



Steelband CHIEF - NIGERIA

In a four-hour long celebration at the palace of the Alagbara of Agbara, Agbara town in Ogun State, south west Nigeria, two chieftaincy titles were conferred upon panman Bowie Sonnie Bowei, and one upon his wife, Ndudi Bowei. The couple was honored in traditional fashion and in recognition for their integral and ongoing roles in the development of Nigeria's steelband artform, especially within the community where Panland, their organization is set up.

➤ Sonnie Bowei's first title is *The Amuludun of Agbara Land* meaning "the one who makes that land sweet" (signifying his making the land 'sweet' with steelpan music). The second, *The Majeobaje of Oto-Awori Kingdom* is more philosophical, meaning "the good deeds which Sonnie Bowei has done should not be allowed to get spoilt." The title bestowed on Ndudi Bowei,

his wife - who does not play pan but is indispensable in her role as managing director of Panland - is that given to the wife of a Chief - *The Yeye Amuludun of Agbara Land*.

Sonnie Bowei's life now revolves almost entirely around the steelpan and was influenced more than twenty-five years ago when he performed

with the Nigerian Army Steelband. The instruments used by the band were left behind by Trinidad and Tobago's Starlift Steel Orchestra who performed in 1977 at FESTAC (Festival of Arts and Culture) in Nigeria. The bulkier steelpans Starlift used were manufactured on-site at the Nigerian Army Band Corps Headquarters in Lagos, Nigeria, by a Trinidadian sent

ahead for this task. The instruments remained with the Nigerian Army, which eventually sent about nine soldiers to Trinidad to become steelpan musicians. They became the core of what would be the Nigerian Army Steelband which Sonnie Bowei joined during his stint in the military. This was the only steelband in Nigeria until 2001 when Sonnie Bowei's brainchild Xcel Steelband came into being.

The enterprising Nigerian also wanted to see steelbands become the norm, not remain a novelty. So in addition to Xcel Steelband performing around the country, Sonnie Bowei began fostering interest in founding other steelbands. Panland - the umbrella organization for Xcel Steelband, and then the Xcel Steelpan Co., Ltd. - was officially commissioned in response to the need for instruments for Xcel and other fledgling steelbands. Located at km33 Badagry Express Way, Agbara, Lagos, on about one acre of land, Panland houses several facilities including a training school, a steeldrum factory and an electroplating plant for chroming steeldrums. It sports a performance area for Xcel, and boasts both a recording and production studio for the purposes of recording the steelband and producing steelband-related television programs, in addition to accommodation for students training as pannists or pan builders/tuners.



November 2006 saw the first really major initiative (in addition to Panland) of Sonnie Bowei come to fruition - Nigeria's first secondary school national panorama where the Nigerian Navy Secondary school emerged victorious. Another school panorama is planned for November 2008 featuring eight schools. Today there are steelbands in several secondary schools and a few churches - all utilizing instruments manufactured at Panland, and with initial instruction by Sonnie Bowei.

The illustrious pan entrepreneur remains busy, dedicated to introducing steelband further afield in Nigeria. Sonnie Bowei/Panland is also focusing on organizing a steelband competition dubbed the "Forces Panorama" featuring the Nigerian military and paramilitary slated for August 2009. Another panorama involving 36 states and the federal capital in Nigeria is also being planned for 2010 during the Abuja national carnival. These undertakings are joint initiatives with various Nigerian government ministries. **In January the Boweis received the news they were going to be honored. Among the many guests present for the occasion were the representative of Nigeria's former president Olusegun Obasanjo (who, back in 1977 was the military head of state responsible for bringing Starlift Steel Orchestra to Nigeria for FESTAC), the deputy governor, along with the Commissioner of Chieftaincy Affairs - both of Ogun State, numerous kings - all traditional rulers of Igbesa, Ilogbo, Ijanikin, and a host of other notables. Also on hand for the auspicious occasion were pan lovers, relatives, friends and community members. His Royal Majesty, Oba Isaac Gbadebo Agunbiekun, the Alagbara of Agbaraland crowned both Bowie Sonnie Bowei and his wife Ndudi Bowei.**



By Panonthenet
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