

We are in this Together: The Insider/Outsider Factors in Fuji Studies (Posted on Facebook on October 19, 2021)

Exactly 5 months ago today, I shot the first scene of the Fuji documentary at the 3rd day prayer (Firdaus) held for Fuji star, the late Taofeeq Amoo Igisekele, at Liberty Stadium in Ibadan. Igisekele was a diaspora Fuji artist who died in New Jersey on May 16. He lived in the UK and the United States for more than a decade. When I started the Fuji project 2 years ago, I thought I would only be having fun attending Fuji parties and hanging-out with superstars. I didn't envision mourning any of my subjects. Agony wasn't anticipated.

If I need invitation to conduct research in private parties, I didn't require approval to attend Igisekele's Firdaus. This experience has compelled me to reflect over how the landscape of encounters shape access and acceptance within the community of research subjects. Being Yoruba, male, abroadian, and a Fuji fan are not enough to give me unrestricted access into the Fuji world. "When did they start granting American visa to Owala/someone who wears facial marks?"-- I can read some people's mind as they doubt my claim of American residency. That I'm a professor is not a selling point, for I lack the gerontocratic credibility of a professor. For many, Wole Soyinka is the authentic prototype of an African male professor. Bolanle Awe is the only female professor that many senior people in southwestern Nigeria know.

My biggest frustration about the Fuji project is that there is a limit to how far I can go with it. I know I can't know everything. But what if what I don't know is the most important thing I'm supposed to know? The boundaries and limitations in Fuji research are not physical space per se, after all, I have conducted research in private homes of Fuji artists, in Fuji Chamber (Barrister's Mausoleum), in high-class parties where cash flew in different directions, and in big-time street performance where my nose can tell the difference between a good and bad weed/Indian Hemp. The boundaries inhibiting my Fuji research are the carefully guarded stories. Those numerous pauses and silences during interviews are loaded with meanings. They are the impenetrable barrier to coded narratives that my interviewees are unwilling to decode for me because I don't belong. Because I know the power of silence, I feel really frustrated each time I hear, "Alhamdulillah/adupe"--a praise to the Almighty God that abruptly ends a line of interesting thought.

Igisekele's Firdaus disrupted these boundaries. While mixing with the crowd, I heard things he wouldn't have told me if he was alive. How he couldn't attend his mother's burial, how he couldn't enjoy his newly completed mansion, the number of his wives and children, rivalry with fellow artists, unrealized dreams. The crowd said things my ears were not prepared for. They said all these things, not to mock the dead, but to belittle the living. To emphasize the futility of life—the very reason why humans are nothing but a piece of nothing. For four hours, 10 brilliant clerics, including star man AkeuGbaGold, deployed the best eruditions from Yoruba and Islamic traditions to explain the limits of human existence. At the center of it all is the futility of life. How a diasporan worked so hard in the winters of London and New Jersey, only to die abroad, buried abroad, and not able to reap the fruits of his labor planted at home would resonate with millions of Nigerians scattered across the globe.

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