changes the power dynamics between the government and the people and suggests that regardless of one’s social standing, there is no citizen protection in Nigeria. According to Locke’s social contract, citizens provide legitimacy to any political system, therefore in the absence of citizens or in the case that citizens are not recognized, no real legitimacy can be provided, thus creating a system of domination politics.

**Civil Society ‘Generations’**

Civil society in post-colonial Nigeria sought to ensure that the government was accountable to its citizens. Darren Kew asserts that civil society, at different points in time, responds to the specific needs within Nigeria’s political milieu. He divides this into three parts he calls ‘generations’.

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\(^6\) He must be protected by weapons every time
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Type of Civil Society</th>
<th>Structural Orientation Toward the State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Generation (Precolonial)</td>
<td>Religious and traditional institutions, ethnic associations</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Generation (circa 1900-1980)</td>
<td>Trade unions, professional associations, chambers of commerce, student associations (voluntary membership organizations)</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Generation (circa 1980-Present)</td>
<td>Nongovernmental organizations (human rights, pro-democracy, women's interests, economic development, environmental, conflict resolution, etc.)</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Darren Kew, Civil Society, Conflict Resolution and Democracy in Nigeria, Syracuse University Press, 2016

The first generation of civil society functioned as neutral organizations “focused on the spiritual concerns of the polity” and largely “oriented toward the social and economic needs of a particular community” (Kew 2016, 98). The second generation advocated for citizens of the state through mass mobilization and rallying of popular support. The third phase, in which Fela lived, is constructed primarily in resistance to the Nigerian state. This version of civil society “seeks to restrict its[the state’s] control over political liberties...and to shift the state’s focus toward more liberal activities” (Kew 2016, 99). These groups attempt to contest undemocratic political apparatus, provide health, advocacy, and services to underserved communities which are all things
the Nigerian government has to do. The governing political apparatus of post-colonial Nigeria created ideal conditions for this kind of civil society to thrive. A fledgling democracy punctuated by a series of military coups, deeply embedded corruption, human rights abuses and citizen dissatisfaction catalyzed mobilization and action of organizations such as the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) and the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) who protested President Buhari’s decision to reduce student subsidies (Falola and Heaton 2008, 215).

Following Kew’s theory of civil society generations and the political state, Fela Kuti’s anti-establishment work between 1977 and 1997 was uniquely positioned to respond to the specific political and economic crises of the Nigerian political state. What this theory also indicates is the fact that in order for a civil society organization to have the maximum impact, it is necessary that actors are well versed with the socio-political milieu of the society in order to engage in any meaningful way.

There are three main stances each civil society actor can employ in relation to the post-colonial state. They can either be neutral, in which they undertake an activity that does not affect the state in a critical manner. They can also adopt the positive strategy which induces the state to perform some public service or policy outcome. Finally, they can employ the negative strategy in which they restrict the state from performing some service or policy, in some instances so that that organization can perform the activity in place of the state. These are important as they give the necessary tools to contextualize Fela’s resistance.
Even though civil society was a political spirit level, ensuring that Nigerian government confirmed to democratic ideals, they had to “conform somewhat to the political trends espoused by the state...in a manner that can best interact with - or resist the state politics” (Kew 2016, 97). This dynamic placed civil society organizations in a compromising situation where had to compromise on their values in order to gain some audience with the Nigerian government. Nigerian civil society groups were lodged between “the authoritarian state, which suffered from a legitimacy deficit, and a public that was largely disengaged and traumatized” (Aiyede 2017, 12). In 1993, General Babangida stepped aside, handing power over to a civilian Interim National Government (ING) headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan who offered key government positions to individuals from the the Campaign for Democracy, a civil society group led by Fela’s brother, Beko Ransome Kuti. The tension was whether to accept these positions in the illegitimate system and reform it from within or fight it from the outside. Beko accepted the offer which brought a
fusillade of criticisms which eventually led to the breakdown of the coalition. However civil society groups adopt a neutral strategy and refuse to engage with the Nigerian government “are so alienated from the state and so oriented towards disengagement that they hardly contribute to state building” (Aiyede 2017, 3). These tensions that characterized the work of civil society in Nigeria allowed them limited success which frustrated Nigerian citizens who were experiencing hardship under Nigerian governments.

In addition to this tension, another factor that limited the work of civil society groups was the role of the elite-led civil society groups. The emergence of a bourgeoisie class within the civil society space reinforced social stratification and deepened the political exclusivity that was represented by the post-colonial government. These actors who were the ‘voice’ and the ‘face’ of civil society in Nigeria espoused ideas that the ordinary Nigerian could not relate with. John Lucas maintains that “the role of civil society institutions in elite strategies became especially significant as the capacity of the state diminished throughout the 1980s...[which] ‘in turn gave elites increased leverage with and independence from the state’” (Lucas 1994, 93). Majority of the affected population were average, Nigerians without significant political affiliation or clout. Peter Lewis warns that we should not conflate the rise of civil society with progress or democracy. He contends that the proliferation of civil society organizations can be conflated with the synonymous rise in democracy whilst in actual fact that may not be the case (Lewis 1998, 1992). More than numbers, Lewis asserts that the representative capacity and progress of civil society is more important.
B: The Rise of Lone Wolf Citizen Activism

At the peak of authoritarianism and the undermining of justice and the rule of law in Nigeria, “civil society, for its part, having lost the unifying theme of resistance to the military, [broke] into the myriad of special interests that its growing numbers represent” (Kew 2016, 263). I argue that amongst other things, the slow pace of civil society’s response to national issues, coupled with its exclusionary politics prompted an alternative source of protest or democratic accountability. These actors that rose up to fill in the gaps that civil society bureaucracy and red tape were often alone and therefore I describe them as ‘lone wolf activists’. Armed with intense passion and unconventional ideas, lone wolf activists were often ostracized or even martyred by the state. Individuals like Ken Saro Wiwa was a lone wolf activists who filled up spaces other formal civil society members were unable to. Fela Kuti himself, having grown up around much civil society organization - from his mother as a women’s organizer to his brother, Beko Ransome Kuti, the leader of Campaign for Democracy (CD), one of the premier civil society groups in post-independence Nigeria, was exposed to a lot of the work of civil society practitioners from a young age. His departure from the traditional idea of civil society, taking up a rather unconventional alternative route in the achievement of his political aims may be linked to the idea of disillusionment with the sphere of traditional civil society. Even though Fela does not make explicit reference to officialized civil society groups, he comments on the fear and uncertainty that paralyzed the general population and forced them into inaction even in the face of suffering. In Fela’s Sorrow, Tears and Blood (Fela Kuti 1977) he maintains that “my people sef dey fear too much...we fear to fight for freedom, we fear to fight for liberty, we fear to fight for justice, we fear to fight for happiness” - an indication of the extreme fear that has paralyzed the Nigerian people. The effect of the brutality of security services is revealed in Fela’s comments about how
“policemen go slap your face, you no go talk [and] army man go whip your yansh, you go dey look like donkey” (Fela Kuti 1977). Fela’s scathing comparison of Nigerians to animals is indicative of the manner in which the system has the succeeded in destroying the morale of the people and infantilizing the population, into blind submission, unable to resist in any substantial capacity.

These structural, political and economic problems in Nigeria were catalysts in pushing Fela to resist the post-colonial state. Armed with domestic, traditional and political influences, Fela came on the resistance scene at a critical time in Nigeria’s history and responded directly to the issues that he observed. His resistance, was colored by the kind of issues and problems that Fela observed in Nigeria and over the continent. His realization of the relative inactivity and success of civil society groups in Nigeria was another catalyst for his resistance and political conscientization of the masses.
CHAPTER 5: FELA’S REBELLION

Fela’s model of rebellion finds itself at the intersection of Pan-African philosophy, the Yoruba griotic tradition, and popular politics. It is important to deconstruct these various components, as it aids in our understanding of citizen rebellion against the Nigerian government between 1977 and 1997.

