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Slam Poetry in Chad

A Space of Belonging in an Environment of Violence and Repression

Mirjam de Bruijn

■ **ABSTRACT:** How can we explain the increasing popularity of slam poetry among youth in societies colored by long histories of conflict and political repression? This article explores this question for the rise of slam poetry in Chad, since 2014, a conflict-ridden country with an authoritarian regime and deep poverty, characteristics of a society in duress. In Francophone Africa we can speak of a slam poetry movement, where slam as a form of expression and the organization of (inter)national festivals has become a space of belonging for young people in Africa who must cope with societies in duress. The article is the result of my long engagement with the slam scene in francophone Africa.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Chad, duress, popular art, slam poetry, youth

Slam poetry is today a recognized artistic discipline for youth in Chad. The culture comprises the poets and their poems, united in slam associations, festivals, and workshops. The slam scene in Chad has produced well-recognized slammers in Africa, and the first (pan-)Africa Cup of Slam Poetry (CASP) was held in N'Djamena in November 2018; hence, the country has written history for the development of slam poetry in the continent.

Slam poetry developed as a form of youth art, first in Chicago, before it spread globally (Smith and Kraynak 2009), including to Africa, where slam as a genre was gaining terrain in the 2010s (Buthelezi et al. 2014; Sacks 2020; van den Bosch 2018). As youth art, slam poetry is also a quest for identity and agency that need not be critical of society per se, but it often takes this turn, and it certainly does so among West and Central African slam artists (de Bruijn and Oudenhuisen 2021; Englund 2021; Muhammad and Gonzalez 2016; Somers-Willet 2005). With a sketch of the development, mainly in the youth circles, of slam poetry and its texts in Chad, I attempt to determine whether slam has become “an art that aims to produce a new perception of the world and therefore create a commitment to its transformation” (Rancière; see Horst and Grabska, this issue) and hence whether slam poets play a role in the “conscientisation” of society (Barber 1987), whereby the poets and their poems “not only emerge out of historical change, but also participate in it, embody it and comment upon it” (Barber 2018: 3).

Slam is a public form of resistance that uncovers the perceived wrongs in society and, as such, creates a space for the youth (Chepp 2012). However, it is not only “voice”—that is, not only the spoken / the text that shows political engagement and morality. And we, as researchers, should also not overdo the “search” for this “protest” *voice* of the artist. In a study on music in Guinea, Nomi David argues that this search for “voice” overlooks the fact that “silence” can be a way to “protest,” as there is often no other way in a conflict and repressive situation. “Their [the Guinea



musicians] choices, shaped by a number of economic, political, and cultural factors, may not always conform to our own political sensibilities and desires, but nonetheless we need to understand them” (2014: 25). Chadian history is, like the history of Guinea, one of civil war and long periods of violence, authoritarian regimes, repression, and poverty. It is a society in duress (de Bruijn and Both 2018).

The slam poets in Chad that I encountered share a discourse that involves a critique of what their society has become after so many years of repression and conflict. In this article I am especially interested in how the slam scene has grown into a contestation and symbiosis with the society in duress, a society that has had to live with its long history of war, conflict, repression, and poverty. This situation for the youth is an arena of contestation and at the same time fear and powerlessness. A central question is how slam poetry constitutes an expressive art for Chadian youth, whereby they break through the silence and create a voice that helps them navigate through their society in duress.

To understand the position of slam poets in Chad, I will describe the duress society that Chad is, the relation with the youth, the way slam poetry has gained space, and how this has become important for the spread of slam over francophone West and Central Africa. Slam has become a movement in itself, but it is driven by individuals. I present two slam poets and their itineraries, to gain insight into the drivers that lead individuals to embrace slam as an art form to convey a message of social change and conscientization of the youth. The youth who practice slam are among those who have followed higher education, and often belong to (lower) middle-class families, but not only so. They join the critical voices in their society.

Didier Lalaye, aka Croquemort, can be considered the founder of today’s slam scene in Chad. His story will be the central thread in this article, as I followed him and experienced the growth of the slam scene in Chad by doing so. I will describe the slam festivals as they appeared from 2014 to 2020¹ as “academies of critical thinking and learning,” in which individuals are formed in the arts form and in which a social network is constructed in a context of violence and oppression. The itinerary of Djemi represents that of people who come out of this “academy” and are the carriers of the slam movement forward into the coming decades. Djemi started to slam in public in the year of the pan-African CASP festival held in 2018 in N’Djamena. The article ends with a reflection on the slam scene as a space of belonging and social change for youth living in contexts of duress.

Inclusive Ethnography

Inclusive ethnography transcends the borders between the observer and the observed (Szabó and Troyer 2017). Such an embedding in “the field” can develop into a deep participation that leads to friendships—in short, to a life lived. Instead of being an outsider-cum-researcher trying to get to grips with the slam scene, I became an integrated participant. Being embedded in the field as an active participant who observes, an observant participant (see Moeran 2017; Wilkinson 2017), is a way to gain access to the so-called backstage, especially with artists who are used to be front stage and do not easily share their private lives with others.

