**From ‘Jaga-Jaga’ to ‘Emi Lokan’: Understanding Nigerian Hip-Hop and Social Critique in Eedris Abdulkareem’s Music**

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**Abstract**

This study examines the evolution of social critique in Nigerian hip-hop, focusing on the works of Eedris Abdulkareem. From his early provocative track 'Jaga-jaga' to the more recent 'Emi Lokan', Abdulkareem's music serves as a lens through which to analyse the changing scene of political and social commentary in Nigerian popular culture. The study traces the development of Abdulkareem's lyrical themes and musical style over two decades, contextualising his work within Nigeria's socio-political climate. It argues that Abdulkareem's improvement on his raw, confrontational approach of 'Jaga-jaga' to the more confrontational critique in 'Emi Lokan' reflects broader shifts in Nigerian hip-hop and public discourse. Through close analysis of Abdulkareem's lyrics, musical composition, and public reception, the paper explores how his work engages with issues of corruption, inequality, and political accountability. It considers the role of language, particularly code-switching between English, Pidgin, and indigenous languages, in crafting messages that resonate across diverse Nigerian audiences. By tracing Abdulkareem's career, this study provides insights into the dynamic relationship between popular music and social critique in Nigeria, contributing to broader discussions about the role of art in fostering political engagement and social change in African contexts.

**Keywords**: Music, Hip-hop, Activism, Society, Politics.

**Introduction**

Music, as a potent form of artistic expression, possesses the capacity to act as a catalyst for social transformation, revolution, and rejuvenation. Its historical role in advocating for justice, disseminating information, and confronting societal ills cannot be understated. However, the genre of hip-hop transcends mere entertainment or the superficial portrayal of affluence often associated with it. In the contemporary world, it has emerged as a powerful force for education, information dissemination, and resistance.

Akpan (2006) submitted in Okpokwasili (2022) that Nigerian hip-hop may serve as a critical resource in the rebranding of the Nigerian nation. 18 years on and his views isn’t far from the current reality. In fact, over the past three to four decades, hip-hop has evolved into a significant cultural and artistic phenomenon, profoundly influencing youth culture globally. Its longevity and its compelling message resonate with both young people and adults worldwide, rendering it more than a fleeting fad or a transient youth movement. Instead, hip-hop demands serious consideration as a multifaceted cultural, political, economic, and intellectual phenomenon worthy of scholarly investigation.

Nigerian society, marked by significant inequalities, pervasive poverty, and social unrest, offers a fertile ground for the rise of hip-hop as a medium of social commentary. According to Adedeji (2010), contemporary artists increasingly critique the political elite for the state's failures, economic collapse, and the lack of essential infrastructure, including electricity, quality roads, adequate housing, and an effective healthcare system. This should be a welcome development since music, as studied by Titus and Bello (2011), is useful in electioneering.

From the constellation of artistes and songs, two of Eedris Abdulkareem’s musical works as a hip-hop musician is selected to establish the functionality of music as a medium for social critique in Nigeria. This is owing to his boisterous vociferousness in staunchly opposing bad leadership, oppression and poor infrastructural development in Nigeria (and Africa by extension) withing the last two decades. He sternly agitates for accountability and doesn’t relent despite open adversity. The selected tracks, ‘Jaga-jaga’ and ‘Emi lokan’, are twenty years apart, this counts for longevity and consistency in Abdulkareem’s musical career.

**Music as a Platform of Social and Political Commentary in Africa**

The use of music as a platform for social commentary on human rights is not a novel phenomenon, nor is it confined to Africa or a specific genre. Throughout history, musicians have engaged in critiques of human rights issues, sometimes placing them at odds with state authorities. Hip-hop artists, in particular, frequently confront their governments regarding corruption and human rights violations. The genre's historical commitment to anti-establishmentarianism and its preference for confrontation over acquiescence have made it a significant platform for African artists (Clark 2019). This history has also rendered hip-hop less susceptible to state control, making it more likely to be perceived as a threat by governmental actors. Consequently, hip-hop serves as a vital medium for both state and non-state actors to gauge public sentiment regarding corruption and human rights.

