

Content and Techniques in Contemporary Nigerian Spoken Word Poetry

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Abstract

Over the years, spoken word poetry has been largely relegated in favour of written poetry. Spoken word poetry, poetry whose origin can be traced to oral tradition, is fast becoming a favourite of the youths. This paper investigated the content and techniques in Dike Chukwumerije's "Okwesilieze", "The Revolution has no Tribe" and Titilope Sonuga's "Icarus" and "Take back the Night". The selection of these poets was informed by the fact that they are not only headline spoken word poets but they also organize workshops, seminars and events where they mentor and teach young aspiring poets. This paper investigated their poetry in light that their works will greatly influence the poetry of their protégées. The paper investigates the content of the poems and poetic techniques employed in them. The study reveals that the content and form of the studied poems are inspired by everyday experiences. The study concludes that the realistic and simple nature of its content and form has made spoken word popular among the Nigerian youths.

Keywords: Nigerian poetry, contemporary "oral" poetry, spoken word poetry.

Introduction

The tradition of Nigerian spoken-word poetry is deeply rooted in oral tradition. Ushie (2001) confirms this when he traced the beginning of Nigerian poetry to oral tradition in various Nigerian cultures. Eleveld (2003) defines spoken word as "poetry designed to be performed in front of an audience" (p. xiii). Spoken word is becoming a force in Nigerian contemporary literature.

Although the term "spoken word" was not popular until the twentieth century, the quest to develop poetry primarily for performance dates back to ancient times when poems like Homer's "Odyssey" was recited for entertainment. Poetry was later fused into theatrical events where forms such as ode were accompanied by music. Years later, oral poetry birthed a variety of forms and styles. For example, chants were incorporated into church sermons, hymns etc. Even when these varieties became very popular, the greater influence of page/written poetry converted many listeners to solitary readers.

Contemporary "Oral" Poetry: Spoken-word poetry

In the 20th Century, there emerged poets who renewed the earlier emphasis of poetry on sound. Basil Bunting and Louis Zukofsky (cited in Makin, 1999) noted that there is a need to link

poetry with drama and other performing arts. According to them, this would give back to poetry its earlier life and popularity. It was these campaigns that saw proliferation of such poetry and the term 'spoken word' poetry was, therefore, coined in the 1980s to describe live audio recordings of poems. 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 uses the technique of storytelling and its tone is conversational and dialogical in nature. 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.

The speech act, and its performance, allows the spoken word poet to employ devices not found on the page. The poet modulates his voice through the use of volume, accent, intonation, pitch and other speech mechanism devices, music is not left out. The poet's body is another device he uses to intensify his poetry. His dressing, gestures and body language also contribute to the success of his performance.



These devices are the distinguishing features of spoken word poetry. All these do not diminish the words of the poet, it instead enhances them.

As old as spoken word is, it has been reinvented in a new and more dynamic form as practised today. The poets of spoken-word poetry are drawn from all walks of life unlike the traditional oral poetry which is rendered by highly trained professionals. Another difference between these two is the venue of performance. Spoken-word poetry is typically performed in public places for the pleasure of all while traditional oral poetry is performed in festive environment for the elites.

Somers-Willett (2009) affirms that it is the performative quality of spoken word poetry that differentiates it from straightforward oral communication. She also notes that the appreciation of spoken word poetry does not involve only hearing but, in fact, all of the senses, with the poem's enactment becoming more important than its recitation. Somers-Willett (2009) takes the position that spoken word poetry functions both in writing and on stage.

