

“Thank You Lord for Not Shaming Me”: Worship, Testimony, and Performance of Prosperity in Fuji (Posted on Facebook on July 13)

It was 11pm on Friday, December 17, 2021, at Mushin, a Lagos township where Fuji Prophet Sikiru Ayinde Barrister started his musical proselytization in the 1950s. Thunderous sound from mountainous speakers reminded residents of a scheduled Fuji crusade. One at a time, Fuji faithfuls—women, men, queer, old and young, strong and feeble, across faith—gathered at an open public space, obviously a tarred road, re-purposed for the nightly service. The tarmac became the tabernacle. What is wrong in that? Why not? God is everywhere, the crusaders assured themselves of the healing power of Fuji and the superfluous blessings of the street. After test-running the sound system with Fuji rookies, deafening noise heralded the preacher-in-command—Alhaji Sule Alao Malaika. “Listen to me,” Malaika prepared his congregation for a Fuji pedagogy in self-narrative of prosperity. “In the past, I was homeless, and I struggled to clothe and feed myself. I was a scavenger. I picked trash. But today, I’m picking dollars, pound sterling, euro. I eat whatever I like, I wear designer apparels, and I have built a house for my mother. Thank You Lord for Not Shaming Me. And for not allowing my enemies to have the last laugh.” “It shall not be well with my haters,” is the mildest in the spectrum of bad things to wish an enemy in Malaika’s estimation. After all, another congregation, the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, prays for their enemies to die, by fire!

The crusade ground was lit, not only with emotive Fuji sound but with the appropriate street lexicons that only faithful streeters, not google translate, can decode. If beat doesn’t spoil faith, dance shouldn’t, either. All hands in the air—Ose Olorun o bo’ju mi je—oya, receive your blessing! When Fuji sound is raving, all other principalities must bow. Shey u dey whine me ni? Are you deaf? Can’t you hear what the gangan is saying? Gan gan gan gan, gan gan (Omo olope s’ope). Dia Fada!

The Mushin Fuji crusaders got Malaika’s message right—“No condition is permanent.” Self-narrative in Fuji is an exercise in autobiographical detailing and self-truth telling. As in, if you don’t tell your own story, your oppressors and their proxies will package their violence, oppression, and slavery as benevolence, and then rank themselves higher in your life—than your destiny, your God, your mother who kept you alive at infancy for the world to experience as an adult, your father who paid your WAEC and JAMB registration fees, instead of taking another wife, your unappreciated poorly paid primary school English teacher who came to class on an empty stomach, your neighborhood old lady who kept a vigilant eye on you so you don’t disappear with the marauding wings of gbomo gbomo. They will claim to be your Mungo Park, as if Africans didn’t know the source of River Niger, even before Mungo Park’s ancestors were born!

To stereotype the performance of testimony and prosperity in Fuji as an uncultured jamboree of illiterate-low-class-never-do-well-street-urchins is to miss something crucial about how millions of Yoruba imagine the present and the future in an unending quest to understand the world and its corresponding temporalities. One must have a prejudiced understanding of faith and salvation to think that Fuji is not a religious text or that Fujicians are not prophets--in their own right.

The 2021 Mushin Fuji crusade is just an episode in the long history of performative prosperity in Yoruba popular art. In Revelation “Maturity” (1987) in the “Book of Fuji,” Prophet Sikiru

Ayinde Barrister recounts his path to artistic stardom. He chronicles his international tours, narrates his growth as an artist, enumerates the tangible evidence of progress, and declares that he would never have to prove his superiority to anyone, again! He would never need anybody's validation, again! For creatives and deep thinkers, reaching the stage of "Maturity," as espoused by Prophet Barrister, is self-liberating.

But how did he reach artistic maturity? Prophet Barrister uses the English expressions "seriousness is the principle of business," in addition to "punctuality," "hard work," and "dedication," as sources of his success. "Hardworking people can never suffer. Hunger will kill the lazy," Prophet Barrister taps into the universality of work ethic to emphasize that talent is useless without hard work. He mentions God and humans as the primary factors in his success, without overlooking the centrality of predestination—after all, a calf/baby cow is born bigger than a kid/baby goat. The Internet is the game changer for the youth in the 21st century; Barrister, who was 39 in 1987, attributes his success to what he calls "computerized equipment," which replaced analog recording machines from the mid-1980s. "If they feed us, we'll be fine. If they don't feed us, we'll be fine—as long as God doesn't starve us," he highlights the supremacy of God in the affairs of humans.

For me, Prophet Barrister's "Maturity" is the most thoughtful articulation of the complementary role that God, destiny, humans, hard work, talent, and work ethic play in success. He was true to his art—he wasn't an empty self-wisher. Everything he wished himself in the 1987 Revelation came to pass by 2010 when he passed on.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SL6leH4faM>

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