

Eunuchs in the Harem of Hausa Cultural Epistemology

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Hausa cultural studies never had it so good. I doubt if there is any field of cultural studies that has engaged much attention from critics — both virile and eunuchs — like studies of contemporary Hausa culture. Outside the country, the main focus is on attempting to understand what makes the Hausa person tick; for instance, why, in spite of high western education, the highly educated and articulated Hausa intellectual retains his cultural mindset and never sees himself as a poor photocopy of a Europeanized mind. On the internet, the focus is on whipping up sentiment against Hausa “zealots” and “fundamentalists” who seemed ready to decimate any opinion contrary to their religion. The incidence with ThisDay newspaper article of November 16 2002 generated a lot of heated debates initiated by “Naija” webmasters, not just against Muslims, but Hausa generally about their “fanaticism”. Within the country the main focus is on entertainment media, particularly the use of literature and home videos to express emergent evolutionary new age cultural patterns of thought among, particularly urban and urbanized Hausa youth.

For the most part the culture critics mean well, if ineffectively. The desire to create a “standard” form of cultural expression through entertainment media is informed by a closed-society mindset that sees conformity as a virtue, and individualism as a crime. The reluctance to accept the changing configurations of social matrixes infused within a transformative cultural change paradigm further entrenches the conformist mindset of the systems’ self-appointed praetorian gatekeepers. At the height of the debates about the virtues, or otherwise, of specifically contemporary Hausa literature, common grounds were laid out, common understandings fleshed out and points were made. Our purpose in starting and sustaining the debates were to provoke those whose intellectual responsibility — and livelihood — it is to grab the mantle and develop the strands into more effective means of creative guidance and, and thus subsequently, control for the authors. Yet, for all they care, we were preaching to the dead. For in their mindset, Hausa literature died with its progenitors, and will remain dead for ever. For instance, look around the various “commercial” courses and programs offered in all our institutions of higher learning. How many took advantage of the largest pool of indigenous writers, producers, artistes and directors, and thus created empowerment programs for them to acquire the necessary technical skills to express themselves better? None.

Thus I was tempted, like Dr. Ibrahim Malumfashi, to throw in the towel and say “the hell with this”. The issue is not the case of Malumfashi vs. Abdalla vs. SHEME vs. ASSADA. It is the three (or four, five and six) of us versus the system

that condemns any new ideas, but refuses to move on from the stagnant pool of stale dreams and nightmares. And like fighting any “system” this particular system has no nexus of control to attack — until recently.

Despite what close observers of the debate on Hausa cultural studies might think, all the critics of the system have a common thread and a common direction: the betterment of Hausa culture, in whatever form, and **from within**. This is the only culture we have. It is intellectually unforgivable to continue to rely on researchers like Murray Last, Graham Furniss, Brian Larkin, Barbara Cooper, John Phillips and Novian Whittsitt to become the sole sources of credible information about our writers, producers, directors, actors and actresses. To these researchers, Hausa culture is an interesting sociological laboratory full of sociological white (or black!?) experimental guinea pigs that provide rich sources for papers for presentation at African Studies Association meetings, or Societies in Transition Academies and so on. Sadly this situation will remain so for a long time because all our efforts to energize local interest and quantitative research on Hausa cultural studies, have been to naught. Ibrahim Malumfashi and Ibrahim SHEME come from literary background, so it is their forte. My background is scientific, and I wish to bring the analytical structures of quantitative scientific methodology to cultural studies. All the shouting, the writings and the prodding have not yielded any significant result.

To add insult to injury, Hausa cultural studies has now an even worse enemy beside the intellectual complacency of its guardians: Al-Bishak, the New Nigerian Editorial Consultant, whose attack on Hausa cultural studies, especially literature, was carried out in an essay titled *The Soyayya Debate: A Redirection* and published in The Write Stuff column of *New Nigerian Weekly* on Saturday 22nd December, 2001. It is now exactly a year to the day Al-Bishak published his essay which he expected to provide a paradigmatic template in the structure of Hausa literature.

In Al-Bishak’s narrowed world, the “soyayya” debates lasted for two years (presumably from 1999 to 2001). Wrong. The debates were started by Hawwa Ibrahim Sherif in “Interview with Ibrahim SHEME” in *Nasiha* of 6th September 1991. By then the genre has been in existence for over ten years (starting life in 1980 with Hafsah Abdulwahid’s *So Aljannar Duniya*).

Al-Bishak argued that during the period the debates lasted, he had expected a more critical analyses of the new novels along an expected (though not listed) literary framework. Apparently Al-Bishak does not seem to read much of the newspapers he was offering services to as an editorial consultant. This is because the lengthy article by Halima Abbas, titled, “New Trends in Hausa Fiction” and published in *New Nigerian Literary Supplement — The Write Stuff*, 11, 18, July; 1 August, 1998, has answered *all* the questions he sarcastically posed in the introduction to his essay. That particular essay by Ms. Halima Abbas was adapted from her masters’ degree project. In addition, there had been over 50 masters, undergraduate and doctorate degrees on Hausa contemporary fiction in both Nigeria and abroad. Currently a lady in Germany, Julie Ahmar, is about to embark on a fieldwork in Kano, on Hausa contemporary fiction leading to the award of a doctorate degree in the field. So the intellectual bases and structures that legitimize Hausa contemporary fiction as a field of study does exist! It was these debates that stimulated the academic interests — and led to further contribution to knowledge in the area.

