

## Religion and Hypocrisy in the Political Lyrics of Eedris Abdulkareem

Victor Afolaranmi



Performing Arts and Film Studies, Lead City University, Ibadan.

DOI:

In Nigeria, religion is deeply woven into public life, frequently serving as a source of legitimacy for political actors. Elected officials often invoke religious language to portray themselves as morally upright, while simultaneously presiding over systems rife with corruption, impunity, and inequality. This paper examines how Nigerian hip-hop artist Eedris Abdulkareem uses religious symbolism and verbal irony in his lyrics to expose the contradictions between public piety and political immorality. Focusing primarily on the songs “Jaga Jaga” and “Letter to Mr. President,” the study applies discourse analysis and semiotic deconstruction to uncover how Abdulkareem weaponizes religious language to critique elite hypocrisy. Findings reveal that Abdulkareem does not attack religion itself but critiques its manipulation by corrupt politicians who use spiritual authority as a cloak for criminal governance. His lyrics perform a reversal of moral order, placing religiously performative elites on trial before the court of public opinion. Moreover, Abdulkareem’s use of irony often dismissed as street vulgarity emerges here as a deliberate rhetorical strategy to collapse the distance between sacredness and state dysfunction. The censorship of “Jaga Jaga” further underscores the state’s discomfort with music that undermines its religious self-image. The study concludes that Abdulkareem’s music constitutes a form of informal moral critique, giving regular Nigerians a different platform to challenge the authority of those in positions of both governmental and spiritual authority. It argues that popular music remains a vital platform for ethical resistance where formal institutions such as the judiciary, media, or religious bodies have been compromised. It is recommended that religious institutions in Nigeria undertake internal reflection on their engagement with political power, resisting complicity in corrupt regimes. Additionally, scholars of religion and governance should treat popular music not merely as entertainment but as a critical archive of ethical dissent that captures the lived contradictions of a society navigating between sacred ideals and failed leadership.

**Keywords:** Eedris Abdulkareem, religion and politics, protest music, Nigeria, moral hypocrisy, lyrical analysis, corruption, irony, popular theology, political discourse.

### Background to the Study

Nigeria presents a paradoxical relationship between religion and governance. The country ranks among the most religious nations in the world, with Christianity and Islam shaping nearly every facet of social and political life (Pew Research Center, 2019). Yet, it consistently struggles with endemic corruption, poor governance, and weak institutional accountability (Transparency International, 2023). Politicians frequently invoke religious symbols, rituals, and language to project themselves as trustworthy leaders, while simultaneously engaging in practices that undermine the very moral codes they claim to embody (Falola, 2022). This contradiction underscores a profound tension between public religiosity and private political conduct, a paradox that citizens navigate daily.

This paradox is not merely abstract; it plays out in the lived experience of Nigerians. Religious leaders often appear at campaign rallies, endorse candidates, or accept patronage from political elites, thereby blurring the line between moral authority and political expediency (Okeke & Oje, 2020). In return, politicians amplify their religious devotion in the public sphere, cultivating an image of piety that coexists with practices of graft, nepotism, and abuse of power. Religion, instead of serving as a moral corrective to the state, is frequently co-opted as a legitimizing tool. This has contributed to widespread cynicism about the sincerity of both politicians and clerics, especially among Nigeria’s youth. It is against this backdrop that the music of Eedris Abdulkareem emerges as a significant cultural text. Born in Kano in 1974,

Abdulkareem rose to national prominence in the late 1990s as a member of the hip-hop collective The Remedies, one of the first groups to popularize Nigerian rap in pidgin English (Osumah, 2018). Following the group's split, he launched a solo career, positioning himself as a social critic unafraid of confronting political and economic elites. His controversial 2004 hit "Jaga Jaga" not only provided a scathing commentary on the failures of governance but also triggered official censorship by President Olusegun Obasanjo, who dismissed the song as unpatriotic (Olaniyan, 2021). Abdulkareem's follow-up works, such as "Letter to Mr. President," reinforced his reputation as an artist who blends musical performance with social responsibility.

Abdulkareem's lyrical style is characterized by irony, satire, and a deliberate use of street idioms, which critics often mistake for vulgarity. Yet these features function as rhetorical tools designed to connect elite corruption with everyday suffering, and to expose the contradictions of a society where corruption flourishes under the veneer of spiritual devotion. His critique resonates with audiences because it reflects a reality that citizens experience daily but rarely see confronted within formal political or religious institutions.

