Poetry Slam: A New Form of Youth's Expression Half-way Between Rap and Traditional Poetry

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Introduction

Poetry Slam appeared in the city of Chicago during the 80s; it is a kind of urban music which is becoming very popular. In the United States, it has been used as a strategy for fighting school violence by organising training sessions on Slam text writing in schools according to Heather E. Bruce and Bryan Dexter Davis (2000). It is also a way of making language classes more attractive and bringing learners to write about what is happening around them. In Francophone countries, it is used to improve language students' skills, notably with a programme of the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* named *Slamophonie* with the participation of slammer Mike Sylla, a native of Senegal.

Poetry Slam is an exercise in writing skills where a special emphasis is laid on improvisation, search for the most relevant word; but is also a language game open to all those who think they have something to say and share with the world at large.

A well-known practice in Europe and America, Slam is gradually becoming popular in Africa, especially among Rappers. However, it leaves people wondering, *interalia*, about the nature of this form of expression and its being hinged on Hip Hop which some question, arguing that Slam is a different style in its own right, compared to Rap, the musical version of Rap movement. Still, many believe Slam to be another way of doing Hip Hop. And there are even people who believe that this music style is dependent on African traditional poetry or African poetries.

Through a comparative analysis, this article tries to determine the type of relationship between Slam and other traditional oral styles and also Rap. But first, let's look at the history of this movement.

Slam History

Looking back at Slam history, one realises that Slam has non-conventional origins. Indeed, it is considered a collective art, a free speech platform and a powerful social protest movement. It has fed both on the tradition of American poetry (from Walt Whitman to Allen Ginsberg) and Afro-American culture (dirty dozen toasting) and the Punk[1] Movement as well. According to www.planetSlam.com Web site, its precursors are said to be Jerome Salla and Elaine Equi. They were followed by Ted Berrigan and Ann Waldam who considered oratorical contests to be comparable to a boxing bout. Accordingly, they wore a boxer outfit and delivered some memorable oratorical contests. These new 'oral gladiators' conquered a new public by making poetry accessible and demonstrating that it is not at all an elitist style as many believed for a long time. This new movement was ironically called 'Uptown poetry Slam'.

But it was Marc Smith, a young construction worker, who lived in Chicago and was considered a non-conformist poet who gave it its final shape at the end of the 80s. He used to organise oratorical contests in bars across his town. In 1986, the first *Slamming sessions* took place with two poet boxers confronting each other in a bout where fists were replaced by words. 'The sessions were named after the verb to Slam' which means to bang or fling in reference to the verses chanted by poets. Often compared to Rap without music, Slam is in fact closer to the libertarian spirit of Jazz and Punk than the Hip Hop Movement; it retained, however, the initial anti-establishment spirit of the latter'.

In initial Slamming sessions, oratorical contests were compared to bouts, and performers like Jean Howard and Anna Brown wore studded outfits and bore weapons during their performance. Their poetic performance was to be used as a weapon. Auditors were called upon to act as referees to rate contestants on a scale of 1 to 10; this was done on a piece of cardboard which they display at the end of each performance. Each poem read is rated from 1 to 10 on a piece of cardboard. Then scores are added up at the end of the contest; the performer with the highest mark is designated as the winner. But at the time, people had no clear idea of Slam.

In modern sessions for instance, when they take place in a cabaret, the public can register with the Master of Ceremony or (MC) without any particular restriction other than their interest for the discipline. The candidate is asked to perform a

cappella, that is, without a music instrument, just like when you are doing Rap.

A candidate has a maximum of 3 minutes' speaking time in a place where there is no scenery, no particular costume nor accessories. Freedom of speech is the rule. And each time a poem is expressed, a drink is offered. These oratorical contests were soon associated with a jury randomly selected from the spectators in the room; the jury's assigned role is to rate the poets or teams of poets (collective poems). What is required of the performers is that they should author the texts being presented in public (Web site of Grand Corps Malade).[2]

In France, the first 'Poetry Slam' evenings were organised during the 1990s, but the vogue was yet to pick up. Writers, poets, Rappers, story tellers or dropouts, 'seduced by the unprecedented platforms offered them by these weekly evenings to express their claims and states of mind' appropriated it as Benjamen Roux remarked (Roux Benjamin, 2005). He went on to say:

A few rules have to be respected: speaking time must not exceed three minutes, and using an instrument, music or fancy dress is prohibited. The participants form a small and almost family circle in which two must-know actors of current French Slam scene: Nada and Pilote le Hot.

