

No Aso ebi, No Food: Music, Fashion, and Party Financing in Yoruba History (Posted on Facebook on January 3, 2022)

History was made in 1986 when Barrister became the first Fuji artist to play in the United States. His band performed in Houston, Dallas, Austin, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Chicago, Washington DC, Providence, and New York City. The cities they visited reflect urban spatiality of diaspora Nigerians in Ronald Reagan America. Not only was Barrister granted “Honorary Citizenship” of Rhode Island, he received the “Key to the City of Providence” -- symbolic honors bestowed on famous people. He returned to Nigeria, and as expected, released a commemorative album. Appropriately titled, “America Special,” the post-tour masterpiece affirms Barrister’s new-found American fame within the context of global Africinity, racial politics, postmodernism, and stereotype-fighting. He reproduced American-style stagecraft, sang in English, and mimicked American accent.

Leader with velvet tone
Chorus with golden voice
Heavy percussion from the sounders
Fuji sound is easy to dance
Songs composed with reality
Because, Fuji sound is beautiful
Sing along la, la, la

The humans of Ibadan, the most mouthed people ever created, decided to add this beautiful composition to the long list of Englishes they altered (knowingly or unknowingly) to meet their imagination or reality. If we assume that the Ibadan of the 1950s didn’t mean to murder Adegoke Adelabu’s “Peculiar mess,” into “Penkelemesi” or if we doubt the colonial origin of how “seven goods and six yeahs” became “gugu gugu meje, ya ya mefa” there is a clear indication that the folks of the 1980s deliberately messed with Barrister’s song by making humor out of a common anxiety over party financing.

Ijewuru te je to
Ko ni kaluku gba le elo
En je’yan, e un je’ba
En je iresi pelu eran igbe
Nitori sile marun te o fun me

Translation

Your excessive eating/gluttony should stop
You should all leave my party
You are eating pounded yam and eba
You are devouring rice and bush meat
Yet, you only giving me a peanut

As texts (oral or written) travel from their original source into new cultural spaces, they may assume a new life/meaning, different from the original. The social life of texts, like of other things, is usually a story of creative adaptation and (re)invention. Here is the context to this

“lyrical subversion” or “new-meaning making” or whatever scholars of African language, linguistics, and discourse analysis would call it.

Before the present century, party financing was based largely on what we can crudely call “post-feast gifting” model. Essentially, people attend your party, eat, and then give you money when leaving. Some may spray you money on the dancefloor. The money collected would then be used to pay for the cow, vegetables, yam flour, among other loans and supplies of the party. Aso ebi has always been part of party spectacle and community bonding, but rarely used to raise money for parties in the 20th century. You simply get a sample of the aso ebi and go to the market to buy your own. If you are lucky, you find the exact sample. If you get something close, you’ll still be admitted to the party on “oto lo rin” level!

Raising money for 21st century parties departs from the 20th century norm. Let’s just call it “Prepaid Owambe.” Essentially, the host adopts a unique aso ebi and expects you to buy directly from them at their fixed/non-negotiable price, which is usually about 50 percent more than the market price of the textile. Money raised through direct sales, among other sources, would then be used to organize the party. Post-feast gifting of the 20th century is not required in the 21st century if you buy the aso ebi, which is also your meal ticket at the party. Ko ra ankara, ko je semo!

On November 11, I attended the birthday party of Fuji veteran Easy Sawaba in Ibadan. I paid 15k for 12 yards of aso ebi for myself, Tolani, and Busuyi. Of course, I sprayed money, not to his forehead, but to his pocket, in front of Rasheed Ayinde (Merenge). The art, performativity, and historicity of party money spraying are as interesting as the story of party financing, itself. Then on Tuesday, November 30, Easy Sawaba honored my invitation to the Music Department at the University of Ibadan. He spoke to undergraduate students who also participated in the Fuji documentary shooting inside the Zoological Garden. I’ll soon write about “Fuji Pedagogy” – a unique encounter between UI students and Easy Sawaba!

Enjoy “America Special” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRF_1xYnkic

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