



Identity Construction of the *Bukusu* People of Kenya in the Spoken Word Performances of *Sokoto*, a Kenyan Poet

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ABSTRACT

Background: Spoken word performance has long served as a medium for identity formation, social critique, and cultural preservation in African oral traditions. Among the Bukusu of western Kenya, rapid social change driven by urbanisation, globalisation, colonialism, and westernisation has intensified questions of cultural belonging, moral order, and political accountability. Sokoto, a Bukusu spoken word artist whose performances circulate on digital platforms, provides a valuable site for examining identity negotiation in contemporary postcolonial Kenya.

Objective: This paper examines how identity is constructed in Sokoto's spoken word performances, focusing on the rhetorical strategies and thematic domains through which he negotiates, critiques, and preserves cultural, political, and moral identities amid rapid social change.

Method: The study employed qualitative content analysis of 20 purposively selected performances drawn from Sokoto's publicly available digital recordings. The performances were translated from Lubukusu into English and verified by a bilingual native speaker with expertise in Bukusu cultural studies. A thematic framework, developed deductively from the research objectives and inductively through repeated textual analysis, identified six identity domains: environment, politics, ethics and morality, love and marriage, family, and religion. Analysis focused particularly on first-person narration as a key site of performative identity construction. The study was informed by Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, postcolonial ecocriticism, and sociological perspectives on cultural identity.

Results: Sokoto constructs identity across multiple interconnected domains. Ecologically, he presents himself as an environmental advocate, documenting biodiversity loss while promoting conservation. Politically, he portrays himself as a voice of accountability, critiquing electoral fraud, corruption, and political betrayal beyond ethnic loyalties. Ethically, he combines Bukusu cultural values with Christian teachings to address theft, witchcraft, and communal violence, positioning himself as a moral guide. In the domains of love, marriage, and family, he negotiates tensions between tradition and modernity while addressing polygamy, orphan neglect, and responsibilities toward ageing parents. Religiously, he integrates Christian eschatology with Bukusu moral traditions to construct a confessional yet communally instructive identity.

Conclusion: Identity in Sokoto's spoken word is dynamic and multidimensional. He simultaneously performs as an environmental advocate, political critic, moral guide, devoted family member, and committed Christian, constructing a vision of authentic Bukusu identity that balances cultural continuity



with social change. His performances function as both a cultural mirror, reflecting contemporary challenges, and a cultural compass, promoting values for navigating a changing society.

Unique Contribution: This study provides the first systematic academic analysis of Sokoto's performances, contributing to scholarship on performative identity, postcolonial African oral literature, and Bukusu cultural studies. It demonstrates that contemporary digital spoken word serves as a powerful medium for cultural preservation, identity negotiation, and social critique.

Key Recommendations: Cultural and educational institutions should archive Sokoto's performances as important texts of Bukusu oral literature. Environmental NGOs should collaborate with spoken word artists to promote conservation awareness through culturally resonant communication. Electoral bodies and civil society organisations should address the political grievances reflected in these performances through electoral reforms and anti-corruption measures. Family welfare organisations should use the issues raised—including orphan neglect, domestic violence, and polygamy—to facilitate community dialogue. Finally, scholars should expand research on contemporary spoken word artists in Kenya and across East Africa, recognising the genre as a significant field of academic inquiry.

Keywords: Spoken word, identity construction, Bukusu, postcolonial Kenya, ecological disruption.