In this article, he noted that Slam scenes have increased to countless numbers in Paris and the provinces *'Slam is a sort of outlet for isolation,'* Nada explained. *'People who use to write in the secret of their isolation can now declaim and listen to poetry by going to a café instead of staying home, watching TV. This is an outdoor leisure'*. These new spaces of expression are more of a meeting place for people from various social backgrounds. On stage, a Rapper succeeds a traditional poet and precedes a political science student (Roux Benjamin 2005).

Thus, in France, you have famous Slammers like Abd Al Mailk and Grand Corps Malade (who won two trophies at the *Victoires de la Musique* in 2007), but you also have African Slammers living in France like Souleymane Diamanka.

In Africa, and particularly in Senegal, Slam is a Rappers' affair. For instance, you have Didier Awadi who takes advantage of his international tours to organise Slam text writing workshops. In the suburbs of Dakar, BMG 44 Rapper Matador regularly organises training sessions on the different styles making up Hip Hop. He integrates in them a few sessions dedicated to Slam. Besides, he is the first artist to release a Slam album in Senegal.

With the support of Project Quality, Support to Teaching French in French and Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, Mike Sylla, a Senegalese national living in Paris where he runs a restaurant also serving as a scenery for Slammers to express themselves, initiated training sessions on Slam writing for students, as part of an educational and teaching process which climaxed with the organisation of 'Slam Opera' in March, 2008. This certainly elicited the interest of Senegalese people in this form of expression.

Definition

Actually born in the bars of Chicago, Slam can be seen as an urban form of poetry founded on proximity and performance associated or not with a musical language. 'This is one reason some people call it *capella Rap* ... In English, the word means 'to bang' and 'fling'. Here, we are not dealing with stones but with composed words instead.

Another translation of the word, but rarely used, is 'chelem' like in a sports contest since Slam contests are real 'physical feats'.[3]

According to Slammer Thierry Mouele, who organises Slam training sessions, it is a form of expression very close to poetry and relies much on the art of writing. To write a successful Slam, you can, and have to, mobilise all language resources. On the flyer introducing his workshops, he wrote:

> Slam is a platform of free expression which encompasses a variety of styles, from classicism to the most urban prose. Our concern is to encourage a participant to define his/her own form of writing.
>
> Tapping on modern texts, topical issues, light or more serious matters, the group gradually establishes its network without necessarily following literary requirements, like for instance Alexandrine verse with or without rhyme or even without verse.
>
> Therefore, seen from this angle, the discipline does no longer seem to be a school exercise but simply an expression game which very often reconciles with vocabulary, stylistic devices, language levels and grammar (Therry Mouele 2008).

The www.lattributdusujet.com Web site wrote that Slam is a multidimensional style which touches on art of oral expression but also on other artistic forms:

> Poetry Slam is a mix, a convergence of different sources and practices. It is poetry regaining voice, gesture, joy and anger. It is transversal and feeds on drama, song, Hip Hop (comprehensive listing is difficult) and tends to become, thanks to all those who Slam with minimum regularity and perseverance, a specific[4] artistic form.

It is a form of expression founded on the principles of traditional poetry. As such, 'it rehabilitates text and rhyme without dissociating them'. It requires working on written language to determine its meaning sequences which are also rhythmic units. Slam also refers to dramatic and scenic expression. It thus falls back on text to generate a song (il can therefore easily lend itself to dramatisation or 'role play'), as indicated on Mike Sylla's Web site dedicated to Slam:

> It fulfils the wish of some modern poets for whom 'poetry becomes accomplished only when it turns into both song and dance' (Senghor). It is no surprise if Slam is therefore a form of mixed music: a synthesis and the ultimate form of musics and songs conveying - and shaped in the same movement by - the most modern emotions.
>
> Slam is indeed the music language which is perhaps most widely spread among the youth not only in Francophone countries but also across the globe.[5]

