

Queen Salawa Abeni: Nigeria's Miriam Makeba @60 (Posted on Facebook on May 6, 2021)  
Today, Queen Salawa Abeni, a Yoruba goddess of sound, turned 60! Happy Birthday Gentle Lady!  
As a child, Salawa began to play Waka, a Yoruba-Muslim genre that blends Islamic and Yoruba idioms to create a hybrid of sound, lyrics, and religio-secular perspectives. She was only 15 in 1976 when she entered mainstream popular culture with a timely album—a social commentary on the military coup that consumed Head of State Muritala Muhammed.

Until October 2, 2000 when music left her due to the loss of her first son, Salawa was the most visible Yoruba female musician. Although she still plays music, the self-acclaimed African Tina Turner is the ghost of her pre-2000 self. The collapse of her career due to child loss established an indisputable fact—motherhood has a unique emotional burden, unmatched by fatherhood of any type. Because she lost her child while away on a gig, her enemies scored a big point against her incredible mother-musician career. No mother, not even the almighty Salawa who divorced a famous Fuji artist, secured the much needed personal and artistic freedom, and fought the entire entertainment industry for sidelining her in the distribution of awards, can recover from losing a child. When it comes to creativity, hard work, and independence, one doesn't need to look far for a role model. In Salawa is a self-assured confidence that radiates in thoughtfully composed lyrics, danceable sound, and social commentary that unsettles the cloud of the past, while giving the right compass to the future. By divorcing Kollington at the peak of her artistic vulnerability around 1991, Salawa proved to the world that the best artists, like the best scholars, depend on people to the extent that they can do without them.

As I stated in my February 20 Facebook post celebrating the 30th anniversary of her career-defining song, "I'm a Gentle Lady, not a Fighter," Salawa espoused a unique form of African feminism that was decidedly career-specific. At the crescendo of her career in the 1990s, she was contesting what constitutes "authentic" and "traditional" Waka sound. For many male artists, Salawa was appropriating the sound and culture of Fuji—all in the quest to "modernize" Waka. Even the most careless observer of the politics of sound knew that the acrimony of the era was caused by undiluted jealousy from men who couldn't understand how and why Salawa became successful.

Salawa doesn't need enrolment in any university to understand and frame modernity in her own terms. She doesn't need a university professor to explain Black global cultural affinity to her or why her musical role models must be Tina Turner and Miriam Makeba, not Dolly Parton or Madonna. If many of her detractors felt that "modern" Waka is Fuji, Salawa understood the intricacies of her invention, which goes beyond sound to include a new female-centered culture that young ladies in the cities lived. Not only did she popularized female shoulder pad dresses, leggings, and Anita Baker hair style (a short pixie haircut that angered some hair and head-covering conservatives), she became a role model to many women, married, and especially unmarried and single mothers, whose sexuality attracted insinuations. The success of modern Waka includes Salawa's global tours, which took her to the prestigious Royal Festival Hall in London, entry of Yoruba female artists into popular music, and the framing of a career-centered feminism that emphasized gender equality for the labor of art and creativity.

My most important tribute to Salawa is not these few words or my February 20 Facebook post. Not even the narratives of her exploit in my ongoing book project and documentary would be enough. Rather, it is the fact that I have successfully convinced a female mentee based in Nigeria to do her MA and PhD research on Salawa!

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

