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THE RIVER GODDESS AND MELODY-MAKERS IN NIGERIA: A CULTURAL VIEW ON MAJEK FASHEK AND VICTOR UWAIFO

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Abstract: The art of music-making is a mental/creative activity. However, spiritual influence cannot be ruled out in the process of constructing music. The mental activity is akin to the deployment of the intellect, while the spiritual influence could be as a result of a direct encounter or impartation by a spirit being through dream/vision as typified by two Nigerian performing artists, Majek Fashek and Victor Uwaifo, who are the foci of this study. Exploring the concept of esotericism with emphasis on music performance, this article contends that although music-making is a mental/creative activity, spiritual or extra-mental influences supervene, with particular reference to the lives and performance careers of the two selected African musicians/media celebrities from Benin City in Nigeria. In doing this, it uses historical-analytic, key informant interview (KII), and direct observation methods to critically reflect on how the supernatural influences their music-making activities.

Keywords: *African culture, River Goddess, media celebrities, esotericism, music performance, African melody-makers*

Introduction

Music is one of the greatest edutainment forms that have survived all epochs in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere. It is expected to dominate the futures of humanity even as science has proved that unborn children react to the sound of music (Trainor and Zatorre 2009: 171; Levitin 2006: 7–9). Music is communicated to humans as sound, which is a reaction of the air waves to their auditory systems. It is a non-physical phenomenon; hence, in one of his songs, Bob Marley noted that “one good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel

no pain...” (Marley 2018). The non-physical nature of music from its raw form, that is, the state of inspiration to its finished state wherein music is made, suggests the ethereal status of the music-maker (the term is interchangeably used with melody-maker in this study). Auslander (2006: 261) affirms that the music-maker creates form from the intangible or the invisible. In this capacity, he or she is partially detached from the physical world or the self, probing the opulent world of the subconscious to harness the resources needed to assemble his or her product or creation. In a sense, this explains the supernatural or extra-mental influence that pervades the activities of many music-makers or melody-makers in Nigeria. Indeed, it is this cultural concept of music that underscores the activities of Hubert Ogunde, Osemwegie Ebohon, among other Nigerian music-makers, who have excelled and contributed to the variegation of world music culture (Clark 1979; Olorunyomi 2005; Omibiyi-Obidike 1981; Omibiyi-Obidike 2001; Odogbor and Ogisi 2014: 334). A particular case in point is Fela Anikulapo-Kuti’s development and popularisation of the Afrobeat genre in the field of popular music in Africa in particular and the world in general (Oikelome 2017: 117).

The influence of divinities or deities on the musical oeuvres of some of these African music-makers has been diachronically interrogated in scholarship. The artistic activities or performances of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and his Egypt 80 Band; Herbert Ogunde, an outstanding librettist, theatre-maker cum filmmaker; and Osemwegie Ebohon, a notable traditional icon, cultural and performing artist underscore this point. The cultural and religious ambience of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti’s homeland Egba, located around the River Ogun in Ogun State of Nigeria, inundates his personal and musical idiom dominated by a luminescent engagement in mythic lore, socio-cultural, and musical codes. It is likely in this connection that Olorunyomi (2005: 94) claims that, “apparently given the import of the subsequent lyrics, he [Fela Anikulapo-Kuti] pays homage to the ancestors and diverse African deities.” Sam Akpabot, examining African traditional performance in connection with myths, observes that only trees located near the road side are suitable materials for the construction of skin drums because they overhear humans conversing as they walk past and, therefore, are able to reproduce their language (1981: 86). Perhaps, this explains the strong African percussive rhythm and its communicative essence that is quite notable in Sam Akpabot’s music and that of other Nigerian

musicians, including Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, King Sunny Ade and Hubert Ogunde.