This vision is shared by Corinne Tyszler who also demonstrated that both Slam and Rap allowed language renewal:

> For each of them, rhyme and breathing is determined by puff. And still, puff is, for language, the trademark of he who speaks. It includes the tones but also as I said, speaking of Rap, a body language and materiality. It seems to me that it is not so much the lexical sense of words neither their semblance of an insult that matters but rather what runs through them, connects or disconnects. Puff also has pauses, blanks and syncopes imposing break-off lines between words which, by connecting them differently and unconventionally, shatters the semological unit. I believe that's also

> what you call Rap or Slam, phrasing cantillation. Just like techno-music with its haunting, caesura-less and breathless rhyme fills the blanks, puff in Rap and Slam gives some depth to silence. (Corinne Tyszler, 2007)

In the light of the foregoing, Slam which has unconventional origins, as I indicated earlier on, is a form of expression with specifics enabling it to swing between poetry, Rap but also dramatic expression. But on top of all, it remains a performance art, focusing especially on improvisation and speech democratisation.

Relationship with other Forms of Expression

Relationship with Traditional Poetry

Many consider Slam as a resurrection of African oral literature. Speaking on latest developments in oral literature, Willy Bongo-Pasi Moke Sangol makes a distinction of two types relating to form and structure. He wrote:

> According to its mode of transmission, free oral art (content is fed by tradition while the form is free) can be distinguished from fixed oral art (content is transmitted word for word. Depending on formal structure, you can distinguish between non-formal oral art which is characterised by the absence of poetic rules and formal oral art characterised by formal components pertaining to stylistics.

He inferred from this observation that there is renewed interest in these literary forms as new strategies are devised to reveal this literature. He went on to say:

> Today, there is a sort of resurrection of oral tradition which deserves more than being simply relegated to folklore while it can instead make contributions to the French language and Francophony. This literature turns out to be very rich because it meets specific standards, notably the universal anthropological laws developed by Marcel Jousse (Willy Bongo-Pasi Moke Sango, p.)

Thus, through Slam, we are witnessing a sort of D return, in a more 'formal' and more elaborate version of traditional forms of expression whether reserved or not for a social class, a body corporate or other. Such is the case of 'taalif' (or poetry in Wolof language) and 'bakk' which are gymnastic songs exalting the courage and bravery of wrestlers in epic bouts. It offers wrestlers the opportunity to reveal their skills and try to scare their opponents. This is a strategy comparable to the ego trip of Rappers used by Souleymane Diamanka in his album titled *L'hiver peul*:

> My name is Souleymane Diamanka nicknamed Duajaabi Jeneba, son of Boubacar Diamanka, nicknamed Kanta Lombi; grandson of Maakaly Diamanka, nicknamed Mamadou Tenen(g); great grandson of Demba Diamanka, nicknamed Len(g)el Nyaama and cætera and cætera... ('L'hiver Peul')

'Taalif' often refers to traditional poetry, whether sacred or profane. While the most widely known work of this kind are those dealing with religious aspects or glorifying a figure who gained fame in a religious battle. These include for instance the work of Cheikh Moussa Ka who sang praises to Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba.

It is a Wolof poetry written in Arabic in a writing style known as 'Wolofal'. It is inspired by Arab poetry and takes on its characteristics, notably the search for the sharpest imagery, while also respecting the rhyme and tones that engineer the full musicality and flavour of this poetry. It is indeed through this aspect that it relates to Slam.

This oral art was revealed by Bassirou Dieng, who proved it to be a religious poetry with a non-negligible social dimension.

Slam is equally a style in which expression and expressiveness play dominant roles. This is what makes it an art deeply rooted in performance principles. It is meant to be spoken, even if the first draft is always in a written form. Traditional forms of expression, such as Slam, thus rely on pompous processes that Willy Bongo Pasi Moke Sangol described as follows:

> In terms of pomposities, there are different sorts, based on their form and content: pompous form (fixed-style oral art), pompous form and content (complex styles) and pompous content only (non-fixed simple styles). According to its function, this literature deals with society and improvised narratives, official recitations, revelation, tradition and fixed refrains. It deals with quite diverse subjects: God, spirit, shades, magic, history, customs and practices (African Traditional Literature Between Popular Culture and Scholarly Culture Willy, Bongo-Pasi Moke Sangol).[7]

In the final analysis, the different forms of expression certainly have several aspects in common and, thanks to this relationship, the new style soon became popular in Senegal.

