

**The Daring Female Voice: Collective Identity and Security in the Spoken Word Poetry
of Women in Northern Nigeria**

By

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Abstract

This paper explores an emerging trend among creatives in Northern Nigeria. Through the spoken word, a daring female voice is emerging. Exploiting the opportunities offered by literary and art festivals across the major cities of the region, these young women are gradually establishing themselves as part and parcel of the cultural producers and critical participants in discursive engagements. It challenges the exclusion of female participation in the public space. This literary tradition is becoming largely dominant and acceptable in a region that has been described as conservative. This creative endeavour has cut across various thematic preoccupations, involving issues that are current in the socio-political sphere of the region. They challenge the status quo; foreground alternatives and ask questions with the intent to reorient society. Their linguistic and ethnic compositions demonstrate the region's multiplicity and heterogeneity that are often taken for granted or ignored. The paper concludes that serious academic scholarship is needed to support and extend the prospect of these performances. It discusses the performances of Hidayat Mahmud, Hassana Shehu and Deborah Johnson in their projection of collective Northern Nigerian identity and problems that spiderweb the region, Nigeria, Africa and black people all over the world. Their performances are very informative and can potentially raise awareness among young people in Northern Nigeria and Nigeria in general.

Key words: Spoken word poetry, young women artist, Northern Nigeria

Introduction

Across Northern Nigeria, there is an emerging trend of female presence and dominance in spoken word poetry. Spoken word poetry has established itself as the window that enables and encourages female participation in the public sphere. While a few decades ago, female presence in the public space has been very much restrictive, especially in Muslim-dominated states, the narrative is fast changing with the female subject forceful arrival into the literary scene via spoken word poetry. The slow but gradual increase in access to Western education

has been an important factor leading to the emergence of these young women as spoken word artists. They are steadily pushing to change the narrative of the region as “educationally backward,” (Ojo 86). Today, society itself has accepted this trend with literary competitions enabled by different sponsors across the region and featuring mainly young female spoken word artists. This trend has recentred the position of womenfolk from “appendages... bent to the whims of their male counterparts,” (Aliyu 60) to participants, shapers and shakers of the major discourse in the region. The turning point could be the appointment of Maryam Bukar Hassan as the United Nations Global Advocate for Peace and Security has become a catalyst for the emergence of new and ambitious spoken word female artists who foreground meaningful public discourse in their arts. These young artists use the spoken word as a vehicle to inscribe the different worldling and multi-perspectival approaches to issues affecting the Northern region and Nigeria in general. Pritika (32) sees this kind of poetry as “a site of re-worlding, where imagination reconstructs the plurality of human experience through forms that evade ideological constraints,” (32). Appropriating the spoken word to themselves, these young women confront some of the dominant narratives built on orthodoxies and ideologies in a region bedevilled by diverse forms of volatility. This way, they inscribe a female voice that has long been neglected and marginalised into the political and social space, engaging with stakeholders in the most direct way possible. Through this medium, they provide multiple perspectives, viewpoints and invite both the political leaders and the larger society into reflection for sustainable solutions largely through self-assessment and self-criticism. These female poets have succeeded in creating a third space where opinions, ideas and positionalities are foregrounded as alternative discourses and counter-hegemonic voices. They exploit a possibility described as “the affirmative and the transgressive potentials of the liminality of the performance... (in which) they believe that social, political, and cultural processes and formations can be perpetuated or changed with words,” (Bauridl 717).

As a medium of performative immediacy, spoken words poetry enables young women to appeal to the affective state of their audience in foregrounding matters of critical importance in society. This is achieved by the tonality central to spoken words that move audience, commanding respect and recognition of the agency of the poet. As Pritika (32) further attested:

The tonality of poetic language does not simply convey emotion, nor does it present a message in the conventional semantic sense. It is not about something rather it

embodies the presence of a presence, one who is involved in it—an affective force that engages the listener on an existential level.

