

Contemporary Realities in Nigerian Spoken Word Poetry

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Abstract

Poetry uses words to recreate imaginative, emotional or intellectual experience of the poet in such a way that it arouses similar experience in the mind of its listener or reader. African poetry, in addition to this, is a poetry characterised by its immense dedication to the promotion of its people's heritage and its profound ability at imagining their realities. In this regard, Nigerian spoken word poetry is nothing but a full-fledged subgenre of African poetry just like its page counterpart. Spoken word poetry is poetry that is written but meant for the stage. This poetry is fully actualized only when it is performed. This paper investigates selected spoken word poems by award winning Nigerian spoken word poets: Efe Paul Azino, Dike Chukwumerije, Wana Udobang, and Titilope Sonuga. The themes of the poems will be the focus of the study. The paper concludes that Nigerian spoken word poetry is a subgenre of Nigerian poetry, as it explores contemporary realities and shares the same vision with its page counterpart, to unite Nigerians and make Nigeria a better place.

Keywords: contemporary realities, themes, page poetry, spoken word poetry,

Introduction

Poetry, just like other arts, has gone through significant and refreshing transformations and innovations. It has expanded its forms from the performance-based oral poetry to the written/page poetry. These changes have however negatively affected the performance aspect of poetry, giving it an inferior position. In the 20th Century, there emerged poets who renewed interest in the earlier emphasis of poetry on sound and performance.

Basil Bunting and Louis Zukofsky (in Makin, 1999), noted that there was a need to link poetry with drama and other performing arts (3). According to them, this would give back to poetry its earlier life and popularity (3). It is these campaigns that saw proliferation of such poetry and the term performance poetry and 'spoken word' poetry (SPW) were therefore coined to describe the live and audio recordings of poems.

Spoken Word Poetry and its Oral Roots.

Before the advent of the print media, oral poetry was the most dominant form of poetry. The composition of an oral poem is started before its performance and completed during its performance. ore an audience. With the coming of writing and printing, a new form of poetry that was delivered on page emerged. This drastically changed the poet's role from that of a performer to a source of written texts for his/her audience's

private reading. The written/page poetry went on to gain prominence with its predecessor being relegated as oral literature where it is generally viewed, especially by young elites, as a lesser poetry compared to the written one. Oral poetry was greatly affected by education. Now that people are able to read and write they began consuming poetry during their private moments. Also, the migration of its audience from the rural setting, where oral poetry was majorly performed to the urban society which had little or no setting for oral literature, led to the decline of interest in acquiring the skill of oral performance by youthful apprentices. This left only the elderly to carry on the aged old tradition with the little audience they could gather.

In the 21st century, with its advancement in technology, new media and new social realities saw the widespread use of poetry from texts and anthologies to a wider audience. Oral poetry capitalised on this incredible opportunity. It now has the means to reach a much wider audience through online transmissions. Besides going to libraries and bookshops to access poetry, one may now visit a cyber cafe or use his/her internet-enabled phone to download, upload favourite poems, enjoy their performances, and interact with performers and audience.

Spoken word poetry (SPW) is poetry

written on page but composed for performance purpose. According to “Spoken Word Guidelines”,

Spoken Word is poetry that has been written to be performed and is based on the interaction between the performer and the audience. When Spoken Word is performed, it gives a greater insight and a humanised experience which forces the audience not only to engage in the content of the poem but also the person behind the words. Spoken Word is storytelling and can be identified through its conversational tone and dialogical nature with the audience. Spoken Word combines poetry with theatre and movement to create a dynamic and engaging experience which draws the audience into the world of the poet (2).

Nigerian spoken word poetry is a contemporary form of Nigerian poetry with performance at its core. However, unlike the ancient oral poetry, Nigerian spoken word poetry is first written on page then comes to life on stage. Also, it is not majorly concerned with traditional themes but with contemporary issues, realities and private emotions. Spoken word poetry fuses orality with written language, and it can only be fully appreciated when performed on stage. Just like other forms of poetry, spoken word poetry draws on poetic devices like metaphor, imagery, allusion etc. to enhance its writing. In addition to these poetic devices, spoken word poetry makes elaborate use of gestures, facial expressions, expressive tone and pace to develop and give poems new and deeper meaning (Omajuwa and Kaine 42).

