

## Hausa Literature Debates Series 7

### Capitalism and Hausa Literature: Transmuted Classics Vs Homeboyz

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Oh dear! Just when you thought it is all over and laid to rest, someone has to stroke the embers of *The Great Soyayya Debate* again. It would appear that *Garkuwa* magazine (January 2000) and its prophets of doom were too early in gleefully mourning the "death" of Hausa novel (and don't count the over 35 new, non-continuity novels that have been released in Kano alone since January this year). I am of course referring to the opinionnaire review of *soyayya* novels as given by Alhaji Ibrahim Bello, the Area Manager of the Zaria branch of Macmillan Nigeria Publishers Ltd, and Alhaji Ja'afaru D. Mohammed, General Manager of the Northern Nigerian Publishing Company (NNPC), Zaria in *New Nigerian Weekly* of Saturday February 19, 2000 ("*Soyayya Novels Get a Kick in the Face*"). Macmillan and NNPC, it should be recalled, make nice bedfellows, so the views were part of the same vacuous, and thus innocuous, continuum.

Ordinarily, the views expressed by these two icons of publishing industry would have been passed as just another raving ranting of the moral brigade, who have never bothered to read *any* of the books in the genre, and who pass opinions based on the ranting and ravings of others. However, coming from representatives of two of the most powerful publishing concerns in this part of the country merits more than a cursory attention. It demands full head-on consideration. Let us recapitulate.

Alhaji Ibrahim Bello, the Area Manager of the Zaria branch of Macmillan Nigeria Publishers Ltd extols the virtues of what he calls Hausa literary works like *Magana Jari Ce*. He scolds youth for "...wasting their precious times reading (*soyayya*) books, most of which thrive in exposing the youth to alien vices..." Further, if "the production of this (sic) kind of books was allowed to continue, most of the Islamic value systems especially as regards marital affairs, would be eroded."

Alhaji Ja'afaru D. Mohammed, General Manager of the Northern Nigerian Publishing Company (NNPC), Zaria believes that the "bulk of these works are unhealthy for both academic and social well-being of the young ones...The contents are mostly alien to the Hausa cultures which they pretend to explore." Alhaji Ja'afaru gleefully and scornfully declared that NNPC does not publish such books because "...they know we won't accept, so they don't even bring to us."

Well excuse me, but I thought Balaraba Ramat Yakubu's *Budurwar Zuciya* (1987) was *printed* by Gaskiya Corporation, the printing division of NNPC (transaction code reference GCL 0648/1090). Similarly, her *Wa Zai Auri Jahila?* was printed by the same corporation. This is of course not quite the same as actually *publishing* it; but it seems that although NNPC feels these books and

the genre they spawned are morally repulsive, yet the lovely solid and crisp cash brought by the authors to the company is acceptable (and I refuse to believe these books were printed *free* due to the sheer milk of human kindness of Gaskiya Corporation). Hooray for capitalism (read *greed*) at its best! Or has Gaskiya/NNPC become born again *after* accepting Ms. Ramat's cash to print her "repulsive" and "immoral" novels?

And *Budurwar Zuciya* is as much a template and wake-up call for Hausa literati if there ever was one — containing all the ingredients that make the meal as fresh in year 2000 Hausa novel (try Bilkisu S. Ahmed Funtuwa's *Kowa Ya Raina Tsaiwar Wata* January 2000) as in the legacy years of 1987 when the genre was about to explode. But don't go away yet, we will get back to this theme.

### ***Glass Houses and Stone Throwers***

It is ironic that two major publishers (assuming, of course that they views they expressed in the opinionnaire survey reflect *official company policies* of their firms) seemed quite proud of their contributions towards snuffing the life out of any literary activity in Northern Nigeria which is not sponsored or sanctioned by them. Thus they totally ignore the fact that the *soyayya* genre has led to the *prayer* genre publishing as a counter-culture in Northern Nigeria, and thus contributed to educating the society in more ways than one. But one feels the pains of NNPC who, having published the winners of a spate of competitions that threw up morally doubtful novels in the 1980s, seemed to sink into oblivion. Yes, morally doubtful. Let us have a quick gander.

