

Before Soapy: Moral Politics and the Evolution of Fuji Dances (Posted on Facebook on January 21, 2021)

When Naira Marley, the President of Marlian Nation, Nigeria's most popular youth counterculture, released Soapy song and dance in 2019, many critics cried to the holy heavens! Kaffy, a famous choreography and dancer, rebukes Soapy as “immoral” and “disgusting” insisting that she “can’t take this in the history of Naija dance.” Soapy performs the imagined or real experience of an incarcerated male by mimicking masturbation. Marley (29) did not let Kaffy (40) get away with her critique. “You can’t dance, and I’m not even sure if you are a boy or a girl...Our generation is different from yours,” Marley mobilizes queer stereotypes to position himself as the boss in the unending dance authenticity contest.

What fascinates me about the Soapy controversy is the assumption that framing a dance step as “immoral” is unique to the current generation. Throughout eras, gatekeepers of morality have found some dance moves problematic. At the center of dance politics is the argument that certain parts of the human body should never be put into motion while dancing. In 1944, an educated elite woman in Lagos was appalled by how young girls danced to Apala, which she claimed “was sufficient to send girls of low morals crazy.... They would then start turning, twisting, rolling and rocking to all forms of disgraceful contortions.” Apala she argued was “opposed to the pristine delicacy and grace associated with womanhood.” Dance morality debates have always been shaped by conflicting notions of respectable gendered bodies, childhood innocence, normative heterosexuality, and the idea that bodily motion reflects human’s personality.

Yet, the politics of morality should not overshadow how dance shaped popular culture. Very early in the history of Fuji musical videos, artists discovered they can promote their songs with a dance manual. So, Barrister’s Fuji Garbage (1988) is a shoulder dance. In Kollington’s “Ijo Yoyo” (1990), fans are taught to flip their hands, diagonally. Obesere’s “Introduction” (1991) is the mother of Zanku legwork! Many kids who tried it received appointment at the orthopedic hospital! Pasuma’s fist throwing dance reproduces the everyday life in the street and motor parks where fighting seems inevitable. Bouncing and dodging blows (or “Always Guarding”) became a metaphor for alertness! Some dance steps came through the globalization of Fuji. Hence, K1’s “American Tips” (1991) introduced his Nigerian fans to American Soul Train! Class and age also shaped dance politics. When K1 introduced “Classical Fuji” in the late-1980s, some elderly people accused him of playing “Palongo,” stereotyped as rhythm-less dance to fast tempo beat.

However, something incredible happened in the late 1990s when Danku, the father of Soapy, surfaced. Unlike most dance steps invented by artists, this move was popularized by K1’s notable fan, Danku Baba Imole (Femi Lekuti), who died in 2017. Why would a guy pretend to be dancing with one of the symbols of his biological masculinity? Without further ado, please enjoy Danku, from Danku himself!

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