It is not surprising that young women have embraced this artistic form. Verbal art has always been enriched by women in Northern Nigeria. As argued by Usman and Muhammed (102), “traditional Hausa women especially preliterate ones have contributed a great deal to non-formal education, to folklore and to literature. Their art was verbal (oral) and their purpose didactic and moralistic.” Young women who dominate spoken word art today are inheritors of the tradition explained by Usman and Muhammed here. Thus, the power of spoken word poetry lies in its forceful appeal to the listener, an appeal that is persuasive not just by its contents but also by its form, the appeal of a young woman crying for recognition, for action, for reflection in a society battling with numerous challenges. What adds to the force of these performances is what Parmar (79) calls “poetic sophistication” –the embedment of all poetic tropes that compel attention on the part of the listener. In this way, there is an escapable force through which the spoken word poets invite their listener to their subject. As Pritika (34), further maintains, “the voice’s power lies in its inescapability. Unlike vision, which permits detachment, listening involves exposure. The sounding voice—the poetic or divine call—penetrates the listener’s interiority with a force that cannot be resisted.” One unique feature of this sub-genre is that it is written to be performed. Thus, attention is given not just to the tonality and all other literary tropes but also to the bodily presence into the arts. This is why Somers-Willett (51-52) calls it slam poetry, by which she means, “[p]oetry that is created for performance and with the slam audience in mind.”

The paper demonstrates how these public platforms have become community of practice for these artists as they engage in political activism, contesting for political space for the woman in a region still governed by patriarchal tendencies. While the themes of the performances remain heterogeneous, what unites them is their interrogation of oppressive systems within society. In this manner, spoken word poetry sessions are transformed into “poetic communities as critical discursive spaces for interrogating experiences of oppression and marginalization,” (Pritika 42). Spoken word poetry used as a vehicle for political activism, especially during slam performances takes into cognisance such matters affecting the girl-child presented to the audience. Society itself is brought forward to be critiqued for its injustice against the female child. Spoken word poetry in this way becomes a site both for resistance against oppression and for societal self-reflection. It fuses the personal and the political in a process described by Chepp (44) as “intensely personal yet communal artistic

practice ... (capable of) inciting progressive change.” This demonstrates the place of poetry in political contestation. As argued by Faulkner (89), “Poetry is political. Writing, performing, and publishing poetry is important political activity.”

It should be noted that sometimes, female poetry performers often performed before the audience of political elites, including elected and appointed representatives. Thus, the performers often use these avenues to assert political messages, draw attention to issues that require political intervention or present a public request before a listening official. Thus, poetry is utilised as a site for power negotiation, for political exercise and as a medium of exchanges between the leader and the governed. More important, is the situatedness of poetry as a process of foregrounding alternative visions about leadership, about development and human progress in society. The long silenced female voice is routed to the ear of leaders in the region, most of them male. This daring voice presents itself as a reliable alternative in the face of failed measures designed, outlined and executed by male actors in the region. The paper contributes towards addressing the wide gap in the documentation of the contribution of women across varied sectors of Northern Nigerian society. As further maintained by Yakubu, Jumare and Saeed (15) that “the lives of individual heroines and women groups as well as their roles in the development of society from antiquity to the present age, whether in high profile positions or not, has not been sufficiently researched into and documented.”