Alhaji Ja'afaru of NNPC proudly displays his catalog of 41 out-of-tune-with-reality fiction books (among others; the last possibly published in 1983). Top of the list is *Dare Dubu Da Daya* (1-5)(published in 1933). As this is a family newspaper, I will not bother to give excerpts of some of the passages in *Dare Dubu...*, but suffice to say that the entire series is an excellent script for a full-action violently explicit pornographic movie. What Alhaji Ja'afaru neglected to tell the readers (possibly because he doesn't know or, as more likely, has *never* read any story in *Dare Dubu...* despite being in the Company since Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1976) is that the series of stories have *nothing* to do with Hausa culture, and therefore it is rather disingenuous of him to quote them as exemplars of what Hausa literary activity should be. If the series of stories in *Dare Dubu Da Daya* were written by any contemporary Hausa writer, they would have *fatawa'd* him. Yet because it was translated by a white colonial officer in collaboration with an *Imamian Paradigm* product, it was given a respectful sheen and touted as a Hausa literary classic. Its morally bankrupt tales of sexual fantasies and activities were seen as harmless to a Hausa "Victorian" society of 1930s (which was more conservative!). I am not happy that I pay tax to the Government, and my hard earned money is used to officially sponsor the publishing of pornographic novels by NNPC. At least the *soyayya* writers operate as independent marketers, not relying on taxpayers money to publish their "morally repulsive" books.

Other acts in the NNPC theater do not fare much better, either. *Karshen Alewa Kasa*, *Tsumagiyar Kan Hanya*, *Zabi Naka*, *Turmin Danya* deal with themes of urbanism, corruption, politics, bureaucracy and technological society. *Turmin Danya*, even when moralizing, deals with sexual corruption of the worst order

— a married man (to three wives) procuring young girls for extra-marital activities.

*Karshen Alewa Kasa* must have been good for other qualities, but certainly not its morality — the very accusations against *soyayya* writers. As Graham Furniss noted, "...marking a major departure from previous writing, the story (*Karshen Alewa Kasa*) is brim full of features of modern Nigeria: fast cars, booze, gambling, sex, violence...girl-friends who speak their minds in no uncertain terms...and a wide variety of stock characters from Northern Nigerian society..." Furniss further observes that, "...this novel owes more to James Hadley Chase, Fredrick Forsyth and the cinema of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* than to earlier Hausa writing..." (Graham Furniss, *Poetry, Prose and Popular Culture in Hausa*, p. 55. London: International African Institute/Edinburgh University Press, 1996).

With these proud credentials, Alhaji Ja'afar presumes to pass moral judgement on the morality of contemporary Hausa writers.

As for *Magana Jari Ce*, that must surely be the most hyped "Hausa literature" ever written. The author, the late Abubakar Imam, had repeatedly declared that the stories were not original to him. As Ibrahim Malumfashi pointed out — in an argument that sees all writers as dancing naked in the market place, borrowing garbs from other writers — the books had "...a semblance of adaptation, transmutation and translation from Arabian, Persian, European, Asian and African sources literary and otherwise.." (*Dancing Naked in the Market Place*, NNW, July 17, 1999). To be specific, Beata Jez in her 'Fukcjonowanie watkow obcych w dziele Magana Jari Ce A. A. Imama (don't worry, it means 'Functioning of the foreign plots in the work Magana Jari Ce by A. A. Imam!'), submitted as MA thesis at the University of Warsaw in 1986, analyzed *Magana Jari Ce* and concluded that 11 stories are from *Thousand and One Nights*; 14 fables are from the brothers Grimm; 5 stories are from a Persian version of the Indian collection *Sukasaptati*; 2 stories are from the Indian collection *Panchatantra*; 2 fables are from Hans Andersen; 7 short stories from *Decameron* by Boccaccio; one each are based on a Greek myth about the king of Macedonia; of Persian origin; a Biblical story, and a fable by W. Hauff. Only about 34 stories were either original or derived from unknown sources. Imam's genius (and we must doff off our caps/hats/whatever to this fact) was in transmutating (to borrow Malumfashi's expression) the stories to read as if they are Hausa literature. Abubakar Imam's other masterpiece, *Ruwan Bagaja* was, according to the author, inspired (read *transmuted*) by an Arabian book titled *Muqamat al-Hariri* (*The Abubakar Imam Interview*, NNW, November 21, 1997).