Despite the significance of these artistic expressions, states often resist engaging constructively with the conversations initiated by artists regarding human rights. Governments typically receive information about policies and state actions through channels that favour specific agendas, which can marginalize dissenting voices. Artists who operate outside of "acceptable" mediums and advocate for transparency and accountability are frequently viewed as threats by political actors. This lack of engagement can lead to restricted access to media outlets and censorship by state regulatory bodies. However, the rise of social media and the internet has enabled these artists to bypass traditional media barriers, allowing them to reach audiences directly and often enhancing the credibility of their messages, especially when mainstream media excludes their work.

One of the most notable figures in hip-hop activism in Africa is Fela Kuti, who engaged with the Nigerian government on issues of corruption and human rights abuses. Music has proven to be effective for the “preparation, mobilisation and the prosecution of war” (Bello and Titus, 2013:131), but Kuti was groundbreaking in his use of music to critique the government and mobilize citizens against state corruption. His songs, such as "Zombie," "Confusion Break Bone," and "Pansa Pansa," exemplify his commitment to addressing governmental malfeasance. Many contemporary hip-hop artists have drawn inspiration from Kuti's legacy, continuing the tradition of using music to speak truth to power. A renowned exponent of the aforementioned is Eedris Abdulkareem.

**About Eedris Abdulkareem and his Music**

Eedris Abdulkareem, born Eedris Tunrayo Abdulkareem Ajenifuja on December 24, 1974, is a prominent Nigerian singer, rapper, and songwriter. He was born into a polygamous family in Kano, Nigeria, and hails from Ilesha, Osun State. Eedris Abdulkareem began his musical journey as the lead rapper of the defunct Nigerian hip-hop boy band, The Remedies, which gained popularity in the late 1990s. He later embarked on a solo career, releasing several influential albums that have cemented his status as one of the pioneers of Nigerian hip-hop.

His discography includes notable albums such as "Pass" (2001), "Mr. Lecturer" (2002), "Jaga Jaga" (2004), "Letter to Mr. President" (2005), "King Is Back" (2007), "Unfinished Business" (2010), and "Nothing but the Truth" (2020). His music often addresses socio-political issues, with tracks like "Jaga Jaga" criticizing corruption and societal decay in Nigeria. His recent work, "Emi Lokan," continues this tradition, taking a bold stand against current and past administrations.

Eedris Abdulkareem is not just a musician but also a vocal activist. He has used his platform to advocate for social justice, criticize government corruption, and highlight issues such as poverty and insecurity. His activism has sometimes put him at odds with political figures, leading to confrontations and controversies. Over the past three decades, Eedris has remained a significant figure in Nigeria's socio-political landscape. His music has been a tool for social commentary and activism, addressing critical issues like corruption, nepotism, and the lack of basic infrastructure. He has been recognized for his contributions to promoting political consciousness and social justice in Nigeria. Eedris Abdulkareem's legacy is marked by his fearless approach to addressing societal issues through his music and activism, making him a pivotal figure in Nigerian hip-hop and a respected voice in the fight for social justice.

**Information about the Selected tracks**

1. “Jaga-Jaga”

Genre: Hip-hop and Rap

Date Released: 2004

Label: Kennis Music

Key: D Major

Tempo: Fast (192 BPM)

Duration: 3 minutes, 46 seconds

1. “Emi Lokan”

Genre: Naija Hip-hop, Afropop

Date Released: June 17, 2024

Label: Kennis Music

Key: Ab Major

Tempo: Mid-tempo

Duration: 4 minutes 57 seconds

**Structural Format of the Tracks**

The structural format of ‘Jaga-jaga’ and ‘Emi lokan’ are presented in tables *1a* and *1b* respectively.

