

Hausa Literature Debates Series 3

The Lexicon of Love:

A Review of *Tsokaci Da Kalailaicewa a kan Litattafan Soyayya na Hausa*, Seminar Presentation in Bayero University, Kano, Wednesday June 16, 1999, Department of Nigerian Languages

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It was hot. But the heat was not only generated by the sheer number of people literally jam-packed into the smallish Seminar Room of the Department of Nigerian Languages, Bayero University Kano on Wednesday June 16, 1999. The heat was largely generated by the intensity of the speaker and the subsequent hot debates that greeted his presentation. The room was ideally meant for about ten to fifteen people sitting at a round table discussing the issue at hand. On that day it had more than one hundred people, many spilled out on the corridor. Without any shadow of doubt, the seminar topic was the most seminal of the year in the Department.

Ambitiously titled *Tsokaci Da Kalailaicewa a kan Litattafan Soyayya na Hausa* (A Preliminary and Definitive Analysis of Hausa *Soyayya* Novels), the Hausa language paper drew a massive, unprecedented attention among the members of the University community. This was not doubt enhanced by the current "titanic debates" on the merits, or otherwise, of the *soyayya* genre, spearheaded by The Write Stuff column of *New Nigerian Weekly*. Whether we want to retreat in revulsion into a nuclear-proof bomb shelter of literary haughtiness, or swim with the tide downstream (to waterfalls?), the fact remains that the *soyayya* genre is back into the arena again. Recently, more debates have started appearing both privately published and as academic discourses. For instance, Muhammad Mujtaba Abubakar has privately published *Litattafan Soyayya a Ma'aunin Hankali Da Na Shari'a (The Rational and Islamic Legal Status of Soyayya Novels; School of Business and Publish Administration, The Polytechnic, Kebbi, 1999)*. Also Iiyasu Ibrahim Abdullahi has just recently defended his. M.A. (Hausa) thesis, *Tsokaci A Kan Kagaggun Labaran Soyayya: Yanayinsu Da Sigoginsu (Structural and Content Analysis of Soyayya Novels; Nigerian Languages, Bayero University, Kano 1999)* which he started since 1996. And whereas the debates in the mid 1990s were mainly in vernacular papers (*Nasiha*, *Mujallar Rana*, etc), the current debates have drawn attention to the need to provide a forum where, as it were, the opposing forces will meet, to chart a new course which will benefit youth development and empowerment.

It was this spirit that drew the massive crowd to the BUK seminar. The literary glitterati were all there: the antagonists, the protagonists, as well and the curious. However the most enlivening feature of the seminar was the speaker, Abdullahi Garba Imam T/Wizirchi, a lecturer in the Department of Nigerian Languages, Aminu Kano School of Islamic and Legal Studies, Kano. It was difficult to ignore him, even though his paper was a massive thirty pages (foolscap!). This was because due to his excellent command of the language, and the intensity of his feeling, he kept the audience captivated with an animated presentation punctuated liberally with supportive Hausa proverbs each of which send ripples of laughter through the

audience due to its aptness. His fluent command of Arabic language also stood him in good stead since he liberally quoted the Qur'an and the Hadith to support a specific argument (especially as it deals with moral issues). It was clear his quotations are "live" in the sense that he knew their meanings, rather than parrot recitation, as some are fond of doing to support arguments.

Midway through the presentation, the entire room erupted into an uproar lasting several minutes (and thus interrupting the presentation!) when Ado Ahmad Gidan Dabino, a fountainhead of the *soyayya* genre appeared and squeezed to his reserved seat at the high table. His presence, coupled with the presence of Bashir Farouk Roukbah already seated, if anything, heightened the expectation of the audience that a giant iceberg has appeared and is about to collide with the Titanic!

The paper had one main objective: to draw attention to some of the alleged undesirable behaviors encouraged among the youth, particularly adolescent girls, by the *soyayya* writings. It thus analyzed the *soyayya* genre from a moral matrix. The Chairman of the Seminar, Dr. Mukhtar Yusuf demonstrated an excellent grip on the proceedings and thus prevented it from turning into a literary boxing match. Indeed he had to literally call an end to the proceedings at 1.15 due to the prayer time, indicating clearly that enough intensity and heat were generated to last for the whole day.