Fela was not the only citizen who rebelled against the post-colonial Nigerian government. Other citizen activists like Wole Soyinka, Fela’s cousin, and environmentalist, Ken Siro Wiwa, were also engaged in anti-establishment resistance work. However, Fela’s resistance was different because of its mass appeal and his ability to connect with the average Nigerian in a more personal way. In a period where anti-government ‘rebellions’ were either too cosmeticized or pandered to illegitimate and oppressive Nigerian regimes, Fela’s blatant critique came as a much needed break away from the norm.

Setting the Stage

Understanding the social and political context of post-independence Nigeria is important to the discussion of Fela Kuti’s methods of resistance. I argue that there are two main factors that uniquely position Fela to resist corrupt governmental structures with the fervor and socio-political adeptness that he did. The first was the socio-economic turbulence of the Nigerian political project. As discussed in previous chapters, Nigeria experienced severe economic and political difficulties which negatively impacted citizens and left them in need of answers. Fela’s exposure to political rebellion through his family’s participation in politics, coupled with his own experiences of
political injustice left him well-positioned to mount up effective resistance against the Nigerian government.

The second factor that aided Fela’s resistance was the wave of anti-government protests emerging all over the world. Influential musicians like James Brown and Bob Marley featured prominently in the American civil rights movement and Jamaican politics respectively. The idea of a collective struggle and a shared vision of freedom amongst politically dissatisfied individuals encouraged Fela’s resistance work.

I consider these factors as independent variables that inspired Fela’s anti-government rhetoric and rebellion. However, these independent variables are not only unique to Fela as other individuals living in Nigeria at the time encountered similar situations and yet did not rebel in the manner Fela did. The main question, therefore, is why Fela employed the specific modes of rebellion he did and what was their significance?

As established previously, three main elements greatly influenced Fela’s rebellion: his family legacy, his Yoruba heritage and the various political philosophies he encountered. Each of these elements manifests strongly in Fela’s resistance model that I will explicate shortly.

Although it is beneficial to assess Fela’s resistance through an anthropological and even ethnomusicological lens, it is important that we consider the political dimension of his resistance. Fela engages traditional ideas and symbols in addition to western-inspired forms of opposition in order to resist the Nigerian state and create policy change. I argue that he employs a three-pronged model of resistance in which he functions as a political philosopher, a political griot and a political practitioner in addressing the issues of corruption, citizenship, militant governance and legitimacy in post-colonial Nigeria.
Figure 5: **Diagram of Fela’s three-pronged model of political resistance**

Fela’s resistance model consists of three major components which are:

I. Political Philosopher

II. Political Griot

III. Political Practitioner
Although Fela may have been better known as a musician, I argue that he functioned primarily as a political philosopher whose philosophy was the backbone of his resistance work. Fela’s political resistance was rooted in pan-Africanist and black liberation ideology inspired by Kwame Nkrumah, first president of Ghana, and American civil rights activist, Malcolm X, amongst others. These thinkers contributed to his development of *Felasophy* - an eclectic range of political, social and cultural ideas pertaining to the true emancipation of the African continent. Fela, therefore, began to contend with questions around citizenship, the state, legitimacy and political accountability within Nigeria and in the larger African context. Fela declared that “Nkrumahism, an African socialist system, is what I would rather recommend for Africa because it is authentic for us, and it involves a system where the merits of a man would not depend on his ethnic background” (Olorunyomi 2005, 35). His political philosophies were the backbone of all the resistance he mounted against the Nigerian government and without such defined philosophies, his music and actions may have been superficial and of very little consequence.

As a political philosopher, Fela assumed the role of a teacher whose aim was to awaken political consciousness, which he believed was the key ingredient in resisting political domination. Fela believed that if anything was ever going to change in Nigeria there was the need for a socio-political awakening and he propounded these ideas through public lectures, *yabis* sessions and his (in)famous column in the Daily Times, *Chief Priest Say*. Yomi Durotoye asserts that the only way resistance can occur is when “the subject becomes conscious of his or her oppression, interprets the nature of that oppression [and] acquires a willingness to act and ultimately finds the capacity to act” (Durotoye 2004, 174). One would imagine that simply by calling attention to and exposing
the problems of the Nigeria government, individuals would ‘wake up’ and fight against these injustices. However, political consciousness was a rare commodity in post-colonial Nigeria and Dr. Esuola asserts that for the average Nigerian who was barely surviving on a minimum wage of 18,000 Naira per month—the equivalent of about $50—responding to governmental issues was secondary (Esuola 2019). This idea is further highlighted by the constraints proposition of the Rational Choice Theory (RCT) which asserts that a subject’s behavior is in response to specific events or situations that prevent them from accomplishing their goals (Opp 2009, 3). In the Nigerian case, the short-term physiological needs of the individual prevent them from working to attain the long-term goals of societal change and thus the need for strong alternative sources of conscientization which Fela provided.

The Anatomy of Felasophy

Having grown up in a political household, Fela was exposed to mass mobilization and anti-government resistance as modeled by his mother, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti (FRK), one of the pioneers of the women’s movement in Nigeria. FRK was his earliest example of “social protest, opposition to repressive authority [and] a distrust of the ruling class” (Denzer 2004, 113).

Ideologically, Fela gleaned his foundational ideas about the negative effects of colonization on the African continent from Walter Rodney and Frantz Fanon’s How Europe Underdeveloped Africa and Wretched of the Earth respectively. These writings were instrumental in the characterization of his anti-imperialist rhetoric which he sang about in many of his songs such as International Thief Thief (ITT). The writings of African thinkers like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Julius Nyerere, and Kwame Nkrumah also contributed to developing an African
consciousness within Fela (Olorunyomi 2005, 23). In 1969, Fela traveled to America where he met Sandra Isidore, his eventual lover, who introduced him to the writings of Malcolm X. After reading X, Fela said that “everything about Africa started coming back to me” (Moore 2009, 85). One significant aspect of Felasophy was the belief that Africans everywhere escaping persecution should be able to come back home. He also decried individualism, questioning, “is it African?” (Moore 2009, 109). These were the beginnings of Fela’s unique Pan-African ideology. These ideas were corroborated by the Yoruba concept of ebi, an idea which emphasizes the interconnectedness of everyone, regardless of family, ethnicity or political affiliation. The Kalakuta Republic, Fela’s home, was a physical manifestation of Felasophy. His commune was home to about 70 singers, instrumentalists, and assistants. Fela employed various symbols in his political resistance, however, the Kalakuta Republic stands out as one of the epitomes of his political resistance. The next section will explore the significance of the Kalakuta Republic in Fela’s resistance against the Nigerian state.

Kalakuta Republic : A State within a State

With Fela, even mundane things like his housing arrangement was an act of political resistance. He lived in a compound that expanded beyond his immediate family and included band members, community members and even foreign visitors. Kalakuta, in mid-1970s Nigeria--an age of extreme social and political censorship--offered an alternative to Nigerian society. It represented a promise of freedom and liberation to citizens trapped by Nigeria’s authoritarian regimes. Kalakuta was rooted in the Yoruba idea that “a family household occupies a large compound [and] one would find three or more generations from a particular genealogy and/or other families of
different genealogies living together as one indivisible family” (Shitta-Bey Olanrewaju Abdul, 2014).

