

“Shagari Won Again, We Don’t Want Baba”: The Most Controversial Beat in Yoruba Popular Music History by Saheed Aderinto Posted on Facebook on September 3, 2023

The political atmosphere was tense. The air was hot, the wind was unfriendly. The event that led to the first military coup in Nigeria in 1966 was replaying itself in August 1983, right in the face of the people who experienced it. It was more than the failure of one individual to achieve a 25-year-old ambition to be Nigeria’s president—it was about cultural nationalism, pride, and dignity of an ethnicity that believed it deserved to produce the Nigeria’s president. It was one of the numerous awa lokan moments!

Obafemi Awolowo, the most distinguished Yoruba politician, lost his second presidential election in four years to Shehu Shagari, a northerner in August 1983. It could be the last attempt of the 74-year-old sage Yoruba sage, to become a truly pan-Nigerian political philosopher.

A month after the election in September 1983, Fuji creator Sikiru Ayinde Barrister released an album, titled “Love” where he preached for unity within the family and community. The album gave his fans the closest glimpse into his family and love life, especially the women giving him joy! During the build-up to the election, he released an album “Nigeria,” where he rebuked the ruling elites for not living up to electoral promises and preached for peace and unity in the fragile postcolonial state. Patronage artists are also politically conscious artists, Barrister made clear.

Because art is a two-way traffic of interpretation between the artist and the audience, a section of the public made a different auditory meaning of the lead percussion of the album, “My Beautiful Wife, Only You I Love,” to mean “Shagari Won Again, We Don’t Want Baba [Awolowo].” A beat preaching love was (mis)interpreted as a harbinger of hatred. Another episode in Barrister’s fight to prevent the politicization of his art, which started in 1980, took a deadly stride.

Kamoru Ayansola, Barrister’s lead percussionist, who composed the controversial beat, added another trophy to the long list of his accomplishments and permanently imprinted his name in the concrete of time. Barrister, the band leader, must fight for his art and life. He must defend himself among the Yoruba who felt he betrayed his ethnicity and committed blasphemy against their god of politics. Yet, he could not shun the ruling party, which had the power to terminate his fame, his ever-glowing fame, in a matter of seconds.

As part of the Fuji documentary, I invited talented talking drum percussionist, Johnson Ayanlowo, to recreate this most controversial beat in Yoruba popular music, and five other percussions originally composed by Ayansola between 1980 and 1984. The strategy is to “resound the past,” using those beats to speak to the narratives of my cast who tried to replay the past in words and signs.

All the conversations about the controversial beat have revolved around what the singer and drummer meant versus public (mis)interpretation. No one is talking about the agency of the talking drum to speak its mind. To think that the dead goat skin doesn’t have a mind of its own is to underplay the core indigenous science that combined the strength of nature and temporal

agencies to create one of the most detailed African percussive instruments. In short, AyanAgalu, the dead goat skin that speaks like a human, has a mind of its own!

At the end of the session, Ayanlowo started messing with me! He began to play some nice tunes to my soul. In a matter of seconds, a co-creation began between the drum, the patron, and the drummer, who all have their own independent minds. Occasionally, our minds align. In other instances, we go in different directions. Later we understood each other, and the flow was thoroughly sustained. In all, my legs, soul, and body didn't betray the moment. And I realized the difficulty of practicalizing what I think and write about.

I dedicate this dance to the late Alaafin (king) of Oyo, Oba Lamidi Adeyemi III, who made the Yoruba dance so dignifying, so honorable, so self-(re)claiming, so self-liberatory...

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