

"I'm a Gentle Lady, not a Fighter": African Tina Turner, Gender, and the Politics of Genre-Making. Posted on Facebook on February 20, 2021

It's now three decades that one of the most boundary-shifting lyrics by a Nigerian female artist hit the airwave. In 1991, Queen Salawa Abeni, the self-styled African Tina Turner, gave her fans a glimpse of her polygamous home as her rocky marriage to Fuji star (Kollington Ayinla) came to a predictable end. This song, the first she would produce after leaving Kollington's record label, spoke the mind of women who contested stereotype of normative womanhood at home, workplace, and the community. For many, "I'm a Gentle Lady, not a Fighter," is the starting point for narrating stories of gendered politics in shifting context.

Salawa's 1991 musical videos, a visual weapon against her critics, broke artistic boundaries set for women artists in the male-dominated entertainment industry. For the first time, a Yoruba female artist would openly flirt with a male lover in a musical video and sing about her willingness to have sex, while simultaneously giving agency to the life of single mothers whose sexuality and love life are topics of misguided insinuations. Salawa flips the narrative of alleged promiscuity and places motherhood at the center of "following men" — "If I follow men, I'll become mother of children; those who didn't, will give birth to rodents." Apparently, Salawa was/is a fighter, not a gentle lady, as she professed!

There is no single way of interpreting an artist. Within the context of my own research on Fuji, I have consistently been drawn to Salawa's politics of gender and genre-making. Salawa had more than gender stereotypes to fight. She was also contesting the naming of her style. This politics became heated when the Nigerian Music Award (NMA), the most prestigious recognition for sound art, started in 1989. The Performing Musician Association of Nigeria (PMAN), which organized the NMA listed her under Fuji, a genre dominated by Barrister and Kollington, her ex-husband. By insisting her genre was Waka, and that her mentors are prominent female artists like Comfort Omoge, Dan Maraya, and Batili Alake, Salawa fought for fairness for her hard-earned achievement.

Gender politics alone cannot explain Salawa's struggle for recognition. At the center of her sound politics are two big questions: What makes a sound Fuji? Who has the power to categorize music? Although artists tend to get sole credit for artistic creation, many individuals and groups—record label owners, percussionists, promoters, fans, sound engineers, and journalists—shape sound politics. Those who argued that Salawa's modern Waka was Fuji seems to have a point. In addition to incorporating guitar, piano, and drum set, Salawa's modern Waka, minimized call-and-response pattern, one of the core features of "traditional" Waka. Meanwhile, I'm excited that a female mentee has decided to do her MA and PhD research on Salawa!

As Salawa turns 60 on May 5, we should be ready to say--Happy Birthday Gentle Lady! And when next you hear, "I'm not a fighter. I come in peace" --- alaye, RUN O!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQYwrx12rYI>

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

# I play waka (traditional) music not fuji — Salawa Abeni

**I** DO not play fuji music as people and some of my fans believe, but waka music which falls under traditional music.

The name "fujiwaka" originated when I was married to the father of my children, Gen. Kollington Ayinla — a fuji musician. I used to play waka music alongside Kollington who played fuji in the same outings. As a result of which some of my fans believe, I play fujiwaka. But I want to correct the notion and tell the whole world that I play nothing but "modern" waka, which is traditional music.

My mentors in this category of music are Chief (Mrs.) Comfort Omoge, Batile Alake, Dan Maraya e.t.c. But we use different styles and approach to get to our audience. For instance, my own type of

waka music (traditional music) has a broad perspective. It appeals to all my fans including the Yuppies, the rich, the poor, the young and the old. I sing about current burning issues that need to be harped upon for proper understanding. For instance in my current album titled: "Congratulations" I sang about S.D.P. and N.R.C.. and "Gentle Lady" correcting the impression that I am not a fighter nor a hooligan as some people believe.

I think I deserve the PMAN award for this year under the traditional music category because of my two current albums. I would have won the award few years back, but the PMAN award committee kept grouping me with fuji music, which I

don't belong to.

Though PMAN award is not my priority or my ultimate, my priority is to win the hearts of my fans and well-wishers through my music. If my music is accepted by them, then I have automatically won an award which cannot be quantified in terms of money or any worldly materials. For instance, I received more than 900 letters from my fans all over the world including London, USA, Saudi Arabia, and West Ger-

many etc. and I am taking my times to reply them.

I have set aside 10% of my royalties, which I donate to charity and a scholarship scheme, which gives financial aid to secondary school students who need my help. I do all these to show my appreciation to my fans, well-wishers and those who helped and are still helping me during my turbulent period.

I cannot forget, Lati Alagbada for his contribution to my success. He has done his home work very well by distributing my records to West Africa coasts and overseas countries. My marriage with him musically is as strong as the rock of "gilbrata" and nobody can put it asunder for now", she said.



—Salawa Abeni