Fela Didn't Believe AIDS Existed. But then he died of the disease. His brother is still trying to convince Fela's fans that HIV is real.

LAGOS, NIGERIA -- This is not an easy country, but Lagos, Nigeria's teeming megacity, is almost fantastical in its difficulties. Rarely do 24 hours pass without a blackout, and power outages lasting weeks are common. Officially, NEPA stands for National Electric Power Authority, but everyone jokes that it stands for Never Expect Power Anytime, so those who can afford it own a diesel generator. But that's not a guarantee, because even though Nigeria is one of the world's biggest oil producers, mismanagement causes frequent fuel shortages: One AIDS researcher lost 3000 refrigerated blood samples when a power outage and a fuel shortage coincided.

Running water? Even wealthy Lagosians often lack it; they pay for trucks to fill up large tanks. Doctors wash their hands with water from buckets. Calling the police is virtually impossible, because even if your phone is working the one in the police station probably isn't. Military dictatorships have plundered Nigeria for most of the 39 years since the country wrested its independence from Britain, and a favorite scam of "the military boys," as they are called, was to transfer government contract money into private Swiss bank accounts and pay off cronies to sign forms stating that, yes, the work had been completed even though anyone with eyes could see that nothing at all had been done. Directors of private companies often award contracts to the highest briber, and many Lagos buildings feature signs warning, "This house not for sale" because con men sell homes they don't own.

What can be relied on in Lagos? The heat. The pollution. The epic traffic jams called "go-slows" that trap millions of commuters for hours, most of them sweltering inside crowded minivan taxis. And Fela.

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the international music star who married 27 women in one day and who usually appeared on stage with nothing but his sax, the skimpiest briefs, and a joint that, as one writer put it, was the size of a small African nation-Fela championed African culture over all things white and he fearlessly excoriated the military governments that were ransacking Nigeria. Foolishly, the state boosted his standing by giving him the dissident's ultimate seal of credibility: jail time. During this year's democratic elections, which brought former military ruler Olusegun Obasanjo back into power, Fela's song "Soldier Go, Soldier Come" could be heard everywhere, accusing Obasanjo and the rest of the military boys of operating a revolving door to power.

But during the election, that song was never heard live, because Fela died in 1997 of a disease he claimed didn't exist, and certainly not in Africa: AIDS. No matter that Fela's older brother, Professor Olikoye Ransome-Kuti, had served as the country's health minister and launched Nigeria's much-lauded early AIDS program. About the only concession Fela made to white medicine was to let Olikoye stitch up his head after the police had gashed it. There was hardly an illness African herbs couldn't cure, Fela maintained, and he dismissed condoms as unnatural, unpleasurable, and a white plot to reduce the black
By the time Fela allowed himself to be taken to a hospital, he was so far gone he never heard the test results confirming that he was infected with HIV. A few days later, deep in a coma, he choked on his own vomit and died.

Then began the fight for Fela's death—and, in a way, for Nigeria's life. Astoundingly popular, Fela carried the potential to do for AIDS in Nigeria what Rock Hudson, Magic Johnson, and Arthur Ashe accomplished in America.

Fela's most ardent fans—such as the legions of out-of-school, unemployed "area boys" who deal, steal, and occasionally riot to get a little cash—are often the groups most vulnerable to HIV. They are also the most alienated from society and authority, including doctors. Many area boys refuse to believe Fela died of AIDS, and their response reveals the complex forms that AIDS denial takes in urban Africa.

It also illuminates an impending holocaust. Nigeria's most recent national statistics, issued in 1996, estimate that almost one in 20 adults are infected. That's already perilously high, especially since Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation, home to one in every seven Africans. What if Nigeria's HIV prevalence rises to the level of some East and Southern African countries, where more than a quarter of adults are HIV-positive? Then, warns veteran Nigerian AIDS activist Pearl Nwashili, "what we have seen in the rest of Africa will be child's play."

Yet Nigeria's efforts to fight AIDS remain mired in what Nwashili calls "apathy and denial." Not even the blood supply is safe, because many of the country's numerous private clinics transfuse unscreened blood. Monitoring them is virtually impossible, largely because the once vigorous National AIDS and STD Control Program has been limping along on 40 million naira a year, which is less than half a million U.S. dollars. And the country's official rate of HIV is widely believed to be underestimated, partly because it was calculated with no data whatsoever from Lagos, sub-Saharan Africa's largest metropolis, a cauldron of at least 8 million inhabitants that swells by almost a thousand newcomers every day.