Symbolism as Ideological Rebellion

The symbolic nature of Kalakuta was at the crux of Fela’s ideological rebellion. Fela named his compound ‘Kalakuta Republic’ after the cell he was placed in during his time in prison in the 1980s. Kalakuta in Swahili means ‘rascal’ and Fela asserted that “if rascality is going to get us what we want, we will use it” (Collins 2011, 120). Kalakuta resisted the Nigerian government in various ways.

Firstly, it was an affront to the idea of the Nigerian nation-state, a project that was already in danger of collapse as a result of brewing ethnic and economic tensions. Fela proclaimed that it was an “autonomous zone free from the laws and jurisdiction of Nigeria” (Veal 2000, 143). The idea of another republic within the Nigerian Federal republic, led by a self-proclaimed president, Fela, threatened the legitimacy of the Nigerian political project. Furthermore, the Kalakuta Republic, unlike the Nigerian state, was fairly self-sufficient, “with farm animals, a free health clinic, and facilities for rehearsing and recording” (Veal 2000, 143). With Nigeria’s fledgling democracy, a general uncertainty about the state of the Nigerian project, military excesses and accusations of government corruption, the creation of a commune that “portended a humanism it [Nigerian government] could not afford its own citizens” made the shortcomings of the Nigerian state painfully obvious (Olorunyomi 2005, 115). The Kalakuta Republic, therefore, contested the Nigerian “ideal of the nation-state” by embodying everything that Nigeria was not.
Socially, the Kalakuta Republic had its own subculture - *pidgin* English was its *lingua franca*, a mixture of Pan-Africanism and Black power was its political ideology, afrobeat and *yabie* were markers of its creative expression and marijuana smoking was its most prominent ritual practice (Veal 2000, 136). This utopian lifestyle gained popularity amongst the youth as it gave them a version of life that the Nigerian government could not provide. The Kalakuta Republic, therefore, represented the ongoing ideological battle between the inactive state and the dissatisfied citizen. President Obasanjo accused Fela of destroying the lives of Nigerian youth, and Fela in his usual manner responded that Obasanjo had rather destroyed the lives of an entire nation. (Veal 2000, 249).

With the Biafran secession still a fresh memory, anything that threatened the unity of the Nigerian project was considered as an enemy. The Nigerian government loathed the existence of Kalakuta because they thought it threatened "secessionist anarchy" (Grass 1986, 139). Kalakuta could be therefore seen as a manifestation of disengagement theory as it represented a pulling away from the state and the establishment of an alternative form of government.

Another way the Kalakuta Republic challenged the Nigerian project was by the Pan-African ideals that it represented. In a country that valued neo-colonial, western ideals over African ones, Kalakuta was a stark reminder of Nigeria’s lack of a national identity. Fela railed against the impact of colonialism on the Nigerian psyche and how even though African institutions were theoretically independent, they had not achieved mental independence. In order to gain real independence, “the colonial structure … needed to be dismantled by violence in order that the colonized could regain a sense of selfhood” (Ahluwalia 2001, 40). From politics to performance, clothing to culture, and religion to rebellion, Kalakuta exemplified a Pan-African alternative to the Nigerian political project. In line with its Pan-African ideology, the mission of Kalakuta was to
accommodate every African escaping from oppression and therefore the commune housed women, band members and visitors from all over Africa and even the diaspora (Olorunyomi 2005, 119). Within the commune, Fela sought to revive the concept of the ebi\(^7\) which had been destroyed by the imposition of colonial borders (Olorunyomi 2019).

The Kalakuta Republic, although devoid of any institutionalized political power, was an ideological threat to the government as “Fela’s interpretation of Pan-Africanism was linked to a vocal disregard for the nation-state” (Veal 2000, 143). On February 1977, over a thousand armed soldiers invaded Kalakuta in a “punitive expedition” and brutalized occupants, threw Fela’s mother down a window and set the compound ablaze. This incident was known as ‘The Kalakuta Massacre’, “the most brutal of a number of violent confrontations between soldiers and civilians in the mid-1970’s” (Veal 2000, 156). This generated public outrage and increased hostility between citizens and the military. A report published by the military tribunal called Fela’s decision to use the term “republic” in describing Kalakuta as unconstitutional. According to the tribunal, Fela’s actions were capable of undermining the state and therefore declared that “no individual, no matter how powerful or popular can set himself above the laws of the land” (Veal 2000, 19). The social and political unrest caused by the Kalakuta is indicative of the power of symbolic resistance in state politics.

James Scott’s theories about symbolic resistance are exemplified in the Kalakuta Republic. He asserts that whoever controls the ideological sectors of society is able to influence the masses, therefore, Kalakuta as a prominent symbol of an alternative system of governance, influenced the

\(^7\) The ebi is the basic socio-political unit of the Yoruba. It can be made up of close family friends, common interest partners or individuals who for some reason are brought together under a single umbrella - socially, politically or economically.
thinking of the Nigerian people. The extensive impact of Kalakuta as a symbol of ideological rebellion was prefixed on the shared cultural and social images and narratives that existed within Nigeria’s socio-political space. Fela therefore employed Kalakuta as a revolutionary symbol against the post-colonial Nigerian government.
The second level of Fela’s resistance was rooted in his role as a political griot. Fela’s unembellished critique of corruption within Nigeria gained him popularity amongst Nigerians citizens. He functioned as a political griot by combining the artistic expressions of music, language, and performance in order to challenge the Nigerian government. These tools of rebellion helped shape political thought, raise consciousness and reform political structures in post-colonial Nigeria. This section seeks to explore Fela’s role as a political griot in resisting the post-colonial Nigeria and the significance of this tool of resistance.

Fela’s political resistance is rooted in the West African tradition of the griot. Griots typically functioned as “genealogists, historians, praise-singers, advisors to patrons, tellers of folktales, reciters of poetry and proverbs....leaders of ceremonies and rites of passage”(Gentile, 152). The work of griots, therefore, demanded a mastery over words in order to respond accurately to various situations. In Yoruba culture, emphasis is placed on the spoken word and this is reflected in the invocations, incantations, proverbs, riddles, aphorisms, puns and jokes employed in everyday speech. Because the work of the griot “links them inextricably to those who hold other forms of power in society,” proverbs are important in mediating power relations. The chief proverb teller or *griot* is known as the *Babalawo*, a traditional priest often associated with a shrine. Fela incorporates this traditional model into his work by referring to himself as *The Chief Priest* of his shrine, the site of his musical performances. However, in order to be effective, the proverb teller must posses “acute linguistic, verbal and mental dexterity” and a “knowledge of folklore: the pantheon of deities, family lore, community traditions and the like” (Falola and Akinyemi 2016,
Fela’s mastery of words was therefore integral to his role as a political griot and featured prominently in his political resistance.

In his role as a political griot, Fela sought to awaken the political consciousness of the Nigerian people through deliberate “ideological [and] cultural reconstruction” (Ahluwalia 2001, 44). It was therefore important to dismantle the physical oppressive colonial structures, however, Frantz Fanon argues that this was not the end goal of the independence struggle. Rather, there was the need to create a “new consciousness that is part of the national culture” (Ahluwalia 2001, 41). This would only be achieved by political education, which is an important factor in awakening political consciousness. The post-colonial Nigerian government attempted their version of political education through “deliver[ing] a long political harangue from time to time”, ‘patriotic’ addresses, rallies and a display of symbols of national pride. All these were largely ineffective as they were based on a top-down, detached and intrinsically hierarchical idea of political education which excluded mass participation in politics. On the other hand, Fela’s music pioneered a political education that was ubiquitous and easily accessible to the Nigerian public. This education therefore provided an avenue for the recreation of alternative political realities divorced from what was presented by the Nigerian political project.

