

Nothing is New under the Sky: The Fuji Origin of Zah Zhu—Zhe (Posted on Facebook on January 24, 2022)

From the fringes of obscurity, Nigerian hip hop artist named Portable emerged, just a month ago, as the country's newest popular culture sensation with three catchy words, "Zah Zhu--Zeh." What Portable lacks in "respectable" appearance and orderly conduct, he made up for them with the ubiquity of the slang in virtually all domains of Nigerian popular life—from the most expensive exclusive night clubs in Ikoyi to the "anything goes" street parties in Agege.

Not even the House of God is immune to the Zah Zhu—Zeh rave. Gospel singers and Pentecostal pastors are connecting with their congregation, either by secularizing Zah Zhu--Zhe or by using Portable's biography to validate their prosperity preaching. If Portable's life can change from a poor unknown local artist in the backwater of Sango Ota to an international sensation within a few days, the fortunes of their congregation can also change for good—Pentecostal pastors insisted. Muslim clerics, in addition to agreeing with their Christian brethren spent quality time countering one another over the Quranic origin of "Zah Zhu"—either to justify why it should be part of their theological preaching or to fight the "unholy" inscription of the "words of the world" into the sanctuary of piety.

As it is, Portable is not the first artist to sing Zah Zhu. For now, we know that Fuji grandmaster Kollington Ayinla actually promoted the slang in a 1981 album titled "Ironu O Papo." It is still unclear if Kollington Ayinla was the first to use the slang. The constructed social meaning, tonality, and phonetics of "Zah Zhu" in Kollington's and Portable's songs are similar. However, Kollington's Zah Zhu was more specific in that it was associated with the appearance of men who wore mustache. From the 1980s, Kollington led an urban youth counterculture that seized the social landscape with unique appearance, fashion, slangs, and skin bleaching. 1980s and 1990s Kollington epitomized a unique form of postcolonial Yoruba urban masculinity that affirms the inseparability of music from fashion.

Why should we bother about the origin of Zah Zhu? The history of popular culture is replete with creative (re)adaption. New words emerged from the ruins of the past to sound "new" or "original" to the people of the present because every generation tries to own its own creativity by neglecting the toils of the people of the past. The disrespect for creative antecedents is partly responsible for copyright conflict. What is true about Zah Zhu is correct about every aspect of culture, including architecture. Old styles, slangs, technology, fashion, architectural designs, cuisine, and ways of seeing the world would take a slightly different bend from the past. Their (re) adaptation in the present would fit new ideals of class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and constructed meanings or essence of everyday life.

Who should claim Zah Zhu copyright between Portable and Kollington? Did you know that Bonsue and Ropopo, the titles of 1964 singles which shot Ghanaian highlife singer Joe Mensah into fame in Nigeria, were readapted as "Fuji Ropopo" and "Bonsue Fuji" by Kollington and Adewale Ayuba in the 1990s?

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