INTRODUCTION

Identity is not a fixed attribute; rather, it is performed and enacted through language, behaviour, and cultural expression within specific social and historical contexts (Butler, 1990). Despite the rich body of scholarship on oral performance and identity in African literary and postcolonial studies, significant gaps remain at the intersection of digital spoken word, community-specific identity negotiation, and the Bukusu experience of rapid social change in postcolonial Kenya. Theoretically, Bauman (1986) argues that oral performance is always an act of social self-positioning, while postcolonial ecocriticism has demonstrated how ecological disruption reshapes cultural identities in the Global South (Deepa & Mishra, 2024). However, these frameworks have been applied predominantly to conventional print literature and live performance, leaving digital spoken word as an underexplored site of identity construction. Sociologically, Nyamwange (2024) documents the evolving identities of Kenyan communities under the pressures of urbanisation and globalisation, while Waswa (2023) affirms the centrality of marriage, family, and moral conduct to Bukusu identity. Yet, no systematic academic study has examined how a contemporary Bukusu artist negotiates these pressures through spoken word, or how such performances function simultaneously as cultural archives, social critique, and identity manifestos. Practically, the Bukusu community of western Kenya faces increasing challenges, including deforestation, electoral violence, polygamy, the neglect of orphans, and the erosion of indigenous ecological knowledge, much of which remains undocumented in oral art forms, creating an urgent archival and scholarly gap.

Against this theoretical and practical background, this paper examines how identity is constructed in the spoken word performances of Sokoto, a Bukusu digital poet from Kenya. Specifically, it explores the rhetorical strategies and thematic domains—environment, politics, ethics and morality, love and marriage, family, and religion—through which he negotiates, critiques, and preserves cultural, political, and moral identities amid rapid social change. In doing so, the study extends performativity frameworks beyond their conventional contexts into the digital sphere and provides the first systematic academic analysis of Sokoto's body of work, thereby contributing to scholarship on postcolonial African oral literature.



LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between oral performance and identity has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Bauman (1986) argues that oral performance is never merely the transmission of content; rather, it is an act of self-presentation through which performers negotiate their social positioning. He further cautions that oral texts should be interpreted with attention to their performative context rather than their literal content alone. In African societies, spoken word and oral poetry have historically functioned as powerful instruments of communal identity formation, moral instruction, and political commentary (Okpewho, 1992).

Postcolonial ecocriticism has increasingly highlighted the ways environmental degradation reshapes cultural identities in the Global South. Deepa and Mishra (2024) demonstrate that ecological disruption acts as a catalyst for cultural transformation by unsettling established practices, beliefs, and social structures. Their analysis of *A Bend in the River* by A Bend in the River illustrates how a shrinking river symbolises the erosion of economic opportunity and communal belonging, a metaphor that resonates strongly with Sokoto's environmental poetry.

Nyamwange (2024) documents how the Gusii community in Kenya experiences evolving cultural identities under the pressures of urbanisation and globalisation, observing that culture continually shifts in response to modernity. Similar dynamics operate within the Bukusu community represented in Sokoto's performances, where modern influences compete with indigenous traditions in shaping belonging, morality, and social organisation. Waswa (2023) similarly affirms that marriage, family, and ethical conduct remain central to Bukusu identity and that moral socialisation begins in childhood.

Political identity in postcolonial Kenya has also received considerable scholarly attention. Berman (1998) traces how colonial state formation created new administrative structures layered upon pre-existing ethnic and communal identities. These dynamics were further reshaped by Kenya's 2010 Constitution, which devolved political power and intensified local political competition, creating what Nyamwange (2024) describes as heightened political tensions during election periods. Sokoto's political performances engage directly with the consequences of this contested political landscape.

The intersection of religion and oral performance has likewise been widely documented in African communities. Religious themes such as life after death, divine justice, and moral accountability permeate oral traditions, providing ethical frameworks through which communities interpret and respond to social challenges (Okpewho, 1992). In Sokoto's performances, Christian theology is interwoven with Bukusu moral traditions to construct a syncretic religious identity that is both personally confessional and communally normative.



METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative content analysis as its primary research method. Spoken word performances by Sokoto were purposively selected from his publicly available digital recordings. The performances were translated from Lubukusu into English, and the translations were verified by a bilingual native speaker of Lubukusu with expertise in Bukusu cultural studies.

A thematic framework was developed both deductively from the research objectives and inductively through repeated listening to and reading of the performances. Six thematic categories emerged: environment, politics, ethics and morality, love and marriage, family, and religion. Each performance was coded according to its primary and secondary themes, identity claims, and rhetorical devices, including repetition, nostalgia, metaphor, direct address, and code-switching between Lubukusu and English.