I became part of the organization of slam in Chad and in Africa. I was and still am part of the organizing team of CASP and a fundraiser for all kind of other activities. During these festivals, I became an active observant participant: presenting opening speeches and, for instance, acting as head of the jury of CASP 2018. My participation in the slam scene began in 2013, when I met Didier Lalaye, aka Croquemort, who allowed me to participate in his adventure to set up the slam scene in Chad. I contacted Didier when I was searching for informants for a research proj-

ect to understand the ways people in Chad deal with their country's long history of violence and conflict. I was particularly interested in the role of young artists in protest movements in Chad.² Croquemort was one of the voluntary informants, a relationship that developed gradually into one of creative cocreation (Faier and Roger 2014). We worked on his biography for three years and published a first multimodal product on his life on the platform *Bridging Humanities* (see de Bruijn 2017a; cf. de Bruijn and Lalaye 2016). I also engaged with other slam poets and with members of the various youth movements and artists who together formed the youth environment in which slam is grounded. Part of this environment is the formation/teaching of young talents. Djemi was certainly one of them. Djemi, who was interested in text and poetry long before she encountered slam poetry, is certainly also a "product" of the African/Chadian slam academy. My relationship with Djemi is not of a long duration, but I gained her trust and friendship because we were both participating in this world of slammers.

The growth of the slam scene in Chad was part of my embedding in the slam world. The festivals can exist only with support from outside, which often involves an arduous search for funding. My presence in the scene mediated the fundraising. For instance, I mediated relationships with the Dutch embassy in Chad, which still funds the festivals. We combined the festival of 2017 with an academic conference that was part of my research program. The experience of organizing and making the festival internationally known finally also brought the *coupe de slam* to N'Djamena. Whether such changes would have happened without my involvement is difficult to say, but it is clear that my presence and research changed the itinerary of the festivals. It also opened an avenue for me to discover and research the slam scene and youth culture in Chad and Africa.

During this research, as observant participant I became a cocreator not only of the research but also of the slam festivals. And these festivals became the inspiration for the start of the foundation Voice4Thought, which embraced the slam scene as one of its promotional networks and of which I have been director since its beginning in 2016. Didier Lalaye has been the artistic director since its start. As such, we have collaborated since 2017 in the organization of festivals and learning events in West and Central Africa.³ This created a space that was no longer related only to research and myself being the "searcher" for knowledge; it became a space of experience for all of us. In this space I could move freely, learn more about slam, and meet other slam poets who consider me part of the endeavor in my various roles and sometimes in a position as a confidante. It has been a real pleasure so far to participate in this world. I have never hidden the fact that I am a researcher and that publishing on the slam scene was for me an important aspect of our collaboration. As public artists, they have no problem about becoming part of these publications, and they do not wish to remain anonymous.

Repression, Conflict, War: The Components of Chadian Society in Duress

People in Chad live in a culture of duress, a normalized situation of conflict and violence that is part of daily life (de Bruijn 2018; de Bruijn and Both 2018). Postcolonial history is a history of civil war, conflict, and regime changes through coup d'états, resulting in regimes of repression and nondevelopment, in structural violence. From 1990 to April 2021, Idriss Déby held power in the country. The power vacuum that his death in April 2021 could have created was avoided with the "coup" of one of his younger sons, the general Mahamat Déby. Idriss Déby ousted Hissein Habré from power also in a coup d'état with the promise of installing democracy in Chad. So far, however, the democratic values are a pipedream and a future plan that is overruled by a systematic neglect of the needs of the population, resulting in poverty for many (Tubiana and

Debos 2017). What the period under his son has brought is not clear yet and does not concern our article here. Marielle Debos (2016) described Chad as a country where people live by the gun, where periods of open and hidden conflict and violence alternate with each other. The country is ruled by a government organized along ethnic lines, and most of the population is extremely poor; inequality is endemic. Recent wars in surrounding countries, which led to an influx of refugees into Chad, and insecurities resulting from terrorist groups such as Boko Haram have added to the pervasive insecurities. Souleymane Adoum (2017) identified the roots of today's structural violence in Chad also in colonial structures of violence: a language of violence inscribed in *la longue durée* that is at the basis of a society in duress.

Such an everyday context turns the living environment for “ordinary people” into an environment of uncertainty and insecurity. This affects the youth especially, who feel discouraged and lacking in opportunities (see Abbink and Kessel 2004; Chepp 2012; Honwana and de Boeck 2005). From the end of 2015, Chad saw an upsurge in youth protests against the government and the rampant police violence. These 2015 protests developed into a youth movement to fight for honest and transparent presidential elections that were to be held in April 2016. Things did not end well: the government suppressed the youth movement, arrested its leaders, and subsequently cut the internet so that reorganization of the movement was hampered (see de Bruijn 2020). At present, the youth organizations in Chad have very limited power, owing to the effective repressive policies of the Chadian government. This movement in Chad can be seen as part of the increasing protests that have evolved in West Africa since 2011: first in Senegal, later in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Cameroon, and then Chad. This development has been tied to the changing possibilities of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). New ICTs have facilitated the sharing of information and the organizing of protests (Branch and Mampilly 2015; Weidman 2015) that have proliferated in West and Central Africa since 2000. These protests gained power also through the possibilities offered by social media (especially in urban environments) from 2009 onward (Seli 2014). The protests in Chad, and the increasing presence of ICTs, coincided with the developing slam scene.

