

The Zombie as Critic

Misinterpreting Fela's "Zombie"

One of the ironies of Fela Anikulapo Kuti's hit song, "Zombie" (1976), is its recurring misinterpretation, which demonstrates the very mind-set that the song attempts to discourage. The original album flaunts pictures of soldiers on its sleeve, while the song is laced with an assortment of commands typically delivered at a military parade. These two factors have provoked conclusions that the song ridicules the regimented life of the Nigerian armed forces, particularly the army. While this analysis couldn't be further from the truth, it illustrates the downside to recklessly embracing popular opinion. It is something of a paradox that majority of "Zombie" enthusiasts have simply refused to rethink and reassess the message of the song for themselves. They have essentially opted to function like *zombies*.

While the *Zombie* album, as noted, displays pictures of soldiers, it is erroneous to assume that "Zombie" explicitly ridicules the army. The cover of Wole Soyinka's famous play, *Death and the King's Horseman*, showcases the carved figure of a man riding a horse in one instance, and in another displays the picture of a horse. Does this mean the play is about a horse or a man riding a horse? Certainly not. Also, one of the reprints of Chinua Achebe's well-known *Things Fall Apart* delineates a head sketched upside-down. Does this mean the novel is about an upturned head? Like these representations, the image on the *Zombie* album is symbolic, symbolic of a much broader issue addressed by Fela, one that goes well beyond regulated military life. Another good literary example is *Xala*, a novel by Senegal's Sembene Ousmane. The story does not only focus on the sexual impotence suffered by a businessman, but also shows his picture on the cover of the novel. Yet, the book is not about impotence; instead, it underscores the greed and fraudulence that defines the lifestyle of an emerging elite class.

Regarding the parade commands that are used to reinforce the cynical tone of "Zombie," these commands are not unique to the armed forces alone. They are also used during drills and parades by members of Nigeria's Customs Service, Boys' Brigade, Girl Scouts and Immigration Service. I was a member of the Boy Scouts and recall that

similar commands were issued during our parades. Among these directives are three that stand out as they are not actually used in parade protocol; namely, “Go and kill,” “Go and die” and “put am for reverse” (“put it in reverse”). Many would argue that “Go and kill” and “Go and die” are proof that the song mocks and vilifies the military. This reasoning is erroneous since the demand for human sacrifice is fundamental to a number of other systems and scenarios, be it the murders carried out by criminal outfits or the ritual killings that inform diverse cultural practices. To refer again to Soyinka’s *Death and the King* horseman and Achebe’s *Things fall Apart*; both literary works document killings that are required by custom but that also engender unease by characters who, however, refuse to openly challenge their implementation. Elesin in Soyinka’s play is designated to play the role of a “horseman” who reluctantly prepares to die so that his spirit will continue to attend to his deceased master, the king. Ikemefuna, a young lad in Achebe’s novel, is brutally killed as retribution for murders that he had nothing to do with. Though his killers are ill at ease, they carry out the act in obedience to their oracle. Questionable acts of murder purportedly carried out for principled reasons—whether sociopolitical or religious—are therefore not restricted to military tenets.

“Put am for reverse” is an even greater digression from the parade process since cars and trucks, machines essentially, can be put in reverse and not human beings. In this regard, reverse also suggests facing the opposite direction while moving backwards. While a vehicle is typically under the informed control of a driver, the individual moving in reverse is blind to what lies behind and is vulnerable to a range of tragic accidents. This self-destructive image does not only portray a deficiency in self-determination and purpose, but also underlines submission to various manipulative forces.

Even though the robotic acquiescence and brainwashing of Nigerian military personnel can be subsumed within the larger “Zombie” theme, the song is certainly not just about the military. It covers a much broader area that challenges docility—the failure to question the information we are fed in a variety of political, economic, industrial, academic, cultural and religious settings, and the failure to challenge and resist