Spoken word poetry as Contemporary Nigerian Poetry.

Contemporary Nigerian Poetry, according to Eyga refers to:

the poetry of the young, maturing Nigerian writers writing today who may not have reached the peak of their writing careers...An exploration of the poetry of this generation shows that the poets, like their predecessors (those

who wrote before them and are still writing along with them), subscribe to the African philosophy of social commitment in art. (4)

Spoken word poetry, as is common with all Nigerian literature genres, is inspired by the social, economic and political realities in Nigeria, both present and past. According to Uwasomba, “the writer, irrespective of his/her logical persuasion, has a duty to discharge to the society and to self” (196). Adetuyi affirms this when he writes that:

In most Nigerian literature, social issues and the way people relate are some of the major subjects, be it in drama, fiction or poetry. How individuals interact in love, friendship, and their relationships with the larger society are the sine qua non of literature. People's interaction in society develop the ethics and morality of a society. Politics is usually integrated into a people's culture and everybody is in one way or the other affected by politics. Political practices are part of a people's culture. Thus politics forms an important thematic preoccupation for Nigerian writers. (22)

This duty the poet ascribes to himself sets his artistic foot into the canon of socially committed literature which has been the mainstream of African literature, whether written or oral. This paper investigates the selected spoken word poems to show how their themes also represent the social, economic and political realities in Nigeria, just like their page counterpart has done.

Studied Poets and their Careers

Efe Paul Azino is widely regarded as one of Nigeria's leading Spoken Word Poets. He is the founder and director of the Lagos International Poetry Festival and the director of poetry at the annual Lagos Book and Art Festival. He has featured in a number of local and international poetry events like Anthill 2.0, Taruwa, Aké Arts and Book Festival, Kaduna Book and Arts Festival, Lagos Art and Book Festival, Johannesburg Arts Festival, Lights Camera Africa Film Festival, the Berlin Poetry Festival, Spier International Poetry Festival Cape Town, Taipei Poetry Festival, and The British Council Festival, Lagos. He is the producer of the spoken word

poetry theatre production Finding Home. In 2015, he published his first collection of poetry titled For Broken Men Who Cross Often, published by Farafina Books. His second poetry collection, The Tragedy of Falling with Laughter Stuck in Your Throat, is due out in 2018. His poems have been translated into Afrikaans, French, German, and Mandarin. He is a fellow of the Osiwa Poetry Residency.

Dike Chukwumerije is a Nigerian spoken word and performance poetry artist. He is also an award-winning author who has published eight books. His novel, *Urichindere* won the 2013 Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Prize for Prose Fiction. He is the founder of a poetry theatre production company Made in Nigeria. He is Nigeria's most prolific performance poet with three successful performance poetry videos. He has won several poetry grand slams in Nigeria including the maiden edition of the African Poet (Nigeria) Grand Slam competition. Since 2013, he has hosted and directed the annual Night of the Spoken Word (NSW) performance poetry event.

Wana Udobang is a Nigeria-based freelance journalist, poet and filmmaker. She has worked with the BBC Radio4, BBC World Service and Nigeria's Inspiration 92.3 FM . Her work has appeared on Aljazeera, The Guardian, Africa Report, Ozy, Index on Censorship, News Deeply, Yahoo and Brittle Paper. In 2016, she was long listed for the One World Media award in the Women's rights in Africa award category. She is a recipient of the International Reporting Project (IRP) Fellowship, IWMF Great Lakes Reporting Fellowship, the Gabriel Garcia Marquez Fellowship in Cultural Journalism, and the Religion News Foundation grant. She has two poetry albums, "Dirty Laundry" and her sophomore album "In memory of forgetting".

Titilope Sonuga (born in Lagos) is a Nigerian-Canadian poet, writer, actor and performance artist. She has taken the stage at festivals in Lagos, New York, Edmonton and Toronto among others. Her first collection of poems, *Down To Earth*, won the 2011 Emerging Writer Award of the Canadian Authors' Association. Her Spoken Word album "Mother Tongue" was released in 2013. In 2015 she performed at the Inauguration of Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari.