Communication is power (Castells 2009), and this is increasingly true for the youth who appropriate new ICTs as a tool to develop their talents, to search for possibilities to earn income, and to act against the oppression they experience. ICTs have influenced the ways youth artists and activists can connect and develop music technologies. Already the ordinary telephone had made a difference through SMS and phone calls (Ekiné 2010); today, social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram help connect youth and spread information rapidly. In addition to such new ways to communicate, there is a plethora of possibilities with digital techniques to develop music: a studio is not difficult to construct, and YouTube and other outlets are channels that help spread text and music. Although internet connectivity in Chad is one of the lowest in the world, its presence is clearly evident in the organization of the urban youth, who in their turn connect to rural areas. We should not overlook the influence of ICTs in our analysis of the developing slam scene (de Bruijn 2017b; Weaver Shipley 2015).

Slam Poetry, Protest Music, and Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression in Chad is restricted. The official media are controlled by the state, which does not permit critique in the public space. From 2013 to the present, I have witnessed the arrests of journalists, the closing down of newspapers, and threats of such actions because of the criticism that was being expressed about the government. Nevertheless, it seems that the state allows the youth a certain amount of freedom of expression, as long as it does not become too

influential in the public space or does not directly touch the circles of power around the president. The radio station Liberty FM, for instance, is permitted to interview slam poets and talk about their texts, and to present urban youth culture and the critiques that they express about government practices. Slam festivals and poetry have also been promoted on this station. On the other hand, the Chadian government also supports singers who, like griots, constitute a genre of praise rather than one of criticism. These artists are then “bought” by the government, who display their “openness” to cultural expression to the wider world. Not so long ago, youth who tried to develop a voice in politics were suppressed by the government, which accused them of conspiracies against the regime. One example was the case of Succès Masra and the political movement Les Transformateurs; they were attacked at the beginning of November 2020 (Dariusstone 2020). Another was the arrest of a young activist during a meeting on 27 November 2020 to discuss how to organize a civil society forum in the time of COVID-19 (Zyzou 2020). These examples show the youth’s limited space for political maneuver in Chad.

An important protest musician in Chad is the hip-hop artist Sultan (born 1984), who criticizes the bad governance of Déby’s regime. He still records these songs, but he must go into hiding now and then. Sultan is not afraid, but he regularly leaves the country. Other, much younger artists, such as Rayskim and N2A, also try to criticize the government. Both are also hip-hop artists and are regularly arrested. Although frequent arrest has not silenced them, they have had to become more careful in their choice of words, and they need to be less explicit. The repression certainly stops a lot of youth from expressing themselves. To find and maintain a balance between “voice” and “silence” is a precarious process. The hip-hop scene has been growing in Chad since the 1980s, and in general it has been rather vocal and engaged (Clark and Mwanzia Koster 2014). The slam scene has yet to find its position, since it emerged really only in 2014.

One way the artists try to secure protection is by joining the international circuit. If international channels play one’s music or invite one for festivals, then one is protected in a way. The French media play an important role in this, as does the French cultural center in Chad. Institut Français Tchad (IFT) is one of the main funders of festivals and other cultural events in the country. However, events that are explicitly political are not accepted at public events at the institute. Radio France International (RFI) also plays an important role in promoting African (francophone) artists. Everybody in West and Central Africa accesses RFI, many on a daily basis. Other international channels are France24, or the French-speaking BBC. For the role of national radio in Chad, a distinction must be made between private stations and those that are state-owned. The private stations are important *porte-paroles* for the artists. For instance, Radio FM has special programs for protest music (hip-hop and others) and aims to air these voices of protest and critique, to inform the population (RH, radio presenter, interview, March 2017). National radio is almost nonexistent in terms of providing an outlet for these young artists. The ultimate embrace of the international world means that many leave Chad and go into exile, or they search for a reason other than music to join the diaspora.

Under these circumstances, artists must play along with, or accommodate, the forces of the state. And as the study by David of artists in Guinea showed, it is not easy to manage a career in such a highly volatile context. Sometimes, toning down one’s political voice may be necessary. This does not mean that these artists “are . . . subjugating themselves to authoritarian rule. Rather, they are reconciling their aspirations with the precariousness of local realities” (2014: 18). How do the slam poets in Chad walk this uncertain path? Do they, in their poems, write history from their perspective and strive for social change? How do they navigate between “voice” and “silence” in this volatile context without losing their political voice and sincerity, and how do they still manage to develop a career? In the next part of this article, I follow two Chadian slam poets, Croquemort and Djemi, to better understand the possible answers to these questions.

Navigating Repressive Chad: The (Im)possibilities of a Slam Movement

Slam artists in Chad are allowed a space to express themselves. As Croquemort said in an interview in March 2014: “There is space for the art in the nonstate space; as long as we do not publish on their radios, it will be OK.” But it is also important that he noted: “I never accuse people directly. I use polite phrases and honest words to tell people what injustice is” (N’Djamena, interview, March 2014; see also de Bruijn 2017a; Voice4Thought 2015). Today Chad has numerous groups of slam poets and various slam festivals and especially a large audience on social media. Slam concerts at IFT and slam festivals are always crowded, with both youth and the elderly. Croquemort was one of the persons who made this growth possible. How did he organize this space and its festivals, despite the limited freedom of expression and the highly volatile context?