Research Objectives

Despite the proliferation of spoken word poetry especially among young women in Northern Nigeria, there is yet to be a sustained study that covers this important endeavour. The attention of literary critics on poetic production in the region remains confined to the written form. In other words, traditional literary works that are published continue to enjoy critical attention at the expense of other sub-genres. This paper is intended to draw attention to the emergent but yet unrecognized tradition of spoken words poetry especially as a voice for the expression of the female worldling of Northern Nigerian experiences. The paper transcends the dichotomy between published and non-published works as many important imaginative insights are lost due to lack of access to publication by these young women. In addition, the study foregrounds the aestheticism in the words used in the spoken word poetry and the performative acts that accompany them. Here, the female body becomes a site for the expression of agency; the voice, the bodily movements and tonality are all incorporated as tropes for aesthetic experience, and as tools crafted and utilized to compel the attention of the

listener into the art. Here, identity is not simply expressed but performed. The research is equally interested in the message delivered by these young women on the issues confronting the region, especially those related to gender, politics and security, as important perspective in the collective search for solutions. These perspectives are useful for policy makers since the female voice has always been suppressed in policy making. The paper aims to amplify the voice of these young women in their quest for inclusion in politics and in various social programs carried out by governments across the region.

Spoken word poetry either as a component of public gathering or simply in the context of slam poetry in which the audience vote for the best performer, is becoming an integral feature of public events in Northern Nigeria. The public performance of poetry is also a major part of arts and literary festivals in most of the states in the region. Poetry training schools are gradually emerging where ambitious young women register to learn the crafts of poetry and to prepare to perform in poetry competition across the region. The paper equally draws attention to this creative revolution as the alternative story of a region whose news and stories are recently dominated by chaos instituted by insecurity, poverty, and other indices of under-development.

Methodology

This paper adopts the descriptive method. It analyses spoken word poetry by women in different fora across Northern Nigeria. Through close reading, the poems are analysed for their thematic preoccupation and formal features. Formal features are studied in relation to their closeness and complementarity to the themes. Aestheticism is seen as organically ingrained in the themes. The recurrent themes in these poems are identified and discussed in the paper as they are portrayed by the poets. Three poets are studied in this paper – Hidayah Mahmud, Hassana Shehu, and Deborah Johnson. The two were selected from the 2025 Hausa International Book and Arts Festival (HIBAF) and Deborah Johnson was selected from her performance in the 2023 Hausa International Book and Arts Festival (HIBAF). Their poetry performances were transcribed analysed. Where Hausa language is used, the segments were translated.

Hidayah Mahmud, Regional Identity and Hope in the Face of Adversity

In an untitled poem, Hidayah Mahmud, one of the promising spoken words artists poeticises the resilience, doggedness and undying spirit of hope that punctuate life among Northern Nigerians. The untitled poem confronts the problem of insecurity in the region in an indirect

way. It acknowledges the existence of the problem but dwells much on the celebration of the resilience of the people of Zamfara, Katsina and other places across the region. The poem blends multiple voices; a striking personal voice and a commanding collective voice blend to register the sense of urgency, tense atmosphere and the resilience that characterise the poem. The poem opens with reference to dust and breath which at first may appear unrelated to the poem until the poet persona foregrounds their connection to Northern Nigeria. It goes thus:

Before there was dust
There was breath
Before there was breath
There was longing
And it moves through lights like a secret searching for form somewhere
A place began to dream itself.
It dreamt of a people who would one day rise before dawn
Whose hearts would hold but mercy and fire
Whose hands would like to sculp beauty from pain
And when the dream became fold
The wind was the first to arrive
It circles around the earth
Gathered the sense of rain
And it rested in a place that one day be called AREWA (Untitled poem by Hidaya Mahmud)

In these opening lines, the persona uses suspense to suspend the theme of the poem. It begins with the formation of the region itself, registered in the word “dust” which signifies the movement of the people to the place and their search for life inscribed in the use of the word “breath.” These two words are succeeded by a nostalgia rooted in the use of the word longing. Longing signifies uneasiness and a certain loss for something. This longing is personified, having the ability to move. It moves through lights. This movement is further magnified in the comparison to a secret searching for form in an unidentified space – somewhere. An alliterative effect is foregrounded in the repetition of the consonants /s/ and /f/ in *a secret searching for form somewhere*. After this relatively long suspense, the poem begins to introduce its subject, a people in search of meanings to their predicament. But the people are located in a space and time. It is within that moment of loss that the region begins

