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[Episode 64 - WORDUP 411](#) (March 2016)

Transcript by Christabel Smith

Host: Michelle Madsen – **MM**

Guest: Olumide Holloway – **OH**

Conversation:

MM: Hello and welcome to Lunar Poetry Podcasts. My name is Michelle Madsen and I am here in sunny Lagos with the head honcho of WORDUP. Can you introduce yourself please?

OH: Hi, my name is Olumide Holloway, better known as King Olulu Not From Zulu. I organise WORDUP event and poetry slam competition.

MM: We're here with King Olulu at Freedom Park at the Lagos Theatre Festival and we are going to talk about Olulu's work and how spoken word and slam is taking over Lagos. So can you tell us about your work and how you came to start writing?

OH: I've been writing for 24 years. I started writing aged 11, way back in junior secondary school. I changed schools and it wasn't easy for me to make new friends, so instead of talking, I was writing. Spoken word poetry started for me in 2010 when I discovered that people react faster to sight and sound than what they have to read.

I thought fine, I can't sing or dance that much, but I can read my poems. Apart from just reading my poems, I can actually perform my poems.

MM: Where did WORDUP and War of Words start? And can you tell us a little about what they are?

OH: Let me talk about how they started. When I started performing in 2010, for a year in 2011, I was going to all the open mics I could find. There were not a lot, maybe two or three.

MM: A month?

OH: No. Like once a month. There was one like weekly, but it was music, poetry, comedy, open mic. That was Freedom Point by Torpedo Pascal.

MM: All in Lagos?

OH: Yes, Lagos. Then there was Chill and Relax once a month. They were the two. I was hoping I would get discovered, that someone would say, I like your poetry, I'd like you to do this or that. For one year, that never happened. It occurred to me, instead of waiting to get discovered, why don't I discover poets?

I had my group of friends, I said let's come together and do our own event. From June 2011, we were hoping to get sponsorship to start our event and then we started organising Chill and Relax, which was another platform. It was an open mic that started in February 2012. WORDUP started August 2012. We thought we can't keep waiting for sponsorship to come, let's put our money into this.

So WORDUP started as an event for established poets, where established poets come on stage to perform and people come and enjoy poetry. Along the line, 2013, we found out that we need to change our poets, not just use the regular poets. We need to find a way to discover new poets, but we showed that those new poets can handle the crowd. They might be good in private, performing one to one, but when they see the crowd, tension and anxiety might come along.

MM: How big is the crowd usually?

OH: Right now, we have 300 to 500 people.

MM: Every month?

OH: No, quarterly. Right now, we're changing WORDUP to be once a year. The need to have new poets on WORDUP led to the War of Words poetry slam competition where the top three get to perform at WORDUP. That was how WORDUP led us to War of Words, a slam competition where poets from all over Nigeria come together, 20 poets on stage, slam, and the winners get to perform at WORDUP.

MM: When is the next War of Words?

OH: We have changed the format. We have done five seasons of War of Words, now we do War of Words Africa, poets from all over Africa.

MM: That's amazing. Do you actually get poets from all over Africa?

OH: We already have them online, Facebook, Twitter. Some of them are planning to come to Nigeria for the event itself. War of Words Africa is planned to be like a reality TV show.

MM: So like Nigeria's Got Talent for Poets?

OH: Exactly. From the video submission, we do two auditions and then we pick 20 poets who go into the house. They will be trained and all that and they will slam consecutively for four weeks.

MM: Has that happened yet?

OH: We have just started. It's officially supposed to kick off March 1st. All we need is the theme for the video submission. Once the theme comes out, they can submit videos and from those, we pick 60 poets, then 20 finalists to go into the house.

MM: So it's like Big Brother for poets, but with more talent.

OH: More talent. More brain work.

MM: Are you opening it up to poets performing in any language?

OH: Yes. We also need to find a way to make sure your poems are understood by anybody in the world.

MM: How are you going to do that?

OH: Maybe subtitles, maybe having the words of the poet scrolled at the back, just to make sure we don't lose the crowd, to make sure people follow. We might, *might*, insist on having

it in English, because once people don't understand what you're saying, you've lost the crowd. If you don't have the crowd with you, how do you get to win the slam?

MM: Where is this massive slam final going to happen?

OH: Everything will be in Lagos, Nigeria, for now, the reason being we are self-funding events. We are hoping to get corporates to come in and sponsor the event. We are still talking to them. Hopefully, officially they will come on board, but for now, we have to work with what we have. Everything will be in Lagos, Nigeria, for this first edition. With time, we want to take it to Ghana, South Africa, at least hold auditions in Ghana, Kenya, South Africa.

MM: It sounds like you're looking at holding auditions mainly in English-speaking countries. What about poets in Francophone Africa, how do you capture them?

OH: We need to find a way. Let's start with English poetry, for now. By the second edition, we will know our mistakes, what we can do better. We want to work with poets performing in any language, have the words in the background, so it's not just what they're saying, but also reading it, so people can follow.