In hindsight, 2014 seems to have been a crucial turning point. That is when Didier Lalaye, aka Croquemort, organized his second international festival N’Djam s’enflamme en Slam, which he initiated as part of his own dedication to the art. He believed, already then, that slam could be a form of expression to empower the youth as it had empowered him. At this festival, he invited slammers and musicians from Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He was able to convince some international institutes to contribute to the festival financially. This festival seems to have opened the eyes of others, and similar initiatives occurred simultaneously, such as “The Spoken Word Project: Stories Travelling through Africa” organized by the Goethe institute in different African countries in 2013. The invitations were mutual, and Croquemort played a role in the festivals organized in other West African countries. The festivals link young people and share slam poetry as a means for the youth to engage with their environment and the wider world. That such activity is not always in concord with the ruling elites—elements of these festivals are specifically directed at making young people think critically about the often-impooverished economy and the political regime they are living under—is not the main, public selling point of the festivals. They are presented primarily as cultural events with workshops, aimed at helping the youth in multiple ways.

The way that Croquemort negotiated a space for his festival in N’Djamena reveals a balance between engagement and neutrality in relation to one’s political position. The permissions to hold the festival and the receipt of funding depend very much on the presentation of the event. To negotiate a space in N’Djamena, one must deal with the institutions in place, which can provide facilities, access to urban centers, and so on. But it is also important that the festival is international, inviting slammers from all over West and Central Africa (at first the festivals did not go beyond this region) to give it a certain allure and at the same time make it less vulnerable to the oppressive arm of the Chadian government. The presence of international artists is a form of protection, as Croquemort explained to me. In the organization of these festivals, therefore, there is ongoing negotiation between the organizers and funders, and between the organizers and government institutions. Another level of organization and negotiation takes place with the more popular side of N’Djamena: the sellers of beer and other merchandise, the organizers of good food, the providers of security and restoration services. A proper festival cannot exist without a festival village.

In all these various negotiations, the representation of slam and its effects on society must be constructed in such a way that it does not offend the government institutions or the funders. In some cases when I was present at negotiations, I wondered how far the organizers wished to go in creating an image of themselves that did not really represent who they were, just in order to be able to realize their goals. One of the negotiations I witnessed was for the festival to be held in 2017. The organizers approached one large business owner who was willing to invest in

“culture” and youth. We were invited to dinner and discussed the issues. It became clear that this person stood on the side of the government and was a “friend” of President Déby. During these discussions, there was no mention of politics at all, only a representation of the potential of slam to educate the youth, and the businessman felt honored to contribute. He later visited the festival village, where he was confronted with the texts of a few very young starting slammers, who openly criticized and accused the president of various injustices. The businessman became angry, left the scene, and never paid the promised funds. Funding for the festival always comes from the French embassy, which has a fund for the promotion of culture. They are also very much interested in the promotion of the French language, which slam also promotes in Chad. During an interview that I had with the director of the IFT in Chad, he clearly shared the political position of the slammers, but he also warned them against proposing this openly at the institute and advised presenting the festival simply as a youth festival for the promotion of language, slam, and youth culture.⁴ Once in 2019, an invitation to Croquemort by the French embassy for a concert was withdrawn. He was certain this was because of his role in the youth protests that had then been going on since 2015, in which he was very much a player, partly from his then Dutch home.

These examples make clear how difficult it is to navigate in the cultural-political scene in Chad. Nevertheless, Croquemort deliberately chooses to do so, because he is convinced of the value of his festival and the “voices” that can spring from these events. His festival offers Chadian youth a space to liberate themselves—from their imprisonment in their own world, as he puts it. Since 2017 other funding avenues have been pursued. One was a businessman who has an explicit position (though not always openly expressed) vis-à-vis the regime. He is convinced of the possible power for change of these festivals and of their necessity for Chad, and he therefore offers his hotels, his space, and his catering at very low prices. He is from a rich family that was also involved in government (his father was a minister) and given his support for one of the national sports teams in Chad he is positively perceived by the regime. He knows well how to navigate Chadian politics. He is convinced of the “educational” function of such festivals and of the necessity to create a youth movement that embraces ideals for a better future for the youth. However, living under the Chadian environment did not satisfy Croquemort; he said he could no longer “grow” in Chad, because the government made this impossible. In 2017 he left Chad to study abroad.

Another way to “leave” Chad is to “go international.” Croquemort and Faithfull, a slam friend of his from Cameroon, developed their vocation by expanding the slam competition beyond Chad and organized the CASP. Because of the experience of the Chadians in organizing such festivals, it was decided to organize the first version in Chad, which took place in November 2018. More than 20 countries participated in this festival, which is now a significant event and a source of pride in Chad.

Indeed, we can see this development as a growth of the slam scene passing from national to international level. On the other hand, we can also view it in relation to the possibilities for youth in Chad, and the necessity for this youth to explore international endeavors. From 2015 onward, Chadian youth became increasingly visible. They protested for democratic elections, against violence against women, and against violence directed at the youth. These protests reached their peak at the beginning 2016, just before the presidential elections. Despite the conciliatory words from the government, youth leaders were arrested, and from March 2016 the internet was shut down in the country. More repressive measures were taken, and the protest voice of the youth was no longer tolerated. How could the slam movement create the desired transformations and be a protest art? The “conscientization” of youth under repression and living in duress is difficult. Perhaps the mission in Chad became a mission impossible?