Regardless of its roots in oral tradition, some scholars also see certain beginnings of modern spoken word poetry in the 19th century, when public recitation of poems by performers other than the author enjoyed widespread popularity. However, the most important movements that advanced the development and globalization of spoken word poetry were the Harlem Renaissance, the Beat Generation, Russell Simmons's Def. Poetry and Slam poetry. As Hall (n.d.) writes, "while each of these movements emerged from its own historical context, both transformed popular understandings of poetry". The term spoken word serves as an umbrella term for a variety of oral performance-oriented poetry practices like dub poetry, slam poetry, hip hop poetry, Def poetry and performance art. It also has strong ties to post-modern performance, and monologue theatre, as well as jazz, blues, and folk music. In a basic sense, Spoken Word is a rhythmic poetry. It is performed enthusiastically, rather than just read plainly.

The 21st Century with its technological

advancement and new social realities facilitated the globalization of spoken word poetry as it spread from texts and anthologies to a wider audience through public performances, television, radio and online transmissions and social media. Besides going to libraries and bookshops to access poetry, one may now use his/her internet-enabled computers and phones to not only download and upload favourite poems but also participate by commenting on these videos.

Also, over the years, there have been an increasing number of 'spoken word' poetry venues, events and festivals in Nigeria. It is in such venues that a paying audience gathers to listen to various poets as they perform their poems. These usually mammoth gatherings of poetry enthusiasts sit for hours as they relish performance after performance from different poets and other 'open mic'. Examples of such 'spoken word' poetry events in Nigeria are WORD UP (Spoken Word Poetry and Soul Music Event), War of Words (Slam Poetry Competition), Word Up Talk Series (a Seminar/Workshop on the Business of Spoken Word Poetry in Nigeria), Freedom Hall: Night of spoken words, Goethe Institut Lagos, Night with Stars Lagos, Book Jam and Poetry Slam, Night of the Spoken Word, Rouge Poetry, Lagos International Poetry Festival, and online site: www.wordup411ng.com etc.

Contemporary Nigerian Spoken Word Poetry: Content

The content of Contemporary spoken word poetry just like its written counterpart, Contemporary Nigerian poetry, reflects the realities of the Nigerian people and its commitment in restoring order in the society. Contemporary poets in Nigeria are known as lamenters. They lament the deterioration of the Nigerian society and the indifferent attitude of its people. Their poems elucidate the failures of the country and its leaders. This makes the

In "**Okwesilieze**" (an Igbo word which literally means, "He is supposed to be king"), Chukwumerije satirizes the economic situation of Nigeria. Beginning from the title of the poem, "Okwesilieze", Nigeria is described as a country with the qualities of greatness but is not great. It



is common knowledge that Nigeria is said to be the “giant of Africa” but in reality smaller countries like South Africa and Ghana are economically more stable. It is this aspect of Nigeria that the poet ridicules in the following lines:

Today, I saw a mysterious thing
A thing that vexed me to my very soul
I saw the black man dressed like a king
But crouching in the shadows with a
begging bowl

The lines above make it clear that Nigeria’s show of wealth is only superficial. Nigeria is only “like a king” but in reality is poor and in debt “with a/begging bowl”. While Nigeria is ‘begging’, ‘his children were starving’.

Chukwumerije believes that Nigeria is a country so richly blessed with natural resources. However, he wonders why the Nigerian people have chosen to suffer. He exposes the foolishness inherent in the Nigerian situation that Nigeria has everything but they are not aware of it. They have an abundance of food: “His children were starving in the fields of/cassava”. They have medicine “Dying of sickness palm kernel could/cure”. The oil extracted from the palm kernel nut could serve medicinal purposes. It is applied all over the body to prevent cold and pneumonia. One can drink it to protect against or neutralize the effect of poison. It is also used to lubricate the rectal passage in children who are constipated. Nigerians are “Homeless” when they have “rock and timber” with which they can build a home.

