

Queen Salawa Abeni: A Date with the Goddess of Sound

After several months of inability to secure an interview with Queen Salawa Abeni, I finally had a breakthrough. How I eventually interviewed the Yoruba goddess of sound requires some context. On October 7, while reviewing my 31, 571 digitized pages of the “Lagos Weekend” magazine, spanning 1974 to 1995, I found a 1977 photo, commemorating Salawa’s return from hajj. I sent the photo to her, and she called me immediately! “How did you get that photo?” she screamed. I told her my source. She then posed an important question: “What exactly do you want from me?” Before I composed my thoughts, she continued, “my son wants to speak with you.” Luckily, Esky, Salawa’s son, is a history geek. We spoke for an hour, fact-checking each other on ancient African civilizations and kingdoms.

After several failed attempts, I interviewed Salawa, not because I’m a Yoruba male, a fan, or even a professor. My abroadian credential couldn’t impress a lady who has travelled the world before I was born. Mentioning that I wrote two Facebook posts about her this year couldn’t help me secure a date. I received an interview because I helped her to remember her past through a deeply emotional visual of her 1977 hajj. I gave her a moment of unexplainable joy through my meticulous and backbreaking research with the newspapers. Salawa was only 16 when she performed her first hajj in 1977. That was a year after she released her first album. For Yoruba Muslim artists, hajj was more than the fulfillment of a tenet of Islam. It legitimized their Yoruba Islamic cosmopolitan credibility as preachers, entertainers, and culture shapers. Hajj was a prerequisite for true stardom. From her reaction, Salawa was probably seeing herself, through the photo, for the first time in 44 years. She won’t keep the rare visual to herself—she posted it on Instagram with the following caption: “My very first Mecca trip. This certainly brought tears to my eyes because my journey hasn’t been an easy one, but I’ll forever stay grateful to Almighty God for his mercies.” Thousands of Instagram followers liked the photo; hundreds paid tribute to a true heroine.

Appreciation

To all the people trying to extort me in exchange for contacts and interviews with artists, the fire that will fire you is hibernating in hell fire. Kaa kulu fun yin (it shall not be well with you). Walaḥi, mi o ni jere gbogbo yin (translation, unavailable). I thank journalist and television personality host Ms. Dábírí Idòwú Òmóbólánlé for providing Salawa’s contact, free-of-charge. In exchange for her kindness, I will honor her invitation to speak about my Fuji project in her live TV show at Lagos MITV. Hotel and transportation, on me! Appearance fee—waived! A big shout-out to Esky, the history geek. Instead of asking for money to tell her story, Queen Salawa Abeni gave Tolani and Busuyí—who looked more like abused and exploited cameramen, than apprentice historians—a gift of 10k.

From Lagos where the interview took place, we arrived safely in Ibadan and blew 6k (out of Salawa’s 10k gift) at Ultima, the most expensive restaurant I have ever eaten in Nigeria. Strangely, they sell soup, separately from amala, at Ultima. This is another serious matter for Olubadan’s attention. We must resist every attempt to turn Ibadan Nation into Nigeria!

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