Oh, and while we are still at it, should it be pointed out that *Iliya Dan Maikarfi*, another Gaskiya/NNPC product was directly based on a Cossack Russian folk hero *Ilya Muromets* of Murom, who defended Kievan Rus (now in Ukraine), from the Mongols in the 10<sup>th</sup> century? *Waldima* was Vladimir Svyatoslavich, born c. 956, Kiev, and died July 15, 1015, Berestova, near Kiev. By the way, Kiev was Ahmadu Ingawa's *Birnin Kib*. Let us not forget that at the end of *Iliya Dan Maikarfi*, he begged God to turn him into a stone — a statue. Is this an Islamic Hausa prose? I was about to go off about A. Katsina's *Sihirtaccen Gari* being another direct translation from an Asian (or whatever) source (not even transmuted!), but I realized that I have probably made my point.

So what is *Hausa* about these proud NNPC titles? Merely substituting the Arabian/Persian/Russian/whatever names for Tanko/Jatau/Gide/whatever does not make them Hausa. But what rankles most was the moral charges against the contemporary Hausa literature, as compared with *Imamian Paradigm* output. I argue therefore that the classicists of Hausa literature were more guilty of polluting and corrupting Hausa moral structure than any work written by any contemporary Hausa writer. And Gaskiya/NNPC (whatever) is the conduit of this moral corruption. Incidentally, *Dare Dubu Da Daya* is still available, unedited!

Back to Macmillan, which hasn't done much (allowing its partner-in-progress NNPC to do the job) for Hausa literature. Alhaji Ibrahim Bello, its Area Manager in Zaria was appalled at the "alien" and "un-Islamic" vices in contemporary *soyayya* novels. Yet he has not given specific examples of the vices and the books where such vices are preached. The nearest he gave was a girl's abhorrence for polygamous relationships as a result of reading a *soyayya* book. So what is wrong with that? As she was giving her opinion, let me also add fuel to the fire by giving my tuppence worth. Most polygamous relationships are miserable. The only person who enjoys them is the husband — the well-endowed super stud with four rotating wives and a brood of tiny, dirty, sickly, unkempt children littering the two bed roomed *gidan haya* hovel they call a home. The kids and the wives are, in most cases, hopelessly miserable. So what is un-Islamic about detesting misery? Nowhere in Islam is it made compulsory for you to marry more than one wife. So why should you label someone un-Islamic simply because they prefer monogamous relationships? The author of the book that made Alhaji Ibrahim's friend (?) detest polygamy was not necessarily providing a template for girls not to get involved in such relationships. He or She was merely pointing out an episode in allegorical narrative which seems to make direct meaning to the reader. Realism or what?!

Hausa writers like Bilkisu Ahmad Funtuwa are not necessarily glorifying monogamous relationships; but pointing out the easy way in which polygamous relationships often go awry, with terrible and cruel consequences on the victims of such relationships. Her recent novel, *Kowa Ya Raina Tsaiwar Wata*, is a classic depiction of the miseries of polygamy; conveyed with such depth, panache, and style that the misery becomes a solid pall. What makes *Tsaiwar Wata* more frightening was the fact that it was based on *real* life story. Monogamous relationships *can* also be miserable; but at least the spread of the misery is limited to only the man, the wife and the odd kids.