The speaker was inspired into writing the paper, according to his preliminary pages, as a student of the Hausa language (in both literary and philosophical sense). However, he was also motivated by being a field assistant to an American postgraduate student, Novial Whitsitt, doctorate student apparently in aspects of African languages. Mr. Whitsitt wrote out eleven questionnaire items, to which Mallam Garba provided written responses. It is this, as it were, completed questionnaire, that Mallam Garba presented to the crowd in BUK. Thus the paper was written in a form of question-answer style. While unusual, it nevertheless provided a unique approach to the presentation.

I will look at the presentation from the perspective of the central core of Mallam Garba's answers to the questions (which I took the liberty of translating from Hausa), excluding the first question in the original questionnaire which focused on biographical information of the respondent.

1. How many (*soyayya* genre) books have you read?
2. Why do you read these books?
3. Which ones do you dislike?
4. Have you ever discussed the themes of these books with other readers or general populace?
5. What do you think are the motives of the writers?
6. Who are their target audience?
7. Do you feel that the writings reflect everyday events?
8. Do you feel they can influence the views of youth, and in what ways?
9. Are you aware of parental complaints on the extent to which these books corrupt their children?
10. What changes needed to be made to these writings to increase their appeal?

Mallam Garba's answers typically reflect the general answers most people would give with regards to the *soyayya* genre. Thus while not representative, it is fairly typical, and reflects the current thinking among some of our academic colleagues. I will briefly outline his discussion of the questions as narrated to us.

Books read

It seems he has read “a lot of them”, although he was able to give a list of fifteen titles (which he brought along with him to show us) and which he said he has read critically.

Why Read them?

Mal. Abdullahi responded that as a student and teacher of the Hausa language, and someone who loves reading, he finds these books fascinating and enlightening. Indeed he even ascribed his huge collection of Hausa proverbs (of which he reproduced ten) to reading these books. Further, they are cheap, easily available and good companions. Also they teach things like letter-writing (romantic!). Finally, he reads them to objectively judge for himself their worth, especially as there are two opposing camps with regards to the books: for, and against.

Books Disliked

Mal. Abdullahi concentrated on one book as the worst of the genre, *Da ko Jika?* which, according to him ascribes the worst possible behaviors a woman can commit in a Hausa society. Further, the novel describes events, settings and themes totally uncharacteristic of the Hausa society. To cap it, the villain, a particularly ruthless, amoral, incestuous, vicious and ambitious woman called Bidi'atu (perhaps an enhanced Scarlet O'Hara of *Gone with the Wind*), seemed to live happily ever after at the end of the story — with all her ill-gotten millions. Mal. Abdullahi had wanted the writer to bring the villain from the lofty heights of acquisitive materialism to the bottomless pit of poverty to prove that “cheats never prosper”; he quoted appropriate passages from the Qur'an to prove this maxim.

Themes of the Books

Mal. Abdullahi reported wide condemnation from the parents he discussed about the corrupting influences of these books, particularly on adolescent youth (see the item above).

Motives for Writing Soyayya books

These were adjudicated by Mal. Abdullahi as competitive spirit, leisure, money, autobiographical (where the author's seemed to be narrating a life similar to their own), desire for fame (especially with home “movie” adaptations), and contribution to literary development of Hausa people and culture.

Target Audience

These, according to Mal. Garba, were mainly adolescent school girls who seemed to pay more attention to these books than their lessons. Further, according to him, at home these girls are useless to their parents because they were always engrossed in reading these books. He claims also that some women attend adult literacy classes — for the sole purpose of learning how to read *soyayya* books! Similarly, many women send their scripts to be read over a popular Hausa radio program.

Reflection of Everyday Events

Some of the books portray life as it is lived. An example given was Ado Ahmad's *In Da So* where some moneybags (almost always an *Alhaji!*) uses money to sway protagonist's grandmother to persuade a girl to marry him, even though the girl detests him. Others portray greedy parents who take a suitor's money, knowing fully

well they were not going to allow him to marry their daughter; or as in *Ruwan Idon Masoya* where rich spoiled brats humiliate others less fortunate than themselves.

Influence on Youth

This was the central core of Mal. Abdullahi's presentation and on which he spent considerable time, illustrating his points with specific examples of the books containing the necessary references. In a way, his views on this issue characterize the views of most antagonists of the *soyayya* genre.

Mal. Abdullahi provided two categories of influences that might emerge out of reading *soyayya* novels. Among the few *good* influences he included teaching virtues such as patience, perseverance, yearning for religious education (e.g. *In Da So da Kauna, Wani Hani Daga Allah*) and belief in predestination — essential attributes of any good Muslim. Further, they encourage brotherly love, and some, like *Duniya Rawar Yammata, In So Ya Yi So*, are interlaced with Hadith quotations to buttress certain contexts or arguments.