Further, if Al-Bishak had high expectations about the debates and what they can do for the authors, where was he during the heat of the battles? As a literary person himself, one would have expected him to come down from high high critical pinnacle and lead us to a refined literary debating forum. So why wait until it is all over, before coming into the, by now empty, arena?

Further, coming from an "irreverent" literary background with impressive credentials in English language (and cultural?) studies, I was surprised that Dr. Ibrahim Malumfashi's analytical framework seemed to have eluded Al-Bishak. Even Ibrahim SHEME, Ibrahim Malumfashi's "friendly enemy" seemed to have missed the whole point of Malumfashi's methodology. When Malumfashi "attacked" me in his article titled "Beyond the Market Criticism", *New Nigerian Weekly Literary Supplement — The Write Stuff*, 15 May 1999 p. 14, 15 (published also in *Weekly Trust*, 28 May 1999), I understood immediately he was not being personal; as such, I was not slighted. Subsequent counter-debates proved this. Yet observers of the debates formed two lines: one behind Abdalla, and the other behind Malumfashi and we were seen as "enemies"! This worried me so much that I one day dragged Malumfashi to a photographer in Bayero University Kano, and had our photograph taken and subsequently published in *New Nigerian*, so that people could see us as what we are: academics engaged in intellectual discourse, not *yan tauri* squabbling over critical theory turf territoriality. That, course, does not mean there were no disagreements in the value of literature between us: Malumfashi was insistent that contemporary Hausa novels do not represent quintessential Hausa culture. My stand is that it does, because literature is a mirror of the society, as it currently is; that culture is a transformative phenomena not bound by any stasis.

When Ibrahim Malumfashi and Ibrahim SHEME "locked" horns last year (2001) over the values of literature, I did not interfere, simply because they were rehashing the same old arguments. However, by now Ibrahim Malumfashi has refined his methodology and given it its proper label: literary invective (*The Art of Literary Invective* *New Nigerian Weekly*, 20th October 2001). What readers (and Ibrahim SHEME) saw, were personal attacks. What I saw were attempts to cast Hausa literary criticism into a new mold. Clearly Ibrahim Malumfashi drew his analytical inspiration from Juvenalian satire, which, as Al-Bishak very well knows, is any bitter and ironic criticism of contemporary persons and institutions that is filled with personal invective, angry moral indignation, and pessimism. We thank the Latin poet and satirist, Decimus Junius Juvenalis, better known as Juvenal for initiating this form of literary criticism. His satiric depictions of Roman life provided templates for other satirist across Europe, such as Samuel Johnson (*The Vanity of Human Wishes*), Jonathan Swift (*Gulliver's Travels*), Thomas More (*Utopia*), Aldus Huxley (*Brave New World*), and George Orwell (1984). As I said, it is surprising that Al-Bishak, who is aware of all this, perceived that Ibrahim Malumfashi was being personal, and appointed himself a literary referee between them.

Nor is the art of literary invective dead. More contemporaneously, it was between Salman Rushdie (*The Satanic Verses*) and John le Carre (real name David John Moore Cornwell, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*). As reported by *The New York Times*, in November 1997

"....In a week of correspondence of growing vituperativeness, Salman Rushdie has called John le Carre "an illiterate pompous ass," and Mr. le Carre has replied that Mr. Rushdie is "self-canonizing" and "arrogant," blinded by the pursuit of increased royalties for himself from the physical danger that sales of his book posed to others.

The exchanges have taken place in a time-honored arena for mudslinging in Britain, the letters page of a newspaper, *The Guardian*. While other parts of the paper were covering the continuing push in high places to have Britain portrayed as a sensitive, caring, compassionate nation, Mr. le Carre and Mr. Rushdie were striking blows in the letters columns for the tradition of literary invective..."

(Warren Hoge, "London Journal; All Is Not Lost: Art of Insult Survives 'New Britain' *The New York Times* November 27, 1997.

The editor (or Editorial Consultant) of *The New York Times* did not step in to prevent the invectives because the antagonists were his "students". Nor did he come up with a weak, limp, arrogant alternative to the invectives. So what gave Al-Bishak the intellectual right to determine the directions Hausa literary criticism should follow?

Nebulously Northern

Adding salt to Al-Bishak's injurious attack on **Hausa** culture is his suggestion of the creation of Arewa Literary Series. In his prescription:

"The Soyayya Debate" should continue, but under a new name called, "The Arewa Literary Series". Well-researched articles or essays on Hausa literature are hereby welcome from interested readers..."