Perhaps Alhaji Ibrahim was against the *womanist* message of books such as Balaraba Ramat Yakubu's *Wa Zai Auri Jahila?* in which the 12 year old protagonist was forced into marriage with someone as old as her father, whom she detests (and who statutorily raped her) and who runs away as a result. Is this a corruption of Hausa society? It is the *reality*. Parents often force their daughters into unhappy relationships based on their own selfish desires, rather than consideration for the happiness of their children (just like the polygamists). Fiction doesn't make it a vice; it just draws it out in the open and points its ugly consequences — a cautionary tale for those who want to learn.

Literature, like all other human activities, necessarily reflects current social and economic conditions. Indeed world literature is replete with occurrences as to

suggest that realism is a universal phenomena. For instance, *Durub al-hijrah* (Ways of Migration), written by Lebanese Iskandar Najjar's recorded the tribulations of the country's European minority. Hasan Dawud's *Sanat al-utumatik* (The Automated Year) and Muhammad Abi-Samra's *Al-Rajul as-sabiq* (The Previous Man) are notable especially for their precision, narrative structure, and exploration of new experience. Sahar Khalife's *Al-Subar* (Wild Thorns) provides a haunting chronicle of life in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Thus Alhaji Ibrahim Bello of Macmillan would rather see "...a situation where the few good ones among them (contemporary Hausa novels) are chosen for school syllabus to augment the established Hausa literary works while the bad ones are banned.." So who makes the judgement? And what are the criteria to be used? Alhaji Ibrahim mentions *school syllabus*. Alhaji Ja'afar of NNPC also mentions *academic* and *social well-being* (from a publisher of *Dare Dubu Da Daya*, let us not forget!) of readers.

### ***Fear of Mad Cow Disease!***

Now the penny drops. Let us be clear on one thing: Macmillan and NNPC are worried because their authors have developed writer's cramps. The slew of books they published in the early 1980s provided a fat cow for the companies to milk by the political strategies of ensuring that the books were on the reading lists of WAEC syllabus. Thus, good or bad, Hausa language and literature candidates — and we are talking thousands here — are forced to buy them and study them. The authors, apparently not overwhelmed by the ₦28.34k check royalty (or some similar pittance) sent to them (which they had to probably go to Lagos to cash) protested by the simple act of refusing to write anymore for these companies. Or maybe they run out of ideas. Or maybe they were no longer up to it. Maybe they have *never* been up to it in the first place, but were warped to a high pedestal by the publishing companies so that they can be exploited.

In any event the stratospheric rise of private publishers (many with ISBN to boot!) has given the major publishing companies cause for concern. Their cow has developed a Mad Cow Disease and is dying. Thus their venom, vitriol, anger and angst at the new crop of independent devil-take-it writers and publishers (that is "publishers" to the cow milkers) is perfectly understandable. Not only do they undermine their established domain, but they also do things the major publishers can never do: reflect the society, intent only on telling the truth. The major publishers will of course shun these books simply because they are not politically correct (no one likes calling a spade a spade, it is a shovel!). Further, they are more concerned with the lovely musical tingle of the cash tills for the sales of their books rather than the well-being of their authors.

The new independent writers were not motivated by capitalist greed — many of them barely recover the cost of their production. Rather, they are motivated by the desire to express literature as an art form. And we all know about struggling poor artists, don't we? The major publishers cannot even sustain their present catalogs unless there is a demand for large quantities. Can you stroll into any bookstore and buy } *arshen Alewa* } *asa*, } *Sihirtaccen Gari*, } *Idon Matambayi* or } *Iblis* } *an Lis*? Of course not! Since there is no large demand for these books, why bother? Thus literature to the major publishers is not an art form; it is a cash form.

Finally, the Alhaji Ja'afar was quoted as arguing that "...the production of more good books of Hausa literature will help to divert the attention of the youth from *soyayya* novels..." An example was Bashari Farouk Roukbah's *Matar Mutum Kabarinsa* — a reprint. One wonders why NNPC did not ask Mal. Bashar to write a *new* play, rather than dusting off the plates of the old one — cutting down on the amount of royalty payment, perhaps? Of all the over 350 young authors of Northern Nigerian extraction — perhaps the largest assembly of such writers from one ethnic group in Nigeria writing in vernacular language — NNPC could not find any worth polishing and pruning in their image. This is not due to conservatism, but capitalist greed; parents, already nervous about these writers because they empower their readers, particularly girls, would protest; further lancing the NNPC's cow. And we wouldn't want that, would we?

