

## Hausa Literature Debates Series 8

### Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge: Coda to an Unfinished Symphony

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Let me digress, first. And in so doing, let me play my riff in my theater, with my orchestra. In this coda to the new Hausa writing genre symphony, I intend to demonstrate, using historical examples from the development of scientific knowledge, that sustained criticism is what leads to the development of knowledge. This is to demonstrate to all concerned with the *soyayya* debate that anything written about the debates — gushing or vitriolic — is simply a pattern which other forms of knowledge follow to develop, grow and eventually mature. The Hausa-Fulani mindset balks at intellectual criticism, preferring to accept knowledgeable people as high priests of an epistemological temple. Critical discourse is not only frowned upon, but in cases where few brave individuals attempted it, is a relatively new phenomenon. My “defense” of the new Hausa writings is seen as merceneristic foray, not because my arguments are illogical or my examples historically invalid, but simply because I have not been trained in the art of literary criticism to a doctorate level. This view reinforces the Hausa-Fulani epistemological mindset of high priests of knowledge only having the power to expound the knowledge. I had wanted to point out that I *had* been trained to the highest level in the art of *textual criticism*, as a curriculum specialist, but I decided not to bother!

Let me therefore explore the development of key concepts of science that characterize the scientific revolution, before moving to literary criticism, and the in the *allegro* to the coda, my final stand.

#### ***The Bases of the Scientific Revolution***

An Alexandrian astronomer with the weighty name of Claudius Ptolemaeus, more commonly called Ptolemy (AD 127-145), was one of the earliest intellectuals to provide the critical world with its first focal base. He did this by the simple expedient of unilaterally declaring the Earth the centre of the universe, an opinion which later came to be known as the “Ptolemaic system”. This theory was fully explained in his great book which eventually became the *Almagest*.

For a book that was the cornerstone of modern astronomy, its foundation on a shaky untested theory of geocentrism, must surely rankle as one of the more embarrassing moments in the history of ideas. Ptolemy describes his geocentric system and gives various arguments to prove that, in its position at the centre of the universe, the Earth must be immovable. As a result of his arguments, the *geocentric* system became dogmatically asserted in Western Christendom, and by 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was seen as an article of faith.

On February 19, 1473, a child was born in Poland and was given another weighty name of Mikolaj Kopernik. Everyone decided that Nicolaus Copernicus, for it was he, was a better sounding alternative. As an undergraduate student of the University of Kraków in 1491, he developed deep interests in astronomy. As his studies progressed long after graduation, Copernicus became increasingly dissatisfied with the Ptolemaic system of astronomy.

From about 1510 to 1514, Copernicus prepared a short manuscript to summarize his new idea, *De hypothesibus motuum coelestium a se constitutis commentariolus* ("A Commentary on the Theories of the Motions of Heavenly Objects from Their Arrangements"), which he privately circulated among friends in 1514. Quite simply, the book argued, using data from observations of the heavenly bodies, that the Earth, therefore, is the centre not of the universe but only of the Moon's orbit. It took to 1542 before a publisher agreed to publish such direct challenge, not on religion, but religious bureaucracy.

The dethronement of the Earth from the centre of the universe caused profound shock. No longer could the Earth be considered the epitome of creation, for it was only a planet like the other planets. The successful challenge to the entire system of ancient authority required a complete change in man's philosophical conception of the universe. This is what is rightly termed the *heliocentric* system, or more colorfully, *Copernican Revolution*. Thus the dethronement of one major thought by another became an intellectual killing field.

During the 16th century the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, rejecting both the Ptolemaic and Copernican systems, was responsible for major changes in observation, unwittingly providing the data that ultimately decided the argument in favor of a new astronomy. However, at the beginning of the 17th century, the German astronomer Johannes Kepler — a contemporary of Galileo — placed the Copernican hypothesis on firm astronomical footing. In 1609 Kepler announced two new planetary laws derived from Tycho's data: (1) the planets travel around the Sun in elliptical orbits, one focus of the ellipse being occupied by the Sun; and (2) a planet moves in its orbit in such a manner that a line drawn from the planet to the Sun always sweeps out equal areas in equal times.