Contemporary realities in Nigerian spoken word poetry

The contemporary issues addressed in spoken word poetry are varied and vast. However, the major themes studied in this paper are: corruption/injustice, politics, quest for greener pasture, ethnic discrimination and feminism.

Corruption/Injustice

Efe Paul Azino's poem "Justice has been kidnapped in my country" moans the level of injustice in the Nigerian judiciary system. With the use of the image of "kidnap", Azino creates a deeper understanding of how injustice is perpetuated in the country. Justice is denied the citizenry by a few well-placed individuals in the government but made available to those who can afford it. These are those who are "well connected" or influential in society.

Justice has been kidnapped in my country,

no one's willing to pay her ransom.

She was absent at the tribunal when the verdict was given,
so the marauders were declared winners,

though we know the votes were phantom... (1-5)

The poet laments that injustice has taken a firm grip on society. He went further by trying to trace its origin in Nigeria. He observes that justice was missing when Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida (IBB) was Nigeria's Head of State (1985-1993) because that was when the prominent lawyer Dele Giwa was murdered. It was also absent during the reign of General Sani Abacha (1993-1998) during which the Niger Delta activist, Kenule Beeson "Ken" Saro-Wiwa, was hanged after marred investigations and trials.

She was missing in the years of IBB

when Dele Giwa was blown to pieces.

She was absent when Abacha reigned
and Justice Auta hit the gavel,

Saro Wiwa was hung (to hell with the critics). (18-22)

After tracing the history of injustice in Nigeria, the poet concludes that justice has been missing since the inception of Nigeria, before the military took justice by the gun and democracy sold it for dollars. Justice has always favoured the rich and well-placed politicians and government officials while seeing to it that the common man receives more than his own share of justice.

Believe now, justice has been lost since
Nigeria was found.

A friend said he saw her at Mile 12, lately,
when a pickpocket was mobbed and set ablaze,
maybe that was Justice, but I'm still not sure,
because I see sticky-fingered politicians
and government officials roaming free, even on TV,
sitting in the assemblies where they make laws. (37-43)

Ironically, the Nigerian Police Force, “the protector of the people”, are part of the “conspiracy” to kidnap justice. The police have been known to collect bribes and worst of all they brutalise innocent citizens in an attempt to bull them into silence.

Justice has been kidnapped
somebody please call the police!
But my friends mock my naiveté...
(9-11)

The activists and youths, with the aid of social media have tried to expose incidences of injustice but has failed to achieve the targeted aim of system transformation. The poet points out that their failure may lie in the fact that they have been used as tools by their leaders to gain wealth and foster a cordial relationship with politicians and government officials. This is typically done by union leaders who embark on industrial action which are often called off after a few days without achieving the desired results because the corrupt union leaders have been hosted to a feast and their pockets lined with money to appease them.

Activists, youths: blog, tweet,
even march on the streets in protest for you,
but I don't trust them
for, while their leaders get famous,
I still don't see Justice free among us. (49-53)

Finally, the poet moans that even he could not ransom justice because he will not pay the price which is probably his life. So just like the politicians, corrupt government officials, everybody is guilty in the kidnapping of justice.

Politics

Politicians in Nigeria have tried all the tricks in the books, and some more, to remain in power. Candidates are given direct tickets to general elections by leaders in political parties. In the 2022 party primaries, Nigerians witnessed a new low. Politicians bought nomination forms at exorbitant cost. Not only that, they outrightly bribed the

delegates. It was a battle of the richest and most desperate. Given the inflation rate of naira, \$1=414 naira (Central Bank of Nigeria) as at the time of the 2022 party primaries, ahead of the 2023 general elections, the politicians paid the delegates in dollars. During the PDP presidential primaries, Ayitogo Nasir of Premium Times reported that top aspirants allegedly paid delegates between \$10,000 to \$20,000 each. This disenfranchised millions of Nigerians who had the ambition to contest in the primaries for a chance in the general elections. The end result is that Nigerians are denied the opportunity of picking their choice as they must vote for the candidates the bribed delegates present. This is the point Dike Chukwumerije makes with his poem “Belly Politics”.