Relationship with Taasou

Slam is related to taasou, not only in performance terms, but also by content, expression places and timing. But it is also a matter of style. Indeed, Taasou is a form of expression in which improvisation is very important since you proceed from a common saying or a proverb or a spoken word to generate a text that can be changed as many times as there are performers. It is also a collective performance which does not necessarily require a copyright, for each Taasou is the property of the community. As Lisa Mc. Nee explained while studying the problem of copyright:

> *Taasu* is improvised from a proverb or a few well known ('traditional') verses by a lead female singer in a choir who sings the refrain and by those who mark the rhythm either by beating the *Tama*, a small drum held in the armpit or calabashes or saucepans. *Taasu* belongs to the community but the artist herself creates a new form by adapting the poem to the specific circumstances of the performance. She uses it to make laudatory comments about some people in the audience or some attitudes, implying that the poem assumes a meaning only in context. In this sense, a *Taasukat* is she who composes a *Taasu* and should therefore benefit from a copyright. But she does not compose it alone; without a choir and drummed rhythm, there can be no *Taasu.* It is a collective work. This notwithstanding, the traditional base of the poem belongs to the community. Once again, we are witnessing here an obvious conflict between the Wolof and European copyright[6] systems (Mc. Nee, Lisa, 1998).

Lisa Mc. Nee also raised the style problem. Indeed, traditionally, Taasou had to do with the performer's gender. She thus wrote: 'Take for example the less equivocal case of *Taasukat* who are generally women specialised in satirical and laudatory poem known as *Taasu*, one soon realises that there are additional problems to it' (Mc. Nee, 1998). Nonetheless, this form of expression is gradually opening up to men, notably singers like for instance Salam Diallo, Papa Ndiaye Thiopet or Papa Ndiaye Daly. But two important

elements have to be mentioned here: Taasu has managed to sneak into mbalakh music through Alla Seck, former backing singer of Youssou Ndour, Salam Diallo when he was a member of Lemzo Diamono or Secka when he sang together with El hadj Ndiaye. The performance is aimed more at heating up the song than playing a dominant role in the band. This is why such artists performed as backing singers or dancers. They, however, became gradually more assertive, opting for a process that will later turn them into leaders of their own bands.

Only that they want to keep the Taasukat status which is exclusively reserved for women, since Taasu is generally a female form of expression. Men who declaim in a similar manner are given other names like Bandkat, Kebetukat or Taaxurankat. This is a view also shared by Lisa Mc. Nee who explained that:

> So far, this style can be performed by any woman since it is a female form of expression. However, society hierarchy plays a decisive role in performance, because women who perform laudatory Taasu immediately put themselves in a lower social class than he who is lauded[14]. This is one reason why, today, female griots specialised in Taasu tend to dominate this area. The media also favour this development trend because radio and TV stations often broadcast the art of great Taasukat, making it well known to all. Men also engaged in the practice of this style. Such is the case of Clowns (Mbàndkatt) who have always practised Taasu to make audiences laugh; now other male artists have started to practise the same, especially in the wake of Rap whose origins can be found in the Diaspora.

She went on to say that the Hip Hop Movement has the merit of restoring the prestige of Taasu long considered a superficial art. She wrote:

> Rap has changed the status of *Taasu* because it has favoured its integration in the songs of star singers like Youssou N'Dour or Baaba Maal and training of young Rapper' bands. Some bands have even started to perform *Taasu* in night clubs (In 1993, the Lemzo Diamono band gave a performance in Dakar). This is evidence that rights to traditional arts exploitation are in a perpetual process of renegotiation (Mc. Nee, 1998).

Finally, even Slam and Taasu appear to be related in their phrasing; they only diverge in terms of the status and gender of the performer, performance sites and assigned functions.

