

Who is a Superstar? Digital Virality versus Street Credibility in Nigerian Popular Culture (Posted on Facebook on September 6, 2022)

Yesterday, Portable, a Nigerian hip hop artist, publicly expressed his displeasure over being sidelined at the Headies, one of Africa's most distinguished entertainment awards ceremonies, held over the weekend. He wasn't recognized, despite his meteoric rise to mainstream popularity since December last year. He lost the Street Artist of the Year Award, his most competitive category. Who is streetier than Portable?-- he queried. For me, the creation of the "Street Artist Award" is problematic because it legitimizes mainstream exclusionary politics. Even this world, in its metaphoric and practical manifestations, is a street in many ways.

The most passive observer of the Nigerian popular culture scene could guess why Portable wasn't recognized. A lot of people think that Portable doesn't fit a normative profile of a cosmopolitan first-rate global-Nigerian hip hop artist. He is not "disciplined," "polished," and "clean" enough to deserve respectability in an industry that defines mainstream inclusion based on "controlled" or "moderated" location-based "excesses" or "vices." As it is, good sound, the most important factor in Nigerian hip hop, is not the only pass into sites of "normative" global stardom.

For many, Portable is the problem of Portable. Since coming into limelight with one of the best sounds in recent Nigerian hip hop history last December, his conducts, including claiming to be the founder of a deadly cult group, public intoxication, thuggery, are turn offs. To cap it all, during the Osun State gubernatorial election in July, he danced, sagged, before a mobile statue of Obafemi Awolowo, one of the founding humans of independent Nigeria. Abomination. What a sacrilege!

There is no single way of interpreting anything. For me, Portable, in this short video, is contesting normative notions of superstardom or contrasting duality of realness and fakeness. A difficult contest over how artists should live in a world of pretenses. Where superstars are made, not necessarily by their real popularity and creativity, but how they live or pretend to live. According to Portable, you are not a superstar if market women, artisans and the police on the physical street cannot recognize you.

Portable presents a contrasting dialectic of seeing and being seen. The contest is, in part, about Street Credibility versus Digital Visibility! His sins, he believes, is not weightier than his fellow artists. Instead of beating people up in public, fellow artists would rather send their bouncers. While his counterparts would smoke weed, womanize, and live in their state of "realness" while their phone camera is off, Portable wants to give his fans an unmediated access into the real world of the street.

Yet, Portable's fight for inclusion and his critique of relevance, visibility, and reward transcends the hip hop world. We see it in virtually all walks of life, where some people and communities are sidelined because they don't fit certain prejudiced profile, based on race, gender, class, ethnicity, location, sexual orientation, religion, performativity, class, and many other paraphernalia of identities.

Yours Sincerely in Fuji,

Emperor Saedo Okola and His International Fuji Lions