My understanding of the word *Arewa* is that it means "north". It is a **geographical** index. It has no political, social, cultural, and certainly no literary meaning. So why should **Arewa** Literary Series start and end with "...articles on **Hausa** literature..."? There are, presumably, other linguistic groups in the geographical Arewa. Are they so unimportant to Al-Bishak that he insults them by denying their identity and lumping every single linguistic manifestation in his "Arewa" as Hausa? Shouldn't a venture like Arewa Literary Series (whatever that is) be aimed at encouraging literary expression of other linguistic groups? How about literature (prose, drama, poetry, educational) in Fulfulde, Shuwa, Yiwom, Berom, Yukuben, Wapan, Zarma, Turkwam, Shanga, Bacama? Hundreds of other linguistic groups have been marginalized by the mainstream Nigerian literary society. Al-Bishak hopes to sustain this marginalization with his new series.

Further what gave Al-Bishak the intellectual right to determine the form, pattern and structure creativity should take place? Are Hausa writers and essayists so puerile that Al-Bishak needs to provide them with a framework for writing nice, cute little essays and stories? For in Al-Bishak's methodology, about 20 analytical topics were given, and he urges readers to write essays on each of these 20 topics that seemed to focus attention on Hausa literature, rather than Arewa literature. Broken down into their essential structural elements, the topic areas seemed to be an examination rubrics for a badly taught Hausa literature course. They include topic areas such as: "What is literature?, Is Hausa literature an off-shoot of European literature?, Are there classic Hausa writers after

Abubakar Imam? What is Hausa literary history?"... etc etc. *Arewa* is missing from these musings. A purebred Fulani like myself will certainly not participate because Al-Bishak is not interested in documenting my Fulani literary heritage! Thus the absurdity of the "Arewa Literary Series". It equates Arewa with Hausa — a typical Nigerian mindset.

Ibrahim Malumfashi, in his rejoinder to Al-Bishak's "Hitleric" paradigm, (*Of Al-Bishak and Editorial Dictatorship*, Weekly Trust, February 5-14, 2002 p.33) diplomatically writes that "...I am not saying that Al-Bishak or the NNW should not conceive the idea of TALS and even implement it..." I hold a contrary opinion. I think it is a bad, arrogant, and intellectually inept idea, and is certainly more anthropologically and culturally irresponsible than the heat of our debates.

Again a year later, we are still waiting for the outcome of Al-Bishak's competition.

Breaking the Boundaries of Cultural Epistemology

Finally, Al-Bishak is worried that

"...because the *New Nigerian* is a public trust devoted to the highest standards of responsible journalism, it can no longer entertain further abuse on the pages of the newspaper vaingloriously called the *Soyayya Debate*..."

This is a pity, because all the articles on these "vainglorious debates" for the last ten years have been compiled into a teaching material by Prof. Graham Furniss of the School of African and Oriental Studies, University of London, as the only source of public discourse on contemporary Hausa literature. No other Nigerian university has these collection of debates in one place, or uses them as a teaching material. Thanks to Al-Bishak, a valuable teaching resource is now decimated.

Further, these "vainglorious debates" have unexpected and unintended outcomes that further the intellectual cause of Hausa literary expression. They stimulated young Hausa writers to begin to diversify their focus — for diversification is only matter of time. It is this diversity that we hoped would emerge out of their initial focus on fictional elements.

In Kano, for instance, there are many Hausa authors who have published on topics they would never have the courage to do in the past. For example, *Cinikin Hannun Jari*, is a Hausa treatise on stock markets and political economy; a young programmer is sending to the press a book he has written on computer programming in Hausa in which he translated all the technical terms; a police sergeant (!) has concluded a manuscript on Internet in Hausa. From Zariya, a young Hausa author has just finished working on a book on email in Hausa; a female writer from Kano is concluding a research on Hausa Women as role models; from Daura, a young author has published a book on European History — all these were in Hausa. From Katsina, a woman doctor has just finished translating a book she originally published (by Spectrum) in English on *Kuruntar Yara*, aimed at providing general psychological and medical information in early childhood deafness. The same author has finished another text-book on *Shayarwa* (breastfeeding); from Kano, again, a book is

currently in production which focuses on comparative analysis between Biblical and Qur'anic laws in Hausa language.

All these and more were encouraged by the "vainglorious debates" on the merit or otherwise of Hausa literature which confirmed to these authors that a readership exists among the Hausa. And that, to me, is the singular most significant contribution of the Hausa writers: creating a wide readership so that other writers with more "stuff" to write about, could build. There was no way these emergent academic writings in Hausa could have been possible without Ado Ahmad Gidan Dabino (*Inda So Da Kauna*), Bala Anas Babinlata (*Da Ko Jika?*), Alkhameed Bature Makwarari (*Matsayin Lover*), Yusuf Adamu (*Ummul-Khairi*), Badamasi Shu'aibu Burji (*In So Ya Yi So*), Dan'azumi Baba C/Yangurasa (*Badakala*) and countless others.

Since Al-Bishak hates these debates and has banned them from New Nigeria (probably affecting sales), I decided to move to an arena Al-Bishak had no control over: the Internet, and we sustained the debates there with a free web-based Yahoo! Groups discussion forum on Contemporary Hausa literature. The debates will not stop. They provide out people with an intellectual avenue not available to any ethnic group in this country.