Excerpt analysis was used to support interpretive claims, with particular emphasis on passages in which Sokoto, or his poetic persona, narrates in the first person, as these most directly construct performative identity. The analysis also examined how Sokoto's self-presentation varies across thematic domains to develop a composite understanding of the identity constructed throughout his body of work.

The study recognises the interpretive limitations inherent in translating and analysing oral texts across languages. Translation inevitably involves some loss of prosodic and cultural nuance. Where appropriate, original Lubukusu expressions are retained and glossed to preserve their cultural meaning. The study also acknowledges that spoken word performances are embodied events and that the textual record, however carefully annotated, cannot fully capture the acoustic, gestural, and relational dimensions of live or recorded performance.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Environment: Ecology, Cultural Memory, and Nostalgia

Environmental identity is the most foundational dimension of Sokoto's spoken word. Across three core performances—*Esambo Yefwe*, *Sitawa*, and *Sokoto*—the poet constructs himself as an environmental advocate deeply rooted in Bukusu ecological knowledge.

Sokoto portrays ecological disruption through the decline of iconic species such as gazelles, hares, and termites, as well as the shrinking of rivers and forests. He attributes this destruction to deforestation, the use of agricultural herbicides, and the cultivation of riparian land driven by greed. These are not presented as abstract environmental concerns but as direct causes of economic hardship and cultural rupture within the Bukusu community. As Deepa and Mishra (2024) observe, ecological disruption in postcolonial contexts is never purely environmental; it destabilises the cultural practices and social structures that depend on a healthy ecosystem.

When Sokoto laments in *Memories We Lost* that *khwebilila khubiala kimisala ne khubikha bichakha* ("we forgot to plant trees and conserve forests"), he narrates the loss of both the



ecosystem and cultural memory. He attributes the shrinking of rivers to *bulianga bwa khwikhupamo* ("greed"), which has eliminated fishing and reduced biodiversity. In *Sitawa*, he recalls how termites (*chiswa*) once served as a rich source of natural protein; their disappearance signifies not only nutritional loss but also environmental degradation. Similarly, in *Sokoto*, the persona recalls how his friend's ability to hunt rabbits and grasshoppers sustained them after the death of their parents, an ecological resource that no longer exists.

Nostalgia is Sokoto's primary rhetorical device in these environmental performances. He recalls his father hunting with dogs, Naliaka collecting firewood from nearby forests, and the community living in harmony with a "virgin" environment. This nostalgic reconstruction serves two purposes. First, it documents a pre-disruption ecological and cultural order, functioning as an oral archive. Second, it suggests that restoration is possible by drawing lessons from the past. Nyamwange (2024) cautions that nostalgia can idealise the past to the extent that it hinders adaptation. Sokoto navigates this tension by combining nostalgia with explicit calls for tree planting and environmental conservation, indicating that his aim is not to recreate the past but to recover the principles that made it sustainable.

Importantly, Sokoto treats ecological and cultural disruption as inseparable. The shrinking rivers, disappearance of wildlife, and erosion of traditional livelihoods are presented as interconnected processes that undermine Bukusu identity through urbanisation, westernisation, and modernity. By performing these concerns on digital platforms, Sokoto also constructs himself as a voice of cultural resistance who uses contemporary media to advocate for traditional ecological values. While Deepa and Mishra (2024) similarly argue that ecological disruption catalyses cultural transformation by unsettling established practices, beliefs, and social structures, their study focuses on communities in the Congo Basin of Central Africa. The present study extends this perspective to the Bukusu community of Kenya.