repression. This is repeatedly demonstrated in the machinelike response of the zombies to a series of commands: “attention,” “quick march,” “slow march,” “left turn,” “right turn,” “about turn,” “double up,” “salute....” To highlight this point, two other songs by Fela need to be acknowledged. The first is “Mr. Follow Follow,” which, incidentally, is the other song on the *Zombie* album. As with “Zombie,” this song reinforces the consequences of blind compliance devoid of thought, inquiry or defiance where necessary. The follower is depicted as following mechanically until he falls into a “gutter” filled with “darkness,” “rats” and other desolate forces. The other song, “Sorrow, Tears & Blood” (1977) was released in an album of the same name. Focusing on the violence meted out against civilians by soldiers and the police during military rule, a portion of the song underscores the dangers in succumbing to subjugation and degradation. Singing in the pidginized English that had become his trademark for reaching a vast Nigerian and West African audience, Fela faults “my people” for being too afraid and always having excuses for not challenging their repressors—everything from taking care of parents to building new homes. Because they say nothing and simply stare like “donkeys” when they are slapped and flogged by soldiers and policemen, in their submissiveness they are foregrounded as being similar to the already cited “zombie” and “Mr. Follow Follow” characters.

The fact is that it was not Fela’s style to conceal his messages in murky images. He never hesitated to point accusatory fingers directly at individuals and institutions, and in the process often mentioned names. In this he was alone as Nigeria has never witnessed another artist that would be so brazen, especially during military rule when speaking truth to power was something of a masochistic risk. The murder of Dele Giwa in 1986 by a first-time parcel bomb is emblematic of this fact. Giwa was a notoriously outspoken journalist during Ibrahim Babangida’s reign, and was rumored to be investigating possibilities that the general’s wife was involved in drug trafficking. True or false, blowing up Giwa sent an unequivocal reminder to the media, scholars and social analysts that even the notion of criticizing the military was off-limits in no uncertain terms.

Fela was therefore a rare and courageous nonconformist as he was undeterred in his denunciation of military rule, which he carried out until his passing in 1997. But “Zombie” does not represent this direct denunciation. If Fela wanted to attack the military or any of its branches in the song, he would have mentioned the applicable institution without mincing words. However, he later released another song, “Army Arrangement” (1984) (also the album title), in which he lashes out at the army and goes on to rubbish two individuals that he identifies as representatives of corrupt military dictatorships—former President Obasanjo and late Shehu Musa Yar’Adua (older brother of late President Umaru Musa Yar’Adua). The reason why Fela blasts the army in “Army Arrangement” is because this is not what he set out to accomplish in “Zombie,” contrary to popular conjecture. Though not about the military, “ITT (International Thief Thief)” (1980), another release by Fela from another album with the same name, is a clear demonstration of his direct approach when it came to slamming crooked military and civilian bigwigs. Here, he is explicit in his accusation of Obasanjo and late business mogul, Moshood Abiola, of being grand global thieves. While “ITT” is the initialism for “International Thief Thief,” it is also a sarcastic reference to ITT1 Corporation, the company that Abiola once worked for and that allegedly afforded him the opportunity to make huge amounts of money through dubious means.

Besides exemplifying the failure to think responsibly and judiciously, which is part of the thematic focus of “Zombie,” the constant flawed conclusion that the song derides the Nigerian army resulted in grave consequences for Fela. While Fela was already hated by the military because of his blatant criticism of its highhandedness, power abuse and mismanagement of resources; he evoked its merciless wrath after “Zombie” went viral and gained international popularity. Until 1977, Fela’s family, band members and recording studio occupied Kalakuta Republic, an elaborate communal compound in Lagos. By February of that year, the compound, for reasons that are ambiguous but that can certainly not be justified, was attacked by hundreds of armed soldiers, during which Fela, members of his family (including his elderly mother) and members of his band were severely assaulted and violated in every physical way imaginable. Kalakuta

¹ International Telephone & Telegraph

Republic was eventually burned to the ground and to date no one has been held responsible for this barbarity. The incident remains a prime example of the dangers in drawing hasty conclusions and randomly going along with prevalent conceptions.

On the day that Kalakuta Republic was raided, the culpable soldiers were, ironically, acting in the capacity of the unthinking zombies whose idiocy Fela exposed in “Zombie.” It was their unconscionable behavior that ultimately defined them as the subject of the song, and not the content of the song. Their action did not only confirm Fela’s depiction of the dangers in operating like brainless automatons, it highlighted the potentially vile and far-reaching consequences of misinterpreting anything.

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