Fela’s rebellion as a political griot can divided under two headings; the compositional and the performative (Durotoye 2004, 180). The compositional aspect of Fela’s political resistance focuses on his lyrics, musicianship and “the extent to which they constituted a distinct and compelling idiom of Fela’s radicalism” whilst the performative encompassed the “lived, embodied and enacted ideas, pronouncements and acts” which registered rebellion against the Nigerian postcolonial structure (Durotoye 2004,180).
Fela’s Music: Dissident Tunes

The first part of Fela’s compositional rebellion was in the music he produced. Even though the traditions associated with the griot have evolved over time, the centrality of political discourse remains central and is reflected in Fela’s music. Fela, argued that “My sole aim is to fight the injustice in Africa, particularly Nigeria ...I talk politics and the only avenue is through my music” (Denzer 2004, 119). His classification of music as an avenue in the fight against injustice is reflective of the emphasis Fela places on the power of music to cause political change. However, Fela’s music was not always political. At the time of the Biafran secession in 1967, Fela declared, “I wasn’t politically minded at all...I was just another musician, playing with Koola Lobitos and singing love songs, songs about rain, about people” (Moore 2009, 77). However, after traveling to America in the mid-’70s, he was exposed to the socio-political marginalization of black peoples all over the world and this affected the tenor of the music he produced thereafter (Moore 2009, 110). Music, therefore, became the weapon for dismantling colonial ideologies and fighting against the postcolonial legacies of corruption and mismanagement (Moore 2009, 260).

Fela’s emphasis on lyrics parallels the rich linguistic character of griotic speech. Therefore in order to evaluate the importance of music in Fela’s rebellion, I will analyze how some of his lyrics address various issues within the post-colonial state. Fela’s extensive bibliography makes it impossible to analyze all his songs, however, I will explore a few relevant ones.
1. Against Neocolonialism

_ I say you fit never release yourself, Colo-mentality_

_ He be say you be colonial man, _

_ You don be slave man before, _

_ Them don release you now, _

_ But you never release yourself. _

- Fela Kuti, _Colonial Mentality_, 1976

Fela’s music resisted the widespread effects of neocolonialism which manifested in various sectors in Nigeria’s government. Fela talks about “Nigerian senators who had gone to America to learn how the Senate is run” which is an indication of post-colonial dependency (Barney Hoskyns 2004, 153). Nigerian political structures also betrayed continued western dependence. The nation’s military, for example, was under the Queen’s jurisdiction up until 1963 when it changed from the Royal Nigerian Army to the Nigerian Army (Fawole 2008, 110). Furthermore, the economic ‘partnership’ between Nigeria and the United Kingdom was one of domination in which Nigeria’s “oil sector and distributive trade and banking, were dominated by British owned corporations and banks” (Fawole 2008, 112). Nigeria’s inclusion in the British Commonwealth determined key decisions such as the supply of weapons to the Nigerian government against the Biafran secession.

In an effort to combat this neo-colonial canker, Fela sang songs like _Colonial Mentality_ and _Movement Against Second Slavery (M.A.S.S)._ In _Colonial Mentality_, Fela ridicules the European aspirational complex that Nigerians are trapped in. He illustrates the mental bondage Nigerians are in when he asserts that “_dem don release you, but you never release yourself_”

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8 “They [colonial authorities] have released you but you never released yourself”
because of “colo - mentality”⁹. Fela also highlights how ethnic constructivism—a situation where colonial authorities favored certain ethnic groups over others—exacerbated the ethno-class divide in Nigeria and led to the development of ethnic tensions in Nigeria (Englebert and Dunn 2013). He criticizes individuals that “think say dem better pass dem brothers”¹⁰ and “dem judge go put white wig and jail him brothers,”¹¹ which are all consequences of the European colonial mentality.

In *Movement Against Second Slavery*, Fela criticizes politicians like General Babangida who, through economic policies like the 1980’s Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP), “go sell us away, selling the continent to make us slaves again.”¹² The imagery is particularly poignant as it recreates images of the slave trade perpetuated against Africans, only this time by Nigerian leaders to their own people. He laments that Nigerian leaders are “selling the continent away without conscience.” Fela declares that “strangers rule our country,” an indication of the detachment of Nigerian leaders from their people. It also points to a situation in which Nigeria’s economic, social, and political order is to a large extent dictated by former colonial masters which is an indication of the colonial dependency of Nigeria. All these factors place the sovereignty of the Nigerian state in question. Fela humorously exposes the reactions of the West to Nigerian leaders when he declares about President Ibrahim Babangida that “Him go paris and when him reach der na ordinary minister meet am,”¹³ instead of being received by a more prestigious government official like President Mitterand. Fela references this action in order to show how

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⁹“Colonial Mentality”
¹⁰“Think that they are better than their brothers”
¹¹“Their judges will put on white wigs and jail their African brothers”
¹²“Will sell us away, selling the continent to make us slaves again”
¹³“He went to Paris and when he arrived, an ordinary minister met him”
undervalued Nigerian leaders are in Western countries even though Nigeria highly esteems the former colonial enterprise.

2. Against Corruption

“Authority stealing pass armed robbery,

We Africans we must do something about this nonsense,

We say we must do something about this nonsense,

I repeat, we Africans we must do something about this nonsense,

Because now authority stealing pass armed robbery”

-Fela Kuti, Authority Stealing, 1980

Corruption was one of the main features of the Nigerian postcolonial project. With embezzlement of monies, no accountability mechanisms, and the siphoning of huge funds into private offshore accounts, the Nigeria political project suffered severe instability. Fela noted in an interview that after the Biafran war, corruption escalated, and “now [1983], it is at its utmost highest” (Barney Hoskyns 2004, 153). Fela’s music responded to the culture of corruption and mismanagement in Nigeria. Notable amongst the myriad of government-related political scandals that emerged post-independence was the International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT) Corporation scandal in which a powerful businessman, Chief Abiola had “received large payments and has distributed some of the funds to Nigerian government officials” including president Olusegun Obasanjo (John Berry, he Washington Post, 1980). Fela responded by releasing International Thief
Thief (ITT) with the acronym as a deliberately contemptuous play on words in reference to the telephone company implicated in the scandal. Here, he decries the actions of Abiola and Obasanjo, both powerful and influential men in society and calls them “international rogue(s)” with “low mentality” that causes corruption, confusion, oppression and inflation. Fela’s use of parallelism in delivering the lines “Friend friend to journalist, Friend friend to Commissioner, Friend friend to Permanent Secretary, Friend friend to Minister, Friend friend to Head of State” represents the close clientelistic networks that facilitate corruption in Nigeria. In exasperation, Fela declares that “We don tire to carry anymore of them shit” but quickly resolves that “we go fight them, well well.”

In songs like Country of pain and Authority Stealing, Fela laments the deplorable state of the country and condemns a series of high level cases of governmental embezzlement. Released during the short lived Shagari era (1979-1983), Fela comments on thievery and its various form, from petty, marketplace theft to white-collar, large-scale theft perpetrated by government officials. Juxtaposing a common thief’s actions with a politician’s actions, Fela asserts that “Him[politician] no need gun, him[politician] need pen. If gun go steal eighty thousand naira, pen go steal two billion naira, you no go hear them shout, ‘Thief, Thief, Thief’” which highlights the bureaucratic theft that characterized Nigeria’s public institutions. Fela’s statement also implicates society’s hypocrisy because, unlike armed robbery, people are silent on issues of governmental corruption. This kind of music exposed the corruption within the government and issued a call for Nigerians to take action.

