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Nigeria's Untold Stories at a Moment of Change: An interview with audio storyteller FayFay

Abstract

Odudu Efe, known as FayFay, is a Lagos-based audio producer and sound designer and also the founder of NaijaPod Hub, a network dedicated to supporting audio producers and promoting high quality audio storytelling in Nigeria. This interview with FayFay shows how her career in many ways reflects the challenges and promise of Nigerian audio storytelling at this moment in time. Like many freelancers, she takes on branding and imaging, tidies up sound and produces studio-based talk podcasts. But increasingly she's being commissioned to work on complex historical documentaries and documentary-dramas. And this for FayFay is key, because like others in her field, she now wants to tell Nigerian stories that have too long gone untold – or too long been told by outsiders – and she wants to tell them in creative and absorbing ways that 'chatcasts' cannot satisfy. FayFay's work draws on globally recognisable documentary conventions but also incorporates Nigerian TV and film sound tropes, in what might prove to be an emerging Nigerian audio-documentary style. She remains frustrated by the tendency for so many in the media to hide away in studios, when a roving microphone in the hands of a greater range of people might better capture the richness of lived experience in this hyper-diverse country.

Keywords

podcast, features, history, Nigeria, Africa

Nigeria's untold stories at a moment of change. An interview with audio storyteller FayFay.

Interview by Abigail Wincott

Introduction

This special issue is dedicated to listening closely to the Global South, not just to the loudest sounds, the award-winners and the chart-toppers, but listening out too for the quieter sounds of emerging makers and their stories and the people who have, often away from the spotlight, been striving to tell stories with care and attention to detail, and to encourage others to do the same. This interview captures a moment in the career of one such producer, Odudu Efe, known as FayFay, an assiduous advocate for audio storytelling in Nigeria.

Online video might be gaining popularity but Nigeria is still a nation of audiophiles. 60% of the population listen to radio and 25% to podcasts each week (Statista 2023; Newman 2022). Talk and music radio top broadcast listening charts (Gewiese and Rau 2023), and Nigerian podcasting has borrowed heavily from those established radio talk genres with much studio-based presenter banter and presenter-led conversation about the issues of the day.

Over the past decade, FayFay has, like most freelance audio creatives, turned her hand to many things. Looking at her online CV, there is mention of imaging, programme research, voiceovers, casting, sound design and mixing. She's a specialist in spatial sound. But there is a trend in the kind of work she is doing, and that trend to some extent reflects changes in the Nigerian audio scene. That is, she has moved from broadcast radio to podcasting work: producing conversation and interview formats like *The Unusual Podcast* and *The Unsullied*. And now increasingly, through her production company 808Xtra, she is called on for documentaries, dramas and documentary-dramas – the kind of well-researched, crafted and creative audio storytelling she loves and has spent her career promoting. So is this to be a moment when narrative audio blossoms in Nigeria, and even brings a new sound, something particularly Nigerian to the audio documentary canon?

Crafted narrative audio faces funding and platform pressures here, as elsewhere, that discourage producers from leaving the studio. If the ubiquitous chumcast and the US storytelling style seem at times to threaten even the cultural behemoth of the European documentary-feature (McHugh 2016), how realistic is it to ask for more than preservation of existing forms? Might we dare to dream of other documentary forms and styles that could come into being, if crafted factual audio's diversity reflected the rich diversity of human culture?

Nigeria isn't just one potential voice in a global arena either. It's an entire polyphonic world. Over 200 million people live there and between them they speak over 500 languages (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig 2023). Add to this huge regional, social class, age and other kinds of difference, and it becomes clear that an incredible wealth of Nigerian stories are there to be recounted. But who will recount them and how?

FayFay's documentary work is still often frustrated by the fact that her country's stories have too often been told by others. She notes, "for a long time people on the African continent haven't had the opportunity to tell their stories themselves. Some people I work with outside of Nigeria have more archives on our stuff than we do." Nigerian records from the time of British rule were held in the Colonial Office in London, created largely to suit the needs of the colonial power – though this is not to say they were not often shaped by the interests of some Nigerian actors too (Newell, 2016). Media companies from the Global North, including the BBC, have long had the resources to record events and interviews, and maintain their own audio archives on Nigerian events and even nature recordings and wildtracks that Nigerian documentary makers might want access to. And at times, Nigerian government interference in the media and party political battles played out in competing journalistic records (Chari and Akpojivi, 2024) have contributed to the lack of easy access to archive material for documentary storytellers. But in an email exchange after the interview, FayFay explains how significant continued access to resources is, in maintaining the dominance of Global North voices, telling Nigerian stories:

'More often than not, the contact information provided leads to dead ends. Companies like the BBC or CNN have the resources, including personnel and budget, to pursue avenues that independent producers like myself may not have access to. Central archives of audio files that are easily accessible to the public are scarce here. Without being employed by a media or broadcasting house, access to such resources is limited.'

