

Femi Kuti: “Africa should focus on real education, not what we are learning today”

He seems to follow in the footsteps of his father, the late Fela Kuti. “Of course, my father is a big inspiration for me. Whether I like it or not, he is my father,” Femi Kuti tells The Post in this exclusive interview. Femi talks tough too. His music is cool but imbued with lines that betoken commitment to change in Africa.

According to him, Africans are suffering today because **“all our leaders have, all over the years, set bad examples.”** To him, the way out of Africa’s present predicament is for Africans to see themselves first as Africans. The artist also talks about his music and lots more. Simon INOU spoke with Femi Kuti in Vienna in 2005 before a concert he gave at Szene Wien, in Vienna.

Excerpts:

Musically, where do you situate yourself? Is your rhythm a continuation of Afrobeat, the rhythm of your father, the late Fela Kuti?

Of course, my father is a big inspiration for me. Whether I like it or not, he is my father. By the way, I don’t understand that question! You are asking me about my father! Would you rather like me to be like Obasanjo? Or like Mugabe? Whether I like it or not, you must see my father in me. Whether I like it or not I must sound like him, dance like him, and, sometimes, sing like him. I say “sometimes” – not all the time – because, as you can see, I am Femi...

The music of Fela Kuti was politically engaged....

In my father's lifetime, when they used to beat him, nobody did anything. About being politically engaged, all of us feel sorry when a person is suffering. But, when the person dies, all of us celebrate. I am politically engaged but very enlightened! When I am beaten and arrested, all of you cry. After his beatings, I was there with him. No one else was there. His name grew bigger and bigger but he was still gone beaten. I understand how you feel about my father but don't forget that you are speaking to his son, Femi.

Lots of people are actually speaking about globalization. How can Africa help itself – culturally, politically and socially- and get out of problems she is facing?

Musically, Africa is doing a lot; there are a lot of Africans working in big corporate bodies; we have nice musicians. We should start thinking about Africa first before our personal game and Africa will start getting better.

The more concerned we are, the more we are going to start thinking about our own society, the more we are not going to wait for Europe to come and tell us about our own problems, the more we Africans should understand that we have problems: hungry, fatherless, and motherless children.

How could music help us today by giving Africa its brightness?

Music is already doing this. Perhaps you didn't realize it. If you were used to listening to the music of my father, you would agree that it helped a lot. What music does is even beyond me.

If you are interviewing me now, it is not because I am Femi Anikulapo Kuti, it's because I have something to offer. If you are here today, it's because you know that the music of my father has also changed a lot about the situation of many Africans... if you are sitting here today and talking to me, it means music is doing a lot.

Most Africans living on the continent are young and are actually facing serious problems the generation before them never faced. A lot of them are dreaming of their future in Europe or the USA. What is your view about this migration?

This is because all our leaders have, all over the years, set bad examples. When the people were suffering and constructing a political base for Africa (Kwame Nkrumah or Lumumba with Pan-Africanism), at the same time, lots of our leaders were dreaming only of Europe and America as their ideals. These continents were the models of those African leaders without a political base in their own countries.

Is the way European countries are trying to help Africa the best way?

Africa should learn how to help itself. Speaking about help, do you see how America is actually helping Iraq? Is it good help? Killing them and sending medicine to them, is that good help? We have to help ourselves. Europe helps itself.

They even got help from Africa by enslaving Africans. If they didn't take us as slaves, they wouldn't be where they are today. History is why we are sitting here today. When we appreciate history, we begin to move forward. Africans should appreciate what their forefathers went through during the Slave Trade. Let us not abuse ourselves by saying that we sold ourselves.

What about the education Africans receive?

I once asked a European whether they learn about Mungo Park in school? He told me he knew nothing about Mungo Park. In Africa, we're taught that Mungo Park discovered the Niger River. Somehow, the way we behave arises from the education we get.

Who is controlling that education?

Someone is controlling the education we get in the schools, fooling the one side and deceiving another side. When we meet our European friends around the corner, we have different ideas about our countries because we are confused.

What advice would you give to Africans in the Diaspora who would like to support Africa?

Keep yourselves in the professions and work hard with one idea: you are here to fight. I am based in Lagos and when I will leave Lagos, it will be only to come here and fight. Because, I am sure, I'll be able to change the views of many people on certain things. For me, in Lagos, as elsewhere on this earth, it is not easy to fight.