 *Table 1a: Structural format of “Jaga-Jaga”*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **SECTION** | **MUSICAL STYLE/ ELEMENTS** | **STRUCTUTAL FUNCTION OF SECTION** | **THEMES/ MESSAGE** |
| **Prologue and Intro**0:00-0:14 | An Instrumental introduction that commenced 3 seconds into a talk that commenced the track. The intro involves an ostinato hook-line and a steady drumline that continued throughout the piece. | It initiates the harmonic and rhythmic progression that defines the mood and tempo of the song. | An expression of the seriousness of the issues to be raised/addressed in the song. |
| **Refrain**00:14-00:34 | The main melody of the song that carries the central massage. It is the statement of the musical theme or Idea. The lead singer’s voice is heard alongside one or more others in unison while the instrumentation is consistent. | States the main Idea of the Song. | The country, Nigeria, in total disarray and the common man at the receiving end, constantly tormented with hardship and insecurity. |
| **Verse 1**0:35-0:54 | The lead vocal singing in the same style as the refrain, only with a busier rhythm due to more shorter notes that are fitted into the same timing. Another voice is heard in the background occasionally adding short recitative lines. | A development of the music. | Narrates the encounter of Nigerians with armed-robbers, their notoriety and current mode of operation due to lawlessness in the country. |
| **Refrain**0:55-1:14 | Repeat of chorused refrain | Same as the initial refrain | Same as the initial refrain |
| **Verse 2**1:15-1:35 | Same as verse 1 | Same as verse 1 | Narrates the ordeals of imprisoned activists and upright Nigerians who are standing up against bad leadership. |
| **Refrain** 1:36-1:56 | Repeat of chorused refrain | Same as the initial refrain | Same as the initial refrain |
| **Bridge**1:57-2:22 | Different melodic statement within the same harmonic framework. It is in 2 sub-sections that contain syncopated rhythms. | Further developing the theme and serving as link between verse 2 and verse 3. | Eulogising Africa and doing a wake-up-call for Africans to move forward. |
| **Verse 3**2:22-3:01 | Same as verse 1 | Same as verse 1 | Addressing embezzlement and corrupt practices in government parastatals. |
| **Refrain** 3:01-3:45 | Repeat of chorused refrain, first as previously done, then 2 more times with and underlay of the first sub-section of the bridge section. | Bringing the track to an end. | Same as the initial refrain and bridge. |

*Table 1b Structural format of “Emi Lokan”*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **SECTION****(Timeline)** | **MUSICAL STYLE/ ELEMENTS** | **STRUCTUTAL FUNCTION OF SECTION** | **THEME / MESSAGE** |
| **Prologue**0:00-0:42 | An excerpt from a live recorded event that involves someone addressing the president, followed by the outburst of a citizen. | Sets a mood for the song | Creative activism: Urging the president to release some detained protesters. |
| **Intro** 0:40-0:59 | Short instrumental introduction that cuts into the prologue. It involves guitar solo and some melo-rhythmic accompaniment. | Further establishes the mood and also defines the key and tempo of the song. | Speaking against the intense hardship in the country and the increase in kidnapping while the political leaders keep enriching themselves at the expense of the masses.  |
| **Verse 1**0:59-1:56 | The first verse features the lead vocal in recitative style. The rhythm is irregular but each line fits-in well to the established time signature and tempo. | Opening of the main body of the work |
| **Refrain**1:56-2:34 | It entails the combination of call-and-response with a chorus in unison. | The hook-line and memorable melodies in the song are stated in this section. | A retrospective look at the chain of poor leadership at the federal level in Nigeria and a plea to the current administration to do something about hunger in Nigeria. |
| **Verse**2:34-4:08 | In the same fashion as the first verse. | A continued development of the theme and building more on the ongoing narrative. | Calling out past and present government officials and public figures who seem to have failed in their role. Then applauding activists that are working in the interest of the people. |
| **Refrain**4:09-4:57 | Repeat of chorused refrain | Same as the initial refrain | Same as the initial refrain |



