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The rotten underbelly of Nigeria's music industry

Artiste Mohbad's death laid bare the urgency to enforce robust governance and protective mechanisms in Africa's biggest music industry

Entertainers live, entertainers die, but sometimes, their deaths carve enduring scars into history. This stark truth is reflected in the legacy of Nigerian Afrobeats musician Mohbad, born Ilerioluwa Oladimeji, whose abrupt demise on 12 September 2023 has sparked fierce public conversations about the oppressive power relations in Nigeria's gigantic music industry with regard to record labels and artistes.

The news of the musician's death first surfaced on the internet in a chilling clip which showed his lifeless body in the back of a car while a man wept profusely into a phone camera, announcing his passing. Although relatively unknown in his lifetime, Mohbad's popularity has soared tremendously in the wake of his death, with his music topping the charts on global streaming platforms.

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The artiste was beloved for his mostly aspirational songs, which highlighted the everyday struggles of ordinary Nigerians, especially those belonging to the country's lower classes, hustling to break out from the rat race of survival. His raw lyrics, imbued with authentic street tales, spoke about the harsh realities of existing in a fractured system, whether within the family unit or broader society. And they talked about life – the twists, turns and mistakes people often encounter on the bumpy road to self-discovery, and the unshaken hopes for a luxurious future regardless. In these evocative verses, his listeners found solace and kinship.

While his fans were still grappling with the shock of his sudden death, it was the hasty burial conducted by his family just a few hours after his

death that rattled society. Far from providing closure, this action stoked nationwide fury and suspicion, leading to demands for justice and a formal inquiry into the troubles that plagued the musician at the peak of his career and in the days leading up to his death. Passionate candlelight processions and protests undertaken by thousands of young persons and industry colleagues of Mohbad erupted across the country, mobilised through social media hashtags and campaigns. These processions were also replicated outside the country, notably in London, even as popular foreign entertainers lent their voice to the calls for an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the artiste's death.

Bullying, drugs and gangs

Prompted by this unforeseen global outrage, state authorities were forced to exhume his body to conduct an autopsy, triggering a formal investigation into the musician's publicly documented cries of bullying and physical abuse by his former record label, Marlian Records. Mohbad was signed by the label in 2019 but broke away last year over issues of disputes, unpaid royalties and accusations of assault from singer and songwriter Naira Marley, the label boss.

Following his departure, the artiste had taken to social media in certain instances to decry brutal bullying and beatings from gangs affiliated with Naira Marley, who grew up in Peckham, South London where he was involved in drug peddling and gang-related violence resulting in 124 arrests by the police. Yet, Mohbad's repeated pleas for help fell on deaf ears and a petition he wrote to the Nigerian police in April asking for protection against his attackers went unheeded. By now, at least six people have been arrested and detained in connection with his death.

Marley, whose real name is Azeez Adeshina Fashola, broke into the Nigerian music scene a few years ago with a unique brand of Afrobeat and exhilarating lyrics that challenged cultural stereotypes. His rebellious and drug-associated persona appealed to a broad spectrum of disaffected Nigerian youths, forced into the borderline of society by a failing education system and economic deprivation. Quickly gaining fame, he became a sort of 'pop Robin Hood' of Nigeria's hardened streets. His fans, comprising everyday rank-and-file people, as well as more radical and dissenting people from middle and upper social strata, dubbed themselves 'Marlians'. Mohbad alongside Zinoleesky and a few other young artistes who joined the record label, became Marley's protégés, helping to expand the edgy beats and raunchy lyrics associated with the brand through their own albums and EPs.

Contracts and conflicts

Generating over $2 bn in revenue per year with over 30 million monthly listeners worldwide, Nigeria's music industry is unarguably one of the largest in the world. Nigerian Afrobeats artistes have headlined international festivals while regularly selling out premier venues abroad. However, despite its global acclaim, the industry remains largely unregulated with signees frequently entering contracts without professional legal advice, and some label bosses acting like mafia gangs, reportedly, utilising drugs, bullying and violence to keep artistes in line. 'Numerous talented individuals have found themselves ensnared in this distressing dynamic, with some failing to fully realise their potential while others tragically meet untimely ends', a legendary Nigerian singer, songwriter and composer from way back in the eighties, Daniel Wilson, explained.

Although nearly four decades apart, Nigeria's music scene today has so much in common with the landscape of Wilson's days. This was an era dominated by highlife legends like Sir Jim Rex Lawson, Onyeka Onwenu, Ras Kimono and Christy Essien-Igbokwe. Yet, Mohbad's death reawakened Wilson's own painful experiences recalling his naive entanglement into a contract with Top Rank Studios, managed by two brothers, George and John Durueke, during his early career years;

'When I eventually recognised the grave mistake I had made and decided to extricate myself from the deceptive contract, particularly as it was hindering my career's progress, George, the younger of the two brothers, relentlessly pursued me, subjecting me to near-constant harassment. The trauma I endured during that period continues to haunt me to this day.'

'Until Africa acknowledges that entertainment serves as a potent tool for societal liberation, one with the potential to drive future cultural and economic advancements, the primitive conditions that led to Mohbad's tragic demise will persist', Wilson warned.

Despite the presence of laws and regulatory bodies like the Nigerian Copyright Commission, weak enforcement in Nigeria's music industry allows pervasive issues like exploitative contracts, habitual breach of copyright infringement otherwise known as piracy, and royalty disputes to persist. Critics argue that this is partly due to the obsolescence of existing laws in comparison with a contemporary industry landscape characterised by developments such as internet record labels, distribution of digital music from the musicians directly to the consumers, and an increase in private recording companies and media houses.

With the Mohbad case laying bare the rotten underbelly of Nigeria's music industry, the urgency to enforce robust governance and protective mechanisms in Africa's biggest music industry is now paramount. 'Until Africa acknowledges that entertainment serves as a potent tool for societal liberation, one with the potential to drive future cultural and economic advancements, the primitive conditions that led to Mohbad's tragic demise will persist', Wilson warned.

When confronted with the question of faith in Nigeria's police to offer closure for Mohbad's heartbroken fans, popular digital creator on social media, Warri Rebel, shared a measured optimism; 'I want to have faith, but I'm also a Nigerian who has seen the police work for years. I am a little skeptical, but I am going to give the new Inspector General of Police, the benefit of the doubt. This is a high-profile case with the whole world watching and I feel he is going to try to use it to prove he is capable and the force under his regime will be better.'



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