



Politics of Art: The Contradictions of Nigeria's KABAFEST

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It has been said that writers, artists and their ilk are prone to profiling themselves as a special breed of humans, towering above the rest of society, intellectually and ideologically – more informed, just, worldly, egalitarian. Yet the likely reality is that writers and artists, just like any other grouping, are a mixture of people with different persuasions, religious or political. For the simple reason that they do not originate from a default place of collective belief set or a common political project, and even if they did, there are no guarantees that dissenters won't arise from within their midst.

This age-old debate, of writers and artists collectively espousing palpable conscientiousness – presumably unlike a good chunk of people in society – and pledging unwavering loyalty to a shared set of beliefs and sense of solidarity, was recently reignited in Nigerian Twitter-sphere following the latest edition of the Kaduna Book and Arts Festival (KABAFEST). The shindig organised by Lola Shoneyin was [described](#) as “*the first and only literary fête of this magnitude in Northern Nigeria.*” The festival was supposed to represent an ethical betrayal, according to critics, since its organisers were going against something, maybe many things, that writers, artists and cultural workers aren't supposed to go against. What that thing or those things are has become a matter of conjecture, as contestation persists.

Shoneyin and those who attended the KABAFEST, were castigated for the alleged sins of commission

and omission. The sin of commission was that Shoneyin and company have warmed up to the powers that be in Nigeria, exemplified by her closeness to Nasir Ahmad El-Rufai, the controversial former federal government minister and current governor of Kaduna State, whose state sponsors KABAFEST. On the founding of KABAFEST, critics opined that it was a public relations gimmick by the Governor to sanitise his misadventures and the literary community had fallen into this trap. The sin of omission was that the high profile festival organizer and her prominent guests from across Africa were silent about increasing repression in Nigeria, manifest in the arbitrary arrest, detention, and in extreme cases kidnapping and disappearing of government critics.

To some, confronting KABAFEST seemed unwarranted. To others, it was completely justified.

Over the years, Shoneyin has distinguished herself as a cultural worker of note, going by the runaway success of her 2013 founded [Ake Arts and Book Festival](#), an important gathering in the African literary calendar at a time when there aren't as many organizing platforms. Beside the two festivals, Shoneyin, best known for her novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, runs Ouida Books, the Lagos based publishing house, home to some of Nigeria's better known novelists and poets. Ouida similarly plays host to literary events, a welcome development in a continent where the Goethe Institute and Alliance Francaise have become the default sanctuaries for writers and artists due to a lack of local investment in physical cultural spaces.

Yet despite all these feats, murmurs and not-so-subtle tweets from her critics (or what some would call haters) continue questioning Shoneyin's proximity to power, raising the question...Can an artist or an arts manager hobnob with politicians with complicated histories and reputations? Can they use such socio-political connections to build partnerships for the benefit of the arts without coming out blemished? Or put another way, can an artist "sellout" for the sake of securing the bag for their industry, or is this an ethical no-no? In a purely capitalistic end-justifies-the-means sense, do the benefits accrued from KABAFEST outweigh any moral concessions made in the process of making the festival possible?

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KABAFEST provokes these reactions since Governor Nasir Ahmad El-Rufai and his wife, the writer and architect Hadiza Isma El-Rufai - who coincidentally is published at [Ouida books](#) - are seen not only as de facto festival patrons courtesy of the state sponsorship but as Shoneyin's conspirators who participate in the program of events. One could argue that even if there was nothing unbecoming in Shoneyin as an artist accepting the governor and his wife's patronage, could their closeness raise conflict of interest questions? Is it proper for persons with pre-existing friendships to use public resources in support of each other's initiatives?

Importantly, Shoneyin has never been shy about her association with Governor El-Rufai.

During a January 2018 interview for a project I was working on -in which Shoneyin's evident milestones with Ake and KABAFEST were of interest - the novelist told me in a very candid interview that the inspiration for KABAFEST came from an incident during an Ake Festival some years back. The story goes that a group of students from Northern Nigeria hitch-hiked to Abeokuta, the former home of Ake Festival, taking train rides and hitching lifts from good Samaritans, and by the time they got to the festival, they looked tired and haggard.

As fate would have it, the Governor of Kaduna State, Nasir Ahmad El-Rufai, in attendance at Ake, as a friend of the festival, and on seeing the state of the students from Northern Nigeria – whose return trip the Governor sponsored – challenged Shoneyin to replicate Ake in Kaduna, seeing the extent to which the students had gone just to be part of the festival. Shoneyin took the Governor up on his word, and plans for KABAFEST, with support from the Governor and his state, got underway.