Croquemort and Words

“I have been engaged my whole life,” remarked Croquemort, in August 2020 when we discussed his engagement in art, while in Mali, now his home.⁵ Far from Chad he is observing what is happening in his country, and he was never so explicit about his position. As he makes clear also in his Facebook posts, the population suffers deeply, while President Déby is honored with the distinction “Marechal” for his role in combating Boko Haram. The irony of such developments makes Croquemort’s posts increasingly critical.

Didier Lalaye, aka Croquemort, was born in the south of Chad. He left for urban N’Djamena to follow his secondary education at a boarding school. His parents also moved to N’Djamena, and they all lived together in one of the southern popular quarters in N’Djamena. Didier’s father, now retired, was an English language teacher. The family could be described as middle class, but in Chad that does not mean that life is always rosy or that the government takes care of one. Life was sometimes hard, but his parents always kept their focus on the careers of their children. That is how Didier was motivated to go to university and study medicine. He became a medical doctor, but with great artistic ambitions.

Didier Lalaye is today a global citizen. He has decided to no longer live in Chad. He can develop himself and his art better outside the country. According to him, it is the poor access to the internet and the absence of an environment of spirited youth that make Chad no longer attractive. He now seeks these factors outside. It must have been a large step to take for a young man with such a strong feeling for his country. He was born and raised in southern Chad, lived with his family through the regime of Habré, and later lived with all the false promises of the Déby regime. As a young man he was already confronted with injustice and the corrupt system of the government. One of his experiences of protest at the university led him to be expelled for two years. Such were some of the ingredients that made him the person he is today: an observer of his society and a disbeliever that life cannot be improved. I also grew to understand his frustration with the generation of his parents, who had celebrated the regime change with Déby as the liberator in power and who continued to support him and his party, despite the clear autocratic character, injustices at every level of governance, and violations of human rights. The generational gap in the interpretation of politics in Chad is huge. Leaving the country seemed to be the only option left, because for Croquemort the country provides no opportunities. Nevertheless, he continues to write slam poems about the situation in Chad and is more active than ever on Facebook, with very poignant observations. His activities for the slam scene have become oriented toward the international circuit, in the sphere of pan-Africanism. The second version of the CASP, which should have taken place in 2020, could not be organized due to the COVID-19 crisis, but he organized the Slam & Eve festival in 2019 in Chad and brought it to Mali in 2021.

At high school Didier was part of the hip-hop scene and recognized for his texts. Later he discovered slam, in which he felt he could better express himself. And indeed he succeeded: the slam poems that date from before 2016 are still repeated on the radio in Chad, and they can now be accessed on YouTube and other platforms. The recent rerelease of one of these poems makes clear that for Croquemort the poems are close to his experience also—for instance, of life in Mali. He feels that his slam poems tell the story of the experience of youth, those just like him, with ambitions in life that cannot develop in a society in duress.

Here I present his slam poem “La Renaissance m’a dit,” which refers to the discourse of the president of Chad, who uses the word *renaissance*, after his fellow statesmen, to refer to a Chad of the future, in which everything is modern due to the investments his government supposedly makes. Chad was going to rise to take its place in the globalizing world. However, the only future

that the people in N'Djamena then saw were electricity cuts, overflowing gutters, and garbage in the streets. The poem refers to the renaissance as a dream that disappears for those who had placed their hopes in it. The violence in this case is the lack of any attention by the government to investments in infrastructure that would make the lives of the population bearable. The poem that he wrote in 2016 made an appeal to the government and spoke to the population.

In 2020, four years after its first appearance, Croquemort decided to relaunch the poem “Renaissance” and made a video clip for it. Currently living in Mali, he is confronted with problems like those he faced in Chad, while things in Chad have not at all improved. This poem can serve a wide Sahelian audience of listeners, confronted as they are by conflict and by governments that neglect the populations they are elected to serve. He relaunched the poem on Sunday, 27 September 2020, through YouTube, a live-stream TV channel, and other music channels and Facebook pages (for the song, see Voice4Thought 2020). The “universal” application of this poem also shows how the text is constructed in a rather impersonal way—as Croquemort says, “I do not attack.” A poem text that says things but is not too direct is digestible by the Chadian regime; they cannot “accuse” the artist.

La renaissance m'a dit:

“Je vais me pencher sur le social”

Les prix des denrées s'emballent

Le panier de la ménagère va mal

Les malnutris envahissent l'hôpital

Incapables de s'offrir le ciment national

Nos ptaules s'écroulent dans les inondations qui les avalent

Le paludisme devient général

Nos gamins crèvent de fièvre banale

Car pour l'aspirine, il y a que dalle.

The renaissance has told me

“I will direct on the social”

The costs of daily needs wrapped up

The household basket is not going well

The undernourished invade the hospital

Not capable to offer a national glue

Our houses collapse as they are eaten by flood

Malaria becomes endemic

And our kids suffer from simple fever

As there is no money to buy aspirin.