*Fig. 2: Instrumentation in ‘Jaga-jaga’, showing the recurring accompaniment in the track*

**Tonality and Range:** The tracks are both composed using the notes within respective major scales and there is no use of chromatic notes. It is worthy of note that the subdominant (f) and leading tones (t) are scarcely used compared to the other five degrees of the scale, giving the music a feel of pentatonicism. The melodies are within an octave, although ‘Emi lokan’ has 2 different sections sung by the lead vocal and the backup singers respectively at different registers which culminates to about 2 octaves.



*Fig.3a: Range in ‘Jaga-jaga’*



*Fig. 3b: Range of the verse in ‘Emi Lokan’*



*Fig. 3c: Range of the chorused refrain in ‘Emi Lokan’*

**Melody:** The melodies in the songs are repetitive and there is ample use of rhythmic and melodic sequences. They follow an established patten in the motif and progress in that fashion with little deviations in order to create some tension and make the melody interesting.



*Fig. 4: Melody in the refrain of ‘Jaga-jaga’*

**Tonal Inflection:** Despite the matrix language of the songs being Pidgin (emphasised in the textual analysis), the relatively few melodies that are set to Yoruba and Igbo words that are used, inflects the natural tonal contour of the Yoruba language. The tonal inflection is evident in the phrases ‘Emi lokan’, ‘O ti di ebi lokan’, and the words ‘bia’ and ‘baba’ to mention a few. Baba which has the tonality of low-high is always set to the intervallic width of a sixth, and this adequate for correspondence.

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*Fig. 5: melodies in the refrain of ‘Emi lokan’*

**Harmony:** The voices in the selected tracks sang in unison, but the Electronic Piano, Electric Bass and other melodic instruments help establish chord progressions in the song into which the vocal melody is locked. The melody, in actuality, is constructed to reference the piano chords as its harmonic framework and (or) vice versa. These features delineate the polyphony and homophonic texture that is typical of popular music, especially Nigerian hip-hop.

In ‘Jaga-jaga’, the music revolves exclusively around two chords, the chords *vi* (E minor) and V (D Major). This sufficiently harmonises the melody and adds to the tunefulness of the song. For ‘Emi lokan’ on the other hand, four chords where established and recurred throughout the entire duration of the songs. The chords are vi (F minor), IV (Db major), I (Ab Major), and iii (C minor).



*Fig. 6: The second section of the refrain in ‘Emi lokan” featuring voice and instruments.*

**TEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

In other to delineate the essence of the lyrical content of the tracks and its importance to the message the singer is passing across, the song text will be examined under the aspects of language, theme, interpretation/meaning and Morphology/Orthography.

**Language and Culture:** Both selected tracks have their matrix language as Pidgin English, which is a dialect that is common to, and understood by virtually all the different tribes in Nigeria. The pidgin English is used with a code-mix of English and Yoruba languages while ‘Emi lokan’ featured a statement in Hausa language at one time. The choice of language domesticates the Eedris Abdulkareem’s works within the total Nigerian Culture rather than limiting it to a section or geo-political zone. The three major tribes in Nigeria – Yoruba, igbo and Hausa – and even the minorities can all identify with the song text without much difficulty, yet, an English-speaking non-Nigerian/African can still access the meaning of the songs no matter how vaguely.

**Theme:** In tandem with the focus of this paper, the theme of the selected Eedris’ songs is social and political criticism. They are mainly written to challenge the political leaders and public figures in Nigeria on their misdemeanours and incompetence in office, and how they have failed to fulfil the obligations of their office and do their duty to the people they govern, to which they are to be accountable. Throughout the tracks, the lyrics did not derail from the central theme.