to locate itself. The people's anguish is recognised but with a positive view of the future that they will "one day rise before dawn." Dawn stands for hope, for rebirth and a beginning free from difficulties. The agency of the people is registered in their bodily parts; their hearts are a storehouse that would contain mercy and fire. Mercy towards the weak and fire towards the people are destroying the region at the moment when it is too weak to respond. Their hands would be used to turn their anguish into something beautiful and impressive. Those hands would "sculpt beauty from pain." When this happens, "wind" and "rain" would arrive in this place called, 'Arewa' or the North. Winds and rain are necessary ingredients for development, progress and rebirth. Wind pollinates the atmosphere and rain fertilises the soil for sustainable productive. The poem transforms into an *Ngausa* poetry, exploiting English and Hausa languages. The code-switching into Hausa registers the sense of pride that once defines the region. Hausa is one of the thriving African languages that is invoked with pride and a deep sense of identity. When the political structure of Hausaland was largely taken over by the leaders of the 1804 Jihad, many of whom were of the Fulani extraction, Hausa language remains the lingua franca to the point that the later generations of the Fulani leaders lost their linguistic identity, taking over Hausa as their first language. Colonialism strengthened the domination of Hausa over other minority languages in Northern Nigeria. Yakubu, Jumare and Saeed (12) attests to this, arguing that "[A]s the most widely-spoken language in Northern Nigeria, the colonial administration and the British missionaries accorded Hausa a special, although not exclusive status."

Arewa kasa mai albarka

Kamshin ki gauraye yake da iska da daukaka

Arewa mai kahon doki mai dakin sarauta

Uwar jarumai masu bugun zuciya kamar guguwa

Kin shafe karni da karni dauke da daraja

Kin yi ado da mutunci

Kin lulluba da alkhairi

The North a land of blessings
Your scent is full of greatness
The North of horns of horses and palaces
Mother of warriors whose heartbeat resembles a hurricane
You have spent centuries after centuries full of worth
You are adorned with dignity
You are covered with blessings

The persona draws the listener's attention to the identity of Northern Nigeria in the lines above. Its blessings, royalty, majesty, adornment and history are echoed in the words *albarka*, *kamshi*, *doki*, *sarauta*, *jarumai*, etc. The mention of its history reminds one of the region's conquests, on horsebacks, of its neighbours stretching back into centuries. These conquerors are recalled with pride and their exploits are celebrated. These exploits represent honour, valour and commitment to the land. There are repeated references to the idea of *mutunci* or modesty which used to be a defining character of the people in the region. After this historical reflection, the poem goes into specificity, it calls out the names of places and their uniqueness:

From the bones of Kwatarkwashi I rose
Storms becoming spirit
silence becoming theory
I held Zamfara in my palms
Whispers courage to her heels
I stretched towards Sokoto
Watch lights fall softly on the calabashes of our women
In Kano,
I learn the colour of persistence
The coloured hands of men and women baptising clothes until even the sun envies its heels.
In Katsina,
I watched centuries of horsemen ride centuries of dust their takubba singing the reign/realms of kings who once commanded rain.
In Zaria,
I slept in the courtyard. I listened to the walls recite wisdom through their cracks.

Sai na je na Argungu (Then I went to Argungu)

Na ji ganguna suna kiran maza su fito daga ruwa (I heard drums calling men to come out of water)

Sautinsu yana girgiza kasa (Their sound was shaking the earth/floor)

Yana tayar da tarihin da bai taba mutuwa (raising a history that would never be forgotten)