The *bad* influences, which certainly far outweigh the good influences in Mal. Abdullahi's categorizations, center on women empowerment where girls were emboldened by the writers to feel they can only marry those they love. To him, many girls develop too much independent thinking as a result of reading these books and become less subservient to either parental or matrimonial authority.

In this regard, Mal. Abdullahi seems to believe that girls should marry suitors of their parent's choice in all circumstances. Some girls in a real-life drama in Kano were reported to have committed suicide (setting fire to self, jumping into deep wells) rather than marry someone they were about to be forced to marry by their parents or guardians. In another incidence, a girl forced by her parents to marry someone she does not love simply sliced the husband's throat while he slept. Mal. Abdullahi believes that such waste of life was attributed to reading *soyayya* novels where the protagonists kill themselves rather than marry someone they do not love. Further, Mal. Abdullahi claimed many girls were enticed into prostitution, while others took their parents to court over matrimonial matters — all as a result of reading *soyayya* novels. His argument was that if such books do not exist, then the self-immolations, the murders, the prostitutions and the court cases would never have occurred. The *soyayya* writers, therefore, seemed to provide adolescent girls with a wake-up call to women empowerment in the new millennium; an extremely undesirable trait, according to the presenter.

The adolescent sexuality expressed in some of the books (*Furen Soyayya, Raina Fansa Ga Masoyinta*) which merely describes, at worst petting, and at best groping among two lovers, were also cited as bad influences on youth. The cover art work, depicting a "modern" empowered Northern adolescent girl (without the hijab, e.g. *Alamomin So, Gimbiya Fauziyya, Furen Soyayya*) all seemed to enable Mal. Abdullahi to "judge a book by its cover". One particularly garish cover of a book had two girls locked in an embrace — whether of sisterly love or some other sinister and unnatural affection is not clear — which all led Mal. Abdullahi to describe such cover artwork and books as salaciously intended.

Another bad habit encouraged is the adoption of the Enghausa slang term when addressing parents. Mal. Abdullahi quoted a dialog in *Furen Soyayya* during which a character addressed his mother as *Mummy*, thus illustrating that Hausa children do not address their parents either as 'Mummy' or 'Daddy'. Further, in this specific example,

the character was talking to his mother about how happy he was to see a girl he loves. His mother actually seem to encourage him by urging him to be serious about her. According to Mal. Garba, such impertinence as discussing love affairs to one's parents (especially a mother) is untypical of Hausa cultural settings.

More bad habits ascribed to reading these books include rampant abortion, single parent families, obsession with glitter and glamour of life (most of the scenes from the fifteen books he read seem to center on flashy expensive cars and massive mansions).

Finally, Mal. Abdullahi cites about four Commercial Libraries where these books are rented (at five naira per book). He believes that the huge popularity of these books tempts many adolescents into stealing especially when they do not have money so that they can "hire" these books. Housewives "addicted" to these books, according to Mal. Garba, may also break up their marriages if their husbands refuse to give them the money to "hire" these books.

Parental Reactions

According to Mal. Abdullahi most parents do not like their children reading these books because of their corrupting influence. Further, they become so engrossed in them that they refuse to help with the household chores. It was also claimed that massive failure in examinations in secondary schools in Kano among girls was due to the obsession of the students to these books, which they would rather read than their textbooks. Specifically, one of the schools in Kano banned the appearance and reading of these books within the school premises.

Mal. Abdullahi cites the popular Radio Kano program, *Duniyar nan Tamu* where parents write to air their grievances on the corrupting influence of these books on their children.

How to make them better

Mal. Abdullahi suggests that since many of the books (it was not clear whether he was referring to those he specifically read) were copied from American or Indian movie themes, a reformative beginning would be for the authors to stop aping American/European and Indian cultural values. He urged the writers to copy Hausa classicist writers like the Late Abubakar Imam by writing books which teach a lot of morals. He also indicted university professors who seem to endorse the books without making sure their contents are appropriately moral enough for the intended audience. He urged such editors to censor the books by endorsing only those with good social messages. Finally, he urged a more positive image of women, since they are portrayed as greedy, corrupt ungrateful, and emotionally unstable; after all who has heard of a boy killing himself because he was denied the chance to marry the girl he loves?!