**Interpretation/Meaning:** Table 2a presents the song text, the translation and implied meaning within the cultural usage of the words in Nigeria. ‘Emi lokan’ lyrics is shortened to include only the refrain due to the enormousness of the words in the verses which are mainly rap.

*Table 2a: Translation of texts in “Jaga-jaga” from the matrix language to English*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Matrix language** | **English translation** | **Implied meaning/****Context** |
| **Refrain:** Nigeria Jaga-jagaEverything scatter-scatter,Poor man dey suffer-suffer(gbosa-gbosa) gun shootinna the air (x2). | Nigeria is a rough placeEverything is scatteredThe poor masses are sufferingGunshots are regularly heard  | The country is in disarray and the common man is living in poverty and insecurity |
| **Verse 1**Armed robber came your houseE no take money E no rape your wifeWent straight to your houseside and shot you downWhich armed robber no want moneyNa which armed robber no want jollyNa political arm robber be thatNa wetin dey kill Nigeria. O | Armed robbers broke into someone’s houseThey did not steal their moneyThey did not rape anyoneThe just went in to gun down the house ownerWhat kind of armed-robber doesn’t want money?They are not even interested in pleasureThat must be a political oneThat’s what is killing Nigeria. | The situation has gone beyond stealing of properties to killing people. This is not ordinary but politically engineered towards the people. |
| If you see Keyamo bia bia Dem Lock am for jail for AbujaKingsley Agbe himself dey for thereAde Bendel na him, dey feed all of them (ye pa) Inside prison-prison Everything scatter-scatter… | Call Keyamo if you see himHe’s been locked up in Jail at AbujaEven Kingsley Agbe is also in detentionIt’s Ade Bendel that takes care of them in thereInside the prison yardEverything is scattered | Festus Keyamo is a Lawyer and human rights activist. He had been jailed with others for speaking against bad governance in Nigeria, and the situation in the prison is so terrible. |
| **Bridge:**Africa, make you love your landAfrica is na motherlandWe dey grow, we dey grow…There is peace and wealth  | Africa, you need to love your landArica is our motherlandWe keep growing And there is Peace and wealth | A wakeup call to Africans to be patriotic. We are progressing as a race and we can live in peace and wealth someday. |
| **Verse 3:**(Eedris What about Coja now)Won ti ko owo wa ja.NEPA won ti di rregular 419 for Nigeria(Agege to Ikeja) Na hundred naira Fuel scarcity na popular action-film for Nigeria (Where Charles Taylor na)E dey live big life Buy Estate for calabarThat na Liberian mafiaFor Nigeria… | (What is the situation with Coja now, Eedris?)Thev’ve gone with our moneyNEPA has actually become a fraudulent organisationIt costs a hundred naira to get to Ikeja from AgegeFuel scarcity is now an everyday experienceWhere is Charles Taylor now?He is living largeBought an estate in CalabarHe’s a Liberian Mafia residing in Nigeria… |  |

*Table 2b: Translation of texts in “Emi lokan” from the matrix language to English*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Matrix language** | **English translation** | **Implied meaning/****Context** |
| **Refrain:** Tinubu Government blame BuhariBuhari Government Blame JonathanHunger dey, people dey dieThis one don pass Jaga-jaga oEmi lokan, o ti di ebi lokanBaba Emi lokan e da kun e bi n pa wa ooEmi lokan, o ti di ebi lokanBaba Emi lokan e da kun ounje ti won oo | Tinubu’s regime blames that of Buhari Buhari’s regime blamed that of JonathanThere is hunger and death This is beyond a rough situation‘It’s my turn’ has become the turn of hungerOld man, please we are hungry now‘It’s my turn’ has become the turn of hungerOld man, please food is too expensive now | The current Tinubu-led Administration keeps referring to that of Buhari – who is the immediate past president – for the downturn of things in the country, and the blaming keeps going down the trail of past leaders.The reality now, however, is that ‘emi lokan’, a phrase used by President Tinubu during his campaign – which means ‘its my turn’ has now changed because it is now the turn of hunger. |