Nigeria is a land filled with young, strong, intelligent and vibrant individuals whom it can use to build a great nation but these individuals are on the streets searching for work with many turning to a life of crime. This has contributed to the crippling of the economy of the society. The following lines describe Nigeria’s human recourses:

But lying in the dust, crying at my feet,
His leg were sturdy like the Iroko
His forest were rich and teeming with
game
His muscles rippled like the proud
Zambezi

I told him, “Get up”, but he said, “I
amlame”

The poet identifies the source of black man poverty and it is none other than the “a fat man” with whom he share a bed. Here the poet expresses how hopeless the situation of Nigeria is. There are people who have taken the “treasure” of the nation for their own. These are people it trusted so much that they share a “bed”. The poet also identifies the solution to the problem of Nigeria. However, he is optimistic that Nigeria will able to “get up”:

But he was sharing a sleeping mat with
poverty

His poverty is a fat man with bulging
stomach

Lying on his back side, beside a pot of
treasure

This knowledge was all he seemed to
lack:

That he could get up and make his own
future.

Chukwumerije’s “**Revolution has no Tribe**” can be read as his call to the Nigerian people to rescue Nigeria from its current state as seen in “Okwesilieze”. In “Revolution has no Tribe”, the poet makes it clear that everything that happens to one person Nigeria, happens to all. To him Nigeria will only get of the wood when everybody unities:

Do you know that poverty is not an
Ijawman?

He will not spare the rest of us and
afflictonly the Ishan

He will step over the river and come
across the border

So, when the drums sound let everybody
answer.

Be it a man-made problem “corruption” or natural problem “HIV/AIDS”, the poet is optimistic that Nigeria will conquer all as long as “everybody/answer” when the problem arises. It is the duty of the citizens to save their country since “if the boat capsizes every one of us/ will go under. So let no say “I am an Iroko” or “I am an Obeche”, meaning that we are from different ethnicity, because “when the forest is burning” it will not ask the type of tree you are. Likewise



when problems befall Nigeria, all its citizens will suffer irrespective of their tribes: Our differences will not prevent us from/ perishing together.

Titilope Sonuga's "**Icarus**" is named after a Greek mythological figure who flew too close to sun and melted the wax which holds his man-made wings together, he fell and drowned in the Aegean Sea. "Icarus" laments the nonchalant attitude of people toward those who have been burnt to death. The poem opens with the poet narrating an event which happens in the past:

I saw a man on fire
a gasoline soaked rubber tire around his neck
arms failing like he was trying to fly
but I was too young to differentiate
the horror from spectacle

This image is quite common in Nigeria where instead of handing over thieves to the police authorities; they are set ablaze on the streets as a spectacle and warning. The poet's personae here is too young to understand the situation, all she sees is a man being burnt alive by his fellow man. This scene not only horrifies her but she is also surprised that nobody wants to help, "nobody brought water?" "Shhh, don't look at it" is what she is told "we'll be past this soon". And she moans "how life went on around him".

The poet is disappointed at people's indifference towards incidents of plane crashes: "we shield our eyes from the flames/but our country is on fire". She likens an airplane to "wings made only of feather and wax", an image which reflects their fragility. "...greed mouths continue/ to blow on embers" on airplane after airplane and all that is done are:

...cast another prayer to God
...plan another memorial
another tribute song
another cautionary tale
another reminder to do better next

After that, life goes on. No one remember the families of the crash victims, "a 3 year old /who will never know her mother/whole families wiped out in one swoop". Attempts were not made to investigate the cause of the crash. All will be forgot:

our memories will betray us yet again

it will tell us
"Shhh... don't look at it
we'll be past it soon"

Then there is the "sound of exploding church" which also becomes normal, "another Sunday morning" by the Boko Haram terrorist group and the killing of Christians by the Muslims. When all these tragedies are summed up, it's become "our legacy".

Sonuga's "**Take Back the Night**" is a poem inspired by an international event and a non-profit organization, Take Back the Night. The organization's goal is to end sexual assault, relationship and domestic violence in all forms. The event which began in America in the 1970s has gone globally. Hundreds of events are held in over 30 countries annually. The event began as a way to protest the violence women experience in the night and its purpose is to speak out against this violence and to create community awareness as a preventive measure against future violence. Within the context of the event, the word "night" means to express the fear that many women feel in the night.