Like so many of Africa's megacities, Lagos is linked with the rest of the country through the extended families of these immigrants, and through the road, rail, sea, and air routes that converge here. Controlling AIDS in Lagos, therefore, is critical to controlling AIDS in Nigeria as a whole. But while only a united, all-out effort can contain Nigeria's epidemic, the country remains gripped by a schizophrenic attitude toward AIDS, epitomized by brothers Olikoye and Fela: on the one hand, a face-the-facts pragmatism; on the other, a denial that is rooted in anti-white, pan-African ideology.

• Resistance to the facts of Fela's death reared up almost before his corpse had cooled. "Fela's doctor came to me and said, 'What should I write as the cause of death?' " Olikoye recalls. "And I said, 'What did you find he died of?' She said it would be too terrible to write it-AIDS is such a shame. So I asked her, 'Are you going to forge a death certificate?' " The doctor relented.

The next day, flanked by most of Fela's family, Olikoye staged a press conference, announced that AIDS had killed his brother, and delivered what Fela's daughter Yeni calls "a serious lecture," pointing out that almost 2 million Nigerians were already carrying the AIDS virus and that people needed to confront the crisis.

The announcement certainly jolted some people. There are prostitutes who say that more of their johns started wearing condoms after Olikoye's announcement. But millions—including Fela's youngest son, 16-year-old Seun—don't believe HIV felled their hero. Hanging out in a crowded alley, area boy and staunch Fela fan Bob "Marlboro" Kuforiji says, in a typical comment, "It's just propaganda to say Fela died of AIDS." His logic: "Fela's a very great man, so he couldn't have died of AIDS." Condoms? Marlboro doesn't use them.

• Virtually every big city has bands of street toughs, but area boys are a phenomenon unique to Lagos, where they have attained almost mythic status as urban nuisance and criminal menace. They riot to intimidate whole neighborhoods into paying them off, or just to loot. Politicians employ them to attack opponents or create a diversion—but ultimately the area boys answer to no one. This summer, in what the papers dubbed "jungle justice," area boys fought turf battles against rival gangs and against citizen vigilante groups fed up with their crimes and with police impotence. More than 50 people were killed, often burned alive.

Victor Inem, a doctor at Lagos University Teaching Hospital, studied 113 area boys and, though few locals use the term, area girls. Twenty-eight percent tested HIV-positive, an infection rate second only to sex workers. And that was six years ago. There have been virtually no other studies of area boys, but today's infection rate would almost certainly be higher, in part because the area boys act in ways that put themselves and others at risk. More than half of the women in Inem's study had prostituted themselves. Both sexes engaged in "sessions," drug binges that often included orgies. And one way they put themselves and others at risk. More than half of the women in Inem's study had prostituted themselves. Both sexes engaged in "sessions," drug binges that often included orgies. And one way they

"We saved millions of children with immunizations and child diarrhea treatment," says Olikoye, "but we never did much to plan for their future. They have no jobs, no schooling. They are selling scraps on the street, and they are beyond the reach of anyone."

Except Fela. He took scores of prostitutes and area boys off the streets, giving them a home in his commune, called Kalakuta Republic, and giving himself unmatched street credibility. But more than that, he transfigured their rolling frustration and sense of betrayal into art—their art. Fela's cousin, Wole Soyinka, may have won the Nobel Prize, but Fela, singing in Pidgin, won the devotion of people at the
Fela's music linked high-level corruption to the everyday sufferings of Lagos life, from conditions in the city's slums—where, he sang, "dey stay ten-ten in one room" and "sleep inside dustbin"—to the almost allegorical torments of the molue, the sweltering, overcrowded Lagos busses. "Every day my people dey inside bus, 49 sitting 99 standing, dem go pack themselves in like sardines, dem dey faint." These lyrics evoke "images of the slave trade," notes Babatope Babalobi, a member of Journalists Against AIDS who wrote his college thesis on Fela. Area boys say simply, "Fela was talking the truth."