The poem makes Kwatarkwashi its starting point. The ancient town is said to have bones. Kwatarkwashi is famous for its impressive stones that surround the town. The poet persona uses bones to mean stones because Kwatarkwashi is protected and supported by these stones, performing the same functions as bones in the human body. The replacement enables the persona to establish more connection with the listener who will identify with bones first before stones. The lines, /storms becoming spirit/, /silence becoming theory/ appear for their rhythmical qualities, intensifying the musical nature of the composition. Sokoto is the biggest city after Zamfara, and it also struggles with challenges of insecurity. Thus, the poet persona says she stretches into Sokoto from Zamfara. In Sokoto, women with their calabashes are mentioned in an atmosphere that registers tranquillity and prosperity. Kano is recalled for the allure of its commerce, with its ancient dye pits where men and women engaged in baptising clothes in amazing colours until the sun itself becomes envious. Katsina is mentioned for its military campaigns led by warrior kings powerful enough to command rain. Zaria is another ancient city that establishes itself as a repository of wisdom that strengthens the city wall. Argungu is recalled for its own history of fishing festival that survives the test of time. This history, the poem asserts, can never be erased. This is defiance rooted in a future full of prospects. No matter what the terrorists do, the region will rise.

For I am the North

The spirit of what Is and what has Been

The beats before music forms rhythms, the songs before a voice sung the best at dawn

I am a symphony of dust and dignity

Of faceless faith and fearless fire

Of a people who do not just eat but live but make survival looks like poetry

In the concluding lines, the poem emphasises the undying spirit of the region rooted in its vast culture and a determination to turn adversity into something positive. The emphasis is registered in the line /For I am the North/ which sutures all the qualities foregrounded in the preceding lines. It coupled its past and the present. It is a region known for its music, for its songs and symphony that are grounded in a spirit of the past and the present. The creativity of the people is registered not just in the resilience but their creative culture to confront adversity and exploit it for something positive. The cultured mind of the people is rooted in

the belief that the people do not live to survive but turn survival into poetry. The persona employs poetic licence in the alliterative effect of *dust* and *dignity*, *faceless faith* and *fearless fire*. These do not have any meaningful presence. They are there for their poetic effects.

Hassana Shehu, Collective Identity and Shared Pride

Another interesting poetry performance is by Hassana Shehu. Her poem, also untitled, points to the proud heritage of Northern Nigeria.

AREWA...

A tapestry rich and rare

A unique identity we proudly wear

Shaped and modelled in ancient louvre

In harmony with rhythms with our spirit selves

The drumbeat of kalangu

A trumpet cry

Algaita tunes acres

Bringing ancestors nigh

In Shehu's composition, the overall objective is to foreground a homogeneous identity rooted in the beauty, glamour and dignity inscribed in the history of Northern Nigeria. Her performance equally foregrounds a refusal to be defeated by the present realities of the region. The history of scholarship and boom in business is recalled in the region's ancient louvre. It corresponds with the peace and tranquillity of the region which together blend with the people organically, something the artist refers to as /harmony with rhythms with our spirit selves/. References are made to drums and double reed wind instrument that signify the rich and rare tapestry that the poem mentions in its beginning. These lines present the region as prosperous, stable and progressing. It buries the region's existential problems by simply ignoring them, ignoring the present and taking refuge in the past that was peaceful, tranquil and prosperous. This evocation of the past continues:

Our tradition endures adorned with pride

A legacy and heritage we try to abide

Bango na dauke take da tarahi masu abun mamaki (my wall is built with amazing history)

Jarumta gare ni wane kai ka kawo farmaki (I am brave who are you to attack me?)

Shin ba ka da labarin 'yar Bayajidda zaki (Are you not aware of the daughter of Bayajidda the lion?)

Jikanya ga Aminatu Sarauniya (Granddaughter to Queen Aminatu)

Fagen karamci gwanaye (In terms of generosity I am an expert)

Mun maida na waje ba bako ba (we have transformed a stranger into our own)
Uwa ce ga Hausa bakwai (I am the mother of seven Hausa states)
Call me the daughter of noble hands
Nurtured by a mother, birthed in many lands
AREWA, a culture I hold dear
Of legacy, of friends, and of pride.