From the title of the poem, it is evident what type of politics Nigerians practice. Politics that is selfishly motivated. To put it in simple pidgin, they are after their own “stomach”. Painfully, the handpicked candidates have nothing to offer. Candidates who are seasoned, educated, cultured, visionary, youthful and energetic, are never chosen.

Adamu Magaji- candidate
Will he win?- No
He makes fine speeches- True... (1-3)

Shola Balogun- candidate
Will he win?- No
A bright, young man- If you say so
Impressive records, he's full of zeal...(13-16)

Those chosen are recycled politicians who have made zero impact in the system. The candidates picked are rich, foolish, gullible and greedy, qualities that make it easy to manipulate them.

Belly politics! Belly politics!
Then who will win?...
Alhaji Kudi- Alhaji Kudi?
The illiterate?- Belly politics!...
Shake a hand here, shake a leg there
Alhaji Kudi, he might win

Dr Mazi Ego Juru N'Akpa- What?
That...that buffoon?- Belly politics!
That imbecile...that...that...oh why?...
Shake a hand there, shake a leg there

Mazi Ego Juru N'Akpa, he might win (19-36)

By using names drawn from the three major tribes, the poet shows that the above practice is common all over Nigeria. The names Adamu Magaji and Alhaji Kudi represent the Hausas; Chika Ugonna and Mazi Ego Juru N'Akpa are Igbos while Shola Balogun and Alhaji Burukutu represent the Yoruba.

These political practices make Nigeria an object of ridicule. However, those who benefit from such, in keeping with their selfish attitude, do not care:

Belly politics is a strange thing
It raises our buttocks to the eyes of a laughing world
So long as those are rich, fleshy buttocks, well oiled
and tender
Who cares?... (44-47)

Quest for Greener Pasture

Efe Paul Azino's poems "Our Mother Died Expecting" and "Dreams die in Malaysia" exposes trails youth go through in their quest for a better life. "Our Mother Died Expecting" laments how a mother, parents generally, dies without reaping the fruits of her labour in her children. Parents invest so much in order to secure a brighter future for their children in hope that when they, the parents, are old, their children will be better equipped to take care of them.

We have come from the city's aspirational end
to redeem the dust she left behind.
She, from that tribe of women who traded sweat,
to buy us access into spaces that promised
a portion of the city where desire lived. (9-11)

The poet explains that the lives of children are a continuation of their parents'. So, their success is their parents' also.

All mother required was that we came back,
in city-sleek machines to whisk her away in full glare
of eyes and hearts awaiting their turn. (12-14)

The expectations of the mother are short-lived. All these hopes and dreams are frustrated and dashed not by the children's laziness or nonchalant attitude but because of the hostile nature of the city. Even a university certificate is unless in the face of all the city's obstacles.

In the city, we rode storms.
We rode them continually,

leaving us too tired to reap the golden fruits of
opportunity
they said the city grew.

We hustled to the drumbeats of our mother's
expectations,
modern day messiahs bearing the cross of an entire
lineage,
on our university-certified shoulders, charged with
redemption. (21-217).

In "Dreams die in Malaysia", Efe Paul Azino exposes the fate of youths who seek greener pastures outside the shores of Nigeria. In this poem, Azino employs the image "Malaysia", a place that has become the hub of youth seeking "fast money. When these youths have made money; they are welcomed with so much "happiness" and "celebrations. Nobody bothers to investigate how this money was made.

The one which held the antidote to a poverty,
three generations deep, the poverty I fled from
less than a decade ago. They welcomed me,
then with generous grins and backslapping,
scrambled to retrieve my luggage. (6-10)

These sorts of celebrations and expectations fuel the youth's greed. He returns to Malaysia to carry out more crimes "Greed soared on the wings of familial respect/and expectations, /So I climbed on a stack of plastic cards/And reached for bigger things" (32-34).