“Mon quartier”: Experiencing Poverty

In the slam poem “Mon quartier,” Croquemort calls on the youth from peripheral urban areas to find a way to become someone. He is inspired by his own life in the popular quarter Chagoua. N'Djamena in its geography reflects the conflict history of Chad. The city is divided into areas that are related to the north and those that are related to the south. The poem is about his memories of his adolescent life in this poor area, mixed with today's conditions of life in Chad. The poem also highlights how the government has abandoned the youth by neglecting all possible improvements to their living environment, the overcrowded schools without equipment, the lack of football clubs, of any leisure spaces, and so on. However, he also calls on the youth to act. They should not sit paralyzed but instead take up opportunities. The poverty and lack of opportunities that form the main topics of this song relate to a society in duress, a consequence of conflict and oppression, a society that is at the same time a new source for the continuation of such duress.

Dans mon quartier, c'est parfois triste, mais y a pas que des pleurs

Dans mon quartier, c'est parfois gai. Mais y a pas que du bonheur

Aujourd'hui on a grandi et on a compris

Que grimper en QI, c'est gratuit

In my neighborhood, it is often sad, but there is not only crying

In my neighborhood, it is often good, but there is not only happiness

Today we have grown up and we have understood

That acquiring higher IQ is for free

*On a des gosses et des histoires à leur raconteur
Qu'à Noël, père Noël va les oublier.*

*Fabriquez vous-même vos jouets
Avec des boîtes de conserves "gift of Japan"*

We have children and stories to tell them
That with Christmas, Father Christmas will
forget them
Make your own games
With the canned food box "gift of Japan"⁶

Today the launches and publicity for these slam poems reach a wide audience through internet TV channels, Facebook pages, and music channels such as Spotify. The digital world has advanced a lot in its support of these initiatives. Does this change the vulnerability of the artists? In a way it does, as a comment on Facebook during the launch revealed: "Croquemort can better not come to Chad, where he will be arrested." Indeed, it seems that Croquemort can express himself more freely outside Chad, where he still works on the festivals and on his position as an artist who wants to transform the world and conscientize the youth. He represents an activist youth that has grown in and with history and who have written a small part of it with their art (Barber 2018). Croquemort said he would release a new album in 2022, in which probably also the poems of his last concert held in N'Djamena in 2019 will be presented. These poems have not yet been made public, probably because in these songs he did "attack" the president, proposed his own political party, and was very open about his political position. Such poem texts would not have been allowed on the radio. The next episode in the life of this artist is probably his stance as one of the diaspora, among those who can be more critical than the artists who are in the country and must live under the oppressive regime.

The Quest of Slam Continues in Chad: Djemi

Does the internationalization of the Africa slam scene mean that the art form has lost its space in Chad, and that the hope of this art-poetry to conscientize the youth and to make a difference has indeed been effectively silenced by the regime? The year 2020 has not been easy in Chad. The COVID-19 crisis has had its effects. One effect is that it was a way for the regime to exert control over the population with the installation of a prohibition on traveling abroad (except by air), to impose a curfew, and to shut down the internet again, especially the use of social media. This has also meant the prohibition of any gatherings in large groups. Combined with the arrests of young people I mentioned earlier, the level of oppression is high. During this year no slam festivals were organized. However, the organization of slam and the expression of the young slam poets continues on Facebook and in competitions. The CASP for 2020 had to be postponed, but national competitions are taking place, now also on the Zoom platform. Meetings of the organization team are held on Zoom, and the preparations for CASP 2021 online are now in full swing. The participants in these festivals and competitions are young; they are the next generation of slam poets after Croquemort, who is often mentioned by them as an example.

How is this transition taking form in Chad? What has been the effect of the slam "school" of Croquemort and his peers? It has certainly "produced" a new crop of slam poets in Chad, such as Danapi, Epiphani (Fanny), and Djemi. Are these slam poets and the collectives that unite in the organization of their own festivals gradually forming a movement for social change? It is difficult to determine whether this is so, especially because there have also been conflicts among the slam collectives and the groups of supporters of slam and of youth movements.

Rehearsals are part of the festivals, where young slam artists are being trained. I remember well how in the preparations for the 2017 festival there was a lot of attention paid to a young woman who was really cherished as a female participant in the competition. Fanny became the first Chadian female slam poet to participate in the competitions, and although she is no longer

an active artist, she pursues her dedication to changing the role of women with her own radio program (Fanny, interview, November 2018). Women have gained an increasingly prominent position in the slam scene. The festival in N'Djamena in 2019, at the time still organized by Didier, was devoted to women in slam: *Slam & Eve, le feminine au Slam*. It was also then that I met Djemi, who participated in the discussions and performed during the festival. She felt at ease in this international, pan-African, female slam environment, proud to be representing Chad. Her story reveals how young people do indeed profit from the slam scene as a way to express their feelings in text and for a public that “heals” them from experiences in the past; the slam scene is a social space of belonging.

Djemi's parents divorced when she was very young. Her father then remarried, and in Djemi's memory he did not really care for the children of his first wife, her and her brother. After the divorce, her mother could not cope with the situation and sent Djemi to her sister who lived in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. This family was well off, educated, and could easily take care of Djemi. This aunt and her husband acted as her parents; her mother visited from time to time, but for Djemi she was her aunt. The family strongly emphasized school, and she grew up between home and school, without a lot of adventure but obedient to the authority of her “parents” and other older people. Her uncle-father introduced her to reading literature, which she grew to admire. But she was also introduced into the hierarchical patriarchal family ties, which leave little room for girls to go outside or to disobey. Worse, it makes young girls objects for older men, or uncles. The subject of the harassment of young children formed part of my discussions with these young female slammers (during the *Slam & Eve* festival held in N'Djamena in 2019; see de Bruijn and Oudenhuijsen 2021). Such experiences of violence have found their way into the poems of Djemi.

