Bukala (Oussama, Algeria)

Imagine a room full of women. The doors are closed, the outside world doesn't exist. Someone draws a small object from beneath a cloth, a ring, a stone, a coin, and recites a poem.

Nobody knows whose fate it speaks of. Everyone listens, and somehow everyone understands. This is Buqala, Algeria's secret oral poetry tradition.

Women would gather, place personal objects in a bowl, and one by one, recite verses. Each verse was a riddle, a prophecy, a mirror held up to love, loss, waiting, and hope. Then someone would draw an object from the bowl, and a verse would become that person's answer.

No one wrote these poems down. They lived in the mouths of grandmothers, in the memory of daughters, passing from Bleda to Constantine, from Tlemcen to Algiers, entirely by voice. Here is one such Buqala verse I remember from my grandmother.

The door is locked, but the key is made of patience. Whoever holds patience holds everything. Buqala is the proof that women have always been poets, even when no one gave them a stage.