15 We are tired of carrying sh*t
16 Politicians don’t need guns, politicians need pens. If by a gun eighty thousand naira is stolen, through a pen, two billion naira is stolen but you don’t hear anyone shouting, ‘Thief, Thief, Thief’
3. Against Bullet Democracy

*And things don come change again*
*Soldier don put everybody for reverse*
*Na back the country take dey walk*
*Soldier don put everybody for reverse*
*Na back the country take dey walk*
*Soldier don put everybody for reverse*[^17]

-Fela Kuti, *Zombie*, 1976

Fela’s songs, *Zombie* and *Overtake don Overtake Overtake* responded to the ‘bullet democracy’ that was developing in Nigeria. The fragility of the post-colonial Nigerian project necessitated the presence of the military to ensure that the project did not devolve into disorder. From curbing the Biafran secession to the regular occurrence of often violent military coups during governmental transitions, military presence dominated the political scene in Nigeria. Its democracy was slowly being characterized by the bullet instead of the ballot box. McGowon and Johnson further assert that within the first three decades of African independence, military coups were the principal form of regime change on the continent (McGowan and Johnson 1984).

*Overtake don Overtake Overtake* was composed during General Babangida’s regime, a time of unprecedented economic hardship and it criticizes the series of military regimes that plagued Nigeria. Fela calls these regimes “*soja come, soja go,*”[^18] an indication of “an endless succession of military governments (Veal 2000, 225). Economic hardship is one of the key factors which lead to military takeovers (McGowan and Johnson 1984) and this was certainly the case in

[^17]: Things are about to change again. The military has set everything back and the country is retrogressing. The country is retrogressing. The military has set everything back. The country is retrogressing. The military has set everything back.

[^18]: “One military government comes, another military government goes”
post-colonial Nigeria. After military takeovers, the situation often remained unchanged due to the “lack of skills, technical expertise, and combat-readiness” (Englebert and Dunn 2013, 154) of these military regimes which eventually led to public extortions, an indication of a failing state. Fela speaks directly to this problem as he says “police station don turn bank, D.P.O na bank manager”\(^{19}\) which indicates a high level of corruption within Nigerian security services. Fela raises questions about government legitimacy when he asserts, “When Obasanjo and Yar’Adua Chop belly full and go them put civilian friends for there Them shout, "Second republic!"\(^{20}\) This is an indication of the inauthenticity and clientelist nature of the Nigerian political project. In order to maintain the so-called civilian governments, Fela asserts that “na soldier dey protect them,”\(^{21}\) which suggests that there is no real democratic government in Nigeria, rather puppet democracies controlled by those with the guns.

Fela’s Zombie mocks Nigerian security services whom he compares to Zombies. Instead of protecting the rights of the citizens, they have become puppets of the post-colonial enterprise. The army, which was the most powerful organized group at the time, had “no brains, no job, no sense” and if they were told to “Go and kill, go and die and go and quench”\(^{22}\), they would do so without hesitation. Singings songs like this not only undermined the credibility of the military but accentuated Fela’s reputation as a political dissident against the Nigerian government. According to Veal, this inspired so much confidence in other citizens that young Nigerians sang Zombie in the streets of Lagos whilst “marching robotically and used sticks as mock rifles” (Veal 2000, 155).

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\(^{19}\) “The police station has turned into a bank and the District Police Officer is a bank manager”

\(^{20}\) “After Obasanjo and Yar’Adua extract maximum profit from the state, they put their friends in office and then declare, “It’s the Second Republic!”

\(^{21}\) “It is the military that protects them”

\(^{22}\) “Go and kill, go and die and go and die”
4. On Citizenship in Nigeria

“Dem no get respect for human being,
Dem no know say you get blood like dem…
Di gun wey dem take your money to buy,
Dem don butt my head wit dem gun,
Di gun wey dem take my money to buy,
Dem go torture you…”
- Fela Kuti, Alagbon Close, 1974

The question of citizenship was prominent amongst many citizens within post-colonial Nigeria. Only seven years after independence, many Igbos who felt disenfranchised by the Yoruba-dominated government attempted to secede and create their own state, Biafra, but were immediately suppressed in one of the most destructive civil wars the subregion had seen. They did not feel like citizens of this new Nigeria they had been added to.

Based on situations like the Biafran war and his observation of the deplorable state of prisoners during his prison experiences, Fela began questioning the concept of citizenship within the post-colonial state. Fela asked, “who jails society when it does horrors to people? Why society does nothing to help beggars; to provide jobs and keep people from having to steal just to chop? Why don’t society fight against corruption, punish the powerful…” (Moore 2009, 119). After his release he composed the song Alagbon Close, named after the cell where he was kept. Fela condemns the Nigerian military who “no get respect for human being, dem no know say you get blood like dem.” This shows the level of disregard for the humanity and citizenship of the Nigerian people. He highlights the citizen abuse by pointing out that “Di gun wey dem take your money to
This statement implies that the Nigerian government is a rogue state that takes from its citizens but does not protect their rights and freedoms. This lack of concern shown and systematic violence meted out by the Nigerian government against its own citizens raises doubts about the concept of citizenship in the Nigerian state and the legitimacy of the Nigerian government. Dr Esuola corroborates this idea of non-existent citizenship by claiming that “there are no citizens in Nigeria,” rather, there are only members of a political entity (Esuola 2019). Fela ridicules the security services saying, “uniform na clot na tailor dey sew am, Na tailor dey sew am like your dress, na tailor dey sew am like my dress,” asserting that the military had no constitutional power and were differentiated from the citizens by their uniforms. This delegitimizes their role in society and by belittling their most obvious identification as security services, Fela destroys the hierarchical system that elevates these governments structures whilst keeping the citizens in a subpar position.

In *Sorrow, Tears, Blood*, Fela emphasizes the ubiquitous struggle of the Nigerian people under Nigeria's security services. Everybody scatters at the mention of the police and the army who “slap your face, [and] whip your nyash,” a further indication of the police brutality that Nigerian ‘citizens’ endures. The role of governments, as posited by Max Weber, consists of “the exercise [of] a monopoly of legitimate force over its territory to keep the peace and enforce the law” (Dreijmanis 2008, 3). However, this is not the case in Nigeria as the government uses force to oppress its ‘citizens.’ Rather than “keep[ing] peace and enforcing the law,” they cause “sorrow,

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23 The gun that the military uses to strike your head is the same gun that was bought by your taxes.
24 A uniform is sewn by a tailor from common clothing. A tailor tailor sewed it like your dress, A tailor tailor sewed it like my dress.
25 Slap you and whip your backside
“tears and blood” to their population, the direct opposite of how a government ought to treat its citizens.

**Other Musical Rebellion**

Fela’s instrumentation was a significant yet underexplored aspect of his musical rebellion. Through the employment of a “fast tempo, an engaging groove, and a dense instrumentation...[Fela] provides an effective musical context for charged political messages” (Falola and Akinyemi 2016, 232). Fela’s first successful single *Jeun Ko Ku*—Chop and Quench—mirrored an accusative and radical musical framework which laid the foundation for his messages. Another set of instruments that contributed to his musical rebellion were talking drums, a Yoruba traditional instrument which he often combined with bright classical horns highlighting traditional adages and coded political messages (Veal 2000, 93). The synthesis of traditional African musical styles of drum music and western styles of Jazz and funk, reveal the eclectic nature of Fela’s resistance. The griotic tradition relied on adopting a variety of musical styles which allowed the griot to speak to a wide variety of social issues. Similarly, Fela’s musicianship employed a wide range of heterogeneous music traditions in order to resist the post-colonial government. Fela’s unique music style may suggest the development of an alternative kind of music, a hybrid of the traditional and the avant-garde and specific to the socio-political milieu in post-colonial Nigeria (Olorunyomi 20, 135).

