

Print Immortality: Fujicians and their Biographers (Posted on Facebook on February 14)

One of the conversations across Africa is the unending decline in reading culture. Although this matter dates to the dying decades of the 20th century or earlier, commentators—from publishers and authors to booksellers and teachers—worry that the inroad of social media is worsening the already perplexed situation. Yet, the digital age in African literary culture is challenging what passes for a literary work, how people produce, consume, and circulate textual creativity, who qualifies to be called an author and a literary critic, and the respectable or acceptable channels for disseminating written literature.

However, a walk into the University of Ibadan bookshop would change anyone's perspective on the gradual death of conventional print book publishing and reading culture. Prominent among the most visible titles are biographies and autobiographies. While the publishing of "conventional" literary works in print has declined, there is an unprecedented increase in the biographies and autobiographies of successful people, mostly men.

The political economy of these publications challenges us to (re)think how audience, marketability, profitability, and utility of book publishing have changed to align with what I have termed "print immortality"—that is, how book publishing is informed more by the need to have people's stories in print than to expand public literary culture. Print immortality is an aspect of self or public immortalization. To live in print, for many, is to live forever. Not all authors write to have their books read by millions of people—the books' existence justifies why they were created in the first instance. Some authors care about the story more than sales and even the reputation of being an author. The auto/biography publishing industry has grown at a speed unmatched by the debate about book publishing among academics in the 21st century. We are far behind effectively tracking everyday reproduction of print immortality—the capacity of printed materials to outlive their authors and subjects—in addition to other motives that are not different from why Samuel Johnson wrote the classic, "The History of the Yorubas," in the late 19th century.

It is within this frame and many others that I engaged Mr. Akintunde Akinteye, author of "Sikiru Ayinde Barrister: The Music Maestro—A Biography," when I interviewed him for the Fuji book and documentary projects in December 2021. To evaluate Mr. Akinteye's book like an academic work is to miss something crucial about the divergent ways that people conceive of the past. Popular biographies of Fujicians don't pretend to be academic history books. Yet, they possess the capacity to shape academic thinking in unpredictable ways. For me, their merits don't lie in whether dates, events, and narratives are incontestable. Or if they have citations and references or not—after all, I can always cross-examine facts with other sources.

There is no single way of interpreting facts. To overthink "facts" in popular biographical writings, including the ones on Fujicians, is to miss something crucial about non-academic literary production. The flexibility to compel me to think in a different way about the past is why popular biographies of Fujicians written by distinguished journalists like Elder Dayo Odeyemi, Otunba Wale Ademowo, Baaroyin Tunde Busari, Mr. Akintunde Akinteye, and Hajia Dikko would remain an indispensable source for the Fuji book and documentary projects. Trying to understand why a text was created in the first instance could be more rewarding than a line-by-line appraisal or a close reading of the content.

Appreciation

I shot three scenes of the Fuji documentary at the breathtaking Natural History Museum of the University of Lagos. My gratitude goes to University Librarian Professor Yetunde Zaid and Curator Dr. Olatunde Barber for helping to secure approval to use this facility. Mr. Akintunde Akinteye made two separate trips to the University of Lagos for the shooting. Ese modupe o.

Yours Sincerely in Fuji:

Emperor Saedo Okola and His International Fuji Lions