

Digital Fuji: The Musical Soundscape of Lagos in Historical Perspective (Posted on Facebook on November 27, 2021)

I presented a paper on Digital Fuji at a conference on Digital Humanities of Lagos organized by the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA-Nigeria) in Lagos on Tuesday, November 23. I'm sharing parts of the paper here:

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On October 12, 2021, I attended an online entertainment show hosted in London from the comfort of my home in North Carolina. The show featured Micky Adisa, a Lagos-based Fuji veteran who is making a comeback after many years of artistic invisibility. Few adult Yoruba who lived in the 1970s and 1980s would not remember Micky Adisa. In addition to being a truly brilliant composer and performer of spoken words, he was at the center of one of the biggest controversies in Yoruba popular culture history.

Exactly 40 years ago, his band of 15 members merged with another 19 who defected Sikiru Ayinde Barrister's band. If it was inconceivable that Barrister's "Fuji Londoners," the best Fuji band of the era would abandon their boss three years after they became the first Fuji band to play abroad; many didn't believe that a Fuji band could have 34 band "boys" and two leaders—Micky Adisa as the lead vocalist and Babatunde Oyadolu of Barrister's band as the lead percussionist. This merger seemed like a creative solution to the protracted tussle between the lead vocalist and the lead percussionist over band ownership, money, labor, and artistic visibility. The uncommon experiment did not last. After releasing two albums, the group collapsed like a pack of cards. Few years later, Micky Adisa reconciled with Barrister. They were happy with each other till Barrister passed-on in 2010.

On March 25, 2021, I was among about 20,000 digital humans who saw Fuji artist Abass Akande Obesere's live Instagram performance at the 60th birthday of Esther Aboderin (alias Esabod), a provocative Nigerian social media sensation, based in Ireland. The physical stage of the performance was mounted in Lagos, but the audience of this creative production was drawn from across the world. Improvising and creativity needed to enhance feeling of "realness" in a digital performance was inevitable. Instead of "spraying" real cash on stage, audience sprayed (digital/soft/e-cash)—not audio money! Fans and friends of the celebrant and artist sent money through payment apps and received head-swelling praises from Obesere, almost instantaneously. But there is more to the Obesere-Esabod Instagram birthday party than the necessity imposed by Covid-19 restriction. There is no period in Fuji history that more than 20,000 people gathered in a single virtual platform to enjoy music.

My first encounter with Micky Adisa was not at the October 12 online show, but in the beautiful prints of the "Lagos Weekend" entertainment magazine in 1980. On November 2, I met him in flesh when I interviewed him for my book and documentary projects at the recording studio of the Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos. Encountering and re-encountering Micky Adisa on three different temporalities and geo-political plains compelled me to think about how popular culture has responded to technological transformation. 10 years ago, it would be inconceivable that a "forgotten" Fuji artist, from the comfort of his home in Lagos, would sell his art, recount his past, and reconnect with his old fans, digitally. Micky Adisa couldn't have imagined that, with his cell phone, and without any "pressman" or newspaper, he would communicate with the wider world and receive the confidence to re-launch his musical career.

For a historian who likes to think seamlessly through eras, topics, and species, the digital era in Fuji history is important for mapping-out the transformation in how people socialize to enjoy music and express new notions of the self. Not only has it fractured “normative” notion of participatory performance, it challenges the parameters of encounter, time, moments, and space. In addition to the blasting of percussion sounds from massive speakers in public spaces, the radio, or live performances, the soundscape of Fuji now includes sound waves and motion pictures, traveling through fibre optics into phones of different capacity. Participatory performance that allows audience to actively engage with artists can now take place across thousands of miles and with the involvement of real humans manifesting in digital format. Digital humans and real humans of digital Fuji share a lot in common...

Appreciation:

By allowing us (me, Tolani and Busuyi) to stay in his house for five days while shooting in Lagos, Dr. Akeem Akinwale saved me at least 100k in hotel accommodation. Yet, the monetary value of his generosity is not as important as his over ten years of uncompromising friendship. I thank Dr. Sheyi Kehny and the Department of Creative Arts at the University of Lagos for letting me shoot my interview with Micky Adisa in their recording studio. Thanks to IFRA for inviting me to present at their conference. More importantly, I’m grateful to Micky Adisa for sharing his world of words and experience with me—free-of-charge.

Yours Sincerely in Fuji:

Emperor Saedo Okola and His International Fuji Lions