The Copernican Revolution received a further major boost in 1610 when Galileo visited Rome and demonstrated his telescope to the most eminent personages at the pontifical court. The following year, he announced observations that contradicted many traditional cosmological assumptions. For instance, he observed that Earthshine on the Moon revealed that the Earth, like the other planets, shines by reflected light; hence, the Earth had been demoted from its unique position. The phases of Venus proved that that planet orbits the Sun, not the Earth. That was his undoing, for as events later proved, intellectuals don't like being challenged. Galileo's thoughts became popular beyond the confines of the universities and created a powerful movement of opinion. The Aristotelian professors, seeing their vested interests threatened, united against him. They strove to cast suspicion upon him in the eyes of ecclesiastical authorities because of contradictions between the Copernican theory and the Scriptures as understood at the time. They obtained the cooperation of the Dominican preachers, who fulminated from the pulpit

against the new impiety of “mathematicians” and secretly denounced Galileo to the Inquisition for blasphemous utterances, which, they said, he had freely invented. On March 5, 1616 a decree came out which declared “false and erroneous” Copernicanism and the book of Copernicus suspended. Galileo himself was forced to recant his beliefs on the intellectual validity of the Copernican theory in 1633, and was kept in a virtual house arrest for the rest of his life.

The battle for Copernicanism was fought in the realm of mechanics as well as astronomy. The Ptolemaic-Aristotelian system stood or fell as a monolith, and it rested on the idea of Earth’s fixity at the centre of the cosmos. Removing the Earth from the centre destroyed the doctrine of natural motion and place, and circular motion of the Earth was incompatible with Aristotelian physics. The work of Sir Isaac Newton represents the culmination of the scientific revolution at the end of the 17th century. His monumental *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687; *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*) solved the major problems posed by the scientific revolution in mechanics and in cosmology. It provided a physical basis for Kepler’s laws, unified celestial and terrestrial physics under one set of laws, and established the problems and methods that dominated much of astronomy and physics for well over a century.

In 1705 the English astronomer Edmond Halley used Newton’s laws to predict that a certain comet last seen in 1682 would reappear 76 years later. When *Halley’s comet* returned on Christmas night 1758, many years after the deaths of both Newton and Halley, no educated person could ever again seriously doubt the power of mechanistic explanations for natural phenomena.

### ***The Continental Drift Theory***

In 1912, Alfred Lothar Wegener, a German meteorologist and geophysicist formulated the first complete statement of the continental drift hypothesis. Bringing together a large mass of geologic and paleontological data, Wegener postulated that throughout most of geologic time there was only one continent, which he called *Pangaea*. Late in the Triassic Period (which lasted from 245 to 208 million years ago), *Pangaea* fragmented and the parts began to move away from one another. Westward drift of the Americas opened the Atlantic Ocean, and the Indian block drifted across the Equator to merge with Asia.

More common than interest or approval, however, was a disbelief in this theory that was so strong that it often bordered on indignation. One of the strongest opponents was the British geophysicist Sir Harold Jeffreys, who spent years attempting to demonstrate that continental drift is impossible because the strength of the mantle should be far greater than any conceivable driving force. He refused to abandon this viewpoint in spite of the massive evidence in favor of plate tectonics. Wegener was attacked from virtually every possible vantage point, his paleontological evidence attributed to land bridges, the similarity of strata on both sides of the Atlantic called into question, the fit of Atlantic shores declared inaccurate, and his very competence doubted. It also did not escape attention that *he did not possess proper credentials as a geologist*. (his PhD, which he obtained in 1905, was in Astronomy).

The roots of the resistance to Wegener’s theory was simply that it was unusual for the practitioners of any science to flock to a new concept—particularly a

revolutionary one of such profound consequences--before the need for a thorough overhaul of the existing conceptual edifice had become compelling and obvious to most, its supporting evidence daily crumbling, and its explanatory power reduced below any acceptable level.