African women, in general, have been brought up to believe that she is worth nothing and that every bad thing that happens to her is entirely her fault. It is this ideology that Sonuga's "Take Back the Night" attacks. Night time has its own advantage and beauty but to a woman, it is a nightmare. Night time stirs the feeling of fear in a woman:

She becomes an unarmed soldier
in a wide open battle field
in a war she never asked for
"She" has been brainwashed into being
afraid of the night "from the day she
entered the world". From childhood, rules
have been" drilled into her head"
Don't talk to strangers
Do not enter their car
Never leave your drink unattended

Unfortunately obeying these rules will not guarantee that a woman will not be attacked in the night. Whether the rules were observed or not, the woman is always found guilty of instigates the attack:

They will ask you how short your skirt



was
Did you smile a little too wide?
Hold his gaze a little too long?
Maybe your body was saying yes
even when your mouth whispered no
In this poem, Sonuga exposes the most
painful truth about sexual violence against, they
sometimes perpetuate by someone we know and
trust:

This is the simple truth
Sometimes strangers are not strangers
at all
They are our brothers
a friend
a friend of a friend
a good Samaritan

In the above lines, Sonuga laments that not only
should one be weary of strangers but also of a
family members and friends. It is extremely
frightening to realize that one is not even safe at
home. The situation is pushed to a new extreme
when Sonuga educates that violence do not
necessarily happen in strange and distance places.
They happen:

on the same route we take every single
day
around the corner
from our front door
inside our own homes
where shadow turns friends
into predators

This poem is therefore Sonuga's way of
sensitizing women on the need to be weary of
both friends and foes.

Poetic Techniques

Due to its intended oral transmission
nature, the form of spoken word poetry is
influenced by the needs of its audience especially
considering the fact that they may be hearing it
for the first time. Unlike the written poetry where
the reader is at leisure to flip the pages back and
forth, when listening to a spoken word poem, one
has to get everything while it is in progress.

1. Storytelling: aware of the above condition,
majority of spoken word poets are forced to be
somehow "prosaic" in their poems so that their
listening can follow the flow and easily get the

message. This technique, enjambment, allows
one to continue the sense of a line over to another
line beyond the metrical unit. This allows the
stream of meaning and thought from one line to
another. Though this tends to make the poem
prose-like, it is necessary for the poems
intelligibility.

Chukwumerije's "Okwesilieze" and
"Revolution has no Tribe" exhibits this prose-like
structure. Sample from "Okwesilieze:

Today, I saw a mysterious thing
A thing that vexed me to my very
soul
I saw the black man dressed like
a king
But crouching in the shadows
with a begging bowl
His children were starving in
fields of cassava
Dying of diseases the palm
kernel could cure
Homeless in a land of rock and
timber
"Why are you begging?"- He
said, "I am poor"

When the lines are joined, the poem reads as
follows:\

- Today, I saw a mysterious thing/ A thing
that vexed me to my very soul/I saw the
black man dressed like a king/ But
crouching in the shadows with a begging
bowl/His children were starving in fields
of cassava/ Dying of diseases the palm
kernel could cure. / Homeless in a land of
rock and timber/"Why are you
begging?"- He said, "I am poor"

From Sonuga's "Take Back the Night":

Somewhere a woman
Is taking an inventory of herself
of breasts
of hips
of thighs
her eyes are scanning the streets
doing the mathematics
of how many hurried steps
she will need to take
to arrive home intact

When joined:



- Somewhere a woman/is taking an inventory of herself/of breasts/of hips/of thighs/her eyes are scanning the streets/doing the mathematics/of how many hurried steps/she will need to take/to arrive home intact

Sonuga's "Icarus":