Fela’s songs, in addition to commenting on themes of citizenship, power, and accountability, also highlight the power relations that exist between the *Oga* - the ‘big man’ and the average Nigerian. He utilizes the theories of engagement and disengagement, public and hidden
transcripts and everyday resistance as a way of calling the people to action. From calling the Nigerian people to reject colonial mentality, standing up to an oppressive military government to encouraging Africans to join in the economic development of Africa, music, as David Jefferress asserts in his theory about arts as resistance became a significant tool in resisting the post-colonial Nigerian state. Dele jegede asserts that Fela’s “lyrics became the most potent element in his creative arsenal” (Jegede 2004, 93).

This assertion may suggest that music has certain inherent qualities that make it political or revolutionary. However, Daniel Fischlin argues that “nothing in sound is intrinsically revolutionary, rebellious or political,” however, the sounds that are generated by individuals and communities serve as “extensions (reflections) of our political cultures, but also as critiques thereof” (Fischlin, 2003 11). Fischlin emphasizes the importance of the socio-political contexts in which music is created as a significant influence in the kind of music that is produced and the purpose for which it is produced. Therefore in Fela’s case, the post-colonial Nigerian socio-political milieu catalyzed the rebellious character and duty of the music Fela produced.
Language

The second aspect of Fela’s compositional rebellion was in the language he used. Fela sang in *pidgin*--a widely understood vernacular--which connected him to the masses, mostly the urban poor and slum dwellers. Michael Veal contends that the decision to sing in *pidgin* made Fela’s music “accessible to a larger audience,” a quality he needed to have if he intended to awaken political consciousness in order to successfully mount large scale rebellion against the post-colonial government. His linguistic decision rebelled against the elite, Western-oriented class structure in Nigeria at the time. Nevertheless, this choice was his attempt at deconstructing the normal and enacting a new vision of society, an act of transgressive resistance as posited by Christina Foust (Foust 2010).

*Pidgin*--the *lingua franca* in Nigeria--increased the reach and effectiveness of Fela’s rebellion. Fela asserts that there was a need for “the use of indigenous languages or mother tongues as the medium of instruction in our society since it is the starting point of the revolution” (Olorunyomi 2005, 35). Therefore, the use of pidgin did more than just provide an accessible alternative to English or ethnic languages, only accessible to a few people, but it also had practical applications for revolution in Nigeria. This incentivized the average Nigerian to pay attention to his music as it was an avenue of the political consciousness in post-colonial Nigeria. Without performing in *pidgin*, Fela would not achieved the widespread fame and impact his messages had in Nigeria and abroad. James Scott’s assertion about the use of “ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups” to resist domination shines through Fela’s use of a commonplace linguistic tradition such as *pidgin* as a tool to encourage rebellion against the Nigerian government (Scott 1985, 29). This strategy Fela uses employs the ‘everyday’ *lingua franca* of the people in order to
dismantle socio-political structures. Class resistance theory asserts that acts are carried out by members of subordinate classes in order to “either to mitigate or deny claims” made by superordinate classes “or to advance its own claims” (Scott 1985, 290). Fela’s use of *pidgin* was therefore an act in class rebellion against highly stratified Nigerian society. It opened up the political space for allowing the average Nigerian to understand political concepts like citizenship, sovereignty, and neopatrimonialism thus allowing them to participate in local political discourse to some extent. Yet, despite the positive effect it had on the Nigerian people, for Fela, it was an act of classicide as it relegated him to the lower and less respected social circles within society (Esuola 2019).

**Performance**

Fela’s performative rebellion consisted of his performative style which included the dances, clothing, and his general demeanour. His performative rebellion comprised the “lived, embodied and enacted ideas, pronouncements and acts” which registered rebellion against the Nigerian political structure (Durotoye 2003, 180). As a political griot, performance was an integral part of his craft therefore he employed various actions and symbols, both mundane and sensational in order to make a point. His performative rebellion, just like his compositional rebellion, found roots in *felasophy* which I discussed in the previous subchapter. Fela’s performative rebellion can be categorized into two categories:

I. Public Performative Rebellion (PPR)

II. Domestic Performative Rebellion (DPR)
It is important to distinguish between these modes of performative rebellion as each category has its unique features and engages the Nigerian project in specific ways.

**Public Performative Rebellion (PPR)**

Fela’s public performances consisted of carefully curated actions meant to make a socio-political statement. His electrifying performances were therefore never devoid of political messages and undertones. Fela’s pre-performance, on-stage talks were significant aspects of his rebellion. As a political griot, one of Fela’s main tools was curated speech which he utilized to his advantage. These talks were known as *yabis* --“a biting satirical song that is deliberately composed with the aim of correcting an atrocity, a misdemeanor or sacrilege committed by either an individual or a corporate body within a particular society” (Olatunji 2007, 2). These *yabis* sessions criticized politicians, their policies and Nigerian political structures openly with the aim of inciting socio-political change in society. Its relatability to current events piqued audience interest and inspired individuals to challenge “oppressive rule, looting of the nation’s treasury, bribery and corruption” and actions that were “undermining conventional democratic processes” (Olatunji 2007, 8). The response to *yabis* was double edged; the masses loved it as it vocalized their frustrations within a highly censored authoritarian regime, however government officials who were vilified by it attacked Fela on many occasions.

*Yabis* falls into the canon of acts that constitute ‘everyday’ rebellion as discussed by James Scott. The power of *yabis* or other “speech acts” such as gossip was in their ability to assassinate an individual’s character, “recall them to a different standard of conduct” or “destroy their social standing and influence” (Scott 1985, 290). In a culture which placed so much emphasis on social
hierarchies, it was unheard of for “a youth to spite or deride an elder”, therefore Fela’s public humiliation of government officials was an affront to the social hierarchies that existed in Nigerian society (Veal 2000, 164).

Another aspect of public performative rebellion is in the dance styles of Fela’s entourage. The culturally conservative Nigerian environment condemned his dancers, whose “undulating dancing style projected far more explicit eroticism than was the rule among popular singers” (Veal 2000, 133). From feigning intercourse on stage to suggestive forms of dance, Fela rebelled against societal rules of modesty, which was often applied to women. In addition to their dancing, their choice of attire was considered scandalous, to say the least. They often performed “bare-breasted or wearing decorative brassieres or tops made of sheer transparent material, beads, and garments that enhanced their buttocks” (Denzer 2003, 131). Fela, in line with his Pan-Africanist ideology, argued that this, in fact, was authentic African culture. People decried his actions and declared him a mentally challenged individual who deserved to be in an asylum (Veal 2000, 136). Denzer claims that traditional rulers, religious figures and even the president at the time, Olusegun Obasanjo, were involved in various acts of sexual ‘perversion’ therefore Fela’s sexually explicit performances were a critique against influential Nigerian ‘big men’ who also practiced polygamy and other sexual obscenities, albeit in secret.

Fela’s smoking and encouragement of marijuana was another act of public performative rebellion that challenged the post-colonial Nigerian government. Fela believed that marijuana was a gift from God to Africans and therefore advocated for its legalization often, even on national television. The atmosphere of the Shrine--Fela’s main performance space--was never complete without the distinct smell of marijuana, which was culturally frowned upon and constitutionally illegal. The punishment for possession was ten years imprisonment whilst cultivation could attract
the death penalty. (Veal 2000, 133). However, in spite of such stringent governmental regulation, Fela and many other visitors to the Shrine smoked freely and openly without any remorse or fear of governmental reaction. Fela’s public display of rebellion indicates his attempts to create an alternative lifestyle contrary to state law. The inability of law enforcement agents to reprimand Fela at the Shrine for the fear of incurring public dissatisfaction was indicative of the efficacy of his rebellion against the post-colonial legal framework.

