

1> **Bisi Silva:** Your career has been burgeoning internationally over the last seven years but this will be your second exhibition in Nigeria. Why has it taken so long and what is the impetus now?

**Ghariokwu Lemi:** Yes, my first exhibition was over six years ago in 2001 at the Alliance Francaise and that was after drawing covers for 27 years. I guess it is my destiny and the way things have turned out, but now the situation is changing. I have made up my mind about focusing on developing my Fine Arts career for the rest of my life. I would like to be in a position to take advantage of the opportunities for my work to be seen in Nigeria and in other African countries.



2> **B.S:** You became a member of Fela's team and his inner circle at a young age. What precipitated this direction?

**G.L:** I always say that I believe in pre-destination. I believe that it was pre-ordained that I met Fela at that particular point in my life and in his music career and especially for the role of the union of Music and Art as a weapon for social and political re-awakening of the African man. I believe that it is a movement for the future of this continent, and I am ready to play more of a role now.

As a young man of aged 19 I didn't realise this, but I synchronized and Fela gave me the freedom to play out my dream and vision on the canvas of his music. It was a wonderful experience. You can't find anywhere in the world where the artist puts his picture and comments side by side with the lyrics and liner notes on a record sleeve. Only FELA and LEMI did that.



3> **B.S:** The first album cover you created for Fela was "Alagbon Close" in 1974. What was the genesis of what would become a working relationship and friendship that would last nearly two decades.

**G.L:** In 1974, two major events decided my professional destiny. The release of Bruce Lee's film, "Enter The Dragon" and the release of Fela's "Roforofo Fight – The Music Of Fela" album. "Enter The Dragon" was a blockbuster movie worldwide, including Nigeria. I used to do commissioned portraits then, but the owner of a beer parlour next door requested I do a poster painting of Bruce Lee, John Saxon and Jim Kelly - the 3 main actors of the movie - for his bar. On the other hand, after studying closely Fela's "Roforofo Fight" cover, which was predominantly photo based, I decided to do an illustration based on the title of the album. I was a self-taught artist and my influences were diverse. I used to give myself assignments to do as a way of experimenting and developing my art practice.

Shortly thereafter, Babatunde Harrison, a journalist with Sunday Punch who saw the Bruce Lee painting requested to meet me. I showed him my portfolio, he inquired as to what I did album covers when he saw my version of "Roforofo Fight". I hesitantly answered affirmative. He asked me to do a portrait of Fela as a test. He approved of the design and consequently took me to Fela for a meeting that was predestined. A few weeks later, Fela's house was raided by the police and the aftermath was the composition of "Alagbon Close". In November 1974, a new dynasty of Album Covers was born in Nigeria.

4> **B.S:** Fela's music is an incisive portrayal of a nation deviating from the ideals of the founding fathers. The lyrics sing out against social injustice, violation of human rights, corruption, bad governance and "colo-mentality" amongst many other social and cultural issues. What were the challenges of articulating some of his powerful messages in a visual format without losing the fundamental essence of the message.

**G.L:** I guess it's better to say that it came almost naturally to me. I was born a conscious pan-African in thought. Long before I met Fela, I was on the same road he trod in my own little way. So whenever Fela said HA! with his music I knew where he was coming from - and could already see where he was going - I would just say HA-BA! with my drawing. It was challenging at such a young age to brave the odds, expressing oneself without fear or favour. I am not as radical as Fela by nature but more the cool type. My Art did not literally translate his lyrics but served as a megaphone to express it further in a slight variant serving a supplementary role rather than being just complimentary.

5> **B.S:** Fela had other talented designers working with him but you were able to develop a distinct style that not only projected but embodied the philosophy behind the music.

**G.L:** Yes indeed... it was my role in the movement, I laid the foundation and built on it when I stepped aside. My destiny with Fela must be fulfilled. I was one of the very few that worked with Fela without being in his employ. Despite our age difference, he treated me like his own son, friend and colleague. I was in his ideological fold of advisers and would travel with him in his personal Range Rover despite the fact he had a convoy of 14 cars! Fela really appreciated my contributions.



6> **B.S:** You have been creating covers for over three decades and in the process built up a flourishing and respected graphic design and printing business specialising in the music industry in Nigeria. You have designed album covers for younger musicians such as Eedris Abdulkareem whose music is a form of social commentary. In fact with "Nigeria Jaga Jaga", former President Obasanjo was not too happy with the lyrics and even made a public reply that was not too polite. I presume that in a "democracy" the kind of brutality that Fela was subjected to in the past by Obasanjo and other military dictators would seem unacceptable to the populace today. How was the process for realizing that Album Cover?

**G.L:** I was out of the country when the song was recorded but on seeing the video, I was pleasantly surprised that a new generation art could sing such social commentary and I felt immediately in sync to illustrate the cover. I called Kenny Ogungebe of Kennis Music and told him I was going to do my cover Art on Eedris. He agreed, because my printing company designs and prints for his record label. I designed "Jaga Jaga" as a way to re-introduce my Cover Art style to the new generation of artists on the music scene.

Were you surprised President Obasanjo reacted negatively? Are you still surprised Naija still dey as e dey after almost 50 years of mickey mouse in-dependence?... some human beings dey shun truth wellu- wellu o <sup>1</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> This is pidgin English. To translate into French here is the "proper" English Translation. Are you surprised Nigeria is still the way it is today after almost 50 years of mickey mouse in-dependence (playing on the work "in" and "dependence") Some people prefer to avoid hearing the truth.

7> **B.S:** What do you think Fela would be singing about if he was still with us today?

