

Digital Media and the Commoditization of Knowledge in the 21st Century (Posted on Facebook on January 8, 2023)

The photo on the first slide of my paper titled, “More than Sound and Lyrics: How Fuji Became an African Popular Culture,” presented at the American Historical Association Conference last Friday is that of Fujician Alhaji Sefiu Alao Adekunle. It’s a shot from my documentary on Fuji. It is easy for foreign media to interview Nigerian artists and politicians, without paying a dime, because of the importance placed on media prestige and digital virality of the interviews. Local researchers are either asked to pay ridiculous sums by artist managers or refused interviews, completely. The problems of African knowledge production are therefore not just the inadequate resources and the lackadaisical disposition of governments at all levels.

The new era of commoditization of interviews gives the wrong impression that everyone collecting oral information, regardless of the purpose, is a blogger, a YouTuber, or a digital content creator who would make millions of naira on it on social media. While this is not totally incorrect, the impact of the commodification of digital content on academic research is not receiving the right attention. Money-for-interview is not a recent phenomenon; paradoxically, digital content creation has added a depressing agony to an already perplexing situation.

The gravity of the money-for-interview problem varies from discipline to discipline. In Nigerian history, for instance, more and more Nigeria-based historians avoid the colonial period and prefer to work on the postcolonial era because of the high cost of securing archival materials. They think the postcolonial period is easy to research because of access to documents, mostly in the public domain. Unfortunately, most of these documents are not only qualitatively inadequate and are over-flogged, they only present a limited chance to critically research about a country that has refused to declassify its official documents since the 1960s. Digital divide is still a problem in global research on Africa. We are still countless of miles away from a true democratization of new media, especially for research purposes.

To worsen the matter, oral history projects which promise to help address the paucity of official archival records on postcolonial Nigerian history is under the threat of commoditization of information. This is in addition to the high cost of travel, hotel accommodation, and logistics in a country overrun by terrorists, among the spectrum of new and old criminals, and where money for research is as scarce as looking for a good commercial amala in Lagos!

How have I been dealing with this problem of commoditization of information? First, I don’t take no for an answer. I don’t feel embarrassed that I need to send multiple text messages, emails, and make countless phone calls to people who keep ignoring me because I refused to talk to them about monetary gains for granting an interview. And I don’t think my professional status, academic qualifications, American residency, gender, or ethnicity, among other common identifiers, entitle me to people’s stories. Rather, I’m just a perennial seeker of new knowledge, conducting archival and ethnographic research like a graduate student. Because I’m not a graduate student or a junior scholar who needs publication for promotion or must write their theses to graduate, I’m not under any time anxiety or urgency factor. This explains why I never give up, even on the most recalcitrant interviewee.

It is within this context that I would remain grateful to everyone who has facilitated my Fuji project. People who look beyond money to give me contacts, speak to me, and share their

stories. Artist managers like [Saheed Ojubanire](#), who made interviewing Alhaji Sefiu Adekunle, as easy as swallowing a koko-less amala. All artist managers are pimps; but the best of them, like Ojubanire, know when not to pimp their boss.

Photo Credit: [Isiani Mathias Chuks](#)

Yours Sincerely in History,
Isola Atoko waa gbowo nle