The poet goes on to list some of the criminal acts they engage in. They sell Syabu, also known as glass, ice, crystal, speed, and blue diamond. All these are the colloquial names for a psycho-stimulant drug called Amphetamine. They smuggle Syabu into Malaysia in food packets "8kg of Syabu. Doha to Sepang. But the food packets/wouldn't be silent..." (36-37). Unfortunately for them, the "food packets" always give them away and they are arrested. Thus, they engage in other 'safer crimes' and become skimmer by cloning credit cards, selling their kidneys and prostituting their bodies, "...We cloned cards and ferried substances/ sold our kidneys and hawked the rivers of pleasure/between our legs..." (38-40).

The possible end of these youths is either they return happily to their families or they are deported. Not mentioning the fact that some die on the quest without their families' knowledge,

“...Some will always/ return to the laughter and respect of family/ others will come back someday, like me, in an oblong panel” (41-43).

Ethnic Discrimination

Ethnic discrimination, tribalism or nepotism play a major role in social, political life of Nigerians. These factors has adversely affected the decision making mechanism of the nation, leading to favoritism of one tribe or another. It is the divisive tendencies of cultural differences that Dike Chukwumerije condemns in his poems “The Wall and the Bridge” and “The Revolution has no tribe”.

In “The Wall and the Bridge”, Chukwumerije criticizes discrimination based on cultural differences. By comparing discrimination by the white man towards the black man and discrimination among Nigerians, he reveals the ironical and dehumanizing aspects of ethnic discrimination. To the poet, it is “righteous” to be angry when insulted by a white man.

If a white man turned and called me, nigger
My blood would boil in righteous anger
For the evil of discrimination is
clearly established
Where a white man tries to treat
me like rubbish. (1-8)

However, the poet rages at the fact that a Nigerian will deny his fellow countryman privileges which he is entitled to. He gives examples of three common area where such happens: education, marriage and property. In the educational sector, admission priority is given to indigenes of the town/state where the educational institution is located. Non indigenes are only considered when there is space left. This also happens during employment.

If my brother passed JAMB but
can't go to Uni
Because he is Tiv and he's not
Kanuri
And UniMaid has a quota for its
catchment area
so, he must go back to Benue or
wait one more year. (33-40)

This division along ethic lines is also reflected on one's choice of spouse. Getting married to someone who is not from your tribe or speaks the same language with you is generally frowned at.

This is more serious with the girl child because a girl getting married to a different tribe is considered ‘gone forever’, especially her children.

If it's okay to say it's not okay to marry
Someone just because they are Kalabari
And that every tribe must have
its own side
Are we not practising...
Apartheid? (41-48)

This discrimination is so deep that one cannot purchase a piece of land with his hard-earned money just because he is not a ‘son of the soil’,

If you cannot buy land unless
you're a native
And can't find work unless
you're a native
How can we then say, we're not primitive. (49-50)

The poet reveals the irony in the situation by telling how a white man treats a Nigerian who is not even a citizen of his country. He enjoys the freedom of becoming a citizen, marrying whosoever he fancies, going to school and even owning a house. He enjoys more privileges than he allows a fellow Nigerian back home.

Yet, you go to New York and get their passport
Then settle wherever, however you want
You stand there and fight for equality
But come back and start to use ethnicity (55-62)

It is baffling that a man who discriminates against another because of culture/tribe, will turn around and cry that he is being insulted or oppressed by a white man because of his race.

To this end, the poet warn that the “fire” of discrimination will keep burning until we are courageous enough to overlook culture diversity and stop insisting on minor details like “surname and accents”. He proclaims that before culture human beings were already in existence “No culture is older than human being”, so it should not be given priority over human life and value.

Chukwumerije's poem “The revolution has no tribe” exposes the futility of ethnic discrimination. It does not give immunity over natural and man-made disasters,

Do you not know that poverty is not an Ijaw man?
He will not spare the rest of us and afflict only the
Ishan...
Do you not know that corruption is not from Nekede?

He will not hear that lfe had no dealings with Modakeke...
Do you not know that HIV/AIDS is not Kanuri
He will not select his victims and kill only the Fulani...
Do you not know that our enemies have no face?
They are indigenes no state, they come from no place...
(1-14)

He uses the images of the “iroko” and “obeche” trees to represent those who believe they are the strongest and weakest tribes respectively. The poet warns that all will perish if they refuse to unite and seek a better future together.