This collective identity construction continues in the lines above. There are references to tradition, pride, legacy, and heritage. The region's wall is full of history that is amazing and beautiful. It is populated by warriors. The legendary Bayajidda, the King of Daura, whose children established the Hausa states is mentioned with the personified North referred to as his granddaughter. Queen Aminatu is another legend from the region who ruled Zaria city and brought many lands under her rulership. She is also the region's grandmother. With this background, the persona connects the region with its people who are generous and hospitable to the strangers. They form the region's history by creating the Hausa seven states. The nobility of the region is informed by its history of conquer, of glorious days and the legacy left by ancestors. These are enough reasons for Northerners to be proud of themselves. These are legacies to be recalled and appreciated. The present challenges in terms of economy, security and political instability would be overcome when the past is revisited and lessons from it are utilised effectively.

What is discernible in these two spoken words artists is the compelling desire to foreground a regional identity that could unite the people and strengthen them to confront the challenges of the day. These artists resist direct address to the challenges but throw them impliedly into the poetic embellishment. A reader must be aware of the socio-political and economic contexts of these productions to fully understand the point at which these two artists speak. Like their poet counterpart, Maria Ajima, they believe that their works "can be harmonized to foster peaceful coexistence, not necessarily throwing the nation into pogroms orchestrated by inter-tribal and religious frictions," (Afolayan 142). In these two performers, the region's division is downplayed for a collective unity informed by shared history, legacy, heritage and tradition. At a time when the region is faced with ethno-religious crises, calls registered in the lines above can be a uniting force for a better, safer and more buoyant Northern Nigeria.

Deborah Johnson, Collective Pain and Self Introspection

One spoken word artist whose performance speaks so directly to the socio-political issue of Northern Nigeria is Deborah Johnson. Born and raised in Kaduna city, she performs so

eloquently of the rot that Northern Nigeria and Nigeria have become. Her spoken word poetry challenges the poor leadership of the country that has enabled insecurity to thrive. She makes references to the Boko Haram abduction of Chibok girls, child soldiers and the lack of adequate pressure on government. In terms of form and style, Deborah uses the English language only in her composition. Her voice, unlike that of Hidayat and Hassana, is shrill. It signifies agony, pain of humiliation and resignation. She decides to confront the challenges of the region head-on. She embodies the region's multiplicity in terms of its ethnic and religious composition. There are cultures, traditions and religions in addition to Islam that make up Northern Nigeria. Deborah begins with reference to the Chibok girls who are referred to as angels for the pain, dehumanisation and abuse they face in the hands of their captors. In April 2014, 276 girls were kidnapped from Chibok, a town 185 kilometres southwest of Maiduguri. She begins by referring to these girls:

Somewhere in my homeland...

96 fallen angels are trapped in earth

Wings clipped, brains washed

Body shifted/sifted from girl to teenager to mother

Breeding factories...

15th of April 2014

276 girls were stolen by terrorists from the one place sworn to protect them – school

The performance opens with the disturbing news of the abduction of Chibok girls from their school. It refers to the remaining girls who are not rescued or released since the abduction. They are fallen angels trapped in earth – in the dark world of Boko Haram members. Their wings – the opportunity to get education and fly high in the social structure are now clipped, broken. This is why they fall. Their brains are washed, thinking distorted by the marauding beasts who abducted them and made them part of the organisation through brainwashing. This has resulted into their immature transition from their girlish status to teenagers and women, sex objects of their abductors who reduced them to breeding factories, bearing children to become future commanders of the group. In the performer's voice we can hear pain, agony, shame and despair. It was shameful and humiliating because the girls were abducted from their school. School is supposed to give them protection, to nurture them, to liberate them from the shackles of ignorance and negative social and cultural expectations. In effect, their quest for security – body, financial, social and even gender – is what takes them to school in the first place. Unfortunately, the school has failed in this important civilisational mission. It has failed these girls who have been plunged into an experience more abysmal

than what they ran away from when they decide to get educated. In an attempt to sound emphatic and nuanced, the performer turns to the abductors themselves who are themselves not as villains as they appear to be. The performance continues:

The kidnappers themselves were victims
Boys as young as 12
Violence indoctrinated into their veins,
Rendering them less human, more machines
Africa's first robots

The lines above are not meant to justify the abduction of Chibok girls. They are a stark reminder that the abductors are sign of rottenness that has come to define the country. Researchers such as Gavin (220) and Folade (43) have portrayed the demographic composition of Boko Haram members. The crisis appears at a scene with young people making 70% of the entire population. Thus, the abductors themselves are supposed to be in school. Unfortunately, they are not just out of school, but they also made sure that others too are denied the opportunity. Boys aged 12 are involved in kidnapping and abduction are indicative of misgovernance at family and governmental levels. These boys have been abandoned and neglected by the system. It is this neglect that made them easy recruits for the terror group. What is tragic is that these boys are almost irredeemably lost because they know nothing but violence. Violence has been transplanted into their veins through indoctrination. This transformation has made them less human, and they are more of robots. They are robotic because they cannot think and they cannot tell the wrong from the right. In this era of competition in robot making and Artificial Intelligence, these lost souls are Africa's first robots – destructive, lost and unthinking beings.

Before the shooting in America
There was Chibok
We learnt how to scream at empty classrooms
Feeling helpless with guns against kids with skins like night
Over the years...
Many of these angels went back to God
Slept six feet beneath salvation
Some saw salvation
We have made them a part of our history
Embalm them on stone
Speak of them in the past tense

As though those 96 angels left will never fly away again

Their mothers are empty shells of hope, petrified by waiting

The performance rears back to its subject, the Chibok girls. They are reintroduced from the prism of globalisation. Thanks to globalisation, brutal experiences are shared across the world in real time. This is why shooting in America can get responses from people in Northern Nigeria. This is why the artist reminds her audience that they are responding to a shooting event in America but they seem to have forgotten other tragic events in their own enclave. Chibok is one of such tragic events when Nigerians and other people outside the country scream helplessly at empty classrooms. The artist proceeds to provide information on what happened after the abduction, an unresolved question that is relevant today as it was on 15th April 2014. Some of the girls died and were buried, sleeping six feet beneath salvation. Poetic experience is established in the alliteration that occurs in the repetition of the /s/ sound in slept and six; /some saw salvation/. These are now part of our history; a dark history that has destroyed the reputation of the region. There are others who are lost and unaccounted for. They may not be dead, but we seem to believe that they will never resurface, they will never be found and brought back. This is why their parents have despaired ever since. They have become empty shells because there is nothing they can do but hope. The poem suddenly becomes Pan-African, weaving different ethos of Africa's tragedies as it relates to its relationship with the West. It does this by revisiting the slavery and how it affects African collective experience.

We have held onto slavery like it was the last shred of our identity

Yes, the ocean is a blanket of muffled screams of my brethren

Yes, they watered the West with their blood dripping from whip cans we would never forget

The reference to slavery recalls the beginning of Africa's social, economic and political woes. It is an experience that devastated the continent and has continued to affect it because the conditions set by slavery are still here today. The artist notices how all Africans and how black people have held onto slavery as a uniting force, a collective identity that ties together a whole race of people. There is recollections of the millions of lives lost to the Atlantic Ocean. More painful is the disrespect from the beneficiaries of slavery who have refused to apologise let alone pay reparations for the centuries of damages wrought on the continent. However, for the artist, this is not enough. The conversation on slavery must be complemented with genuine introspection on inimical treatment that we have inflicted on each other as Africans.