Nonetheless FayFay's recent work often revisits the past. She has produced programmes for the long-running *Black Lenses* series (Loopify Media), including 'Ogiame' about one moment in a royal family that played a key role in Nigeria's history in the 20th century, and 'Oyo's Women' about the women of the Alaafin of Oyo's palace. Most recently she's been working on a series for the Voix Collective about the election of June 12 1993, a pivotal moment in Nigeria's recent political history.^{1 2}

Read the interview in full below or [click to listen](#).

<https://on.soundcloud.com/Fsk9g>

¹ <https://www.voixcollective.com/>

² <https://soundcloud.com/loopifymedia>

AW: When I look at your credits for work that you've done, there's a lot of different credits. So there's sound designing, producing, I know you run a production company, you run a podcast platform. So how would you describe yourself? What do you do?

FF: Okay... my name is FayFay, I am... an audio storyteller. Initially when I started cos I was working on radio a lot I used to do a lot of radio imaging and branding, promos, radio ads. I've got my hands in a few things when it comes to the audio production side of things. I do a lot of audio editing. I do sound design. I do mixing and mastering as well. But for 808Xtra I would say the majority of work that I do comes from podcasting and audio documentaries.

AW: And is that a growth area at the moment in Nigeria?

FF: It's a really growing space. When we started the growth was very slow paced – this was around 2016, 2017. But right now a lot of people are exploring all the avenues possible to be able to get word out there about what they are doing and stories from their past and the history of the country.

AW: One of the things I wanted to talk to you about is the episode you said you thought was interesting that you'd worked on – the 'Ogiame' episode of the *Black Lenses* series. And when I looked at *Black Lenses*, it's got a lot of episodes, it's been going for a while. They're very varied, but the one thing that keeps coming back is history – a lot of those are history episodes and so a lot of people interested in the past and history storytelling, is that right?

FF: Yes so right now I'm working with a brand called The Voix Collective and they are producing a podcast on the 1993 June 12 elections, which is, in the history of Nigeria, is one of the most controversial election periods. And a lot of those stories are getting told right now because the podcasting space in Nigeria is flooded with chatcasts and entertainment-style podcasting and people are starting to realise that, you know, there could be more in this space.

We are rich in all these kind of stories and you know, for a long time people on the African continent haven't had the opportunity to tell their stories themselves. And since podcasting is presenting such a vast space for the stories to be told, people are waking up and being like, OK, there's an audience for this. We can take the time to tell our stories and make our stories right.

AW: Why is there this interest, do you think at this particular time in going and retelling things that have happened in our past?

FF: One of the major reasons I think that is happening is because we do not have a good culture of documenting the things that have happened in our past. And if you even listen to a story like 'Ogiame', I'm thinking because the writers couldn't pull up enough facts or articles and stuff like that, they had to kind of mix it with a little bit of fiction. So when you think about the history of Nigeria, for one, there's so many interesting things that happened, you know, early on, but there's nowhere that it's documented and because of the way like the government is set

up a lot of times when things happened, they have the right to, like, just not let it get out or not let it get published anywhere for record purposes. And sometimes they could even pull stuff like that down and there would be no record of it. So because of that people think okay, what can we still piece together so that a future generation would not come and have the same problems that we are having, where we do not have enough information on our own history, right?

Sometimes even some people I work with outside of Nigeria tend to have more archives on our stuff than we do, because even at the time while we were not documenting, they were, right? So people are seeing it as you know, an avenue to start archiving the stories that are important to our history, even the fictional stories that make up some of our culture as well.

AW: Yeah. So that's something that really interests me about the episode that you suggested to me to listen to, 'Ogiame', because it has a little warning on it at the bottom. It says that even though it's based on true events, it's been fictionalised, as a kind of, little warning notice how we should think about what we hear. But that's always true, isn't it, of any history podcast? As soon as you try to tell a story in detail, there's always the risk that there's some bits there that have been embellished or imagined or put together in some way from different sources. But for you as a programme maker, where's the boundary between it being a drama? At what point do you think that that it goes from being a history programme to being a drama?

