

Who is Barry Wonder? How Not to Describe African Celebrities (Posted on Facebook on August 26, 2022)

In addition to teaching my first class—a graduate seminar on African historiography—at Florida International University yesterday, I pasted the cover or sleeve of “Barry Wonder,” a 1987 album of Fujician Sikiru Ayinde Barrister on my office door and took a commemorative photo with it!

In trying to help our audience to appreciate the popularity of African celebrities, we often mistakenly equate their personality with people they know. For instance, you hear something like, “Tiwa Savage is the Beyoncé of Nigeria,” “Dagrin is the Tupac of Africa,” “Sikiru Ayinde Barrister is African Elvis Presley.” This common practice is not only misleading, but also diminishes the essence of engaging people about African celebrities, in the first place. When we make this kind of dissimilar parallels, our audience automatically super-impose the celebrity they know on the one they don’t. The only common thing between Barrister and Elvis Presley is that they are both bad ass artists. Their career trajectories, art, politics, environment, and personalities are completely different—even though they both served in their countries’ military.

The need to Africanize famous people is one of the central themes of the panel on celebrities organized by Dr. Rosemary Popoola at the June 2022 Lagos Studies Association Conference. I presented a paper titled, “All Fandom is Local: How the Street Creates its Own Fuji Superstars” in her panel. My paper challenges, in part, the common practice of using global normative parameters to define relevance and popularity. I found many approaches useful. One includes using the origins of nicknames to tell the stories of famous people.

For instance, Serubawon (scare them), the stage name of Fujician Rasheed Ayinde (Merenge) didn’t come from the artist’s self or public proclamation. Rather, it came from the thunderous sound of the computerized musical instrument he launched on March 1, 1990, at the famous Green Springs Hotel, where Ibadan adulterers of the 1980s and 1990s went for short-time! So, Merenge’s instruments, not the artist himself, intimidated people. Almost during the same period, another celebrity, the late Senator and Governor Isiaka Adeleke (Davido’s uncle), was also nicknamed Serubawon for his flamboyant personality, which intimidated political opponents. Serubawon the Governor and Serubawon the Fujician are two different Serubawons, intimidating people with different things and in shifting context.

Recently, I added, Atoko wa gbo nle to the long list of my nicknames. This new addition was inspired by Ayanyemi Ayinla Atoko wa gbo won le, a famous Yoruba talking drum artist of the 1980s, who hailed from Arulogun village in southwestern Nigeria, but took his music across the country. A Facebook friend queried my new nickname, noting that Ibadan my hometown, is not a village/farm. Of course, Ibadan is a first class 21st century African city—even bigger in population and size than Lagos up to the 1960s.

But comparative modernity and urbanity of oko (village/farm) and ile (town/city) is just a fraction of the social context of the name, which is more about profiling personality, the site of toil and location of reward, and the “process of becoming” ---than a simplistic literal dichotomy of “village/farm” and “city.” Hence, London, a major global city can be the village of Osogbo, an urban center in southwestern Nigeria. Isola Atoko wa gbo won le and Ayanyemi Ayinla Atoko

wa gbo nle are two different Atoko wa gbo nles. One is a kolanut-chewing, amala-eating, Fuji-loving history professor, the other is a famous drummer. Yet, they share some things in common...

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