Feminism

Wana Udobang’s “This is not a Feminist poem” was inspired by Efe Paul Azino’s famous “This is not a political poem”. The poem “This is not a Feminist poem” wishes not to be labelled so that it will not sound so far-fetched, like a theory. It does not intend to discuss issues that feminists have protested fervently against, issues like fairness during “funeral rites” gender equality as it concerns “daughter’s non-inheritance” The poem presents strong, vivid images of the realities in women’s lives. It intends to bring to the fore what happens to the women who dwell around us.

The first reality which Udobang narrates is that of widowhood. Here the poet hails the woman on how she is able to think and act ahead by overcoming her grief before “ her love takes his last breath”. She does this because she has a greater battle to face with her in-laws.

It is a woman learning to trade possessions before her lover takes his last breath.

She will never get the chance to say goodbye because those final hours are one match-point away from the backstroke of ravenous relatives.

You see where we come from, widows learn to bid their dead farewell even before they are lowered into the ground.

Because grief requires time and time is a luxury she cannot afford.

But I don’t want to talk about funeral rites or a daughter’s non-inheritance

Because this is not a feminist poem (4-11)

The poet laments about the health consequences of child-bride. The bride births a child but suffers health challenges because she is still a child and her body has not developed enough for

motherhood. Medically, when an under aged girl get pregnant and goes through labour, she is likely to develop fistula. Fistula is a hole between the vagina and rectum or bladder that is caused by prolonged labour, this results in incontinent of urine, faeces, or both, “It is a thirteen-year-old leaking between her legs. She cannot will her waste to stop because culture/ demands that babies must birth babies even before they are whole (12-13). This practice is very common in the North.

In the case of sexual abuse, Udobang puts the blame on the parents. The poet accuses the parent of indifferent and sometimes selfish about things that happen to their girl-child,

It is the landlord who pays off your father to clench his teeth over choking tears for what his son had done to you.

And your daddy knows that homelessness is too close to home so he washes of your shame with a sponge, dabs your wounds with scripture hoping these words will in turn douse the stench of the breath, erase the handprints that form maps across your skin, and glue together all that is broken of you. (21-26)

The poet also moans that the girl-child is just a means to an end for anyone who possesses her. She does not own herself or her destiny. All that she possesses or has achieved is meaningless if she is not married, i.e. to have somebody to lord her. The poet concludes by reiterating that the poem is not meant to incite a protest but rather to enlighten us on some of the realities of being a woman.

Titilope Sonuga’s poem “Becoming” inspires courage in women who are facing subjugation and repression. The poet believes that the woman is stronger than she thinks. Everything that happens to a woman only makes her stronger “each scar is a bandage of honour/ every misstep is a dance/waiting to happen” (15-16). It is the ideology that the poet brings to the fore in “Becoming”.

When the world unravels before you
and even your dreams are crumbling
stones
when everything you dare to touch
is set on fire
and all around you is ash and smoke
remember this
rock bottom

is a perfect place for rebuilding (1-8)
When a woman faces trials and tribulations, she is just “learning the complicated language/ of forgiveness/ the intricate lesson of the universe” (18-20). All these make her the woman she will become. Nothing can break, damage or destroy a woman because she was “born for this sort of heavy lifting”

However, the poet warns that the only thing capable of undoing a woman is lack of self-love, as this is both her strength and weakness. Although a woman is powerful enough to endure a great deal, she should not forget to love herself for

who and what she is “Loving yourself without shame/ is the most important thing/ you will ever have to fight for” (27-29).

Conclusion

The thematic preoccupation of the studied poems has shown that spoken word poetry is nothing but a subgenre of contemporary Nigerian poetry. Just like the poetry of Remi Raj, Obari Gomba, Lola Shoneyin, Maik Nwosu, Ogaga Ifowodo etc., spoken word poets are great writers, and social reformers. They have maintained the tradition of being town criers who bear messages to the people, opposing the ills of the society.

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