

Before Cubana: Performative Elitism, Nightlife, and Popular Culture in Nigeria (Posted on Facebook on July 17, 2021)

The incredible display of wealth at the funeral of the mother of Obi Iyiegbu, owner of Cubana Nightclub, is among the most sensational social media developments this week. Obi Cubana, as Obi Iyiegbu is informally called, mobilized insanely rich Nigerians to contribute to the “most expensive” funeral of 21st century Nigeria. The spectacle of honoring the dead began with the donation of 46 cows by another nightclub owner, Cubana Chief Priest. The visuals of the arrival of the animals is a reminder of how non-human creatures have historically been used to frame a unique image of progress and performative elitism. Most of the financiers or “bankrollers” of the funeral were also patrons of Cubana Nightclub. Their list is as diverse as their source of wealth.

Many have wondered how a nightclub owner was able to mobilize billions of naira for a private event. History has some answers. In 1996, socialite Ken Olumesi completed his multi-million naira club named Nightshift Coliseum in Ikeja, Lagos. Nicknamed “Mecca of Entertainment,” and voted as Nigeria’s most beautiful nightclub, the clients of Nightshift Coliseum included famous footballers, entertainers, military officers, and clean money businessmen and their 419 counterparts. A symbol of wealth, class, and status, Nightshift Coliseum was a badge of honor for most of the elites of the period. It was a rite of passage for old and young monies. Indeed, the eclipse of stardom for many artists was incomplete without playing at the Nightshift Coliseum.

Donors to Obi Cubana’s private event thought they were giving back to the man who created a space for them to hang-out with people of certain class and status, expand the coast of their wealth, and indulge in unrestrained socio-sexual behavior. The political-economy of night clubs as spaces where business deals are sealed and connections for upward socio-economic mobility are established exist side-by-side with superfluous consumption of nudity, sexualized visualities, and the patronage of expressive and popular culture.

It is easy to conclude that nightclubs are unsavory spaces where economic criminals squander their ill-gotten wealth and where men get a mojo for their malfunctioning poron. If we expand the social meaning and etymology of nightclubs to diverse locations—including the moderately-managed Iya Lola Cool Spot located inside central Akure Motor Park where artisans and transporters retire after the toil of the day to download Trophy beer, we shall get a non-elitist, broader and nuanced perspective on the intersections of nightlife and popular culture. Without the numerous brothels, which also operate as bona fide nightclubs, in Sabon gari across Kaduna and Kano, many young artists wouldn’t have a space to exhibit their talents. The so-called beer parlors, where budding Fuji artists test-run their talent, have historically operated as nightclubs. The thin line between legitimate promotion of “good” art and superfluous commodification of the body is blurred in spaces that curate spectacle for a living, no doubt. But the construction of nightclubs as elite spaces disrespect the sociality of existence of millions of people and countless of social locations that offer similar services as Cubana Nightclub across Nigeria.

Curators of nocturnal life, regardless of their class, gender, and location, have always had access to the vault of their clients. Hence, there is nothing really spectacular or new about the feast of wealth at Obi Cubana mother’s burial. Meanwhile, in a couple of days, K1 will open his night club! He will join the long list of artists, like highlife star Bobby Benson, who operated nightclubs after retirement. Barrister was only 34 years old when he dreamt of operating a hotel and night club after retirement. Shortly after resolving their legal battle in 1982, he told Olabisi Ajala, Nigeria’s most famous globe-

trotter that “After retiring from music, I want to be a hotelier...I have been proposing to have two acres of land to build a hotel in the heart of Lagos. It will be known as Motel de Barrister.”

Yours Sincerely in Fuji,
Emperor Saedo Okola and His International Fuji Lions