It is clear that both Alhaji Ibrahim and Alhaji Ja'afar did not bother to read the books they are casting aspersions on; for most of them are full of the moral motifs they claim to represent in their stable. For instance, Bala Anas Babinlata's *Da Ko Jika* is a tale of horrifying descent into the abyss of greed and its terrible consequences; while El-Bashir Abubakar's *Kafar Ungulu* deals with self-styled "niggas", the dangers of irresponsible parenting and power of religious introspection; Auwalu Yusuf Hamza's *Gidan Haya* is a poignant portrait of communal living; *Bacewar Awwal* by Sabo Sa'idu Mohammed is a story of a struggle against all odds, and the triumph of the righteous; Nafisa Baballe Ilah's *Zabin Iyaye* is a tale of betrayal by foster parents of an orphaned girl. No rampaging racist stereotyped "blackmoors" satisfying the lusts of a busty Arabian queen. Certainly these, and many more books like them, are more moral, more relevant to contemporary Hausa society than *Dare Dubu Da Daya*, the "top list" of NNPC catalog! Perhaps Alhaji Ibrahim and Alhaji Ja'afar should read Muhammad Mujtaba Abubakar's *Littafan Soyayya a Ma'aunin Hankali Da na Shari'a* (1999) which, while also full of rants and raves, nevertheless bothered to provide some albeit tilted perspective on some of the books which the author has clearly read. A more noble effort than that of the major publishers.

Alhaji Ja'afar also bemoans the lack of organization of Hausa *soyayya* writers and urges them to group and set up publishing firms. This remark clearly reflects his indifference to Hausa literary development. In Kano, the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANAK) has developed a Hausa version of the association called *Dandalin Marubuta* since early 1990s that provided the monitoring mechanism he yearns. It meets the first Wednesday of every month at the Kano State Library Board. Thus Khamisu Bature's *Matsayin Lover* (first edition) was forced to be withdrawn as a result of pressure from members of ANAK due to its perceived moral lapses. The author was quite resentful of this decision because he claimed he was writing about what he knew was happening in girls' secondary schools. Similarly, ANAK banned Ashhabu Gamji's *Dufana* on grounds of moral depravity. Bilki Ahmad Funtuwa's *Kyan Dan Miciji* created such furor that she was forced to withdraw the offending bits in a second edition. More specifically, ANAK provides a "certificate of acceptability" to books the ANAK Executive read and accepted, and this certificate is often reproduced in some of the books. So a monitoring, *moral* mechanism exists, precisely because the Hausa novelists are aware of the eagerness of most

people, especially those who don't bother to read their books, to give a dog a bad name just to hang it.

Further, at the beginning of the Hausa literary revolution in the early 1980s, many of the authors coalesced into writers clubs. These included *Jigon Hausa*, *Kukan Kurciya*, *Raina Kama Writers Association*, *Writer's Forum*, *Kungiyar Matasa Marubuta* and many of others. These clubs still sustain the printing/publishing tradition of Hausa novels, at least in Kano. They remain small outfits because they don't have taxpayers money to sustain them. They remain heroes of Hausa literary expression because they dare to go boldly where no man (or woman) has gone before. If you can't emulate them, can't praise them, then let them be.

The only way to redeem the society is to listen to these New Age Interpreters, learn their lessons and reflect on our activities and behaviors as parents, guardians, husbands, wives and ordinary folk. Far from eroding the moral fiber of the conservative Hausa society, the Hausa novelist emerges as a moral crusader, using language as his jousting lance to probe the innermost fears and hypocrisy that is prevalent in the current society. The major publishers such as NNPC are too concerned with the WAEC syllabus and cash tills and their trial balances to worry about literature and society.