Whatever the cause, continental drift, having been rejected by the vast majority of geologists the world over, retreated into obscurity and remained there for roughly three decades. And yet while Wegener did not manage to persuade the world, the successor theory was readily embraced 40 years later, even though it remained open to much of the same criticism that had caused the downfall of continental drift.

### ***Kuhnian Paradigmatic Shifts***

In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, two other philosophers of science stood out in the critical discourse on the nature of scientific knowledge. Sir Kari Popper, who died on September 17, 1994, and Thomas S. Kuhn who departed the planet on June 17 1996.

Sir Karl set the pace in his monumental and highly regarded *Logik der Forschung* (1934; *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, 1959). In it, he postulated that since no one can ever observe and verify all possible evidence to prove a scientific hypothesis correct, it is necessary only to discover one observed exception to the hypothesis to prove it false. He rejected as "pseudoscience" any system of beliefs that could not pass this "falsifiability criterion" and that relied on predetermined "laws" of human behavior. These included logical positivism, metaphysics, Marxism (!), fascism, and Freudian psychoanalysis — ideas he explored further in, for instance, *The Open Society and Its Enemies Vol I: Marx* (1945).

Kuhn's epic exegesis on scientific knowledge was contained in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), and became one of the most widely read and influential books in 20th-century social sciences, humanities, and philosophy. In the book, Kuhn argued that scientific work and thought are defined by "paradigms" consisting of formal theories, classic experiments, and trusted methods. Scientists use the resources of paradigms to refine theories, explain puzzling data, and establish increasingly precise measures of standards and phenomena. Confidence in paradigms, however, can be eroded by irresolvable theoretical problems or experimental anomalies, and the accumulation of such difficulties eventually creates a crisis that can be resolved only by revolutions in which new paradigms are formulated to replace the old. The overthrow of Ptolemaic cosmology by Copernican heliocentrism and Newtonian mechanics by quantum physics and general relativity are both examples of fundamental paradigm shifts.

Both Popper and Kuhn are essentially saying the same thing: verification is the central focus of scientific knowledge. However, they do differ in one fundamental aspect. For Popper scientific change is rational or at least rationally reconstrutable and falls in the realm of the *logic of discovery*. For Kuhn scientific change — from one 'paradigm' to another — is a mystical conversion which is not and cannot be governed by rules of reason and which falls totally within the realm of the social psychology of discovery. Scientific change is a kind of religious change.

The difference formed the focus of an *International Colloquium in the Philosophy of Science*, held in London in 1965. Top-notch philosophers of science and scientists graced the occasion, with one central purpose: critical discourse on the nature of science as seen by Kuhn. Incidentally, Sir Karl was the Chairman! Writers like P. K. Feyerabend, S. E. Toulmin, L. Pearce Williams and Margaret Masterman spent days disemboweling the Kuhnian concept of *paradigm*. Indeed Margaret Masterman claimed that Kuhn used the expression in at least 21 different ways in his original exegesis. Such a concentrated of peers and teachers is enough to daunt any scholar. No so Kuhn who not only attended the colloquium, but also gamely defended his theories excellently. Thus knowledge moved an inch!

### **So What About Literary Criticism?**

Construed loosely, literary criticism is the reasoned consideration of literary works and issues. It applies, as a term, to any argumentation about literature, whether or not specific works are analyzed. None of the rules of literary criticism mentions having tons of degrees to either write good literature or criticize it (in my case, years of reading London *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) did help!). The basic qualification needed is simple common sense semantic logic. Thus it is "practical criticism": the interpretation of meaning and the judgment of quality.

As in the development of any knowledge, the totality of Western criticism in the 20th century defies summary except in terms of its restless multiplicity and factionalism. Schools of literary practice, such as Imagism, Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, have found no want of defenders and explicators. Ideological groupings, psychological dogmas, and philosophical trends have generated polemics and analysis, and literary materials have been taken as primary data by sociologists and historians. Literary creators themselves have continued to write illuminating commentary on their own principles and aims. In poetry, Paul Valéry, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens; in the theatre, George Bernard Shaw, Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht; and in fiction, Marcel Proust, D.H. Lawrence, and Thomas Mann have contributed to criticism in the act of justifying their art.