With this background, one can therefore safely argue that KABAFEST was not wholly a Lola Shoneyin project, since the prompt came from Governor El-Rufai. Perhaps, this makes a case for vindication (not that Shoneyin has said she needs any). Shoneyin didn't approach the Governor with a formed idea seeking sponsorship, but rather the Governor initiated a partnership and asked for Shoneyin's hand in setting up KABAFEST.

At the same time, one cannot separate KABAFEST from Shoneyin, since without her Ake Festival experience, the Governor may have been inspired to propose a festival in the North. The artistic input and knowledge that Shoneyin brings to the KABAFEST and her success with the Ake festival, goes without saying. Was this therefore a quid pro quo between Shoneyin and the Governor, a case of two people meeting at the right place at the right time? Shoneyin armed with the experience and expertise, the Governor with resources to implement the idea with her consent and support.

The KABAFEST is now in its third year. Before plans for KABAFEST were solidified, the Governor offered to sponsor a group of Kaduna students to subsequent Ake Festivals. This appeared to be a perfect convergence of minds and needs. The Governor found a suitable collaborator in Shoneyin, for the sake of meeting the needs of the eager students and other residents of Kaduna and the outcome was a Public Private Partnership to build and grow cultural infrastructure.

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Governor Nasir Ahmad El-Rufai was nicknamed "The Destroyer" while serving as state minister of Federal Capital Territory, Abuja (2003-2007) due to his merciless flattening of properties that didn't comply with the by-laws. El-Rufai was quoted saying Abuja wasn't built for the poor. He was perceived as President Olusegun Obasanjo's blue eyed boy and enforcer, deployed to deal with opponents in the pretext of enforcing laws. Credited with fixing Abuja and lauded for improving education standards in Kaduna State, where he recently [enrolled](#) his son into public school in leading by example, El-Rufai has been criticized for making religiously inflammatory statements and for mishandling ethnic and other volatile conflicts in Kaduna. It is the baggage of El-Rufai's politics that seems to be weighing down the KABAFEST partnership.

The finger-pointing directed at Shoneyin and her associations with power, including at the highest echelons of the Nigerian state, may have some historical context. During the 2015 Nigerian presidential election, pitting incumbent Goodluck Jonathan against the country's one time military ruler Muhammadu Buhari, Shoneyin took an unprecedented step by writing a provocative piece in the UK's The Guardian, titled [How my father's jailer can offer Nigeria a fresh start](#), in support of the then candidate Buhari. It was a bold move, where a writer, poet and artist was willingly sticking their neck out by taking a public stand in a divisive election.

In the piece, Shoneyin recalls a 1984 incident – she calls it possibly her worst year – when her father failed to show up at her school in Edinburgh in the UK. She was only years old and her 15 year old elder brother took her to Heathrow, from where they flew to Lagos, to meet their distraught mother.

Buhari had put Shoneyin's father, a contractor, behind bars, in a supposed anti-corruption purge. In an unexpected turn of events, as Shoneyin was writing to endorse candidate Buhari, her father was part of the local advisory committee within Buhari's party.

Shoneyin wrote about how she had travelled around Nigeria with Buhari's campaign team, interviewing people, watching and talking to the man himself, because she really wanted to understand who Buhari was, what he represented, to cure her own misgivings. The verdict? The man was firm, he didn't own a mansion, and indeed exceeded the 'anything but Jonathan' resolve. It was a risky political gamble, but if anyone needed to understand Shoneyin's grit, then there is the answer. Here is someone unafraid, someone who will cast her lot fearlessly.

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However, much as it took courage to do whatever she did, some would argue that Buhari was already a front runner, and that Shoneyin was simply aligning herself with the winning team, such that Buhari and his people - the El-Rufais of this world - wouldn't forget they owed her for her support once they assumed power. One may ask, is Shoneyin a patriotic Nigerian looking out for her country and the arts, or is she a smooth operator who has mastered how to work the system for her own benefit and for the benefit of the causes she is invested in?

As Buhari's human rights record falters, and as his governance continuously comes under heavy criticism, Shoneyin and others who placed their bets on the man could be perceived as partly owning the Buhari problem, for publicly campaigning for the retired General. Buhari's recent excesses include the arrests of perceived trouble makers such as Omoyele Sowore, founder of the Sahara Reporters news agency, who ran against President Buhari during the 2018 general election. Sowore was arrested by Nigeria's Department of Security Services (DSS) in August 2019, accused of treason for his *Revolution Now* protest movement. Then there are those like Abubakar Idris, popularly known as Dadiyata, a Governor El-Rufai critic, who was kidnapped from his home in Kaduna, and whose whereabouts remain unknown.