What is more, Hubert Ogunde, a pioneer Nigerian dramatist, filmmaker and indeed melody-maker has had his performance odyssey structured on traditional society heavily anchored on the belief in, and influence of the gods or the supernatural. Ugolo (2014: 235) asserts that “Herbert Ogunde is a man who believes very strongly in predestination as it relates to the Yoruba worldview.” In agreement with him, Eburn Clarke affirms that “Ogunde’s theatre is embodied in the spirit and personality of the man” (1980: 68). In his role as a cultural literalist, cultural troupe proprietor and traditional icon, Ebohon Osemwegie, an Olokun High Priest in Benin City, is motivated by his belief, reliance and worship of the Olokun goddess or deity, the same deity that Majek Fashek’s and Victor Uwaifo’s experiences and travails as performing artistes are predicated on in this article. Ebohon’s writings, interviews, dramaturgy and supra-rational influences have had tremendous impact on his audience and clients as a diviner, seer and consultant across the world (Ebohon 2010). It is within this context of supraliminal tendencies in music-making that this article reflects critically on how the supernatural influences the music-making activities of Majek Fashek and Victor Uwaifo, two outstanding African melody-makers and media celebrities from Benin City, Nigeria. The study expands the knowledge space of African performance studies scholarship, with a particular reference to how musical artists engage with supernatural sources in their creative and performance processes.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Theories are formulated to explain, predict and understand phenomena and, in many cases, to challenge and extend existing knowledge within the limits of critical bounding assumptions (Swanson 2013). Exploring this perspective, this article is intellectually anchored on what we term an African experience of esotericism with an emphasis on music as performance. In Africa, religion, mysteries, spiritualities and belief systems, like in most other parts of the world, permeate the performing arts, including music, dance, drama, folklore, etc. This, perhaps, partly explains why performance studies, in the view of

Nicholas Cook and Richard Pettengill (2013), incorporates theories of drama, dance, media, anthropology, folkloristics, philosophy, cultural studies, psychology, sociology, comparative literature, communication studies, and increasingly, music performance. Melanie Fritsch and Stefan Strötgen (2012: 47) substantiate this claim that performance studies is an interdisciplinary field studying performance and using performance as a lens to study the world in contemporary scholarship.

With specific reference to music performance, Nicholas Cook (2001: 4) argues that “to understand music as performance means to see it as an irreducibly social phenomenon, even when only a single individual is involved.” However, Aluede (2006: 159–160) argues that, in African performance worldview, the performing artistes generally believe that some other entities are expressing things through them; a kind of esoteric or arcane practice steeped in African traditional religion. In fact, the employment of supernatural aid or assistance in achieving a feat has been a practice among indigenous African peoples such as the Yoruba and Benin (Edo). Idowu (1962: 5) alluded to this when he argued that the real keynote of the life of the Yoruba (African) is neither their noble ancestry nor the past deeds of their heroes, but their religion and belief systems. Religion forms the foundation and the all-governing principle of life for them. Many people of different African backgrounds and ethnicities subscribe to the idea of mystical or supernatural beings influencing the course of their lives, vocations or careers.

In much of traditional Africa, that is, communities within the African continent where diverse traditional beliefs and practices, including ethnic religions still hold sway, people tenaciously hold that the full responsibility of all affairs of life belong to the deity; their own part in the matter is to do as they are ordered through the priest and diviners whom they believe to be the interpreters of the will of their deity. Relying further on Yoruba religious beliefs and practices with regard to the notion that a man’s or woman’s destiny is ordered and controlled by supernatural elements, an African traditional religion adherent, Osamaro Ibie’s personal experience relates how he was initiated into the Ifa cult (a traditional religion of the Yorubas and Benins in Nigeria) and became Orunmila’s devotee attests to the above – Orunmila being the spirit of wisdom and the divinity of destiny and prophecy.

Osamaro Ibie was born into a Christian family, baptised with the name of Clement, and confirmed with the name of Joseph in the Catholic Faith. At an early stage in life he was to be introduced into priesthood. This makes his encounter and involvement with *Ifism* (the study of the Ifa belief system) strange. A retired permanent secretary in the Nigerian government civil service, he authored *Ifism*, a collection of works published in five volumes in which he explores Ifa philosophy – a method of divination as revealed by Orunmila; one of the sixteen divinities created by God at the beginning of time to assist in making the earth fit for human habitation, and whose involvement, and influence on persuaded persons in contemporary African communities and elsewhere, is not in doubt. According to Ibie (1986: 1),

Ifa philosophy is one of the oldest forms of knowledge revealed to mankind. Unfortunately, the revelations of Orunmila have since the beginning of time been shrouded in utter secrecy and those who could afford the time and leisure to acquire it, had no means of leaving any records behind them. Whatever we know of Ifa today has been handed down from generation to generation. A lot of what people know about Ifa is also revealed, even to this day by Orunmila himself because he constantly appears to his adherents in dreams, to teach them what they ought to know about him and his works. Knowledge of Ifa has mainly survived by oral tradition from one Ifa priest to another. No conscious effort has ever been made to record the complete works of Orunmila for public consumption. Even the Ifa priests themselves are often reluctant to part with the knowledge for fear [that] if the knowledge becomes public property, the mythical façade behind which they operate will be destroyed.