I once saw a man on
fire
a gasoline soaked rubber tire around his
neck
arms flailing like he was trying to fly
but I was too young to differentiate
horror from spectacle
so I asked my mother
why
with all the people that surrounded him
nobody brought water?
She was navigating a different kind of
spectacle
in the bumper to bumper traffic
that lay before us
she told me
"Shhh, don't look at it
we'll be past this soon"

Once again, the pseudo-poetic lines can be joined to read as:

- I once saw a man on fire/ a gasoline soaked rubber tire around his neck/ arms flailing like he was trying to fly/ but I was too young to differentiate/ horror from spectacle/so I asked my mother/ why/with all the people that surrounded him/ nobody brought water?/ She was navigating a different kind of spectacle/ in the bumper to bumper traffic/ that lay before us/she told me/ "Shhh, don't look at it/ we'll be past this soon"

It is therefore wise to conclude that the above lines defy the traditional sense of poetic lines as rhythmic and thematic units. A continuous reading of the poems will make them sound like a narrations or storytelling.

2. Figures of speech: although spoken word poets diction is relatively easy to understand, compared to the written poetry, it still employs some figure of speech to help in create clear and concrete images.

a. Metaphor: In "Okwesilieze", Chukwumerije uses the metaphor of a "black man" to represent Africa. When a "black man" is "dressed like a king" it becomes easier to see that it is Nigeria that is being described here. Nigeria is the only African country described in sure manner, with the title "giant", but does not deserve the title. In "Revolution has no Tribe", the trees "iroko" and "obeche" are used to represent the strongest/highly regarded and the weakest/cheap. This image helps the audience to understand that everybody is needed for the revolution.

Sonuga also employed metaphors in her poems. In "Icarus" where she mourns the death of people in the hands of fire, she used the image of the burning thief to represent the intentional burning of a criminal. The image of "Royal Jordanian Airlines, 171..." is used to represent the unintentional burning of innocent people. Finally, she used the image of the "exploding church" to refer to the intentional burning of innocent people. In "Take Back the Night", "night" connotes danger and violence.

b. Simile: Chukwumerije and Sonuga made use of simile in their poems to create concrete images which their audience will be able to visualize. In "Okwesilieze", Chukwumerije used the simile "dressed like a king" to create the image of how expensively the "black man" was dressed. Sonuga's "Icarus", "arms flailing like he was trying to fly" creates a mental picture of how the man ran frantically around beating his body, trying to put out the fire.

3. Repetition: this is a technique used expressively in spoken word poetry. The repetition of words, phrases, or image helps to hold a particular thought or image throughout the poem. It can also help extend a thought or image beyond its original meaning. The purpose of this technique is to help the writer make a point or exaggerate a point. This feature is shared by all



the poems studied in this paper. In Chukwumerije's "Okwesilieze", "Today, I saw a mysterious thing" and "I saw the black man dressed like a king" are both repeated four (4) times. In "Revolution has no Tribe", "Do you not know that" and "So, when the drums sound, let everybody answer" are both repeated four (4) times. And the structure "Do not say...when the forest is burning" is repeated twice. "Shhh, don't look at it/we'll be past this soon" is repeated twice in Sonuga's "Icarus"

Conclusion

In recent years we have witnessed the exponential growth of spoken word poetry in popular culture. In this paper, the following observations were made: both contemporary Nigerian spoken word poetry and contemporary Nigerian written poetry cannot be separated from the events of its time. The poets studied in this

paper use their poems to comment and correct some fundamental issues germane to the Nigerian society. However, their approach differs from that of their written counterpart. The spoken word poetry because of its oral nature gives the poems a conversational tone. The content of the poems are approached from a general perspective so that even an audience with a primary school leaving certificate can appreciate the poems. This approach is necessary because the audience are not disposed to make research on the content of the poem while it is being performed. The poems are presented in very simple diction to facilitate easy and fast comprehension of words. Where metaphors and similes are used, they are not cryptic. Repetition is used not only to make emphasis but also to aid remembrance as a spoken word poem when performed cannot be redone.

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