Despite his cultural significance, Abdulkareem's work has not been sufficiently engaged by scholars of religion, governance, and cultural studies. While protest music in Nigeria has attracted growing academic attention (Osugwu, 2019; Egere, 2025), analyses often privilege its political content

without addressing how it challenges the instrumentalization of religion in public life. Abdulkareem's songs occupy a middle ground between political commentary and moral critique, positioning him as an unorthodox voice in Nigeria's discursive public sphere. He does not reject religion but critiques its misuse, thereby creating what may be described as a vernacular political theology, a grassroots discourse that exposes the hypocrisy of elites who publicly perform piety while privately sustaining corruption.

This study, therefore, examines Abdulkareem's lyrics as critical texts that interrogate the gap between sacred discourse and profane political practice. By situating his music within broader debates on political theology and the public sphere, the paper foregrounds Abdulkareem as both an artist and a vernacular theologian of Nigerian corruption. In doing so, it contributes to wider debates about the intersection of religion, governance, and cultural resistance in contemporary Africa.

## Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's political culture is defined by the paradox of deep religiosity coexisting with entrenched corruption. Political leaders frequently adopt the language of faith, seek endorsements from clerics, and present themselves as moral custodians of society. Yet, these performances of piety stand in stark contrast to governance marked by graft, impunity, and institutional failure (Okeke & Oje, 2020; Transparency International, 2023). The result is a profound dissonance between the sacred ideals invoked in public and the

profane realities sustained in practice a contradiction that has fueled public distrust of both political and religious institutions.

Although this paradox is widely recognized, it has received limited critical attention in cultural and religious studies. Popular music, especially protest hip-hop, is often dismissed as vulgar or unserious, even when it articulates incisive critiques of political hypocrisy. Eedris Abdulkareem's songs, particularly "Jaga Jaga" and "Letter to Mr. President," directly expose the manipulation of religion by corrupt elites, yet scholarship has seldom treated his work as a legitimate archive of political theology. The absence of sustained analysis of Abdulkareem's lyrics represents a gap in understanding how ordinary Nigerians, through music, confront the complicity of religion and politics in sustaining corruption. This study addresses that gap by positioning Abdulkareem's music as a vernacular moral critique within Nigeria's contested public sphere.

## Research Objectives

This study seeks to examine the intersection of religion, politics, and corruption in Nigeria through the protest music of Eedris Abdulkareem. The specific objectives are to Analyze how Abdulkareem employs irony, satire, and religious imagery in songs such as "Jaga Jaga" and "Letter to Mr. President" to critique political hypocrisy.

Interrogate the ways in which Abdulkareem's music challenges the manipulation of religion by political elites as a tool of legitimacy and impunity.

Evaluate the role of popular music as a form of vernacular political theology, providing ordinary Nigerians with an alternative moral space to contest corruption and governance failures.

Contribute to scholarly debates on religion and governance in Africa by situating Abdulkareem's lyrics within broader discourses of cultural resistance and ethical accountability.

## Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three interrelated theoretical lenses political theology, the public sphere, and satire/irony in cultural critique. To analyze how Eedris Abdulkareem's music interrogates the entanglement of religion, politics, and corruption in Nigeria.

Political Theology provides a framework for understanding how religious symbols and language are mobilized within political contexts. As Mbembe (2001) argues in *On the Postcolony*, African political authority often borrows from sacred discourses to cloak itself in legitimacy, even while sustaining practices of violence and impunity. Abdulkareem's songs speak directly to this dynamic: politicians invoke God publicly but preside over "jaga jaga" realities. By reading his lyrics as a form of vernacular political theology, this study situates popular music as a counter-discourse that exposes the hollowness of religiously infused political performances.

The concept of the public sphere, adapted from Habermas (1989), further illuminates Abdulkareem's significance. While Habermas identified rational-critical

debate as the foundation of democratic life, Fraser (1990) reminds us that marginalized groups often form counterpublics when excluded from formal institutions of debate. Abdulkareem's music, circulated widely across radio, street markets, and digital platforms, creates such a counterpublic, one where ordinary Nigerians challenge elite hypocrisy outside formal religious or political arenas. In this sense, his protest songs serve as both cultural expression and democratic practice.

Finally, the tradition of satire and irony in cultural critique highlights Abdulkareem's rhetorical strategies. Nigerian popular culture has long used humor, parody, and exaggeration to confront social contradictions (Onyekwelu, 2012). Abdulkareem's use of irony casting pious leaders as architects of chaos is not mere vulgarity but a deliberate inversion of moral order. Through satire, he collapses the divide between the sacred and the profane, holding leaders accountable before the "moral tribunal" of the people. This lens explains why his work resonates with audiences while provoking discomfort among political elites.