Analogous mysteries and belief systems exist among the Benin (Africans), the Indians (Asians), Native North Americans, just to mention a few other peoples, whose spiritualities find expression in their performing arts. Oluwatoyin Adepoju (2018: para.3) pointedly remarks that:

Ifa is also a bastion in the little studied field of African esotericism. Esotericism may be understood as the exploration of the structures of meaning and the direction of existence through the use of techniques either concealed from the public or inaccessible to the public on account of most people not having cultivated the perceptual

faculties vital to accessing such knowledge. This description of what I describe as social and epistemic esotericism represents my own understanding within the controversial characterizations of esotericism as this has emerged in the academic study of Western and Jewish esotericism, perhaps the most developed areas in the scholarly study of this field of knowledge.

In any case, what is germane is that the African experience of esotericism as highlighted above constitute, for this study, an “active agency” and a valid field of intellectual contemplation that provides an enduring context for probing the intersections between the realms of creativity and spirituality in the performance activities of music-makers in Benin City in Nigeria as represented by Majek Fashek and Victor Uwaifo, who are, in their own rights, celebrated African performing artistes.

Furthermore, Allegue, Jones, Kershaw, and Piccini (2009) have noted Richard Schechner’s claims, in *The Introduction of Performance Studies*, that performance studies examine performances in two categories: artistic and cultural performances. Accordingly, artistic performances are marked and understood as art forms such as solo-performance, performance art, theatrical storytelling, plays, and performance poetry or spoken word poetry, while cultural performances include events that occur in everyday life in which cultural values are displayed for their continuation: rituals such as parades, religious ceremonies, community festivals, storytelling, and performances of social and civic roles, among others. In a slightly different context, however, the above categorisation is consistent with Schechner’s earlier proposition that “performance studies tend to concentrate on a mix of research methods” (2001: x).

In view of the above, we seek to apprehend music performance activities as well as the careers of select African melody-makers by synthesising the relevant aspects of the artistic and cultural performances and by integrating the historical-analytic, key informant interview (KII), and direct observation methods into an interrogation of the African experience of esotericism as exhibited in the music performance careers of Majek Fashek and Victor Uwaifo. Relevant historical documents, song texts, photographs, musical videos, books, etc., by and on these melody-makers and African musical performance/artistes

were sourced from public/private libraries and websites, and analysed, and systematically deployed in our study. A key informant interview (KII) guide was designed and used to elicit relevant information. The KII guide consisted of sentences, in the form of questions, which the researchers asked the participants, for instance, “Do you think that Majek Fashek and Victor Uwaifo as musical artists engage with supernatural sources in their creative and performance processes?”; “Are you of the opinion that Majek Fashek and Victor Uwaifo have been heavily influenced by Olokun, the River Goddess?”; “Do their affinities or relationships with African traditional religion and other esoteric cultural observances in Benin community have any bearing on their successes or failures as performing artists?”, etc.

The key informant interviews were conducted with eight purposively selected music-makers, music enthusiasts, cultural administrators, African traditional religion practitioners, Benin historians, etc.). After familiarisation and explanations of the essence of the research were handed down to the selected participants, the researchers, on every occasion, sought their consent before proceeding with each session. The researchers also told the participants that they were free to opt out during the proceedings if any of them felt uncomfortable with the discussions. Thereafter, participants were given the opportunity to respond to what was posed in relation to how Majek Fashek and Victor Uwaifo as musical artists engage with the supernatural in their creative and performance processes. Information and opinions gathered from the KIIs were recorded and synchronised into statements in accordance with the objective of our study. As well as direct observers, the researchers paid a dozen visits to music production and familial sites of the subjects under investigation in Benin City and environs and had useful discussion sessions with the stakeholders, from 2016 to 2018. The data gathered were qualitatively analysed.

The “Spirit” of the River Goddess and the Creative Essence

Using practical instances of Africans who subscribe to African traditional religion and African cultural belief systems, particularly among the Yoruba and Benin peoples, Omoera (2007: 142) and Adepoju (2018: para.2) have demonstrated the power and influence of “spirits” or of the spiritual in human affairs. Furthermore, Omoera