**Morphology and Orthography:** The word formation and writing system employed by the singer in the analyzed works include the doubling of words and the use of rhymes. Words such as 'scatter-scatter,' 'prison-prison,' 'bia-bia,' and 'suffer-suffer' are not typically used in this manner but are creatively crafted by Eedris in his works to emphasize the message and possibly for aesthetic purposes. Additionally, for rappers, rhyming is a common technique in lyric creation; thus, it is not surprising that Eedris incorporates numerous rhymes in his works. He combines words with similar vowel sounds at cadential points. A notable example is 'Emi lokan o ti di ebi lokan’.

**Discussion of Findings**

The musical and textual analysis of 'Jaga-jaga' and 'Emi lokan' reveals that the key issues addressed in these tracks include hunger, insecurity, kidnapping, nepotism, and corruption. These issues are articulated in both tracks, albeit not verbatim, but with clear emphasis. 'Emi Lokan' exhibits a heightened intensity, reflecting the deterioration from the Obasanjo-led administration to a more alarming state. Eedris explicitly mentions in 'Emi lokan' that 'this one don pass jaga-jaga o,' indicating that the Nigerian situation has worsened beyond mere disarray to a destructive downward trajectory.

On the surface, the lyrics in Abdulkareem's tracks convey the message, but a closer examination reveals that the musicality significantly enhances and supports the message. The simplicity of the instrumentation, harmony, and rhythm in 'Jaga-jaga' allows for clear communication of the message without distortion. The strategic use of only two chords focuses the listener's attention on the lyrics, with the chords synchronized with the bass drum and electric bass to minimize interference with the melody. The dynamics are well-articulated, with the ostinato hook-line by the guitar softened in the verse compared to its loudness in the intro and refrain sections.

'Emi lokan' features more intense and busier rhythms, corresponding to the increased intensity of the message compared to 'Jaga-jaga.' There is a noticeable improvement in instrumentation due to advancements in production techniques and equipment over the 20-year gap between the two tracks. While 'Jaga-jaga' is relatively more complex in form, it is simpler in melodic progression and lyrical construction than 'Emi lokan,' where the singer has more to convey.

Further musical analysis shows that Eedris employs sequences and repetition as compositional techniques to precisely communicate the messages in his works. The notated excerpts demonstrate repeated melodic lines and ample use of rhythmic/melodic patterns, creating familiar yet non-redundant tunes through seamless transitions between sections. These repetitions are also evident in the song lyrics.

The findings also indicate that the artist, whether consciously or not, inflects the tonality of the music within the tonal system of Nigerian languages (Yoruba and Igbo). This enhances communicability in African music and establishes the rootedness of his music within Nigerian culture. Pidgin English, lacking a defined or universally established intonation, is less of a concern in tonal inflection concerning music. However, this aligns with Okunola (2024), who observed that Nigerian hip-hop artists use vernacular languages to critique the political class and address various sensitive themes. Pidgin English, as a prominent vernacular language, is favoured by hip-hop artists for its ability to effectively convey the nuances and complexities of the Nigerian experience."

 **Conclusion**

The analysis of selected tracks by Eedris Abdulkareem demonstrates that his work as a Nigerian hip-hop artist exemplifies the genre as a tool for social and political criticism. His approach is a blend of boldness and artistry, as he daringly names top government officials, influential politicians, and religious leaders with significant local and international followings—a move that could jeopardize his career, given past occurrences in the nation. Eedris Abdulkareem is not new to this struggle, having previously faced confrontations with former President Olusegun Obasanjo (Punch, 2018).

Consequently, Abdulkareem's music, as examined in this paper, constitutes bold statements in activism rather than mere socio-political commentary. He has solidified his status as an individual who – via the instrumentality of his music – is consistently prepared to challenge anyone whose actions or inactions contribute to the regression and decline of the country in terms of economy, security, and infrastructure.

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