FF: So there's a thing with, how do I put it? The attention span of people today, right? Because of how fast and how downsized information has become, you start thinking of ways in which you can keep someone's attention, right? And so you think about a story, let's say for example, like 'Ogiame'. Let's say you even have the full story, the full true story of everything that has. But a lot of it can maybe sound like just this narrator going on and on and on. So for me, I would welcome throwing in a little bit of fiction into it to make it a bit more dramatic than it was actually. But if the sole purpose of 'Ogiame' was to tell the events of that moment in history, then I would lean more towards getting as much info as I can and then the amount of info could be posed around the piece as questions – unanswered questions, because that information was not... we're not able to get it or it's not available.

AW: And you on this, you're the narrator, but you're also sound designer is your credit on it. So when you got the brief for this, what what was the brief like in terms of how accurate it needed to be or what you were supposed to be doing with your sound design?

FF: OK, so when I got the brief for it, I thought to myself first of all, what is the budget?

AW: Before intellectual considerations you have to know the budget!

FF: Yeah.

AW: So once you kind of realised what your budget was, did you have any thoughts about the kind of foley, of what the sounds should be like and how authentic you wanted them to be or did that not really seem important? Because it's a history but it's also kind of feels slightly mythological. And a little bit like a soap opera as well. So was there any thought there about what would people be wearing or what would their footfalls sound like or any what other sounds should we hear or what should we not be able to hear, like phones or cars?

FF: Yeah, absolutely. I would definitely think about the environment. In my mind, I could definitely see that it was set in a village in the South of Nigeria. I could also see that the chiefs would have wrappers around their waist and maybe hold a horse tail, or a traditional staff or something. And they would mostly have their meetings at night, right? With candle lights or lamps and all of that. And you know, not wear sophisticated shoes, right? But there was also an element of it that made me feel like, the successor of the throne wasn't particularly in that village setting. It was somewhere more urban than, you know, where the chiefs were, and so you may also have to take note of that feel, when you are designing such a project.

AW: Yeah. And did you have what you needed to be able to do that or? Was any of that problematic to achieve?

FF: For that particular piece, I could find resources to work with. For that piece I knew where I wanted to feel a bit of tension. I also had to think of, you know, in the normal Nollywood setting, which is our movie industry, what does tension sound like, you know, because that then helps you to design a tension moment in an audio piece because it is easily recognisable by the average Nigerian who has ever watched a Nigerian film.

AW: So what does tension sound like then?

FF: Oh, so do you want me to make the sound, yeah?

AW: Yeah do it!

FF: OK, so from Nigerian movies, when something dramatic is about to happen, like let's say for example, someone's about to just use the line "How dare you?!", you know, in an angry tone, there's always like an impact hit. Dum! And then it stays like it lingers, you know Duh dum!

AW: So musical support?

FF: Yeah. Exactly. And the scores for films in Nollywood at that time also include a lot of like flute-sounding melodies so you could throw that in as well.

AW: Have you worked on any other history programmes and were they any different to that?

FF: So before working on 'Ogiame', I did a lot of just pure fiction. I only started working on more history pieces with *Black Lenses*, which is on that 'Ogiame' project, and

they also have another one about the Oyo women's revolt,³ which is another historical moment in Nigeria, but that one wasn't fictionalised at all. It's just a short piece on what happened and how the women fought for their rights and all of that, and then more recently, you know, still mid-project with the June 12 podcast that's currently being released on a weekly basis. So those are just a few of the history content I've done.

AW: Okay. So the Oyo women's Revolt is straightforward telling a story of something that happened. How is your treatment of the June the 12th podcast, how are you telling that history?

FF: So it's mostly documentary style, it's centred around a man called MKO Abiola, who was, like, supposed to be Nigeria's president at the time that would change everything⁴. And so there's a lot of sound bites from the time: news, people that you know were up against him, people that were for him, some of his campaign materials. Also the host was able to bag interviews with, I think a few of his kids, a few of the people that worked on his campaign. And so there are soundbites online of some of the people who ran against him at that time, still referring to that time and how everything unfolded with the elections. For example, one of the politicians then was Atiku Abubakar, who was at least two or three times our Vice President and is still alive today. So that's the main approach for it. There's also music that flows with it. There's not too much sound design. We just kind of sprinkled that around a little bit, so it's not overwhelming, you know.

AW: So that is what we would expect to hear in the UK as well for a kind of a, you know, a documentary about the past, lots of archives, someone telling the story, narrating it, interviewing people now. But still, of course, there's these dramatic techniques to try to engage the audience or to kind of make them feel something that we want them to feel about it. So it's interesting that you're still saying that little bit of music here and there, but not not the kind of tension music and the flute that you used in 'Ogiame' then.

FF: No. No. No. No. No.