But now

My brothers kill their brothers for being a different tribe, colour, religion and country than them
Racism is a name of a family tree
Its younger brothers tribalism and colourism
Uncle xenophobia and Afrophobia
Sit around at a dinner table eating up our unity
We self-righteously shout 'black lives matter'
On the internet
Like we are any different
Black lives only matter when they are across the sea
Too far away to tell what their tribe, colour or country is
We are pots calling kettles black
As if fire differentiates one from the other
The racist white man calls you a nigger and doesn't care where you are from in Africa

The performance takes another turn. It becomes self-reflexive, reminding the audience the evils it has done on itself. The ethnic and religious differences have been exploited as tools of division across Africans. These divisions upon which Africans discriminate against each other are in the family tree of racism. The performance questions our own intervention on what happens to Africans outside the continent even though we mete the same treatment on one another on the continent. It calls for deep reflection on the way we harm ourselves. If Africans cannot treat their kins with dignity, they lose the moral grounds to interfere with what happens to their kins outside the continent. It calls for unity across Africans because the racism they face has no considerations over their nationality or ethnic backgrounds. The poem reverts to the fate of abducted Chibok girls and the emotional and psychological pain inflicted on the people.

Some days, I wonder what those falling angels told those children they were forced to bear
The sounds of bullets suffice as lullabies
Did they ever try to smother their babies with something a little stronger than love, thought maybe
God forgive these black bodies so that we can blend into the earth...

The lines above go back to the conditions of the Chibok girls and their immature transformation to motherhood through rapes perpetrated by their abductors. These suffer not just from the abductions but the forced motherhood. They have to nurture children they are forced to bear. They have to provide motherly care to their children amidst the sounds of gunfire that lull their children to sleep. God is invoked to forgive these people reduced to bodies by their abductors.

See,

I don't want to fight the Ghanaians over whose jollof rice is better

I want them to help us answer why we will be the executioner's act upon our necks

I want us to talk to the sibling countries

Who are visa free for white men

Like Cortis with legs wide open

But slap travel restrictions handcuffs on other Africans seeking refuge

The burden on this black skin is a weight of the world

In its back-and-forth style, the performance rears back to the Pan African campaigns that provided in the previous lines. In its call for African unity, the performance dispels all forms of competition even the flimsiest as the best jollof debate between Nigerians and Ghanaians. Instead of fighting and competing against one another, calls are made for common front that will identify the ways African destroy themselves. By extension, the persona wants to investigate the relationship among African countries who open their borders to Europeans but restrict fellow Africans from gaining entry. The speaker regrets how black people have been compelled to bear the burden of the whole world.

See

Black panther cannot save this version of Wakanda

I want those 96 angels left to go home

And not die as a folktale we struggle to remember

I want Africa to stop being the snake eating itself from its tail.

Please don't shoot (with hands raised in surrender)

I look like you

See,

I am your brother, too.

The performance ends in a tone that is difficult to delineate. It registers despair that even in the imaginative and creative space, the black panther cannot save this Wakanda. The tone changes to hope and prayer that these 96 fallen angels be allowed to go home. They must not die and be forgotten like a folktale. The speaker further hopes that Africa will stop destroying itself. In its closure, the performance demonstrates the insecurity that has now invaded the land that the performer surrenders, reminding the attacker that he is his brother and should be spared.

Conclusion

Across Northern Nigeria, spoken word poetry has been established as an important avenue that young women use to engage with issues of public, national and international interest.

Young women foreground their own understanding on matters of the moment. They use their poetry performance to reignite collective identity across regional, national, international and racial groups. They sometimes challenge the status, draw attention to the nuanced nature of topics under discussion and invite the listeners into self-reflexive activity. These young women use the floor of their performances to engage with authority on the important matters affecting the region. What is interesting is that they use these platforms to join debates and provide their own perspectives in society's quest for solutions to many of its intractable problems. There are many unexplored talents in these groups of women. They are a literary intervention that should be carefully studied by academics and researchers on literature and culture across Northern Nigeria.

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