Politics: Power, Accountability, and the Abandoned Electorate

Politics is a dominant and recurring theme in Sokoto's performances. In *Namalwa*, *Mbakarira Mufubi*, and *Soya*, he offers a sustained critique of Kenya's postcolonial political culture while positioning himself as an advocate of accountability and peace. Berman (1998) explains that colonial state formation created layered administrative structures that produced competing social identities. Nyamwange (2024) further argues that Kenya's 2010 Constitution intensified these dynamics by devolving power, increasing ethnic competition, and heightening political tensions. Sokoto's performances engage directly with this political landscape, portraying politicians as architects of violence, electoral fraud, economic exploitation, and broken promises.

In *Namalwa*, Sokoto mourns his sister, who was killed during post-election violence, and uses her death to advocate political tolerance across ethnic communities. His appeal for Kalenjins, Luos, and Agikuyu to live peacefully represents both a political and an identity claim, positioning himself as a Kenyan whose identity transcends ethnicity. In *Mbakarira Mufubi*, the abandoned voter is likened to an impatient orphan whose hopes for employment, democracy, and quality healthcare have been frustrated by corrupt and incompetent leaders. Sokoto documents systemic failures, including



electoral malpractice, prolonged doctors' strikes, parliamentarians disconnected from ordinary farmers, and the collapse of coffee farming due to greed and poor governance.

His poem *Soya* ("Bribery") addresses electoral corruption directly. He warns politicians and voters that exchanging votes for fifty shillings is both illegal and self-defeating because corrupt politicians ultimately recover such expenditures by looting public funds, leaving citizens worse off. Instead, he argues that these resources should be invested in roads, bridges, and community development. Through these performances, Sokoto constructs the Kenyan politician as deceitful, irresponsible, and dismissive of voters while presenting the ideal citizen as one who rejects corruption, votes responsibly, and demands accountability. Simultaneously, he constructs himself as a poet who speaks for the voiceless and holds those in power accountable through art.

Ethics and Morality: Social Ills and the Ideal Bukusu Society

Sokoto's ethical performances draw on both Bukusu cultural values and Christian moral teachings to construct a vision of a just and virtuous society. Waswa (2023) identifies morality as central to Bukusu identity, noting that ethical values are instilled from childhood. Likewise, Ochieng (1998) argues that moral values within Kenyan communities safeguard social harmony and peaceful coexistence.

In *Sibala Simyanu* ("Evil World"), Sokoto narrates a brutal home invasion during which his family is attacked, his mother and infant sister are sexually assaulted, and his father is murdered before his eyes. The graphic violence functions not merely as narration but as a metaphor for the collapse of the community's moral fabric. Bauman (1986) cautions that oral texts should be interpreted symbolically as well as literally. Accordingly, the father's death symbolises the collapse of moral authority in a society that no longer protects its most vulnerable members.

In the second part of *Sibala Simyanu*, Sokoto addresses witchcraft and sorcery, criticising the tendency of community members to consult witch doctors whenever their neighbours prosper. He frames this behaviour as a collective moral failure and, speaking with the authority of an elder, condemns witches, thieves, sorcerers, and those who reject wise counsel. This rhetorical strategy constructs Sokoto as a moral authority, a significant identity claim within Bukusu culture, where eldership carries spiritual and social legitimacy.

In *Bubwifwi* ("Theft"), Sokoto employs repetition to warn against stealing, noting that thieves often become victims of mob justice. He grounds his message in both religious teaching ("God forbids stealing") and practical ethics ("You better work hard to earn your ten shillings"). *Likulu* ("The Heavens") presents his most comprehensive ethical vision by portraying a society free from promiscuity, jealousy, corruption, and murder, governed instead by the biblical commandment of love. Throughout these performances, Sokoto constructs himself not as a judge but as a moral guide who illuminates a better path for his community.



Love and Marriage: Tradition, Modernity, and Gendered Expectations

Marriage is regarded by Waswa (2023) as a highly valued rite of passage in Bukusu culture, characterised by expectations of female industriousness, fidelity, and respect for in-laws. Sokoto's love and marriage performances, particularly *Penina*, explore what happens when these traditional expectations collide with the realities of modern urban life.