**G.L:** MADNESS JUNCTION!! The title of one of my artworks answers that question. It is in this exhibition. It's like the same day, same job and same yama-yama? Who wan do dat forever? That is why he has moved on to join our ancestors! <sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It is like the same day, same job and same rubbish. Who wants wants to do that forever?



# Fela Ghariokwu Lemi and the Art of the Album Cover

Fela was perhaps the most visibly political in his personal life, the one who went most against the grain, the one who lived closest to the edge, who suffered incarceration and physical assault at the hands of the state and was charged with treason for none other than the content of his art, yet returned time and again more resolute and defiant. It was he, also, who lived in the most treacherous times in a most treacherous nation, he who could least count on his country for the liberties and protection that others at least had enshrined in their national statutes. *Olu Oguibe* <sup>1</sup>.

In 2007 Nigerians commemorated 10 years of the death of one of Africa's leading cultural icons, Afro-beat musician Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. Fela, Ghariokwu Lemi and The Art of the Album Cover, begins the four part inaugural exhibition of the Democracy project of the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos in an apt tribute to an uncompromising artist, a creative innovator, and a human rights activist. Lemi presents over 20 of his highly graphic sardonic album cover art designed for Fela and more recent drawings which continue to engage with social and political issues which affect Nigeria. His garish cartoon-like illustrations for a new generation of musicians such as Eedris Abdulkareem and Daddy Showkey continue the biting criticism of the despondency inflicted on the nation by one insensitive government after another parading under the disguise of democracy.

In April 2007 the elections held were a milestone in the political history of Nigeria. The nation witnessed the successful transition from one democratic government to another. Whilst the electoral process was severely flawed and continues to be challenged, it nonetheless signals the nascent but precarious journey towards democracy. But what do we really understand by this ideology called democracy and what kind of democracy is appropriate within the Nigerian context? Starting from a broad perspective of the notion of Democracy these issues underpin the conceptual framework for the Democracy project.

## Ghariokwu Lemi

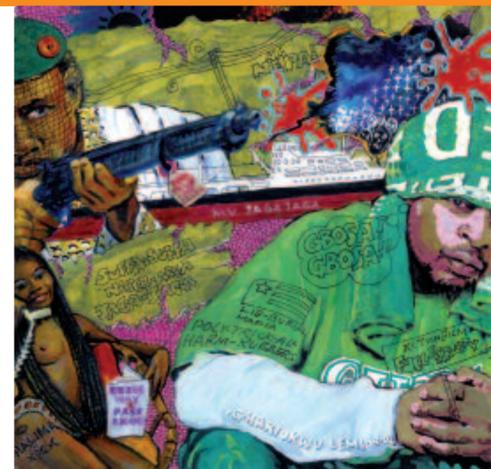
Ghariokwu Lemi is a Graphic/Fine Artist, Cover Designer and Illustrator. He is internationally known for his cover illustrations Afro-Beat musician ; Fela Anikulapo Kuti, for whom he created 26 Album Covers. Lemi's art is rebellious and comical incorporating social commentary, political cartooning and sometimes graffiti.

A pioneer in his field, Lemi was the recipient of the Nigeria Music Awards 1988, Best Sleeve Album designer 1989 and Nigerian Fame music award 1992. In July 2003, he participated in "Black President: The Art and The Legacy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti" at the New Museum, New York. He has exhibited recently in Europe and America and will feature in the publication "Area 2", 100 emerging graphic artists in the world by Phaidon Press New York in spring 2008.

Three Nigerian contemporary artists Ghariokwu Lemi, Ndid Dike and George Osodi explore the abuse and denial of the democratic process through a diversity of themes such as social injustice, bad governance, mental and physical slavery, poverty, environmental degradation using divergent media ; illustration, cover art, sculptural installation and photography. In the second exhibition, Dike's evolving artistic direction with sculptural installation delves into the historical past of slavery to highlight contemporary forms of human trafficking and bondage, whilst in the last part of the curatorial trilogy Osodi presents his powerful, vivid photographic images which highlight the inhumanity of the situation in the highly volatile oil rich Niger Delta region. Democracy - three solo exhibitions and a publication - like Fela's music is a timeless reminder of the way in which the rights of the common man is abrogated, the mandate of the people denied and the hopes for a better future robbed.

Bisi Silva

<sup>1</sup> Olu Oguibe, "Power of Song" in Black President: The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 2003, p27



## Fela, Ghariokwu Lemi and The Art of the Album Cover

8 December 2007 – 20 January 2008

Curator: Bisi Silva.

A DEMOCRACY Project: 3 solo exhibitions and a publication. Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos

The Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos (CCA,Lagos) is a independent, non profit making visual arts organisation. It aims to provide a platform for the development, presentation, and discussion of contemporary visual art and culture through a diverse programme of exhibitions, workshops, talks, seminars, performances and film screenings. CCA, Lagos focuses on new media and experimental visual art practice such as photography, animation, film and video, performance art and new forms of sculpture which have been under-presented in contemporary Nigerian artistic practice. CCA, Lagos works primarily from Nigeria and the West African Region in addition to collaborating with other African and international organisations, artists and curators.

### Acknowledgment:

D' M.A Silva, Mrs G. Rosiji, Bruce Onabrakpeya, Rasheed Gbadamosi, Ben Murray-Bruce, Iria Ojeikere, Ufuoma Akpokabayen, Raquib Bashorun, Jide Bello.

Design: Fabrice Lecouffe, witgraphicdesign.blogspot.com / Printed in Nigeria.

With Support from: Picture Works / Framemasters / Silverbird Group