

What is the Language of Fuji? Engaging Yoruba Ethnicity and Cultural Dominance with Sefiu Alao Adekunle (JJC) (Posted on Facebook on September 3, 2021)

I received a big shock when 12 members of the Fuji Musicians Association of Nigeria (Ondo State Chapter) told me during a group interview in Akure on August 3 that they cannot sing Fuji in their local dialects. For them, not only is it impossible, it would amount to singing their localized "native" songs, which have deeper roots than Fuji. Ideally, this revelation shouldn't have surprised me, after all, I have never heard Fuji in any Yoruba dialect other than the "Oyo-Yoruba" or "Yoruba proper." During my interview with Fuji star Sefiu Alao Adekunle, this revelation became far more obvious, and incredibly interesting. Adekunle spoke Egba-Yoruba in the interview, but switched to "Yoruba" whenever he inserted songs. He then schooled me on how certain Egba words and names cannot be rendered in Fuji lyrical composition/pattern because it would have limited intelligibility among the multi-ethnic Fuji fans. For his art to appeal to a cosmopolitan audience, he must pronounce Egba-specific words in "Yoruba." No one would have sponsored his first album in 1990 if he proposed to sing in Egba. His first major nickname—JJC (Johnny Just Come) recounts the story as an Egba boy (a newbie/a rookie) attempting to break into mainstream Yoruba popular culture.

When I asked Adekunle why Fuji can only be sang in "Oyo-Yoruba," he returned me to where it all started--the creativity of one man, Sikiru Ayinde Barrister, a child of Ibadan born in Lagos! Ajiwere, the root of Fuji was a Yoruba-Muslim tradition. Because most Oyo-Yoruba, including the Ibadan, and indigenous Lagosians are Muslims, it is easy to see how the Egba, Ijesa, Ijebu, Ekiti, or Akure who are predominantly Christians, couldn't have pioneered Fuji. My interview with Adekunle was outstanding, not just because he spoke Egba and the brilliant ways he answered 98 percent of my questions, but his deep understanding of the interrelatedness of popular culture on one hand, and politics, identity formation, diaspora, religion, gender, on the other.

Dialect-switching in popular culture and everyday language use, which Adekunle demonstrated to me, reveals the complex reality of the multi-cultural language environment in which we live. But more importantly, it compels me to rethink an obvious fact-- that the Oyo-Yoruba language "hegemony," which began with the reduction of Yoruba into writing actually has significant implication on Yoruba popular culture, than we ever imagined. The "language" of pan-Yoruba popular culture is not Ijebu, Egba, or Ekiti, but "Oyo-Yoruba." It is this pan-Yoruba appeal, among other things, that makes Fuji popular culture. This also explains why we unknowingly fetishize artists who speak Egba, Ijebu, Ekiti dialects in Yoruba films and on the Internet. Subconsciously, we assign "difference" to their art, because we think it's "unconventional." Yet, the Islamic genealogy of Fuji, as previously noted, extends the explanation of Oyo-Yoruba dominance in Fuji beyond lexicography. I would need additional research on language and linguistics to express this better. For now, this is all I got!

Appreciation: I'm grateful to Adekunle's Media Manager Saheed Ojubanire for making the interview possible. Unlike some managers who tried to collect money from me in exchange for interview, Ojubanire acted professionally and understands the value of his principal's participation in the project. I thank Adekunle for taking the interview very seriously. He changed clothes so we can shoot two scenes and allowed us to move his furniture to get the best possible pictures. In recognition of the value of intellectualizing Fuji, Adekunle, whose daughter studied and lives in the United States, firmly held my hands and said, "I'm happy to shake a Professor." For me, an ordinary mortal, it was a privilege speaking with a Fuji god, whose exploits shaped my childhood.

Thank you Agbara Orin. Ogundabede Orin. Iko Olokun Ola!

Artist: Sefiu Alao Adekunle

Location: Private residence of Sefiu Adekunle, Abeokuta

Episode: Everyone is a King in the Kingdom of Fuji, among 7 others

Yours Sincerely in Fuji:

Emperor Saedo Okola and His International Fuji Lions