Similarities with Rap

It is clear today that Slam and Rap have the same origin. They were born in the same places (America), their development followed similar pattern, by travelling across continents and involved almost similar performers. Indeed, most slammers were initially rappers. They shifted to Slam because they were not fully satisfied with Rap. In an interview, David Querrien and Kevin Vrolant[7] tried to determine the common features between these two styles:

> Rap and Slam are today described as the protest symbols of state cities and suburbs. This soon made me think of symbolism because in our circles of analysts, we often pretend that the young residents of the suburbs and city states are caught between a virtual father and a real father or confronted with the absence of a symbolic father.
>
> Historically, 'Slam' means 'To bang' in English. It appeared in Chicago in 1980 and arrived in France in 1996. Slam is half-way between poetry and drama (Anne Querrien).

Since Rap and Slam performers came from similar backgrounds, there is some similarity in the themes developed which have a direct link to society.

> The similarity between Rap and Slam is about the type of message artists want to get across. Indeed, Rap and Slam are often committed messages against society, racism and politics.
>
> Rap and Slam have a common origin. Indeed, both forms of musical expression emanated from the United States. (http://www.latributduverbe.com/Slam.html)

Thus, there was a sort of shift from Rap to Slam, considered more poetic and formal. This is one reason Mike Sylla considers slammers to be the intellectuals of Rap. However, despite these apparent similarities, there are also great differences. Those differences are first of a musical nature and relate in the first place to rhythm. In fact, Rap rhythm roughly relies on 4-stroke, as explained hereinafter: 'the rhymes of Rap music (it is not always the case of the lyrics) are almost always made of rhythms 4/4 or 2/2. In its rhythmic base, 'Rap swings' (see Wikipédia)'. (http://www.latributduverbe.com/Slam.html)

As for Slam, it does not always follow this music logic. It banks on improvisation and is first and foremost an oral performance; its intrinsic link with the music rhythm accompanying it only comes next.

> *Slam* improvises because it is *a capella* and contains no rhythm while Rap must be maintained in a 4-stroke system. *Slam* sessions bring together people who have been performing the art for years. (http://translate.eipcp.net/transversal/0307/querrienvrolant/fr/print)

There is also a violent dimension to Rap, whether physical or verbal, which you don't find in Slam considered softer. Anyway, such is the message Mike Sylla is trying to convey on his Slam-dedicated Web site.

> Compared to more aggressive forms of expression, it is a music founded on the will to create a common poetic work ('Renga' is a writing workshop which also takes up again the so-called 'exquisite corpses' formula so dear to Surrealists. In substance, the purpose is to share lyrics and obtain from them, together, some original and new tones.

He also feels that this form of expression has educational properties, justifying the fact that the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* chose it as a French language teaching method in Francophone countries. But Rap was chosen for the same reasons, like in the Senegal instance where it is taught to French classes. Mike Sylla still stood in defence of Slam saying:

It (Slam) has an 'educational content'; it compels you to look closely at the language mechanisms, participating in text composition; it incites (and invites) you to produce rhythm and text sequences by yourself, with one calling for the other. The proliferation of poetic writing workshops in the Francophony sphere is the evidence of this educational content. For example, some were organised this year in Senegal within the framework of *'Printemps des Poétes'* (Poets' Spring) in which you also actively participated as a design artist (13th -16th March (http://www.baifalldream.com/)

Finally, concluding that Rap and Slam have everything in common is not an overstatement; the more non-violent trend you

find in Rap Movement the closer Rap gets to Slam. In the end, far from being clones, both music styles are closely related.

Slam Specifics

An Urban Literature

Slam no matter where you place it is first and foremost a mode of expression for urban youth, like in Chicago, Paris, New York or Dakar. It is also a generation bridging music, open both to young and senior citizens. Anybody who feels he/she is a poet and has anything to say or share with others has access to slamming sessions. They usually take place in an urban space and performers address exclusively city-related problems. Virginie Mege further explained that:

> According to the French Federation of Poetry Slam (FFDSP), Slam is both a 'democratisation tool and an art of poetic performance'. It is a 'link between writing and performance and encourages poets to focus on what they are saying and how they say it's (Mege Virginie 2007).

In one word, everybody is a slammer and can try to perform it. You just need to be willing to participate. Slam thus distances itself from Rap which puts the emphasis on ghetto lyrics, contrary to Slam where lyrics are liberated and can be appropriated by anyone, regardless of age, sex or race, the important thing being to share the performance site.