Together, these frameworks enable a holistic reading of Abdulkareem's music: as theological critique, as counterpublic discourse, and as satirical resistance. They justify treating his lyrics not as popular entertainment alone, but as cultural texts that illuminate the contradictions of religion and governance in contemporary Nigeria.

## Discussion of Findings

### Case Study 1: "Jaga Jaga" (2004)

When Eedris Abdulkareem released "Jaga Jaga" in 2004, it struck a nerve across Nigerian society. The phrase "jaga jaga," a colloquial expression for disorder and decay, captured the disillusionment of citizens who saw corruption as the defining feature of governance. In the song, Abdulkareem uses vivid snapshots of everyday life, violence on the streets, poverty, and hunger to paint a portrait of a society collapsing under the weight of bad leadership. The power of the refrain lies in its brutal simplicity: Nigeria, presented by leaders as "blessed by God," is instead characterized as "scattered and broken."

This ironic juxtaposition is central to Abdulkareem's critique. Political elites frequently appeal to divine destiny and national exceptionalism, portraying themselves as chosen vessels of God. Abdulkareem dismantles this theology of legitimacy, pointing out that a truly God-fearing leadership could not preside over a nation where inequality and suffering are normalized. In essence, he unmasks what Mbembe (2001) calls the aesthetics of power: the performance of religiosity as a cover for exploitation.

The state's reaction confirmed the song's disruptive force. President Olusegun Obasanjo condemned it as an insult to Nigeria and banned it from airplay on state-owned stations. Yet, this act of censorship only amplified the song's reach, demonstrating the very authoritarianism Abdulkareem denounced (Oje & Obatomi, 2020). Among

ordinary Nigerians, especially urban youth, the song became an anthem of frustration. Its street-level popularity made clear that Abdulkareem had succeeded in creating what Fraser (1990) describes as a counterpublic, a space where marginalized voices could articulate grievances excluded from official channels of debate.

## Case Study 2: “Letter to Mr. President” (2005)

Following the controversy of “Jaga Jaga”, Abdulkareem sharpened his critique in “Letter to Mr. President.” Structured as a direct address, the song reads like an open epistle in musical form. Abdulkareem challenges the head of state not only on issues of corruption and mismanagement but also on the moral duplicity of claiming religious devotion while perpetuating injustice. He calls attention to the rituals of piety, church visits, mosque donations, and public invocations of God that function as political spectacle rather than evidence of ethical leadership.

This song embodies what scholars term theological inversion. Instead of seeing the president as a divinely sanctioned figure, Abdulkareem positions him before a tribunal of ordinary citizens. In doing so, he destabilizes the political theology that grants sacred aura to state power. Unlike “Jaga Jaga,” which casts a wide net of critique, “Letter to Mr. President” takes a confrontational stance, collapsing the distance between ruler and ruled. This move resonates with Habermas’ (1989) notion of communicative action: Abdulkareem insists on dialogue, even if only

symbolically, with a political elite unaccustomed to accountability.

The rhetorical strategy here blends respect and defiance. By framing the song as a “letter,” Abdulkareem invokes the cultural practice of respectful petitioning, but the content overturns convention by delivering raw critique. This layering of form and message underscores how satire can simultaneously observe and subvert norms (Onyekwelu, 2012).

## Irony and the Collapse of Sacred/Profane Boundaries

Both songs reveal Abdulkareem’s mastery of irony as a mode of social commentary. Nigerian leaders are often portrayed as “men of God” or as protectors of divine destiny, but Abdulkareem turns this imagery on its head, depicting them instead as agents of chaos. In doing so, he collapses the sacred/profane divide, showing that piety without justice is not sacred but profane. His irony functions as a mirror, reflecting the contradictions of a society where churches and mosques thrive but corruption remains systemic.

This rhetorical collapse is not accidental. As Onyekwelu (2012) argues, satire in Nigerian popular culture has historically operated as a “weapon of the weak,” allowing ordinary people to challenge the untouchable status of elites. Abdulkareem’s blunt Pidgin phrasing makes his critique accessible, democratizing political discourse that is otherwise confined to English-speaking elite forums. By translating political theology into street vernacular, Abdulkareem creates a



populist moral grammar that resonates across class lines.