**Domestic Performative Rebellion (DPR)**

Fela’s scathing public opinions and resistance to Nigerian political culture brought even his private life under scrutiny. His domestic life seemed to be an ongoing performance characterized by military raids, exciting concerts, mysticism and a large commune, all of which pioneered an alternative lifestyle in socially conservative Nigeria. The government responded to Fela’s actions, both domestic and public, with threats, harassment and physical violence almost to the point where the lines between public and private in his life were essentially blurred.

One of his notable domestic actions which was an affront to Nigerian social traditions was his marriage to 27 women in one day - an act that was considered heresy in religiously conservative Nigeria. Even though the marriage was annulled a few days prior on the legal grounds of bigamy, Fela, resisted the law and “police or no police, I married,” he asserted (Moore 2009, 158). Fela said concerning his marriage that in 1978, “I was full into my case against the Nigerian government”, implying that he was willing to challenge the colonial law that mandated a monogamous marriage (Moore 2009, 159). Fela’s outrageous marriage speaks to Foust’s idea of transgressive resistance in which certain actions cause a breakdown of social order for the purposes
of “cultural innovation” (Foust 2010, 7). The social outrage that preceded Fela’s marriage was an indication of the disruption that had taken place within Nigerian social structure.

Fela’s uniqueness as a political griot was in his ability to successfully synthesize the traditional and the contemporary inappropriate response to Nigerian political events (Goldman 2003, 106). The work of the griot encompasses many roles such as historian, exhorter, musician, warrior, and teacher of which Fela epitomized the role of the teacher and warrior (Hale 1998). Fela’s relentless advocacy for mass citizen rebellion against the state is highlighted in the work of the griot who is “eager to inspire others to go into battle” (Hale 1998, 45).

Therefore, rather than seeing his griotic tools - music, language and performance as separate entities that simply aided political action, Fela redefines them as a standard political tools that can be employed for political change. Just like a public protest or a motion for impeachment, Fela’s music, language and performance coalesced to form another legitimate tool capable of enacting socio-political change within the Nigeria. Other contemporaries of Fela may have weighed in on Nigerian politics in one way or another, however, Fela’s development of a unique griotic model consisting of music, language and performance pioneered a resistance model unique to the political situation and cultural history of the Nigeria.

**Governmental Reaction to Fela’s Griotic Tradition**

Fela’s protest music, harsh critique of the Nigerian government, disregard for state laws and socially deviant actions placed him at the epicenter of public discourse. His actions promoted counter-cultural and anti-government ideas amongst the Nigerian people. Citizens are the source
of legitimacy in any nation-state and with growing displeasure amongst the citizenry, the
dissolution of the legitimacy of the Nigerian state was imminent. Therefore, in an attempt to curb
the rising rebellion of the masses, the government attacked elements that represented this griotic
tradition. For instance, as early as 1971, Fela’s *Jeun K’Oku* was banned by the Nigerian
Broadcasting Corporation. During Sani Abacha’s regime, Fela’s compound was sprayed with
bullets and in 1997, his compound was permanently closed after he was sentenced to 10 years in
prison (Moore 2009, 284).

Fela’s body became a living site of protest as advanced by Christina Foust’s enactment
theory. In this capacity, the actions, words and even ideas of these bodies define the meanings,
rules and characteristics of the rebellion (Foust 2010, 145). Therefore in order to deal with the
‘Fela problem’, methods such as imprisonment, beatings and mental torture were ineffective as
they only served as a temporary solution. The more effective solution was to eliminate the ‘living
site of protest’ which was Fela’s body and this is the agenda the government pursued fully. Dede
Mbiaku, a close friend and confidant of Fela asserts that the government was instrumental in the
death of Fela (Mbiaku 2019).
Fela: The Political Practitioner

From Obasanjo to Buhari to Babangida and finally Abacha, Fela resisted almost every Nigerian government that he encountered. His political *modus operandi* involved “interrogating, and pronouncing judgments on the partisan political arrangements and attendant social relations” and thus by the time he died, he had successfully created the image of himself as a quintessentially political musician (Olaniyan 2004, 3).

Growing up in 1950’s colonial Nigeria, Fela lived in the liminal space between oppression and freedom, dependence and independence and western domination and African nationalism and therefore, like many other Africans within the period yearned for the taste of true independence. Even though Nigeria eventually gained independence in 1960, it was nothing more than a change in the personalities who ruled the country as the same structures of colonial governance were maintained.

During the early to mid-’80s Fela began showing signs of a disenchanted, battle-weary political warrior. His quest to reform Nigerian society seemed to produce no tangible change and the Nigerian masses “in whose name he had suffered broken legs and arms, a fractured skull, repeated imprisonment, and unabated harassment - gave no sign of being ready to defy their oppressors head-on” (Moore 2009, 269). Fela’s quick, boyish mannerisms had been replaced by a “somber, humorless [and] withdrawn” Fela who sought to use the official apparatus of the state to reform the Nigerian state (Moore 2009, 282). Fela’s grief became a catalyst for his political resistance against the state. This is highlighted in Bruce Rogers-Vaughn’s theory of depression as resistance which asserts that mourning or grief “becomes a refusal, a standing aside, directed toward a socio-political hegemony” (Rogers-Vaughn 2013, 505). Fela often oscillated between the
feelings of happiness and sadness and attributed his sadness to “how many Africans are so unaware, [and] how they suffer in oblivion” (Moore 2009, 260). Throughout his resistance career, he employed the tools of political philosophy and the political griotic tradition in order to reform Nigerian political structures but was largely unsuccessful. These tools were primarily ‘external’, outside the official channels of rebellion, however, he eventually turned to state-sanctioned processes as a means of rebelling against the state. Fela functioned as a political practitioner by involving himself more in formalized systems of politics through the formation of a political party, Movement of the People (MoP). He also took advantage of print media as a means to advance his political ideas and initiated the Young African Pioneers (YAP) - a group of politically conscious youth who sought to address issues of corruption in Nigeria.

Fela’s work as a political practitioner can be divided into two main categories;

- Resistance through Print media
- Resistance through Political Party

These categories largely shaped his formal political career and contributed to the image of Fela as a political practitioner.

Media

In an effort to reach a wider audience with his anti-government message, Fela “bought space in newspapers regularly to broadcast his ideological positions and comment on government activities” (Olaniyan 2004, 110). His weekly column in the Daily Times, *Chief Priest Say*, was an extension of the *yabis* sessions that took place at the Shrine, only this time with more decorum and less acerbity. Nevertheless, Fela employed sharp wit and biting ridicule to expose the actions of
the Nigerian state. An example of this was his comment on the fact that “as a result of the port backlog, it would be quicker to reach England from jumping from ship to ship than flying” (Veal 2000, 126). Comments like this exposed the Nigerian government’s incompetencies to its people and to the international community which angered the Nigerian government. Realizing the importance of print media, Fela he bought a press to print *YAP News*, the broadsheet of the activist youth organization he founded, Young African Pioneers. Thousands of papers, which he called “anti-government propaganda” were distributed with the aim of “denouncing those corrupt, unprogressive politicians and military men to the people” (Olaniyan 2004, 110).