This is essentially because literary criticism, as distinguished from scholarly research, is usually itself considered a form of literature. Some people find great critics as entertaining and stimulating as great poets, and theoretical treatises of literary aesthetics can be as exciting as novels. Aristotle, Longinus, and the Roman rhetorician and critic Quintilian are still read, although Renaissance critics like the once all-powerful Josephus Scaliger are forgotten by all but specialized scholars. Later critics, such as Poe, Sainte-Beuve, Taine, Vissarion Belinsky, Matthew Arnold, Walter Bagehot, Walter Pater, and George Saintsbury, are probably read more for themselves than for their literary judgments and for their general theorizing rather than for their applications.

The English critics have survived because they largely confined themselves to acknowledged masterpieces and general ideas. Perhaps literary criticism can really be read as a form of autobiography. Aestheticians of literature like I.A. Richards, Sir C.M. Bowra, Paul Valéry, Suzanne Langer, and Ernst Cassirer have had an influence beyond the narrow confines of literary scholarship and have played the role of general philosophers. This has been true on the popular level as well. The Dane Georg Brandes, the Americans James Gibbons Huneker, H.L. Mencken, and Edmund Wilson--these men have been social

forces in their day. Literary criticism can play its role in social change. In Japan, the overthrow of the shogunate, the restoration of the emperor, and the profound change in the Japanese social sensibility begins with the literary criticism of *Moto-ori Norinaga* (1730-1801).

### ***To Communicate with the Deaf, Use a Sign Language!***

So what leads to all this high-powered torrent? Simple: the role of criticism in the growth of knowledge. I believe I have demonstrated, using scientific knowledge, as well as developments in literary criticism, how criticism shapes the growth of any discipline. Adamu Mohammed Nababa's *Dialog with the Deaf* (Bookshelf, *The Weekly Trust*, April 7, 2000) was meant to scold me and Dr. Ibrahim Malumfashi over our "battle stands". He urges us to stop. By so urging, he wants me to commit epistemological suicide and declare knowledge having been exhausted. Sorry, I beg to differ, and the whole essay above is the reason for my not accepting Nababa's admonition.

Yet surprisingly, Nababa — and other intellectually blind by-standers like him — did not give alternative to the debates. Like most critics who have not read more than five or ten of the books (if at all), Nababa erroneously believed that the new Hausa writings are concerned with only love. This is far from the truth. Of my catalog of about 443 of the books (and there could be more that escaped my attention) more than 60% of the ones published between 1996-1999 deal with real-life situations of living, dying, and surviving. But because nobody bothers to read the books (due to the contempt heaped on them), the impression given is that they are *all soyayya*. My main arguments is that people should *read* them first, point out *specific ones* that are "morally corrupting" (after defining *moral corruption*), and then publish their findings. That way, a *specific author* gets a feedback about his work.

For example, of the catalog of roughly 443 books (as of December 1999), only about 160 (36%) use *soyayya* as the main theme (e.g. Halima Salisu Sidi's } *asaitacciyar Soyayya*, 1997). That leaves about 283 (64%) dealing with other issues. Of these, at least 77 deal with day-to-day lives — captured live on a literary camera (e.g. Dan'azumi Baba C/Yangurasa's *Idan | era Da Sata*, 1993). Other themes covered by the writers included (with one example each): deception (Salisu Yusuf Salihi's *Maza Masu Wuyar Sha'ani*, 1995) sword and bravery (Babangida Abdu's *Gugan } arfe*, 1995), life in marriage (Jamila Ibrahim Nabature's *Ba A Raba Hanta Da Jini*, 1999), perseverance (Ado Ahmad Gidan Dabino's *Kaicho!* 1996), fate (Mansur Ibrahim Birnin Kuka's *Haka Allah Ya So*, 1996), crime and punishment (Aminu Umar's *Ban Ji Ba Ban Gani Ba*, 1999), greed (Nazir Adam Salihi, *Me Ya Fi Ku[ i?*, 1998), tribalism (Balaraba Ramat Yakubu's *Badriyya*, 1997) friendship (Bala Anas Babinlata's *Rashin Sani*, 1994), comedy (Kabiru Ibrahim Yakasai's *Suda*, 1994), obedience to parents (Bara'atu Muhammad's *Kowa Ya } i Ji Ba Zai } i Gani Ba*, 1995) betrayal of trust (Ahmad Musa Anka's *Zakaran Da Allah Ya Nufa Da Cara*, 1996), moralizing (Balarabe Abdullahi's *Idan Kasan Wata*, 1997), detective (Yusif Gwangwazo's *Yalla\ai*, 1998), steadfastness (Hafsat Umar Dange's *Ha]uri Amintaccen Ciniki*, 1997), allegory (Abubakar Balarabe's *Tsunsu Duka Tsuntsu Ne*, 1999), obedience (Kabiru Ibrahim's *Yabanya* (1999), and many others.