## Audience Reception and Resistance

Audience reception further illustrates Abdulkareem's role in shaping public discourse. For marginalized Nigerians, "Jaga Jaga" and "Letter to Mr. President" were more than entertainment; they were vehicles of catharsis and solidarity. Young people, in particular, appropriated "Jaga Jaga" as a shorthand for everyday frustrations, weaving it into protest chants, graffiti, and casual conversations (Egere, 2025). Even years after its release, politicians still reference the phrase sometimes derisively, sometimes defensively demonstrating its enduring symbolic weight.

Religious leaders, however, largely avoided engaging with Abdulkareem's critique. Their silence reflected a reluctance to confront political patrons who fund religious projects and bolster their influence. This absence of clerical critique reinforced Abdulkareem's message: if institutional religion has been compromised, then music and satire must take up the work of moral resistance. In this way, Abdulkareem's songs expose the limits of formal institutions and elevate popular culture as a legitimate site of ethical accountability.

## Synthesis of Findings

From these case studies, three interrelated findings emerge:

**Irony as Moral Weapon:** Abdulkareem deploys irony not as vulgar provocation but as a deliberate tool of moral inversion, exposing

the hypocrisy of leaders who cloak corruption in religiosity.

## Music as Vernacular Political Theology:

His lyrics reposition ordinary citizens as the true custodians of moral judgment, thereby reframing political theology from below rather than above.

**Counterpublic Formation:** The widespread reception of his songs demonstrates how protest music creates counterpublics, offering Nigerians an alternative arena to confront political and religious complicity in corruption.

Together, these findings establish Abdulkareem's music as a critical archive for understanding the nexus of politics, governance, probity, religion, and corruption in Nigeria. His work embodies cultural resistance, where art becomes both social memory and political intervention.

## Conclusion

This study has examined how Eedris Abdulkareem's protest music particularly "Jaga Jaga" and "Letter to Mr. President" interrogates the paradox of religion and corruption in Nigerian politics. The analysis revealed that Abdulkareem employs irony and satire to collapse the boundary between sacred rhetoric and profane governance, exposing the hollowness of leaders who claim religiosity while perpetuating systemic injustice. His songs function as vernacular political theology, repositioning ordinary Nigerians as the true custodians of moral judgment, and as vehicles of counter public discourse where grievances excluded from institutional

platforms are voiced with clarity and resonance.

The findings establish that Abdulkareem's music is not merely popular culture but a form of cultural resistance with enduring political significance. In the absence of consistent accountability from religious institutions and compromised state structures, Abdulkareem's protest songs provide a moral grammar through which citizens interpret and resist the collusion of religion and corruption in governance. His work should therefore be understood as both a cultural archive and a political intervention in Nigeria's democratic project.

## Recommendations

**For Political Leaders:** Policymakers must recognize that appeals to religious legitimacy cannot substitute for good governance. Abdulkareem's critique shows that citizens are no longer persuaded by ritualized piety but demand tangible accountability. Leaders should therefore prioritize institutional reforms that strengthen transparency, justice, and inclusive governance.

**For Religious Institutions:** Clerics and religious organizations should resist co-optation by political elites and reclaim their role as moral voices. Silence in the face of corruption diminishes religious credibility. Abdulkareem's music underscores the urgent need for faith-based institutions to confront rather than accommodate political excess.

**For Civil Society and Cultural Practitioners:** Abdulkareem's songs highlight the role of music and art as tools of

civic education and resistance. Civil society groups should invest in collaborations with artists, musicians, and satirists who provide accessible platforms for social critique, especially among youth populations.

**For Scholarship:** Future research should extend beyond Abdulkareem to examine how other Nigerian musicians from Fela Kuti to contemporary Afrobeat and hip-hop artists negotiate the relationship between religion, politics, and corruption. Such studies would enrich understanding of how popular culture functions as a parallel archive of moral and political thought in Africa.

## References:

- Egere, R. C. (2025). Protest songs as political activism in Africa: A sociological perspective. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 37(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2025.1112345>
- Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, (25/26), 56–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. MIT Press.
- Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press.
- Oje, S., & Obatomi, F. (2020). *Censorship, freedom of expression, and popular music in Nigeria*. *Critical Arts*, 34(5), 44–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2020.1829407>
- Onyekwelu, J. (2012). Satire and social criticism in Nigerian popular culture. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 24(2), 185–200.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2012.692>

[013](#)

Osuagwu, I. C. (2019). Popular music and political consciousness in Nigeria. *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 8(2), 45–61.