

Gendering Fuji: Unmasking Pioneering Women Fuji Artists (Part I) (Posted on Facebook on 7/4/2020)

My research on Fuji took a turning point a week ago at the sound archive of Radio Nigeria in Ibadan. I discovered that two women (Alake Alasela and Mutiat Amope) produced Fuji albums in the 1970s when an unprecedented wealth from crude oil fueled art and popular culture in Nigeria. Today, we know almost nothing about these two women, not because they didn't do enough to be remembered, but because cultural memory and production of knowledge have continued to privilege male voices over women. Essentially, these women are contemporaries of Sikiru Ayinde Barrister and Kollington Ayinla. How and why did these women disappear from the pantheon of Fuji?

I have a moral and a self-imposed obligation, as a research scholar, to tell the stories of these women and to write their lives into the broader narrative of the musical empire they helped to build. Because none of the pioneers of Fuji started their career as Fuji artist, my first task is figuring out which genre the women played before venturing into Fuji. My preliminary guess would be Waka, Rara, or Pakenke, but I can't rely on assumption. To come to terms with this, I must listen to the women's music carefully, searching for non-Fuji style. I will then listen to popular genres like Waka, which women dominated. I pray to find these women, if they are still alive, or their relatives. The good news is that poet extraordinaire Olanrewaju Adepoju, under whose record label Alake Alasela shined, is still alive in Ibadan.

What makes a sound Fuji? Who has the right to name or categorize sound and expressive culture? The naming of musical genre is a political act moderated by artists, fans, record label owners, promoters, and even scholars. For instance, Queen Salawa Abeni's "Modern Waka" would easily pass for Fuji. Indeed, her most famous song "Gentle Lady" sounds exactly like Alake Alasela's Fuji. My proposition is that Salawa did not call her Modern Waka "Fuji" so as not to compete with Kollington, her first husband and Fuji pioneer. In an interview several years after her marriage collapsed, Salawa claimed that Kollington didn't want "Iya ilu" in her band because women should not be playing the biggest of the talking drum set. The politics of gender, artistic expression, and genre-making is fascinating!

Be that as it may, we know (from their songs) that early women Fuji artists fought to have their voice heard, artistically. A song in Alake Alasela's 1976 album bragged about the ability of women to sing Fuji, even better than men. Mutiat Amope in a 1986 album ranked herself third (only after Barrister and Kollington) in the hierarchy of Fuji. In 1985 she established her own record label (MUT Iganmode), under which she produced her own songs, probably to fight the exploitation in the industry and to have artistic freedom.

Yours sincerely in Fuji,
Emperor Saedo Okola and His International Fuji Lions!

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