Djemi's confrontation with political oppression and conflict in Chad was more indirect than it was for Croquemort. She was born at the end of the twentieth century under the regime of Déby, whose structural violence defined the situation of her family's poverty and forced her mother to separate from her daughter. When Djemi moved to Burkina Faso, she continued to live with Chadians, her family. Only when she was entering adolescence did she discover who her real mother and father were, through a mistake by a Chadian visitor who made a remark about her real mother. She was determined to see their life in Chad and appropriate that for herself. She revolted against family life in Ouagadougou and was sent back to Chad. There she did not find her peace; instead, her father refused to pay for her schooling and follow-up at university. In a way, she was confronted very directly with the difficult urban society of Chad and the conditions of life for the youth. She now lives on her own, cannot return to Burkina Faso, and lives with the reality of Chad.

It seems that in slam poetry she has found an escape from this difficult life. She was taken up in the scene simply because of her principled texts and performances. The themes in her texts are related to conflict and violence as she experiences them in daily life, as a woman in a patriarchal authoritarian family structure and as the citizen of an authoritarian state. Her texts speak to daily life in contexts of uncertainty and are a critical reflection on such situations. She sees this story as her own, but some parts are indeed universal, and she hopes other girls will listen and make their choices. She indirectly calls on them to not accept all that is imposed on women. Such messages are very difficult to convey in ordinary discussions, but slam poetry offers such a space.

Searching for Freedom: Individuality and Slam

One of Djemi's first slam poems is a praise of slam; she celebrates slam as a space where she finally has become the free woman she wants to be. It is the struggle with the patriarchal society,

the strong control over the youth, that she finds suffocating. In this song text, she uses having sex as a metaphor for her liberation. In the urban context where she lived and lives this is certainly not appreciated.

*En couchant sur du papier mes pensées
En faisant l'amour aux mots
En organisant une vraie partouze de lettres
C'est tout ce qui me rend complète et me permet d'être*

Putting my thoughts on paper
By making love to words
By organizing a real letter orgy
It's all that makes me complete and allows me to be

*Je voulais un homme qui me permettrait d'être
infidèle*

I wanted a man who would allow me to be
unfaithful

...

...

*Avec lui, je Suis, je me **Libère**, j' Aime et je M'ouvre
au monde*

With him, I Am, I Am Free, I Love and I Open
myself to the world

*Ce soir là, j'ai ouvert mon cœur à un art synonyme
de vie*

That night, I opened my heart to an art
synonymous with life

She explains that her slam texts are about her own confrontations and struggle, but she does not refer directly to herself. She has come to accept the slam scene, despite her father's and her wider family's disgust, who see slam as a deviant art form similar to rap and other hip-hop expressions.

*“Envie, en vie”
J'ai cherché, oui j'ai cherché*

“Desire, alive”
I searched, yes I searched / I have found and I
have to endure

*J'ai trouvé et je me dois de supporter
Je n'aurais jamais dû naître sur cette planète*

I should never have been born on this planet.
On this part of the Earth, where we don't even eat
clean food

*Sur cette partie de la terre, où on ne mange même
pas des plats nets
Ces vers qui me libèrent des choses immondes*

These verses that free me from filthy things

*De ce monde qui inondent notre vie sans notre avis
Permettez-moi de vous dire le fond de ma pensée
Même si ces mots ne sont pas assez profonds à
mon goût*

Of this world that floods our lives without our
opinion
Allow me to tell you the bottom of my thoughts
Even if these words are not deep enough for my taste
I want to lose my eyesight

*J'ai envie de perdre ma vue
Ainsi, je ne verrai plus mes semblables se faire
exploser tels des ballons gonflables au nom du néant
Je ne verrai plus ma jeunesse s'adonner à une vie
de débauche
Dans l'optique de remplir ses poches*

Thus, I will no longer see my fellow men explode
like inflatable balloons in the name of
nothingness.
I will no longer see my youth indulge in a life of
debauchery
In order to fill your pockets

Then she sent me a third slam poem. This poem refers to her experiences of violence as a young girl, an experience she shares with many of her slam sisters.

*Celui qui était chargé de mon éducation
S'est chargé de me déposséder de mon innocence
Il m'a inscrite très tôt au cours de « viens je pisse entre
tes jambes »
Jusqu'à ce que de ma boîte à outils géométriques
disparaissent mes règles*

The one who was in charge of my education
has taken it upon himself to rob me of my innocence
He enrolled me very early in the course of “Come,
I pee between your legs”
Such that it disturbed my inner self, and even
ruptured my monthly bleeding⁷

Rats-content-et racontez
Pendant que je tombe et me relève
Vous, vous racontez

Rats-content-and-tell
While I fall and get up
You gossip

With the sharing of these three slam poems, Djemi also conveyed a message to me. I read these poems as a reference to the direct violence done to her and her search for freedom that followed in the context of her family life and the life conditions in the countries where she lived. Djemi refers to social relations and gender relations in her poems, which are just like the experiences expressed in Croquemort's poems about an individual's suffering caused by larger structural violence and directed toward a listening public. In her poems, Djemi does not talk about national politics or criticize the regime, but she does touch on structural violence as it is embedded in a society in duress. In this way, she supports the young people who go onto the streets to fight for their rights and to protest against injustices, but she is not physically there on the streets with them. Her work searches the spaces of silence, the *non-dit* (unsaid), and she turns this into a message to the people who wish to listen.