and Obanor (2012: 405) have evidentially proved how Olokun, the “river goddess” (this will be expatiated on later in the discourse), have gifted seeking worshippers with children, wealth and career successes in the creative arts in Benin localities in Nigeria. Such local beliefs and trust in deities or divinities in parts of Africa have corresponding equivalents in other geo-religious and geo-cultural settings and among other peoples of the world. For instance, in spite of the European Enlightenment epoch, which had a considerable impact on humanity’s imagination in terms of questioning the monopoly of religion, many persons of Christian religion across the world are still persuaded by the conception of Holy Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ by the Holy Ghost. A Watch Tower Bible Society publication entitled “The Bible: What is its Message?” attests to the power of the Holy Spirit: “An angel named Gabriel appeared to her and told her that God was going to use his active force, his holy spirit, to cause her to give birth to a son, though she was a virgin” (2012: 19). However, Osemwegie Ebohon (2010: 104), Charles O. Aluede, among other polytheists, have argued that such a creative essence does not only apply to one religion. In contemporary Nigerian (African), particularly in Benin and Yoruba communities, deities such as Ogun, Orunmila, Olokun, Obatala, among others, have been known to intervene positively or otherwise in the lives and careers of the people who worship them. Ebohon (2010: 198) further claims that:

There was once a business woman who was barren. She used to cross a river in a boat while going on her business trips. While taking her wares across the river one day she called on Olokun to bless her womb, promising if he [Olokun] did she would offer the first child to him as sacrifice. Later, she became pregnant and delivered a bouncing baby girl.

Supernatural conceptions and births have also been attributed to the intervention of Christian or church leaders and Islamic leaders or *Imams* today in many African communities through the impartation by the Holy Spirit. Barnhart and Barnhart (1982) describe the spirit as “a supernatural being,” and noted that “God is a spirit.” They also note that “ghosts and fairies are spirits.” In parts of Africa and Asia, where there are strong beliefs and reliance of the people on God and His extended pantheon of spiritual intermediaries that are actively intervening in the life of the people and the society for good or bad,

the definition of a spirit is more embracing. In this connection, Ebohon (2010:104) asserts that “Africans believe in and worship several deities (sub-gods and sub-goddesses). They believe these divinities are an extension of God’s presence on earth; are subordinate to Him in the spiritual hierarchy; and act as God’s appointed intermediaries with the responsibility of building bridges linking humankind to Him.”

These creative or spiritual forces are believed to exist within the natural phenomena of the wind, forests and rivers. The “eziza” (a Benin word for whirlwind) is a spirit commonly associated with the wind. In some African societies, the whirlwind is believed to have the capacity to carry people away. Hence, there is usually stampede when there is whirlwind as people struggle to run away to safety. In an interview with Charles O. Aluede, a music-maker, professor of ethnomusicology and an African traditional religion practitioner, conducted in Ekpoma in 2018, we gathered that the whirlwind, based on folklore, is believed to be of two kinds. He noted that the good or benevolent one is the type that carries a person away, imbues him or her with supernatural knowledge and powers and returns him or her to the spot it took him or her from in order to continue living and to use the knowledge and creative powers gained to benefit the people, while the wicked one never brings back a victim once it takes him or her away. In the same way, the forest in its superfluous ambience is believed to be the abode of certain spiritual or creative forces that live inside tree trunks or in thick grooves. He explained further that some traditional African religion worshippers locate their shrines at the feet of some magnificent trees (e.g., Iroko) in the belief that they are the abode of benevolent spirits from whom they seek support or kindness or creative powers. They make sacrifices at these spots, hoping to attract the attention of these spirits who they believe have solutions to their problems.

On the other hand, the waters (rivers, seas and oceans) in their grandeur are believed to be the abode of the most potent and magnificent spiritual forces or deities. Hence, a Benin proverb holds that “the god in the sea is greater than the god on land” (Agheyisi 1986). Foremost among spiritual forces associated with water is the “river goddess” who in the Benin or Edo pantheon is known as “Olokun.” Other indigenous communities in Nigeria equally worship the river goddess. The Igbo call it “mmuommiri”; the Gwosa “mindiruha”; the Efik “ndemmmo”; the Yoruba call it “yemoja” (Edofolks.com 2018).

There has been controversy as to the gender type of Olokun. According to Nowa Omoigui (2018), “Olokun is not a goddess.” He opines that in Benin mythology Olokun is the son of Osanobua, the husband of Ora and, therefore, a god. Omoera and Obonor (2012) corroborate this view. However, Alex Igbineweka (2018) notes as follows: “in Edo language ‘okun’ means sea, ‘ole’ or ‘ol’ is an adjectival prefix meaning ‘chief,’ ‘pilot,’ ‘expert,’ ‘master,’ ‘leader,’ etc. The aforementioned does not specify the gender; therefore, the word ‘ole’ may be used to refer to a man or a woman.” According to Sister Tina (2018), “Olokun is a woman period. That is the reason her brother Ogun is always by her side for protection or support.”