The significance of Fela’s print media was its ability to transcend class barriers and reach out to the elite class who may have otherwise not engaged with his music. Apart from radio, portable electronic devices were not massively popular especially in Nigeria, and so one of the main ways of interacting with his music was attending events at the Shrine, which the elite Nigerian class objected to as the Shrine was known as a place for social misfits. Therefore print media was one of the most widespread and class-independent routes through which Fela could disseminate his ideas.

Thomas Hodgkin discusses the role of print media in colonial Nigeria and asserts that, popular press “contributed to the rise of [political] parties in a variety of ways” - through the dissemination of information which contributed to the spread of political ideology. However, the dissemination of information was not the end goal. He asserts that it is a strategy in building a popular following after which at a later stage it is easier to “shift the focus of an activity from agitation to organization” (Hodgkin 1961, 33). Hodgkin speaks to Fela’s *modus operandi* when he contends that newspapers have been a platform for “an emerging radical - or relatively radical leadership” to expand their viewpoints (Hodgkins 1961, 34).
Fela’s political rhetoric always had mass appeal as he resisted socially exclusive and elite structures which gave political access to few people within Nigeria. Whereas the political landscape of post-independence Nigeria was run by a small group of Nigerian, western-educated, elites who attended to the needs of a niche population, Fela reached out and in fact enjoyed the company of the ordinary people in society. Fela’s work as a political practitioner was officialized in 1978 when he formed his own political party, the Movement of the People (MOP) commemorated by a huge political rally at the Tafewa Balewa Square in November 1978. (Veal 2000, 169) Contrary to the popular conception of post-independence Nigerian politics as a struggle for political office and self-enrichment, Fela’s ideas about politics emphasized a struggle for the empowerment of the masses in order for them to gain access to basic necessities of life (Olorunyomi 2005, 142).

Fela’s formation of a political party is an engagement tactic which attempts to transform the system from within employing the tools of the system to destroy the system. Even though Nigerians live in an extensively associational culture, the concept of the political party as a tool of political accountability and the expression of the will of the people is not inherent to pre-colonial societies of Nigeria. Rather, the political party was an adoption from the neocolonial framework of western liberal democracy. Thus, its functioning in Nigeria was characterized by instances of inconsistency, voter disengagement and a manipulation of the electoral process. Fela’s employment of this western-inspired model of governance is indicative of two things; firstly it presents a contradiction in Fela’s pan-Africanist philosophy which rejected everything Western,
even medicines which he claimed were Western poisons. Another thing his adoption of the political party as a mode of rebellion reveals is the centrality of Western structures to the Nigerian political structure. It was therefore impossible to engage the Nigerian structure in any way without first adopting the political party as a tool of engagement. This was another point of contradiction for Fela; a known anti-establishment individual who had to employ a more western-inspired, ‘legitimate’ route in order to achieve social change. This synthesis presents a unique “juxtaposition of anarchy and authority and [was]radical in its social non-conformity” (Veal 2000,16).

Hodgkins discusses the two main political party structures in Africa; mass political parties and elite political parties. Whereas mass political parties “enroll the mass of the population as members”, elite political parties consist of a “nucleus of persons enjoying status and authority within the existing social order” (Hodgkins 1961, 69). Fela subscribed to the mass political party model which allowed him to connect to the disenfranchised masses of Nigeria in order to promote the vision of creating an alternative Nigerian socio-political structure (Hodgkins 1961, 69). Fela’s rebellion against Nigerian political structures was highlighted in the constitution of the MoP which determined to “work for the speedy reconstruction of a better Nigeria, in which the people shall have all the rights to live and govern themselves as free people without military interference” - a slight to the governance structures of the Nigerian government. The constitution also called for the achievement of a “second independence” for the Nigerian people - an indicator of the insignificance of Nigeria’s ‘first independence’. Even though the MoP was disqualified twice for not meeting organizational guidelines thus destroying Fela’s hopes of becoming president, the fact that his political campaign garnered such popularity amongst the people (as evidenced by the establishment of party offices in fourteen of the nine state capitals) is indicative of the potential success of the political party model as a means of rebellion against the state (Durotoye 2003, 189).
Conclusion and Implications

This paper has examined how Fela rebelled and the significance of his rebellion in post-colonial Nigeria. Through Fela’s three pronged model that involved his work as a political, philosopher, a political griot and a political practitioner, Fela successfully constructed a model of rebellion that was specific enough to call to order the wrongs in the Nigerian post-colonial state as well as impact other people beyond the Nigerian political context. The strength of Fela’s rebellion model is not in the power of his songs, neither in his charismatic nature or eccentric personality rather, it is rooted in the syncretism and eclectic nature of his rebellion. Rarely did Fela employ a single faceted form of protest. Borrowing from a wide range of social, political and economic sources, Fela built a model of rebellion that was both widespread and impactful to individuals in different places. Barney Hoskyns asserted that even European youth, whose history and culture Fela denigrated on multiple occasions, looked up to him as a folk hero (Hoskyns, 2003). The reach and realatbility of the message was important in advancing the cause of his rebellion. Therefore, Fela a Nigerian musician who fought against the ills within Nigerian society, his rebellion was one that peoples from all over were able to connect to. The truth and passion for humanity was important in enhancing the quality and strength of his rebellion.

In as much as Fela’s rebellion achieved a global reach, his rebellion was also very traditionally inspired. His ability to reach into culture and employ very specific traditional symbols, music, language and even political concepts in an attempt transform society won him favor with local Nigerians and made him relatable to various aspects of the population.

However, the question still remains about the effectiveness of Fela’s rebellion within the Nigerian state. Even though the assessing effectiveness is important and it helps us make
reasonable conclusions about the success of his model, it is outside the scope of this paper. This paper focused more on understanding the character of Fela’s rebellion and the significance of the various tools he employed.

Decoding and understanding Fela’s model of rebellion is important for current post-colonial societies. Fela’s actions and his ethos give modern rebels a sort of blueprint for rebellion. His ideological persuasions as the foundation for his resistance has changed the face of resistance and characterized it as more than basic disagreements with the other party. Rather, through his ideological convictions, he single-handedly pioneered unique and focused rebellion and also created an alternative lifestyle to what existed in Nigeria. It therefore stands to reason that, the contestation between citizen and state begins at the point of ideology rather than physical exchanges. Fela’s emphasis on ideology is rooted in the idea that the post-colonial state was defeated with false ideologies by colonial authorities so the only way individuals in post-colonial societies can win is through the employment of powerful resistant ideologies.

It is interesting that without any ‘hard’ power Fela distressed the various governments that encountered him. So provoking was his presence and rebellious actions that a 1000-soldier delegation was sent to his home to attack him on one occasion. Dispatching a team of 1000 soldiers, enough for about three small towns, to one man’s commune suggests something unique about Fela and the kind of resistance he mounted. His uniqueness was in his ability to read the Nigerian political landscape and employ poignant symbols that spoke to issues he sought to address. From the (in)famous Kalakuta to the carrying of his mother’s coffin to the Dodan Barracks, Fela’s political trajectory was filled with poignant symbols that he utilized to resist the state. In our current globalized world, there such great ease of access that the manipulation of popular symbols to resist is more possible than ever. The numbers of people have access to these
symbols coupled with the speed with which they are transmitted makes rebellion even more effective. Similar to the assertion about ideology, symbols are rooted in Nigerian and many African cultures and thus play a significant role in resistance struggles within the post-colonial government.

The analysis of Fela’s model of resistance also gives post-colonial African nations an understanding of citizen activism and the avenues through citizen displeasure is expressed. This highlights the relationship between citizen and state and gives us an idea or a pattern to how citizens react to situations in post-colonial settings. This ideas are important as they shape the actions of the post-colonial African state in relation to the citizens.
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