It is this richness of coverage and diversity of themes that elevated the new Hausa novelists on a *higher intellectual pedestal* than the Onitsha Market

Literature writers who were only writing love manuals. And writing in the vernacular gives the writers considerable conceptual flexibility which brings out the richness of their perceptions, again unlike the Onitsha Market authors whose poor command of the English language medium they use stultify their ability to fully express themselves. For instance, read Bala Anas Babalinlata's *{ a Ko Jika?* (1992) and be awed by the elegant simplicity and beauty of a Hausa person writing *in Hausa language*.

It is for these reasons that I argue against the sobriquet "Kano Market Literature"; produced in largely Kano, yes; sold mainly in Kano markets yes; but intellectually, rather than commercially driven. Oh, and also definitely literature! It has been predicted by Dr. Malumfashi that the phenomenon will last only another 20 years, meaning that by 2020 it should all be over. I have no problem with that, as nothing lasts for ever. The fact that it can exist for 40 years (having started life in 1980) meant that it had something to offer. The Elizabethan literature Dr. Malumfashi mentioned, had a life span from essentially 1558 to 1603 when Elizabeth I ruled England, and eventually merged into Jacobean literature from 1603 to 1625. Yet the themes did not die, rather an amalgamated sobriquet, the *Jacobethan* emerged! So your Kano Market Literature (ouch!) may well metamorphose into something in 2020 containing elements of the earlier foundation. Allah Ya ba mu rai, da lafiya!

### ***The Great Soyayya Debate: The Next Generation***

Finally, Nababa asks me to *shelve* my sword. This worries me, as shelving in my dictionary means putting something on a shelf: in full view in case you need it again. If I were thus to *shelve* my sword, it means the "fight" is far from over, since I will only put it on a shelf I can easily reach.

Instead of doing that, and in the spirit of moving the debate forward, I would rather *sheath* my sword — the act of putting it back in its scabbard, for I believe I have made my points since April 24 1999 when I entered into the fray. The challenge is simply this: if you have to comment on the new Hausa writings, be specific — indicate the author, the title and your grouse or praise. I have consistently done that. In all my arguments and debates, I have not only provided clear analytical frameworks, but also drawn examples from the books I have read, accented with perspectives of authors I have discussed the books with. Thus if we really want to move forward, we must come down from the lofty heights of "should they, shouldn't they" and begin to dissect what "they" actually do in their novels. How about the following as rough and ready framework?

- What do you think of the *plot*? It is plausible? Psychologically applicable?
- Does the *characterizations* deal with the human personality, under the stress of artfully selected experience?
- How about the *setting* or scene? Does it rhyme with the characters?
- To what extent does the author binds you, the reader, with the characters? In other words, what is his *narrative method* or point of view?
- And the *scope*? Are we talking ten pages or one thousand, and should that really matter?

Halima Abbas ("New Trends in Hausa Fiction", *New Nigerian Literary Supplement — The Write Stuff*, 11, 18, July; 1 August, 1998), are you still there? Come back, all is forgiven!