It is not surprising, therefore, to observe that in contemporary Benin *Weltanschauung*, some people see Olokun as a goddess rather than a god. Victor Uwaifo, one of the music-makers under investigation, in an interview in Benin City in 2016, claimed that people who have encountered this spiritual being as well as photographs available depict it as a goddess. Whether it is a god or a goddess, we have chosen to consider it a goddess in this study, even as we argue that its influence on the lives of Africans of Edo (Benin) extraction, particularly Majek Fashek and Victor Uwaifo, who have time and again publicly acknowledged the river goddess as their inspirer and creative source as musicians, is noteworthy and deserves scholarly attention.

Majek Fashek and the Influence of the Deity

Wahab Uwagboe, Majek Fashek’s paternal cousin, childhood friend and music enthusiast during an interview in Benin City in 2017 recalled that, “Majek’s family wanted him to be an engineer first but he had already succumbed to the spirit of music. From the beginning his mother would bring him along to participate in the ceremonies celebrating her traditional religion, where mainly women would play the Olokun rhythms used for worship of the river goddess. Playing the heavy rhythms and intricate syncopations, Majek would say: ‘he’d bring down the spirit.’” “Bringing down the spirit” to borrow what Majek Fashek is quoted to have said, is not an easy task, except for initiates into the realm of the deity that understand the rhythm and nature of their mentoring spiritual force or creative essence. The above aptly captures Majek Fashek’s spiritual odyssey from adolescence to

adulthood; an experience that enveloped his musical career spanning from the mid-1970s till date. However, in order to have a methodical approach to studying Majek Fashek in relation to the highs and lows of his musical career, which are apparently traceable to his guiding deity, we consider it convenient to categorise his life and musical vocation into: childhood and adolescence; search for a musical breakthrough; and days in the wilderness.

Childhood and Adolescence

Princess Kate, Majek Fashek's maternal aunt, music enthusiast, and African traditional religion practitioner, during an interview in Benin City in 2016, insisted that "even though the events surrounding Majek Fashek's childhood are not very clear, two facts are outstanding: he usually accompanied his mother to a Cherubim and Seraphim Church situated at 199 Mission Road, Benin City and also to an Olokun shrine in another area of the same city, where she simultaneously worshipped amid great drumming and singing." Although Majek Fashek's mother, who arguably was a polytheist, has passed away, it is likely that her intricate religious living may have had a huge influence on Majek Fashek's childhood and musical career.

Furthermore, Ben Olaye (Benjof), a music enthusiast, media celebrity, music promoter and showbiz practitioner, during an interview in Benin City, in 2016, claimed that "it was in adolescence that Majek Fashek started exhibiting his musical talent. The result was that he mimicked playing music using unconventional musical equipment created from cans, carved out wood and fitted wires. He often played around a guitar-playing neighbour who later taught him how to play the guitar and probably introduced him to the smoking of marijuana." John Ajayi, Majek Fashek's classmate and friend, during an interview in Benin City in 2016, attested that "Majek Fashek attended Fabiyi Akpata Primary School in Iwehen district of Benin City where he and his siblings grew up and lived. Also, we gathered from Wahab Uwagboe, Majek Fashek's paternal cousin, in an interview in Benin City, in 2017 that "around the 1980s when Majek Fashek was in class three at Edokpolor Grammar School, Benin City, he was already smoking Indian hemp (marijuana) and notorious as a truant. His favourite hideout during school hours was the nearby Benin City moat behind the school from where he was often overheard playing

his favourite Indian music made popular by Indian films that were en vogue in the cinema halls during the 1970s and 1980s in Benin City.”

Search for a Musical Breakthrough

Majek Fashek’s quest for a musical breakthrough was as interesting as revealing. During the 2017 interview with him in Benin City, Ben Olaye noted that “after leaving school unceremoniously, he co-established a musical band called the Jah Stix, which included artists such as Black O’ Rice, Isaac Black and Amos Mackraw. Having consolidated the group in Benin City, they moved to Lagos where they featured at Nite Clubs and later at some units of Nigerian prisons. His breakthrough came at a chance meeting with Jake Solo, a London-based Nigerian musical producer who invited him to London as the lead vocalist/composer of Jah Stix to do a remix of the demo tape earlier recorded by the group at Tabansi Records in Onitsha.” Observably, it was that invitation that led to the making of his iconic album *Prisoner of Conscience*, with the hit track, *Send Down the Rain*, which shot him into limelight in Nigeria and the West African sub region.