So it is a cruel irony that his downfall was caused by self-deception. The humor in his dismissal of condoms—"After I remove my trouser," he was fond of saying, "why I got to wear trouser for prick?"—has become grotesque as the AIDS epidemic swells into one of the worst tragedies in Africa's history. Fela was risking his own life, but he was also risking the lives of his partners, many of whom were the street girls he took into his home. Fela was often criticized for his views on women: "Woman got no other role than making the man happy," he once said—but HIV armed his attitude with the potential to kill.

Indeed, life at Fela's Kalakuta Republic was a safe-sex educator's nightmare. The air was hazy with marijuana smoke, and hot-Nigerian street gin-flowed freely. Fela's oldest son, Femi, remembers that "the whole compound was dirty," and not one of the area boys who took shelter there "was doing anything constructive."

Femi, who like his dad plays the sax and has a successful band of his own, Positive Force, swore off pot because, he explains, "I can't do what my father did. I have to work more than play." That work ethic, not to mention the notion of no more pot, has made him unpopular with the city toughs. And, Femi comes as close as a son can to blaming his father for colluding in the collective tragedy of the area boys: "They want me to act like my father to support the way they are ruining their lives."

Fela did support the behaviors that help to spread HIV. But perhaps more damaging, he sanctioned an attitude that makes it extremely difficult to change those ways.

- Dominating Ojuelegba Lane in the Surulere district of Lagos is a cement apartment block, laundry hanging off the balconies, several windows broken. Below it cluster small cement shacks with corrugated iron roofs. Stagnant water sits in the open sewers, and chickens peck among the garbage, squawking and fluttering to avoid the running, all-but-naked children. Lounging shirtless in an alley, area boy Thomas "Boy-O-Boy" Edem, who used to live in Fela's commune, insists he doesn't steal. "That's why I deal in this," he says, holding up a plastic bag bulging with marijuana. His other revenue stream comes from the nearby bus stop. During the evening rush hour Boy-O-Boy darts through the chaos, collecting his dash, slang for a payoff. Like mafia protection money, the payment keeps the area boys from attacking the busses.

No one is exempt from such extortion, certainly not AIDS workers, who are perceived as being rich because they are funded by international donor agencies. Onemtein Amadi of the Nigerian Youth AIDS Programme (NYAP) recalls a soccer league, organized by her agency, in which the requirement for participation was taking an AIDS course and competing in halftime AIDS quizzes. Sixteen teams totaling more than 400 players signed up, but NYAP hadn't settled with the area boys. "They would move onto the field and disrupt the match," she recalls. "They'd say, 'If you don't give us money and gin, the match won't go on.'" NYAP ended up hiring the area boys as security guards, a job they relished.

This is the simplest form of what Amadi calls "the money syndrome," a corrosive blend of cynicism and mistrust that comes from a culture where corruption is king and poverty forces hard deals. Elvira Obike, program officer for the Lagos chapter of The Society of Women against AIDS in Africa, estimates that "more than 70 percent of female university students engage in sex for money to pay school fees," almost always with older sugar daddies. In a culture where so many are prostituting themselves, and where leaders steal millions and sometimes billions of dollars, everyone has an angle. And Fela stoked this cynicism.

While it was always clear what he was against, no one could say precisely what Fela was for. He was pure dissident. His brother Olikoye brought primary care to Nigeria's poor, but Fela criticized him for serving in a military government. Fela's rejection of virtually everything white—including Western medicine—was fundamentally reactionary, a wholesale backlash against white rule. It may have been fatal, but in urban Africa, it is a common response. In fact, it is one of colonialism's legacies.

Fela did espouse notions of freedom and equality and African unity, but they were nebulous, little more than slogans. Meanwhile, he ruled his commune like a king, meting out harsh beatings to errant area boys and indulging his legendary appetite for marijuana and sex. Fela made it seem that all it took to be a revolutionary was to pursue one's own gratification and blame the powers that be.

Such cynicism undermines AIDS education. As NYAP's Edem Effiong explains, "people might not believe accurate information about AIDS, because they might not trust the source." Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a source more credible than Olikoye, one of the very few government ministers who has retained a good reputation. It doesn't matter. Marlboro is only one of many who thinks Olikoye was lying about the cause of Fela's death. Asked why Olikoye would claim his own brother died of AIDS when he hadn't, Marlboro replies, "Nigerians will do anything because of money, even sell our mother and father.

Olikoye was paid off, people say, by the World Bank or the Americans.