De-territorialisation of Hip Hop

Generally speaking, Slam has allowed Hip Hop which has long claimed to be essentially street-related, to leave that space or, more precisely, to deploy in other spaces. It has thus moved from street to more tolerant sites like cabarets and teashops, etc. and gained more respect in the process while some claimed to be the theoreticians of this music style. People like Grand Corps Malade and Abd El Malik received several awards at the *Victoires de la Musiqu,* an institution which rewards best music artists in France. According to Négrier (2009), the recognition process was sped up by this de-territorialisation, inciting public authorities to ally with slammers in an effort to prevent any violent drift, especially in French suburbs.

Slam's success is also linked to both the play dimension and free character of the phenomenon. In one article, Querrien explained these concepts and consider them to be key to the success of this form of expression.

> Today, *Slam* is publicly performed in some cafés with rating systems like in sports championships. *Slam* is charge-free, all you need is to be offered a drink in a bar to declaim what you have just written or improvised. *Slam* is a form of philosophy.

Thanks to Slam, Hip Hop gained more respect and got access to places it usually would not have access to or would not choose to perform, its favourite deployment site being the streets.

Democratisation of Urban Speech

Urban speech is no longer the property of a group of particularly gifted people or people who define themselves as oral speech experts for, anyone can afford to take the floor and say what he/she has to say. Slam is premised on the fact that everybody has something to say.

For slammers like David Querrien and Kevin Vrolant who were interviewed by Anne Querrien:

> Within 10 years, Slam went from underground where only a few insiders performed in places known to them alone to an almost general democratisation. From 'Spoken word' as it was called initially, it has now become an urban poetry.

Going through the comments made throughout Olive2's article, one can read the following:

> The first contribution is democratisation of poetry, often perceived as dusty and even filled with traps. Poems used to sleep like a log in books, Slam woke them up. A variant of Slam is to say loudly, to declaim in public spots (in streets for example), the poems that you particularly like and which may not necessarily be of your composition for, not anyone can be a poet! This is the first form of democratisation of poetry by Slam. The second contribution allows creativity to fully deploy because contest, as an incentive, compels you to excel yourself and create original poems of your own and more importantly to declaim them. Writing and declaiming a poem are two different things. You can write a poem for yourself but when you express it, you declaim it for others. Slam is sharing, donating; Slam is love (Olive2 2005).

In summary, Slam appears to be the form of expression allowing anyone to say what he/she means to say without any restriction or prior preparations, and by being only driven by prevailing circumstances. Improvisation thus constitutes the major component of this artistic creation. This is the position defended by Cathérine Mazauric when she stated that:

> Contrary to other practices like *Slam*, Rap is, aside from any oratorical contests whose forms are by the way codified, has little to do with oral improvisation. However, Rap text does not really exist if not orally expressed through a body and in a particular scansion. (Les Rappeurs de l'Afrance: de la négociation identitaire aux pistes didactiques ? (Mazauric, 2007: 178).

Restrictions are thus lifted and speech becomes accessible to all.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Slam appears to be an essentially oral style based on improvisation, speech democratisation and urban expression. From this perspective, it constitutes an heritage both from Rap and African traditional poetry. Beyond the formal aspects, there is the use made of it notably with possible social and educational exploitation. It also has the merit of allowing Hip Hop in general, and Rap in particular, to have access to places that had so far been closed to it. This kinship has certainly facilitated Slam appropriation by all segments of the population who have some interest in this form of art.

Notes

1. http://www.planeteSlam.com/histoire/histoire.htm
2. http://www.grandcorpsmalade.com/Slam.htm
3. 'An urban poem. The Reflection of our Slam Society: People Side' in http://www.aufeminin.com/mag/societe/d1637/c42733.html)
4. http://www.latributduverbe.com/Slam.html
5. http://www.baifalldream.com/
6. Lisa Mc Nee, Le cadastre de la tradition : Propriété intellectuelle et oralité en Afrique occidentale, Mots Pluriels, Octobre 1998, http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP898lmn.html
7. David (30 years) and Kevin (21 years) are both Parisians and have been part of the Rap Movement since they were 12 like