

All Politics is Local: Gender, Social Media, and Political Fuji in Nigeria (Posted on Facebook on September 25, 2021)

Earlier this week, a faction of the Peoples Democratic Party "expelled" Governor Seyi Makinde of Oyo State from their party. Careful observers of politics in the state are not surprised about this development. Governor Makinde had a fallout with his political godfather, Alhaji Adebisi Olopoeniyan who is equally a first-rate grassroots political mobilizer. I didn't understand the real meaning of the popular saying that "All Politics is Local" beyond what the books taught me until July 20 when I conducted research at the home of Olopoeniyan. Although the event was branded "Parti Ileya/Ileya Party" because it happened a day after Eid, it was essentially a political rally. One at a time, aspirants into elective offices in Oyo State arrived to pay homage to their political godfather.

Of all the hundreds of voices present at the event, one was the loudest—that of Fuji star Besco Azeez Adisa. With over 30 microphones amplifying beats from percussionists, Besco Azeez and his band unleashed head-swelling songs in praise of the political aspirants and Olopoeniyan, a man who lives true to the meaning of his name. But Besco Azeez's power went beyond monopolizing the loudest voice in the crowd. He had the poetic license and authority to perform outside the convention of his art, act as oral proxy of politicians in exaggerating their influence, while also enumerating the potential gains of election victory! Besco Azeez's poetic license is not a postcolonial innovation. Ancient tradition empowered musicians and poets to express political ideas, with sarcasm and innuendos, and escape persecution. Thus, music and politics have been inseparable from time immemorial.

Besco Azeez didn't monopolize Fuji artistry—he received help from women who were all members of the Olopoeniyan Ladies Club, one of the grassroots formations through which the strongman exerts power. Not only were they initiating some of the political songs, they also served as unpaid backup singers, complementing the predominantly male Fuji band with sonorous feminine voices. But the women's presence at the party transcends the spectacle of merry-making. The modern Nigerian state, like its colonial precursor, is idealized as a female. Women have always been seen as political brides to be wooed to vote for men who then control the economic wealth of the state. In theory, power belongs to women who vote for men, but in reality, men themselves are the state.

Historically, African women have always been politically conscious. But the current political consciousness is driven by a uniquely 21st century poverty, not by ideology--no thanks to the mismanagement of the nation's wealth by men. The intensification of poverty among market women increased reliance on informal loan systems such as the infamous "K'omu le lanta." Literally translated as "to rest the breast on a (hot) lantern," —a distinctively gendered metaphor for the hardship of repayment of loan-- the real origin of "K'omu le lanta" dates to the colonial court system where people gave testimonies inside a court lectern, usually a wooden furniture. In short, whether the breast is resting on a court lectern or a hot lantern, the consequences of loan default intensifies feminized poverty, thus making market women's political participation for immediate financial gain, inevitable.

This brings me to the assumption that public opinions expressed on the Internet have direct implication on election results in Nigeria. All politics is local; and the true political reality of most societies is determined by grassroots situation, not digital humans who would nag about political failure on the Internet, but would never show up on election day to vote. Digital political participation has limited consequences for political outcomes that are decided by deep-rooted structures operating through family compounds, trade unions and guilds, markets women, artisanal

networks, and are executed by real on-the-ground people who would queue for hours to vote, against all odds. Guys who control these structures, not a social media influencer, decide outcomes of elections. Social media is definitely powerful in the idealization of reality in some publics; but not in the grassroot political public.

On election day, Iya Kudi Eleba, who uses a “tan na s’obe,” not an android phone, will not take order from Tunde Ednut, but from the local representative of a political party, aka the “Women Leader” who paid 500 naira for her sick child’s chloroquine, attended Kudi, her daughter’s “hair dresser freedom,” and gave her a good aware connection to enhance her kolubo-kolobe business. While money is important for politics in Nigeria, social capital and the structures to share it are importanter. The aggressive attempt to market smart phones and Apps to market women disturbs the idea of “democratized” digital spaces. “Google, Ofe. Facebook, Ofe. Instagram, Ofe. Won ja’wo re ni ja ku ja. Mu phone e wa, a obo se!”

Yours Sincerely in Fuji:

Emperor Saedo Okola and His International Fuji Lions