

Fuji in an American Classroom (Posted on Facebook on January 12, 2022)

I taught my first post-sabbatical class this week. It's going to be a difficult semester. I must decide whether to teach as Professor Saheed Aderinto or as Emperor Saedo Okola and His International Fuji Lions, or as both. This is because having spent a total of 11 months in Nigeria (within the past 21 months), conducting research, I now see Fuji in anything and in everything. As it turned out, there is a big difference between listening to music for entertainment, and studying it creatively, artistically, and for knowledge production.

This is the first “normal” class I'll be teaching since coronavirus pandemic broke out two years. I have either been teaching online or not teaching at all while on sabbatical. Although this course is a general history of Africa, I will start each class with a Fuji musical video. So on Tuesday, we saw Barrister's Fuji Garbage (1988)—one of the earliest Fuji musical videos. Since music is more than lyrics, sound, and entertainment, I intend to use the musical videos to launch deep conversations about such topics as colonialism, modernity, gender and sexuality, fashion, identity construction, diaspora and global Africanity, education, religion, urbanization, corruption and underdevelopment, and orality, among other topics the course would cover.

But more importantly, this experiment would prepare me to introduce a course on “Fuji: An African Popular Culture”—the first of its kind in any university in any part of the world. Materials for teaching a full-fledged Fuji class would come from popular/non-academic books and biographies written by Nigerian journalists. I have newspaper data that will be used as primary sources for critical analysis and thinking. My Facebook posts and video materials from my on-going documentary are potential materials. I will supplement all of them with some academic journal articles. Because I treat my students, not as empty vessels, but as reciprocal teachers, their contributions would help me improve on my book and documentary projects.

I teach what I write; I write what I teach. If I cannot teach my research to students in an effective manner, then I don't know it enough. If I cannot break down complex ideas into consumable format for 100-level students, then I shouldn't be doing research at all. It's that simple. I wrote all my books during regular academic session (August to May), not during summer breaks when I gather data, because I feel comfortable writing books while teaching, than during breaks. Teaching/speaking/talking fuels my writing and gives traction to my multiple professional obligations. I never applied for a sabbatical or seek research fellowship, until I started the Fuji project which require longer presence in Nigeria, because the three months of regular summer break (May to August) was enough to gather data for my previous books, which focused on the colonial era in Nigerian history.

Am I a good teacher? This is a difficult question for self-assessment. In 2018, I was finalist for the Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Award—the most prestigious teaching honor in my university. In 2020, I was nominated for the “Board of Governors Award for Excellence in Teaching”—the biggest teaching prize in all the 16 universities under the University of North Carolina system. While awards are good rewards for quality teaching, the transformative impact that teaching has on students is the most important prize for a teacher.