The song was phenomenal because it had the propensity to cause rain to pour down whenever it was sung during Majek Fashek’s live performances. Pulse.ng (2017) contends that “his first solo attempt resulted in the release of the album entitled *Prisoner of Conscience* containing tracks such as, *Prisoner of Conscience*, *I’ve Got the Feeling*, *Genesis*, *Africans*, *Police Brutality* and *Send Down the Rain* in 1987. The album sold more than 200,000 copies in Nigeria with sales in the West African sub region. The success of the music is fore grounded on the myth that any time he performs this song in a public show, it would rain.”

This belief was so strong among Nigerian audiences that they would plead that *Send Down the Rain* should not be played until towards the tail end of Majek Fashek’s musical shows! John Ajayi, a music enthusiast, Majek Fashek’s classmate and friend, during an interview in 2016 in Benin City, recalled that “I was among the audience in public performances in Benin City, Edo State and Aba, Abia State in Nigeria in 1987 and 1988 respectively when towards the end of the performances, the clear skies unexpectedly gave way to sudden rain as he started to sing the song. The crowd would then go home narrating

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their experience and spreading the myth around the rainmaker artist. Such live performances were usually heralded by a form of ritual engagement on the stage in which Majek Fashek, clad in his red robe, military boot and dreadlocks, went around the stage clanging a hand-held bell and asking the audience “Do you want it to rain?,” to which the audience would respond with an effervescent “yes.” The lyrics of Majek Fashek’s *Send Down the Rain* song are as follows:

The sky looks misty and cloudy

It looks like the rain gonna fall today

Since morning I’ve been sowing my seed

Waiting for the rain to drop and water it lord

Oh, lord. Yeah!

I’m a hungry man

I don’t want to be angry

Please send down the rain

To water up my seed

Send down the rain, send down the rain

Send down the rain, send down the rain

Instrumental interlude

Everything in life has got its time and season

So you better not ask me why

You don’t expect to sow cassava, and reap up cocoyam

You don’t expect to sow rice, and reap up cassava

Whatsoever I and I soweth in this world

So shall he reap

Chorus: Papa, papa, papayo

Mama, mama, mamayo

Send down the rain

Jah is my song that makes me feel strong

Jah is my song that makes me feel strong

Even though am young I'm gonno be strong

Because I know I'm gonno live long

Chorus: I'm a living man

Gat a lot of work to do

Send down the rain

Papa, papa, papayo

Mama, mama, mamayo

Send down the rain

Papa, papa, papa yo

A-yaghayaghayahgayo

Send down the rain

Jah is my song that makes me feel strong (repeat chorus).

In more ways than one, the above lyrics and several acts that Majek Fashek always put up during live performances speak to the overwhelming “presence” of Olokun, the river goddess, and her paraphernalia such as “water” or “rain,” “red cloth,” “dreadlocks,” etc., in his life and music. Moreover, Majek Fashek’s exceptionally bright skin colour is one reason to believe, as is often the case in Benin communities that such a person is a child of the water or river goddess, who gives children prodigious beauty or extraordinary talent as is the case with Sir Victor Uwaifo.



Majek Fashek, performing during the “Restoration Concert” in Benin City on 14 February 2016, organised by Majek Fashek’s fans after one of his rehabilitations. Photo credit: Osakue S. Omoera and Daniel E. Omoruan.

Days in the Wilderness

His days in the wilderness are the “rough and tough” days in his life and musical career in which Majek Fashek, under the mixed influence of suspected spiritual backlash and family issues, lost his performing prowess and became a destitute in the streets of New York, Atlanta, Georgia in the US and later Lagos, Benin City and Ibadan in Nigeria. He is currently being treated for alternate schizophrenia in a London hospital courtesy of public spirited individuals and kind-hearted Nigerians. This nosedive in his career may have been the reprisal of the Olokun cult, the river goddess’ cult which he was initiated into by his mother. Every society or cult has its codes of conduct and ethics. While the members are guaranteed protection and prosperity, even through supernatural mediation; if such cults are so inclined, failure to adhere to the rules and ethics can attract severe penalty.

