

Unequal Grace: Dissident Art, Poverty, and Religious Ideologies in Nigeria (Posted on January 5, 2023)

Hate or like him, Portable, one of Nigeria's most controversial hip-hop artists, has just released a thoughtful critique of the contradictions of contemporary religion in Nigeria. Since the 1970s when the oil boom paved the way for a new era of the commoditization of art, many protest artists have emerged to speak truth to power in unmasking the everyday realities of underdevelopment that cannot be dissociated from the entrenchment of foreign religious ideologies. The most popular personality in this regard is Fela Kuti—even though, several other protest artists, like Sunny Okosun and Segun Bucknor, also deserve serious attention in the history of dissident art.

What is the connection between Portable's new song and the long history of protest art in Nigeria? First, there is a common assumption that patronage artists—that is, singers who depend on the goodwill of rich and powerful people, institutions of state power, and the mainstream entertainment industry for survival—cannot be protest or rebel artists. In the paper I presented at the African Studies Association Conference in November 2022, I argued, using the case of Political Fuji, that patronage art can be a resistant art or rebel art—within the frame that deploys indigenous forms and iconographies of non-conformist art to speak to postcolonial politics and the quagmire of underdevelopment.

Again, the need to move from established ideas that limit the conceptualization of expressive forms to “normative” idealization is important here. Hence, it is not enough to say that Fuji, a total patronage art, can also be a dissident or a rebel art. We also need to (re)invent a new paradigm, codify a new language, and recalibrate what constitutes a “rebel” art outside of the common connotations that privilege some artists or genres over others.

For me, Portable has just provided one of the most thoughtful expressions of the contradictions of power, spirituality, and class in a society that sees inequality as “natural,” “normal,” and “just.” He has used his art to speak truth to power, while simultaneously compelling us to peel through multiple layers of violence that the state, through powerful people like Apostle Johnson Suleiman, inflicts on its own people. How many popular hip-hop artists would risk fame and political patronage to do what Portable has just done? Very few. Very very few. Portable could risk the consequences of this dissident performance because he has secured his fan base. He doesn't require mainstream political power and institutions of selective privilege to survive. The trenches are firmly behind him. Because he has defined success in his own terms, he refused the pressure of “normative” stardom that compels his contemporaries to always be in the good books of powerful people, including religious authorities, through which the state exerts power.

Polemics aside, what is not cool about this piece of ingenuity? Is it the composition, the ambiance, the backup, the realness, or the rhythm? The opening vocal of the song is one reason that African-story culture remains alive, albeit in different forms. Storytelling impulses are natural in most African cultures. And a 21st-century eccentric human just reaffirms it, here! Apostoli Must to Hear This!

Yours Sincerely in History,  
Isola Atoko waa gbowo nle