AW: I know that sounds really obvious that you wouldn't do that, but why? Why can't we do that? What would be wrong with doing that?

FF: I don't think that anything would be particularly wrong. I think that if you try to do that with a documentary, erm, it comes off a bit confusing, right? So if, for instance, we've created a script that that is some sort of drama around a political time that is, say, 1993, for instance, and we're telling this in an audio drama style, definitely I would use, those traditional soundtrack style from Nollywood films. But I do think – and I could be wrong and things could change at any time – but

³ <https://soundcloud.com/loopifymedia/oyos-women>

⁴ Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola, known as MKO Abiola, contested the 1993 Nigerian presidential election. Though he was reported to have won, the results were annulled by the military government of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, on the grounds of an urgent security threat (Adebanwi, 2016; Sowande, 2022)

I do think that when you hit play on an audio documentary, there's just things that you expect to hear to keep you in that documentary state of mind. And if you don't hear those things, then it's like, what exactly is the producer trying to achieve? So for me, it's like for documentary, there's always that, what I would call a walk through music or walk through background sound that just tells you that OK here the story is being told and then when a question is being asked, you know it could be a more suspense-filled type of background music. And you know when there's a build-up to like a big reveal, it could have that rising feel until whatever information that you're waiting for is then revealed, right?

AW: So I think this is so interesting that you've got your Nollywood sounds and then you've got your documentary sounds and in some ways they're doing some of the same job, but it's like a different genre of music that we expect. 'Walk through sounds'. Suspense, music - rising feel music in a documentary – totally agree, we do hear it, don't we? And it is a dramatic technique, but the genre has to feel right. So that otherwise we start to go, "oh wait, is this a soap? I don't understand what it is". I think that's so interesting.

You also have set up NaijaPod Hub, which is a platform, a podcasting platform. So this community, what's your aim with that? What do you want to achieve with it?

FF: So when I started it, I just wanted to find people who were interested in and doing the same things I was doing, which is like listening to podcasts and trying to make their own. And so it was just a directory of people who had podcasts. And we then decided that what we would do is freely and openly share information within the community that could help us grow. And that's like the system on which we've been operating since it started, right? Anybody who has a question about podcasting or a challenge that they're facing would come in the group and ask. Or anybody who's been offered some sort of terms and conditions for certain platforms and they don't understand what the terms and conditions mean, they will paste it in the group. And people will always add, oh where can I get a good microphone? What is a good budget for a microphone?

But over time, it's also grown into a space where we're slowly trying to sensitise podcasters and tell them that, you know, yes, you just pick up your mic and record what happened in your day or what happened last week. But you can do more. You know you come from somewhere. That place has a history. That place has a culture. That place has stories. Even your family story is a story that could be relatable by somebody else.

AW: you said before about there's obviously like a lively industry in you know, chatting in the studio kind of podcast, people interviewing people, people having fun, etcetera. I mean, they're really popular in the UK as well. Which is nice, I haven't got anything against it. But if we move on and you were saying before you want them to do more, you want people to think about what else could be achieved if you're, you know, perhaps more ambitious with the way you put stories together, you think about what stories ought to be told that, you know, are not gonna get

told by celebrities chatting... What do you want to see that maybe you're not seeing enough of in Nigeria? What would you love to see more of, hear more of, in Nigerian factual podcasts?

FF: OK, so for me I think. I would just like to hear ...effort, to be honest! I think that because of the ease with which you can put out a podcast episode, people don't do enough. Most of what you hear is just not well researched or well scripted or well produced, you know? So they just record it and just put it out that way, right? I try to let people know that you can rerecord. You can find more information. You can find people who want to share their experiences on that particular project. And take time. So it doesn't even have to be 'oh we're doing this big history or this big audio documentary on how Nigeria came to be', or anything like that. You know, it could be something as simple as... I don't know, the best female shoemakers around the city, you know? Just go around, find people, talk to them about their business, how they built their business. And you, never know, you might even find a more interesting story than you bargained for.

I also don't have anything against like people who do simple conversational podcast, but the challenge you find there as well is everyone has an opinion that is backed with no facts. So even if you are having just a casual conversation about something you saw on social media with a friend, at least make references to... read an article on such topics you know, come from a more informed standpoint. Because what you find really is people just talk a little bit of sense and then ramble on for a long time and lose you a lot during the podcast, like you almost never make it to the end, you know!

AW: So they're a bit self-indulgent.

FF: Exactly.