Penina presents a cautionary portrait of a modern woman whose aspirations exceed her husband's financial capacity. She desires expensive cosmetics, beef, and the social status enjoyed by wealthier women before eventually leaving her husband for Walumbe, a man whose wealth appears limitless. However, Sokoto's portrayal is more nuanced than simple condemnation. He acknowledges that Penina's desires were shaped by social comparison and that her husband's inability to pay bridewealth or provide materially created legitimate frustrations. He further admits that, despite her betrayal, his love for her endures, adding emotional complexity to the narrative.

The poem reveals enduring tensions within Bukusu gender ideology. On one hand, Sokoto upholds the traditional ideal of a humble, patient, and contented wife. On the other, he recognises that women increasingly encounter broader social realities that reshape their aspirations. Rather than resolving this tension, the poem performs it. Across other love poems, including *Bumicho*, *Ua Langu*, and *Sokoto Esecha*, Sokoto employs metaphors of seeds, flowers, and the bull to portray love as a transformative and enduring force capable of breaking, reshaping, and ultimately uniting people beyond social convention. These performances construct him as a passionate and loyal lover whose capacity for love survives even betrayal.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, the study concludes that the dominant tension in Sokoto's construction of identity lies between tradition and modernity. He expresses nostalgia for a time when rivers flowed freely, forests remained intact, marriages were stable, and communities cared collectively for their orphans. However, he does not merely romanticise the past. Instead, he critiques traditional practices such as polygamy, challenges patriarchal assumptions about women, and advocates civic virtues that transcend ethnic boundaries. Consequently, his performed identity is not simply conservative but generative, imagining new possibilities for Bukusu society while remaining firmly rooted in its cultural heritage.

Sokoto's spoken word therefore functions as both a cultural mirror and a cultural compass. It reflects the ecological, political, moral, and familial challenges confronting the Bukusu community while pointing towards values of love, accountability, environmental conservation, and social solidarity as pathways for addressing them. As digital platforms extend his reach beyond the Bukusu homeland, his performances contribute to wider conversations about identity, belonging, and responsibility in postcolonial Kenya. This study enriches scholarship on Bukusu oral tradition and demonstrates the enduring capacity of spoken word to shape how communities understand themselves and envision their future.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Cultural and educational institutions in western Kenya should systematically document and archive Sokoto's spoken word performances as important texts of contemporary Bukusu oral literature. These performances preserve invaluable ecological knowledge, moral instruction, and cultural memory that may otherwise be lost with older generations.
2. Environmental agencies and NGOs operating in Bukusu communities should collaborate with spoken word artists such as Sokoto as community advocates. His performances demonstrate that culturally grounded artistic expressions can communicate environmental conservation messages more effectively than conventional extension approaches, thereby enhancing community participation in initiatives such as tree planting and riparian land protection.
3. Political stakeholders, including electoral bodies, civil society organisations, and community leaders, should treat the political disillusionment reflected in Sokoto's performances as evidence of genuine public concerns. Strengthening electoral integrity, enforcing anti-corruption measures, and promoting accountable leadership are essential for rebuilding civic trust and fostering inclusive national identity.
4. Family welfare organisations and community counsellors should use the family challenges portrayed in Sokoto's performances—including the neglect of orphaned children, domestic violence, and the consequences of polygamy—as entry points for structured community dialogue and intervention. These performances reveal that communities already possess the moral vocabulary needed to address such issues.
5. Scholars of African oral literature, performance studies, and postcolonial studies should expand research on contemporary spoken word artists in Kenya and across East Africa. Sokoto's work demonstrates that digital spoken word is not merely a popular cultural expression but also a sophisticated medium for identity construction, cultural preservation, and social critique that deserves sustained scholarly attention.



Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

Dennis conceived the study, including the design. Dennis, Lencer and Obala collated the data, and they all handled the analysis and interpretation. Dennis wrote the initial manuscript. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used AI specifically for formatting the document. The authors carefully reviewed, revised, and verified all outputs generated by the tool and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript content.

Data availability statement

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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