

## **Aki Gbe'Na Wo Oni Bembe Oru: Religion, Nightlife, and the Roots of Fuji (Posted on Facebook on 5/19/2020)**

Yoruba-Islam gave us Fuji, a major cultural achievement of the Yoruba. Ajiwere/ajisari, the precursor of Fuji is a nightly performance that takes place during Ramadan. It gave early practitioners of Fuji the materials, space, and social and religious networks to showcase their talent. Yet, the religious origin of secular music is not unique to Fuji. If Christianity gave us I.K Dairo, Sango gifted us Ayoka Foyeke Ajangila, a musical heroine who toured Europe with Hubert Ogunde in 1979 and released a beautiful album (Olorun ni s'Omo) to commemorate the safe delivery of her first child.

The change from religious to secular music took place through the transformation of African musical instruments from ritual to worldly objects. This process can also be called "secularization of sound, instruments, and auditory meaning." Thus, fans and artists of contemporary music (such as Fuji, hip hop, Afrobeat, Juju, Ogene, etc) should not disrespect African spiritualities, the foundation of their musical muse.

The emergence of Fuji did not totally kill the ajiwere/ajisari tradition. Some weeks ago, I interviewed one of the best known ajisari groups today-- Alhaji Taiwo and Kehinde Oni Bembe Oru. Born in 1957, the Oni Bembe Oru twins recorded their first ajisari album, appropriately titled "Bismillahi," in 1980. The album is a beautiful oral art that borrows extensively from a repertoire of Yoruba and Islamic materials. Like other Yoruba artists, the Oni Bembe Oru's career has been sustained by a patronage tradition, rooted in Islamic and Yoruba cultures. They still perform for Yoruba-Muslims who appreciate their talents with gifts, including band buses and multiple trips to Mecca.

In a show of respect for the ajiwere foundation of his fame, Fuji pioneer Sikiru Ayinde Barrister (SAB) recorded his 1989 album (Current Affairs) with the Oni Bembe Oru twins. The album, which celebrates his title of "Seriki Nwaka Kano" conferred by Emir Ado Bayero of Kano for the religious teachings of his songs, further affirms the Islamic genealogy/root of Fuji. Anyone familiar with the politics of Islam in Nigeria would easily understand why a chieftaincy title on music and Islamic pedagogy conferred by a northern emir was important for SAB, a Yoruba-Muslim, in the 1980s.

What is more, the album celebrates famous women patrons like Magajiya Aweni Rabiātu Adebisi Idikan who facilitated the chieftaincy title for SAB. Aweni Rabiātu was a wealthy Yoruba merchant who lived in Kano and did many great things. She "repaired," "honored," or "beautified" her mother's home-- a role that 20th century people would assign exclusively to men. If people think you are weak and unimpressive because you are a woman, let them enjoy SAB's praise of Aweni Rabiātu as he transitions from Fuji to bembe tune, supplied by the Oni Bembe Oru twins (From 28:20) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CIXTwwBL4Q&t=820s>)