AW: Right when you started talking about what was interesting and what you wanted to work on, you talked about stories that haven't been told and this sense that there's a gap in stories that have been told in Nigeria. So you know, maybe that also comes to down to where the microphone goes. So if we sit in the studio and we just chat, I wonder what we lose compared to features-type radio where you take the microphone out and you record in different locations and you tell stories through sounds apart from speaking. I mean it is mostly speaking but you do tell stories through other sounds, don't you? I wonder if there would be more, we would learn more about Nigeria through just those other sounds, if there was more of this kind of complex, crafted storytelling that that happened.

FF: Yeah, I do believe that we would. And I know it may sound like asking every podcaster to become a journalist, but I don't see it that way. I'm just asking every podcaster to do better at telling their stories, right? So there are various areas, say just inside Lagos, for instance, I feel like there's a whole different culture in this part of town. And, you know, podcasters are spread around these places. So just imagine that, you know, someone is picking up the everyday occurrences that happen in all of these areas. I used to have a young boy that comes to my

estate to clean, and some of the days he would just, you know, have a conversation with me about stuff that happens where he lives. And trust me, it's the craziest thing. You almost cannot believe that you're in the same space as somebody who's experiencing that. Like sometimes when he speaks, I ask myself, this boy needs therapy!

AW: What kind of thing is he telling you that happens to him?

FF: So there was a particular story he shared with me where he said they were randomly sitting outside in front of his house. And usually the places that he would stay are like what we call Face-Me-I-Face-You. And that basically means that there's a lot of flats where the doors are facing each other and people live, you know, in clusters just like that. And so a fight broke out outside and you know, everybody comes out and is watching, and apparently this guy was shot because he didn't pay 400 Naira worth of beer money that he bought beer for 400 Naira and he didn't pay and the person got so upset and shot him. Just outside. And 400 Naira is like... about 50 pence?

AW: Oh my goodness. and this boy, how old is this boy who saw that happen?

FF: He's like 16, you know? And that's like an example of the stories he would tell. And I'm like, imagine that this boy had a recorder, you know, and he could record some of these things in real time or if I even had the courage to go into a place like that and have conversations with the people who live there.

AW: So you wouldn't feel comfortable going into his estate and recording?

FF: If I wanted to do that, there's certain things I'd have to put in place. I'd have to ensure that I have a local with me. And I wouldn't even hold a mic and point it in someone's face. I would have to maybe carry a microphone in my bag.

AW: Okay.

FF: And you know, once I would appear in such a place, I would definitely look out of place. So I'd have to watch my back so I don't get jumped. And just generally be careful. I mean the story would have to be really, really worth it for me. To do that.

AW: Yeah, it shows, doesn't it, that we need a lot more people that are able to go out and tell these stories in the place where they are. And the people that they live with or the jobs that they do and lots and lots of lots of stories that could be told that aren't.

FF: Yeah it does.

AW: So what histories would you like to tell next? So imagine someone's going to give you the mone and commission you to do it. What's missing, What kind of history documentary would you love to do, either fictionalised or straightforward?

FF: I think there's something I've always been curious about. It's the Ghana Must Go era⁵ in Nigeria and that's because, you know, that entire era left a bag that will always make us remember that that happened. But you know, I don't think anyone has really told that story yet.

AW: So tell me again, the Ghana Moscow [sic] era, did you say? Which is what?

FF: So apparently there was a time in which there were so many Ghanaians in Lagos that they had to ask them to leave. And I personally do not know like the full history of it. And that bag itself has now become some sort of fashion statement piece in some fashion shows nowadays. Where you just see, I'm like this is a Ghana Must Go bag!

AW: So you've seen that bag, but it has this historical resonance that you think maybe people don't know.

FF: Yeah, I think a lot of people don't know.

AW: And what do Ghanaians think if they see that bag?

FF: That is a good question. It's a question that I would love to ask a Ghanaian. And I believe I should be able to find at least one or two persons that would want to tell me what they feel when they see that bag.

Conclusion

Diversity of stories and voices isn't just about retelling Nigerian history on a global stage. It's about whether producers are listening to the polyphony of Nigerian voices and their stories, going out into the suburbs and villages, listening to the sounds and voices that won't be heard in studio-based chatcasts. It's about diversity of programme-makers, who see different things in the past and the present. Taking the microphone out of the studio, researching stories, taking time in the edit – these are not the easy option and they require knowledge and skills as well as time and budget. But we all come from somewhere. That place has a history. That place has a culture. That place has stories.

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⁵ In 1983, Nigeria expelled around 1 million undocumented Ghanaian migrants. They packed their belongings into the large checked woven plastic bags people still use today to carry laundry or goods for hawking, but in Nigeria they are known as Ghana Must Go bags (Lawal, 2019; Orjinmo, 2020)

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