We had one of our poets go to Brazil, which is not necessarily an English-speaking country. She went to slam there, I think she came second or third. She had to perform in English, but her poem was put in the Brazilian language. People could follow it based on what was behind. That's how we plan to include poets with different languages.

MM: We've heard lots about what you're doing for poetry in Lagos is amazing. Can you give us a poem yourself?

OH: OK, this is my signature piece, titled Silence Can Be Avoided and it goes like this.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

MM: Thank you. That's like a klaxon call to the new poets to get up on stage and slam and do their thing.

OH: Express themselves. Exactly.

MM: You said that was your signature piece. What are you writing about at the moment?

OH: What I am writing about at the moment has to do with the difficulty that comes in when having to choose between making a living and living a making. I have to work to fund my passion, but my passion doesn't put food on my table.

MM: Quite a common theme among artists, wherever you are in the world! What is your day job?

OH: I work in a bank as a credit analyst. That helps how I write because you have to analyse, which helps my writing. They are in sync with each other, however time is a major challenge,

the timing to go around meeting people, get to talk to sponsors, get to talk to people, get to encourage poets, get to mentor. You need mentorship, you need training, but time, time, time.

MM: Do you have another poem on that theme or any you like?

OH: I'm trying to remember. I don't perform that much because of poetry organisation.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

MM: In the UK, there's a movement of poets trying to say you can't work for free because it brings everyone's prices down, but you've got to do what you've got to do. How has the new government in Nigeria affected poetry?

OH: Right now, most poets in Nigeria write political poems. Politics is what everybody is keen on. The government is getting better, but they can be better. Most poets write about politics. Even from our last slam, the theme has changed. Most poets write about change or say change will come. Has the change really come? Is this the change we want? It's more about politics. Yes, there's a bit about love and other factors, but for most poets, it's all about politics, the government and all that.

MM: Is it very much focused on the Nigerian government or do poets write about global governments?

OH: Yeah, they do. It has to do with what you're aware of, knowledge and information are very key. Most of the time, so you don't get quoted out of context when speaking about a country that isn't yours, you don't know how it is really affected. Right now, it's about Trump and other aspirants in the US government and people have this – I use the word very carefully – biased view about Trump.

Some people even like him, say OK, he's going to ban people from coming to the USA, he's going to ensure Africans don't get there, but then I don't live there, so it would be wrong of me to write about something I'm not too sure about. If you look online, he has followers, people who like him. He says he is going to change USA and make sure terrorism doesn't get to overrun the country.

You have to balance what you know with what it really is. There is nothing more damaging for a poet to write about something you're not sure of and then people punch holes in what you have written. We talk about global issues, poverty, which is a safe zone, terrorism, human injustice. Global politics is kept where it is.

Politics locally, freely we can shout about that because we know what the major party is, we know who is doing what. Global politics, no. Global issues, we do talk about those.

MM: Nigeria is a really big country and we're here in Lagos in the south, what about in the north, like Abuja, is there much going on in a poetry way?

OH: Yeah, when we started our event, we tried to bring poets together from all around Nigeria. We have had poets coming from Abuja to our slam, also Benin, Port Harcourt. One from Kano. There was one that was supposed to come from Zambia, but he couldn't make it because of school functions and all that. We also reach out to poetry organisations in Abuja, Benin, Jos and Port Harcourt because they have an active organisation there.

In the North, we have them as individuals, we don't have them as a collective group. We reach out to them and talk to them. It's easier when they have a collective group, it's easier to talk to them and know. OK, what are your plans? Our plans are... How can we work together? In Benin, we did the same thing as in Abuja. For others, maybe because of the issue of terrorism, it's not been easy reaching out to poets there.

MM: What would you like to see happen with poetry here in the next year or so? How about joining up with poetry groups in different parts of the world?

OH: We have the local vision, the semi-local vision and the international vision. Our watchword is act local, think global. We hope to do War of Words International where we'd have poets from all over the world coming together. We could even have UK vs Nigeria poetry slam. It's not just about Nigeria, Africa. It's global, but you have to start small, you can't start too big.

Our core vision is we want spoken word poetry to be a vibrant industry, where people can tell their parents, I'm a poet, and nobody's answering, yeah, I know, what's your day job? Where you can earn your money and your living from poetry. For us, it's a vision to make it a vibrant, thriving industry, where you can earn your money without having to take care of a family.

We hope organisations can come in and sponsor poetry like they do for music and comedy because music and comedy are very big in Africa and we believe poetry can also be big. We love music and comedy, but you have people who are more into intellectual stuff. Poetry makes you think, puts your imagination on a wider scope. You have people that love that. It might be a niche market, but it's also a market that can be vibrant. That's our vision, make it a very vibrant industry, in Nigeria, in Africa, around the world.

MM: Thank you very much for your time. This is Michelle Madsen signing off from Lagos. You can find more out about War of Words and Olulu at these Twitter addresses.

OH: OK @WORDUP411 on Twitter and on my personal Twitter as @Olulu4ever

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