It is therefore a combination of these things - the support for Buhari, the collaboration with El-Rufai - that has made Shoneyin a target, as some form of representative for those in the arts in Nigeria who seem to cozy up to the state, yet as things fall apart, they remain busy with their projects, some in collaboration with politicians, while those many would consider their default comrades in the arts - the Sowores of this world - languish in detention. Critics have therefore concluded that Shoneyin and her lot aren't part of the broader civic project which is expected of someone of her literary stature, of speaking truth to power. The charge is that even when the said government officials show up for events like KABAFEST, no hard questions are necessarily asked of them regarding issues such as the ongoing clampdowns.

In Kenya, the writer and essayist Binyavanga Wainaina was frowned upon especially within the Kenyan intelligentsia for openly [endorsing](#) President Uhuru Kenyatta's 2013 election, at a time when crimes against humanity charges at the International Criminal Court in The Hague were hanging over Kenyatta's head. In Zimbabwe, the lawyer and novelist Petina Gappah has come under [fire](#) for working as Trade and Investment advisor to President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who some posit is an extension of Robert Mugabe's misdeeds. Gappah has since vacated her position to focus on her new

book, cheekily [announcing](#) that she would share her book tour dates so that those angry at her for advising Mnangagwa can show up and picket.

The choices and actions of Shoneyin, Binyavanga and Gappah, as a random sample, certainly have consequences. First because the trio are citizens operating in highly polarized political environments, but mainly out of the fact that as writers with high visibility, choosing a political side means throwing considerable weight of seeming legitimacy behind it, even if imaginary. Therefore those in the literary space who don't agree with the politics of whoever a Shoneyin, a Binyavanga or a Gappah publicly support or work for may see their actions as acts of betrayal of some unwritten artistic covenant, a collective agreement which is now being interrogated.

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The recurring question has been, is there an ideological collective to which writers and artists belong to, other than the fact that they are engaged in the same practice, or trade. Can one choose to be who they want to be, including by purposely becoming "sellouts", while still belonging to the supposed collective? And if the collective is real - that we belong together - then what is the shared project and its philosophy?

The older generation of post-independence African writers preached the gospel of taking the side of the oppressed. But is that the prerogative of African writers? Can a writer choose to take the side of the oppressor and still have a place at the table, or can they break away from the collective and choose to pursue their own project, political or not, without being ostracized? Is there a rulebook given to writers when they burst into the scene, such that if in doubt one can revisit the guidelines and reboot, regaining default factory settings?

Of course writers and artists are citizens of countries, and may therefore decide to take a political stand, like Binyavanga and Shoneyin did, or to work for a government, like Gappah did, a liberty one can choose to or choose not to exercise, without consulting or seeking consent from anyone. Those who pick this path of taking public stands or taking up prominent government positions are or should at least beware of attendant consequences - the backlash from those in opposing camps or those in opposition of whatever articulated arguments - such that in the end, one shouldn't be afraid to challenge either Binyavanga's or Shoneyin's standpoints, just as writers shouldn't be afraid of taking a stand. This is the practice in everyday political engagement, where people articulate their views, and those views attract reactions. Writers and artists are no exception to this rule.

There will similarly be those who will argue that politics is too heavy for them - coming from a place of elevation and privilege, because ordinarily politics in all its manifestations affects life and forces us to engage with it - and will therefore do their art for art's sake project. It won't mean that they will be lesser writers or artists, but it will be a mistake for the ideologues to imagine that such individuals are part of some collective project, because what selling out means to one may not be the same thing to the other. This could be the divide between Shoneyin and those who support her, and the critics who believe KABAFEST is a flagrant betrayal of something eternally sacred within the Nigerian literary and artistic community.

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As debates get messy and muddy, what mustn't escape everyone is that writers, artists and intellectuals have always been agents of confronting society's contradictions, including and their own. Shoneyin's sympathizers have pointed out that majority of those policing the conduct of those living and working in Nigeria are themselves "sellouts", holed up in the West, cushioned by fellowships, well-paying jobs and enjoying the advantage of distance. On the other hand, the anti-Shoneyin brigade has alleged that those defending KABAFEST are doing so for the sake of the hustle, so that they may get invitations to Shoneyin-organized events and the likes. There are no signs of a truce between the two sides.

In what appeared to be her one and only rebuttal, a response to her critics at the height of the Twitter brawls, Shoneyin [posted](#) a black and white photo of herself wearing a KABAFEST T-shirt - making sure the logo was visible - arms crossed, with a half-serious half-playful facial expression, looking like a boss. The brief, unmistakable, this-is-all-I-have-to-say caption read, "*I remain committed to the development, promotion and celebration of literature and arts on the African continent. Next is #AkeFest19! #WeMove!*"

Shoneyin seemed to be sticking to her guns, unruffled. Her critics will have to wait a whole year, for the next KABAFEST, for the next round of scuffles to happen all over again, as has become routine. There seems to be neither a mediating force nor looming ceasefire in sight.

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