Interestingly, in the past Majek Fashek has affirmed his bond with the gods when he in an interview with Channels Television (in Nigeria) in 2015 said “I’m a semi god. Whoever says I’m not okay should check himself. As for me, I have become an ‘orisa,’ so nothing can happen to me...” Orisa is a semi-god in the Yoruba pantheon. Similarly, in his musical heyday, Majek is known to have time and again exclaimed the word “spiritual” while performing on stage. He is known to have often carried a cock onto the stage which he sacrificed by ripping its neck from its body just before singing his iconic *Send Down the Rain*, precipitating the sudden outburst of rain. In all of this, we cannot ascertain if Majek Fashek flouted any of the “rules” of his patron goddess, Olokun, or if there were “conditions” he was expected to maintain in his relationship with Olokun. In fact, many of Majek Fashek’s fans and music lovers are still wondering how Majek Fashek went off the ark, considering the meteoric rise in his musical career and the followership he commanded as a media celebrity.

Ebohon (2010: 364) informs us that: “initiation into Olokun cult means undergoing a series of systematic ritual processes during which one spiritually enters into a covenant with Olokun and one is empowered to worship the deity at a designated shrine.” Corroborating Ebohon’s view, Princess Kate, an Olokun worshipper, during an interview in Benin City in 2016 affirmed that “the process of initiation into the Olokun cult is procedural and elaborate and is conducted by a chief

priest or priestess assisted by a number of priests and priestesses as well as a retinue of drummers and singers. Initiation involves the spiritual separation of the initiate from this physical world, and his or her integration into the ethereal with codes and norms he or she is expected to uphold failing which will attract reprisal especially if he or she has filial link in the spiritual world.” Observably, it is likely that Majek Fashek’s travails and his exhibited bouts of ailments or insanity are indications of some kind of imbalance in his relationship with his patron deity; and defaulters in the Olokun cult suffer severely.

Victor Uwaifo and the Encounter with the River Goddess

Popularly known and called Sir Victor Uwaifo in performing arts parlance, he is probably the most educated, most versatile multi-instrumentalist among the first generation and post-independence breed of popular Nigerian musicians. In his book, *Origin of Highlife and the Nigerian Music Industry* (1995), he says about himself: “Victor Uwaifo is a musician with a rare panache, taste and class. A fashion and sports enthusiast, a creative artist per excellence and an innovator and inventor of the double-neck magic guitar fitted with eighteen strings capable of rotating at 360 degree.” Chris O. Eburu, a music-maker, cultural administrator, and manager of the Revelation Tourist Palazzo, during an interview in Benin City in 2017 affirmed that Victor Uwaifo “is the exponent of *Ekassa*, *Titibiti*, *Joromi*, *Arabade*, among other indigenous music forms, who prides himself as a wordsmith as a result of his knack for re-engineering and bringing to limelight remote Benin native words and giving them creative significance in his music, which universalizes them in African performance and cultural discourses.” This, in a significant way, accounts for Victor Uwaifo’s style of music which he describes as folkloric. According to him, in an interview in Benin City in 2016, “*Joromi* [his first and greatest album] is a mid tempo music based on folklore with modern musical embellishment with some effects that I created. This boosted the reception of *Joromi* and subsequently from *Joromi* to *Akwete-Mutaba-Shadow-Ekassa*, which sprang from the coronation of the Oba to *Titibiti*; a bird in Benin folklore.”

Even though he discovered his musical talent at an early age, playing on the guitar he had personally constructed using plywood, bicycle spokes and a sardine opener (Uwaifo 1995), he had eyes for education

and at various times won academic laurels as best student of his school. In another interview, given at Benin City in 2018, Victor Uwaifo confirmed that he holds a Diploma in Graphic Arts from Yaba College of Technology, Lagos; a Bachelor of Arts degree in Fine and Applied Arts (First Class); a Master of Arts in Fine and Applied Arts from the University of Benin, Benin City; and Doctor of Letters degrees (honoris causa) from the University of Benin, Benin City and Temple University, United States of America. In the same interview, he affirmed further that “I have in a lot of ways combined art and music and you must know how to play one musical instrument to appreciate good music.” Furthermore, we observe that today, Victor Uwaifo is the proprietor of a private museum of art and music; the first in the South-South region of Nigeria called Revelation Tourist Palazzo, Benin City.