It's also common to hear blanket dismissals of Western medicine. A bus conductor, who loved Fela's music and went to his funeral, is sure Feladidn't die of AIDS "because the man took care of himself. He used traditional, tribal ways." Does he believe AIDS is real? "I'm hearing this, but I don't believe it." A
used traditional, tribal ways. "Does he believe AIDS is real? "I'm hearing this, but I don't believe it." A teenager, dressed in his school uniform, interjects to say he's read a pamphlet saying that AIDS was invented by the Americans because they want to dominate the world.

Some people, including Fela's daughter, think the government should have used her father's death to launch an AIDS program. But others think that would have backfired. "If the government had tried using Fela, there would have been trouble," says NYAP's Effiong. She thinks it would only have hardened the refusal to believe that AIDS is real.

- AIDS came very late to Nigeria. The first case was reported in 1986, four years after the disease was first identified in Africa, and even then, study after study showed the virus was not widespread. While this gave Nigeria time, it also played into the hands of those who denied the existence or gravity of AIDS, because almost nobody was dying. Even now, those who are reaching the last stages of the disease were infected six to 10 years ago, so they are relatively few-unlike malaria, a clear and present killer. So activists such as Nwashili of STOPAIDS have toiled at "trying to make people believe there is AIDS when there is no AIDS."

There are signs of hope. Nigeria's new president may have a checkered past, but he has almost tripled the AIDS Programme budget, committed his government to dealing with the epidemic-something his corrupt predecessors failed to do-and called in international assistance. Olikoye supported the new president's election (even though his police raided Fela's home in 1977 and inflicted injuries that killed their mother) because Obasanjo "has a wicked streak, which we need in Nigeria." Olikoye is also leading an energetic advocacy effort. And at the Iddo motor park, a vast and crowded bustling truck stop, STOPAIDS peer educator Robert Eselojor is optimistic. "Now the drivers aren't taking women, or they are using condoms."

But that's not how the younger guys hanging out at the motor park tell it. To the hearty laughter of everyone around, a burly driver says he doesn't wear condoms because "if I put it on, my prick can't rise." Another man in the group blames AIDS on "irresponsible girls" and waves his arm in the direction of the brothels. "The only risk is around them," he insists. "A responsible woman cannot get AIDS."

At the base of the Carter Bridge in the crowded, crime-ridden Idumota area, a group of women hawks petty merchandise-cigarettes, soap, fruit. Do their partners use condoms? They just laugh. "My husband," says one, "can't use a condom because he's not a eunuch." Do their husbands have girlfriends on the side? "Two that I know of," answers the first. "My husband is very religious so he has none," says a third woman, wearing a headscarf. "But," she adds, "my boyfriend has had up to 30 other girls."

At the pink-painted Royal Crown Hotel, a sex worker who gives her name as Tina, says many johns offer extra money for unsheathed sex. Trained as a peer educator by the Lagos chapter of the Society of Women against AIDS in Africa, Tina insists she doesn't accept those offers. But, she adds, "I can't lie. Some of the girls, especially the younger ones, if they see 1000 naira, they can't leave it." So how many sex workers use a condom every time? Among the older ones, estimates Tina, six out of 10. But among the younger ones, only two or three out of 10.

Fela wouldn't have solved Nigeria's AIDS problem. But like the Congo's wildly popular Franco Luambo or Uganda's Philly Lutaya, both of whom recorded songs warning about AIDS shortly before the disease killed them, Fela could have made every Nigerian feel that they knew someone with HIV, thus bypassing the process of waiting for the death toll to scare people into taking precautions. As it is, Olikoye believes his brother symbolizes Nigeria's denial and, he says, "I don't know how we will get over the barrier of convincing people that HIV is real."

Over in the Lagos slum of Makoko, where fishing people have constructed a watery shantytown on stilts, 21-year-old Frank Ogbonnaya says he's slept with four women over the last year, and while he maintains that he usually uses condoms with his casual partners, he never uses them with his steady girlfriend. AIDS, he says, just isn't a big concern. Does he know anyone with the disease? "I don't know anyone," he replies, "unless you count Fela. And I don't believe Fela died of AIDS."

Research assistance: Reetpaul Rana, Jason Schwartzberg

© 1999, The Village Voice

Index for: International Reporting 2000