The production of these poems goes along with her other activities, such as the organization of a TV program and her contribution to many NGO programs that fight for the position of girls in society, messages she also conveys through the multiple workshops she organizes and her TV program. In the official policies of the Chadian government, emancipation of women and girls is not contested; hence, Djemi does not transgress any political taboos here. Nevertheless, the effects of her slam poems and program activities can be seen as "activist." Her poems and program activities can be read as a call to other women and girls to think about their lives and change the world around them. As such, she creates a social-artistic space to share feelings of belonging, in an environment of conflict and violence that creates uncertainty and insecurity for the common (wo)man.

Conclusion

The two slam poets I chose to discuss in this article are also presented in other articles, where I discuss their engagement with the slam scene. In this article, I have focused on how their itineraries are related and intertwined with the duress society of which they are a part. Their stories are aspects of a larger (hi)story of slam poetry as a space for youth in Africa—youth who are confronted with misery, the burden of a patriarchic system, the consequences of inept governance, of long periods of war, of measures taken by repressive regimes. These are conditions of life where voicing one's position is often suppressed. The itineraries of Croquemort and Djemi show that the slam scene has become one of the spaces where voicing what is normally silenced has become possible. It is indeed a space of belonging for this group of youth.

Often these slam poets have entered their art from a background of love for literature, and most slam poets we met are relatively highly educated and "players" with words. They choose a specific style to criticize, a style that cannot easily be condemned as offensive or rude. They are in fact also showing their capacity to critically reflect on their society. With their art they enhance the protest scene with a sophisticated form of art that is difficult to be criticized. Nevertheless, it is an activist and protest form of art that is part of a history in the making, one in which the youth in Africa tries to transform society.

This article has illustrated how slam poetry and the way it has developed in Chad and Africa are also an example of a popular culture that writes history and is part of the changes that are occurring, as Karin Barber (2018) argued. Indeed, the slam movement, if we may term it thus,

arose at a crucial moment in the opening up of society in the second decade of the twenty-first century, when youth movements were gaining ground in the new digital communication space. Slam poetry has not only been part of this new possibility but has also “participated, created and commented” on it. The poems of both Croquemort and Djemi show this element, as does the organization of the slam scene itself.

I interpret the growth of the slam scene in Chad as a constructive force in society. It has created a space that is like an *academy* of free and critical thinking, where youth can find advice on how to behave and work, and where they can find instructions on how to use words, and most important a space where they can express themselves without fear. They can feel at home in making their own slams. Slam poetry is an art that demands an attitude that gives the poet a form of certainty about oneself, something very much needed in the situations of uncertainty that so many youths live through. As identity poetry, it also forms the individual, and in Chad this means learning to live with duress. The slam scene in Chad is also fed from the diaspora of which Didier Lalaye is now a part. The extension of this scene into the pan-African movement CASP is also a way to gain more ground and to contribute to the growing space for protest in Chad itself as well.

Slam poetry in West and Central Africa has become a medium with the power to be a liberal space where people can express their discontent and their comments on society, without the presence of the direct arm of the repressive state: a free space of expression, where one meets other like-minded people. But the strategies and itineraries of these slam poets are “polyvalent . . . as they seek to maintain an ‘open stance’ to the volatile world around them” (Makhulu et al. 2010: 8, cited in David 2014). Hence the activist, or protest musician, is not a logical given in a repressive and conflict-ridden environment. It might simply be too dangerous or not rewarding enough in terms of an income and living, or even allow for a career in one’s own country. For this reason, the artists may be “silent” about the deep violence of their society. Slam poetry, as an identity poetry, allows one to search for being; and if you want healing, the words are born that rhyme. In this it may hide another message that need not be in the open but can be heard by those with ears to hear. To be able to gather these youth in an urban space such as N’Djamena, it is sometimes necessary to bow to the people you would otherwise rather not submit to. But finding a way to do this without losing one’s dignity, realizing one’s goals in the process, is also the art of resistance.

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■ NOTES

1. In this period, President Idriss Déby was in power. He died in April 2021 in a confrontation with rebels (although the story is not so clear). This article does not include the changes in Chad under

- the regime of Déby's son. I am trying to follow what happens under this young general, but as for COVID, it was not possible to do research in Chad.
2. For more information on this project, see www.connecting-in-times-of-duress.nl.
 3. See www.voice4thought.org. The website contains documentation on the various projects and actions that have been undertaken.
 4. I interviewed the director of IFT in March 2017 as part of Croquemort's biography.
 5. To read more about Croquemort and see his texts that were published on "Connecting in Times of Duress" in 2016's *Apprenons à les comprendre*, now available on many music platforms (e.g., Spotify), see De Bruijn (2017a).
 6. For the full song lyrics, see Croquemort (2022).
 7. I asked Djemi to explain to me what this sentence meant. The literal translation would not make sense; hence, I have decided to "explain" instead of translate.

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