The Discussions on the Presentation

As I said, the presentation was listened to with rapt attention, and naturally enough immediately after the applause greeting this conclusion died down, about fifty hands went up. All through the presentations many listeners were busy scribbling their own questions. It was decided by the chairman that three discussants will provide a critique of the presentation, before an opportunity is given to members of the audience to ask their questions, and the proceedings will close with Mal. Abdullahi responding to the questions.

The discussants lauded the paper and its focus on such a topical issue. However, the most dangerous aspects of the paper was that the presenter gave the impressions of

being a typical adolescent *soyayya* novel reader. To an American, unfamiliar with the reading habits of adolescent Hausa, Mal. Abdullahi's views might therefore provide a distorted image of the true picture. These views, coming from a college lecturer in Nigerian Languages (specifically Hausa), confer on Mal. Abdullahi's views an authority on adolescent reading habits, which judging from the materials he presented, he clearly does not have.

The biggest weakness of the paper pointed out was that it was essentially a collection of *personal* opinions, devoid of any form of statistical analysis that will validate many of its claims. And in a way, it reflects the characteristic thinking of most antagonists to the genre: cursory reading of a few of these books (and in the case of Mal. Garba, mostly outdated and out-of-print titles), and suddenly one has become "an expert" on their corrupting influences on youth, and therefore they should be banned. Also at aged 31, Mal. Abdullahi is hardly the typical youth who reads these books, and as such could not be adjudged a conventional spokesman for the readership of the genre. This was because it was clear that the original questionnaire (itself poorly constructed) was aimed at the adolescent (12-22 or so) readers of the books; not college lecturers whose responses were likely to have been value-laden, biased, and therefore statistically invalid.

It was also pointed out that out of an estimated 800 *soyayya* books in Kano alone, the fifteen which Mal. Abdullahi reproduced (less than 2%) are hardly enough to provide judgmental barometers. The discussants wanted Mal. Abdullahi to provide a specific *methodological* approach to his analysis. For instance, how many *soyayya* books are in the market? How many has he read? How many *soyayya* book readers has he targeted; how many has he talked to? How many parents? Teachers? Community leaders? Etc. Effective sampling frame and valid statistical analysis of the trend would provide a greater representativeness and generalizability of the effects of the genre, rather than hostile condemnation.

Further, nowhere in his presentation did he mention talking to *any* of the numerous authors to ascertain *their* motives. This lapse drew the ire of Ado Ahmad Gidan Dabino who denied some of the books attributed to him, as well as a Commercial Library: points that reflect poor methodology on the part of the author; for it would have been an easy thing to verify since both Ado Ahmad and Mal. Abdullahi operate less than five kilometers from each other. This made some believe that the presenter has not read some of the books he quoted in the paper.

It was also pointed out the dialogs are normally attached to scenes. For instance, the *Mummy dialog* in *Furen Soyayya* took place in a setting considered contemporaneous (urbanized, westernized) to some households in Kano. If the dialog had taken place in a rural setting, then it would certainly be out of place, and less credible.

Another discussant argued that the central core of his arguments seemed to center on sexist pedestal of keeping women down. This was because Mal. Abdullahi was totally against the women empowerment messages in most of the books. To him, the refusal of girls to marry someone they do not love is a rebellion against parental authority. The girl's happiness and emotional stability are unimportant! Yet it was precisely this emotional instability, caused by psychological trauma, not reading *soyayya* books, that made some of the more unfortunate girls to commit suicide, as a way out of a miserable life they cannot endure. Mal. Abdullahi has not provided a remediating mechanism through which such trauma can be contained, choosing instead to blame the writers of *soyayya* novels, rather than irresponsible parents (who had probably

taken lots of the *Alhaji's* money and must honor their promise). Despite his rich repertoire of Hausa proverbs (many of which, according to him, he gleaned from the books he is condemning!), he has forgotten one Hausa aphorism: *ko shi ko rijiya* (either him, or death by drowning!), an anthem sung by girls denied their lovers by parents long before the appearance of *soyayya* writings in *Kasar* Hausa!

