

The interscholastic Akewí poetry slam

Clara Carolina de Oliveira Costa
Geovanna Laura Santos Januario
Isabela Kaila da Silva Cunha

Translation
Edmund Ruge

| Brazil |

translated by Edmund Ruge

Poetry in school, ideas in poetry

The Akewí Poetry Slam of Viçosa, Minas Gerais, works to recognize and value

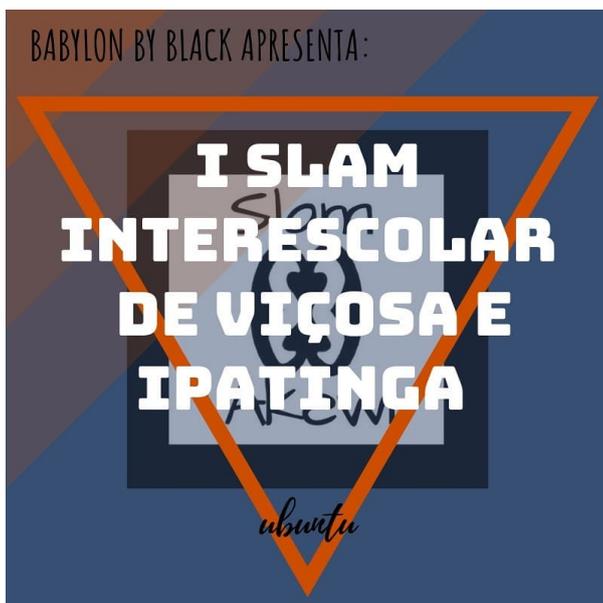
peripheral and black cultural and artistic manifestations. Through poetry sustained in the civilizing values of ancestral black African societies, in orality and corporeality — reconstructed from African cultures brought by the diaspora of black slavery — our daily work has become an essential counterweight to the Brazilian social imaginary, loaded with stigmas and stereotypes resulting from Brazil's racist structural socio-historic process.

The Akewí Slam is an independent project, conceived in July of 2017 by Clara Costa in the city of Viçosa, Minas Gerais. Its team has been, since its inception, made up of exclusively black women: Geovanna Laura, Isabela Kaila, and Andressa Farias. We have since expanded to the Minas city of Ipatinga. Our proposal has been one of grassroots work, independent in

relation to the space occupied — from public schools to the streets, promoting free, democratic expression for the black youth of our cities.

Our main activity is that of holding monthly spoken word poetry competitions in the cities of Viçosa and Ipatinga, both located in the interior of Minas Gerais. The spoken word battles involve three rules: poetry must be of the author's own writing, up to three minutes, and without musical or visual accompaniment. We work "from the street to the school and from the school to the street," as they say at the Guilhermina Poetry Slam in São Paulo. Our focus is with grassroots work capable of promoting educational poetic interventions and workshops based in the concept of arts in education, with a focus on public schools.

We also develop informational and educational material about black and peripheral cultural and artistic manifestations, with the goal of redefining them in public schools and in society, presenting poetry as a powerful educational tool, within schools and without. It is thus that students become protagonists, and youth peripheral and black culture reveals itself, beginning a process of identity construction and cultural auto-recognition in occupied spaces.





The practice of the Interscholastic Slam came from France and arrived in Brazil in 2014 with Emerson Alcalde, a poet and member of the Guilhermina Slam. The movement began to expand and take over more and more spaces in Brazilian states, in informal spaces and formal ones, placing a focus on the use of poetry as part of an educational methodology. In Minas Gerais, the first edition of the MG Interscholastic Slam took place in 2018 in the city of Juiz de Fora. The BR Interscholastic Slam took place in Belo Horizonte in 2018.

The BR Interscholastic Slam took place together with MG Slam, giving us the chance to learn about a national scale slam. We had direct contact with the event's organizers, including Emerson Alcalde, a pioneer in Brazil, and with student poets. This gave us

renewed strength. In 2019, we began to prepare ourselves to hold our own Interscholastic Slam, adapting it to our reality in Viçosa and Ipatinga.

Giving value to the social, economic, and historical context of the students, the Akewí Slam began working with and developing educational materials introducing the histories of certain Peripheral Cultural manifestations such as funk. This was something the students appreciated, though funk remains “monsterized” in the social imaginary by the vast majority — something key to understanding the historical, social, and political context of these manifestations.

In addressing issues and challenges relevant to the reality of black youth, we emphasize orality and the importance of writing with adolescents as a form of expression, of political manifestation, and of dispute. In public schools, we operate in a set format: events begin with an opening introduction about the spoken word poetry battle and a poetic intervention with the invited poets, followed by a writing and performance workshop (with the students themselves preparing poetry), and finally the poetry battle itself. Despite various methodological and financial challenges, we have been able to execute the Interscholastic Akewí Slam with very little support from the city public school network.

In two years of existence, we have been able to work with approximately 50 schools in various cities in the state in a completely independent manner, with workshops, talks, events, and poetic interventions. We have distributed more than 7000 informational zines on the Peripheral Cultural Manifestations: FUNK, SLAM, and HIP HOP (2018), and 1000 poetry booklets by the poets themselves and student poets (2019).

In our daily exchanges with teachers, educators, students, and parents, we have received various reactions about the perceptions of poetry as a methodological form that encourages students, with enthusiasm from all. The interaction and relation created by poetry are evident, even for students that do not write poetry. The exchange and construction become collective, and students begin to believe more and more in their own potential and the potential of other students. Mariana Lenir Moura de Jesus, a Professor of Literature at the State School Alice Loureiro, in Viçosa, shares:

“The classes and practices have been of great value for the students. You can tell that they

recognize themselves in their words, present their inquiries in debates, and have become more and more empowered in the discourse of marginal poetry, in addition to improving in their writing and reading. The proposed activities (production of poetry or prose texts), are being developed by the students enthusiastically. And throughout the meetings, their development in the learning of basic poetic language concepts has been remarkable. It can be seen in their writing.”









“I believe that the presence of the graduate-level representatives from the Akewí Slam in the classroom is extremely important for these students, as much for the level of teaching and learning as for representation, given that the majority of students are black and from peripheral communities in the city of Viçosa. With the meetings, the students in the classes in which the project is developed have the opportunity to recognize that the practice of writing through marginal artistic and cultural manifestations should be valued alongside erudite poetic manifestations, and that they too should have their voices heard, expressing their anxieties, happiness, and anguish in the written, oral, and poetic form that these marginal expressions can offer.”

One student, who participated in the Ipatinga Interscholarar Slam Final, adds:

“I don’t know how to describe how amazing this whole experience was, of feeling the energy of the people involved was really motivating. I want to thank you all for the opportunity, and also the brother that offered us some of his knowledge during the workshop. He helped me feel more confident. It was my first time on stage presenting my poems before a big audience, something that before I only did as a hobby and shared with my friends.

“To you all that organized the slam, women from the favelas, who stuck your necks out and made this happen, you are true symbols of inspiration. I am the son of a single mother, and I watched my mother, in the room that we split, conquer her own home with zero contact with my father since I was two years old, something gave a lot of meaning to my experience.

I know that Ipatinga is very well represented and I wish good luck to Maira and to my man from Viçosa. I’ll be at the events every chance I get. I am so thankful!”

With poetry, we can take on diverse challenges in public schools despite neglect from cities and government actions. The focus of the collective has always been to allow peripheral voices to express themselves through the power of orality, with the idea of demonstrating that youth are leaders in education and leaders of the future. We are always present in the schools, in the streets, and even as they create obstacles for us, we persist and resist.

Yelling:

Poetry on the rise

The word insists

The periphery exists

Akwí Slam!