Around sunset in 1967 at the Lagos Bar Beach where he had gone to relax and play his guitar, probably seeking inspiration from the airy environment and imposing waters of the beach, he received more than mere inspiration as he encountered a mermaid that swam out of the water and glided towards him. In his transfixed state, he noticed the friendly demeanour of the human cum fish figure. Festus Isibor, a US-based filmmaker, music enthusiast and promoter, in an interview in Benin City in 2016, opined that “probably Victor Uwaifo was overpowered by the mystic nature of the figure or it was out of curiosity and boldness that he refused to take to his heels on the deserted beach.” His encounter with this figure would thereafter indelibly mark remarkable notes on his musical and professional career. In his book *Origin of Highlife and the Nigerian Music Industry* (1995), Victor Uwaifo claimed that:

I am esoteric and God has made that possible. I can visualize and I can make things happen. People don't know the difference between dream and vision. Vision is like watching a film physically and all of a sudden it vanishes. It was way back in the sixties in Lagos at the Bar beach. After closing from NTA [Nigerian Television Authority], I go there to strum my guitar to look for inspiration. As I lie on my camp bed, some worshippers come and go. That night I watched the movement of the waves and I always adjusted my camp bed. Suddenly, I saw from a distance a figure and it got clearer and clearer, and I saw it was this figure. I was transfixed and I heard it say “Guitar boy”, and I screamed- hey! And it said “if you

see mammy water, never run away.” It swam back into the sea and I packed my camp bed and ran into my Citroen car and sped away.

The short dialogue between Victor Uwaifo and the mermaid or “mammy water” informed the theme of the lyrics of *Guitar Boy*. The encounter occasioned the release of his chartbuster, *Guitar Boy*, which gained equal popularity and reputation as Majek Fashek’s *Send Down the Rain*. This is in spite of the fact that both songs are separated by some twenty years, the former having been released in 1967 while the latter was released in 1986. An excerpt from the lyrics of *Guitar Boy*, which clearly underlines the robust relationship between Victor Uwaifo and the river goddess (also called “mammy water” in Nigerian pidgin English), is:

Guitar boy, Umh

If you see mammy water o

Never, never you run away

Hey, hey, never run away

Victor Uwaifo...

Chris O. Eburu, during an interview in Benin City in 2017, affirmed that another remarkable outcome of this supernatural encounter is that the phrase “Guitar Boy” became so popular in the West African sub-region that it almost replaced Victor Uwaifo’s name, and in Ghana a popular African fabric was named “Guitar Boy.” Another significant emanation from this incidence was that the phrase “Guitar Boy,” which is now regarded as an African entertainment cliché, was deployed as code name by military coup plotters in Ghana during the 1970s (Uwaifo 1995).

Engaging the historical/mystic significance of the water or river goddess as tourist enthrallment, Victor Uwaifo has installed a sculptured replica of the mermaid and himself as one of the major attractions in his Revelation Tourist Palazzo, which continues to attract both local and international tourists. Apart from providing a steady source of income to the artist for his upkeep, and that of his family, it is providing employment from managers, guides, sculptors, security personnel, cleaners to a number of other persons in Benin City and

environs. Buttressing Victor Uwaifo's fascination with the water deity and historical artefacts and the kind of fame he has attained, Ebohon (2010) asserts that "*Joromi*, a song based on the story of a legendary hero in the Benin history, won a gold disc award, the first in Africa in 1966 and of equal importance is the song, *Guitar Boy*, which narrates his encounter with a mermaid one night at the Lagos Bar beach in 1967." Victor Uwaifo has immortalised this experience not only in songs, but also with a sculptural representation of the mermaid and his guitar in a water pool at his Revelation Tourist Palazzo in Benin City. He hardly engages in any intense commercial performance these days and the sales from his music have considerably dwindled compared to his glory days, but his Revelation Tourist Palazzo has become his source of constant revenue. The ageless Victor Uwaifo also teaches interested children and university students the rudiments of arts and music-making pro bono.



Victor Uwaifo at the Revelation Tourist Palazzo Ground in Benin City, 12 August 2016. Photo Credit: Osakue S. Omoera and Daniel E. Omoruan.

Conclusion

This article has been a critical reflection on how the supernatural influences the music-making activities of select African performing artists in Benin City, Nigeria. It employed historical-analytic, key informant interviews (KII), and direct observation methods to examine the spiritual or extra-mental influences of Olokun, the river goddess, on the lives and musical careers of Majek Fashek and Victor Uwaifo. It also analyses what music performance means to Africans as expressed in the lives and experiences of performing artistes in Nigeria, with a specific reference to the situation in Benin City. It further argues that the belief that deities or divinities such as Olokun, the river goddess, are actively involved in the shaping and reshaping of human destinies either for good or for ill still subsist in Africa, particularly in contemporary Benin localities. Hence, there is a need for the sustained dialectic re-examination of rather esoteric influences of deities in the lives and careers of performing artists in Africa.

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