Can you describe the living conditions prevailing in your Lagos neighbourhood? What about democracy in Nigeria?

To wake up every morning is difficult. Sometimes, you don't want to wake up. Some of the inhabitants of my neighbourhood are so poor that they do not eat for two days. In short, life is difficult. It should be the goal of every nation to eradicate people's sorrows. That's the duty of governments. Government is not just about a nation, it's also about how to govern yourself and how to lead yourself as a person. When this kind of education will start being taught in schools, the world will be a better place. It does not require more than that.

Back to Lagos: In Lagos, there are many places without electricity and, this, after 40 years of independence! In Lagos, you could be sitting down and the light just goes off! How can you talk to those kinds of people about AIDS? Have you seen the way we live in Lagos? Ten people in a room – living like cattle. Have you seen the prisons in Africa?

Africa is neither a city nor a village. There are just too many dissatisfied people. Look at villages in Europe. Compare

them with those in Africa. You are here, in Europe, because you know that if you were in Africa, you could never achieve what you want to achieve.

"When we will start to appreciate ourselves, Africa and Africans will be better."

femi Kuti

You can never actually fulfil your dreams in Africa. They will lock you up as soon as the government knows you want to liberate your mind and express your views, like in many European countries. When colonial masters divided Africa in 1884, they knew what they were doing. Do you think it was for Africa they were playing this game? It was for them... You can see it in Zimbabwe and Congo. If the Europeans supported Mugabe and Mobutu for so many years and, then, tell us afterwards that they are bad because they were not playing their game any more, they want to come and tell me that they didn't know it was bad for thirty years? Taking land from the white farmers was bad... Europeans are enlightening themselves; they are not enlightening us. When we will start to appreciate ourselves, Africa and Africans will be better. Africa has to unite if she wants to resolve its problems. The whole world is uniting.

Why not Africa?

We want the kind of Africa where every human being is given a chance to express himself freely, to express his will, his desires, the notion of freedom. But not the US brand of freedom. American freedom and justice consist in going and killing people in the name of freedom... So, this is not the kind of freedom we want.

Does Femi Kuti have projects in Africa, specifically in Nigeria?

My whole life, my dear brother, revolves for the total independence of the African mind – women, men or children of the whole continent. Everything I live for is based on that. My death will be about that. I have lived it through my father. My son will live it and his children will live it. It is our goal to rebuild Africa, to build, for example, hospitals with our own traditional medicines, our own way of life, our own health and our culture. We have to start to appreciate ourselves. We, Africans, were taken as slaves and didn't even appreciate it. Millions of Africans died during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. We appreciate when we see what happened to the Jews because there is footage. Concerning African slavery, there is no footage. During the Second World War, people had the possibility to film the situation in Nazi camps. Even if you see the footage today, you say yeeeeeeee ...you have to fear. Imagine that millions of Africans went through that over 500 hundreds years ago. Let us Africans appreciate our forefathers who died during the slavery, fighting against the slave masters to live as human beings. Maybe we should start to see some appreciation in this life, and that's what I do.

There are too many poor children in Africa. I don't need Europe to come and tell me there are poor people in Africa. Our TV channels don't tell us about it. They are still working with colonial views and perspectives on their own population. They are only doing what their colonial masters tell them to do. When we see a white going to Africa and showing a black child, we blacks will say: Ohhhhhhhhhh! Why don't black people do the same? Do we need a white man to come and show us African realities? We don't need that. Malaria is killing millions of people. Every day, I hear about big donations and the more donations, the poorer we get. How can you understand this kind of mathematics? The biggest scandal was Ethiopia in the 90s. Aid for Ethiopia.

I know that there are a lot of Europeans who would like

truthfully to invest in Africa. But it depends on Africans to organize their societies. I am not waiting for some government to do that. In my position, I know I am a public servant. In Africa, we just talk and talk and talk without end. If Africa is great today it's because of what great musicians have done; great thinkers like my father, Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba and many others. Even Charly Parker or Coltrane are Africans who have changed the face of the world.

What should Africa focus on, to truly liberate itself ?

My brother, we have all kinds of resources, and we are not able to organize them...we want only to live like white men do on TV – like watching young Americans with big cars, and we dream only about that without thinking about the work or the suffering that it entails.

Frankly, Africa should focus on education if she would like to be something tomorrow. And I mean real education, not what we are learning today.

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