It was also pointed out that many of his comments were simply too outlandish, unsubstantiated, and cannot be honestly linked to the effect of reading *soyayya* books. There have been child prostitutes, single-parent families, abortions and court cases in the society for decades. Ascribing every sex-related evil committed by a miscreant adolescent (or corrupt adults, who have more influence on corrupting youth than *soyayya* books) to the *soyayya* genre, is being quite unfair to the genre. Further, there are other adolescent delinquent behaviors rampant in modern societies: drugs and substance abuse, gangs (*yan tauri, yan daba*), turf territoriality, truancy, sheer nuisance, grand larceny, etc. These are not themes covered by most *soyayya* genre, so which books do these miscreants read to acquire these awful behaviors? Thus there is more to immorality than sex: it is a whole spectrum of behaviors. It would be helpful for the antagonists if they can create an acceptable scale of morality, so that we know that a village girl-prostitute (and they do exist) who has never been to a western school, did not become so due to reading a *soyayya* book; but due to other social forces. Pointing fingers at *soyayya* books and their corrupting potentials ignores the *real* forces of moral corruption in the society. Someone also pointed out that of the scores of fortysomething adults who have voraciously read James Hadley Chase in their teens did not turn out to be criminals, despite the intricate details Chase provides in his books about crimes and criminals.

Another discussant pointed out that it would appear Mal. Abdullahi thinks that being literate is evil, particularly if you are a woman. Without any supportive statistical information, Mal. Abdullahi wants the audience to believe that many adolescents in Kano are encouraged into stealing to obtain the five naira to register in a Commercial Library to read these books. Evil are also the housewives who decided to learn to read, purely for the pleasure of reading *soyayya* books, not self-empowerment and betterment!! Mal. Abdullahi's message is clear: women should stop attending literacy classes, because in his universe, the only books available in Kano are *soyayya* books; so even if a woman acquires literacy, and since she will only read *soyayya* books, then her literacy is useless!

A final discussant comment was on the alleged effects of reading these novels on poor performance of students in schools. Such simplistic correlation merely confirms the notion of giving a dog a bad name to hang it. Results in girls' schools have been poor for a very long time in Kano, with very few girls obtaining the necessary five credits to enable them to be enrolled in University degree programs. We are of course aware that there are many factors responsible for student's failure in examinations: yet Mal. Abdullahi ignores all of them (lack of teacher and pupil motivation, paucity of instructional materials, poor curriculum planning, even the nature of the examination itself, to mention just a few) and instead, place the blame on reading these books. Such conclusion would have been more believable if we are presented with examination results of the affected students and their correlative reading habits and preferences.

Further, no one has ever claimed that all the books written were the best of their kind (regardless of what meter is used); as such the non-representativeness of Mal. Abdullahi's sampling frame for the books he quoted was pointed out as a severe

limitation that invalidates generalization. Ironically, most of the books he used in the presentation, were out of print, and thus not currently available in Kano.

The Chairman of the Seminar, Dr. Mukhtar Yusuf, then threw the floor open for questions and further comments, most of which center on the points made by the discussants. However, one very illuminative question was asked by a female member, who wanted an explanation of what is actually meant by *soyayya* in the first place! This question was not as naïve as it may seem because it deals with the fundamental core of *methodology*: just what are we talking about anyway? It drew a babble of responses with a discussant explaining that in his view *soyayya* (love) connotes underlying *sha'awa* (desire); whilst *kauna* (affection) is more neutered word. But since many *soyayya* novels eventually end up in marriage or semblance of emotional relationship, it was more preferred to call them *soyayya* novels, rather than *kauna* novels. There are some who did not agree with this explanation, and the debated went on.

Professor Mu'azu Sani Zaria, the Special Guest of Honor, and Head of Department provided a structural critique of the paper, which drew a hushed and respected silence from the audience, clearly awed by his mechanical skills in structural analysis. That in itself is worth the entire seminar attendance!

Generally the audience, especially the arch-critics (and they were there!) acknowledge that the *soyayya* genre can either be vilified or praised, but certainly cannot be ignored; but all call for a toning down of their more explicit contents to contain any possible long-term damaging effect they may have on the more impressionistic adolescent readers.

The presenter took all the criticisms gamely and in his stride, agreeing to places where he clearly made too many assumptions, and clarifying where he felt he was misunderstood. At the end, it was clear that he was happy with the comments made on the paper, and promised to take them into consideration if he has plans of revising the paper in the future.

As I said earlier, the seminar drew the attention of people from various disciplines, especially those dealing with educational issues, youth empowerment, curricular analysts, and psychologists. Many NGOs such as The World Bank, UNICEF, UNDP, USAID, are increasingly focusing their attention on youth empowerment, especially adolescent girls. So far most programs have been aimed at institutional capacity building; until it was realized that youth are people with views and perspectives. The *soyayya* genre does not necessarily provide a snapshot on the mind of youth; but it certainly points to a direction. Many social-impact messages can be channeled through such media (e.g. awareness of HIV/AIDS, STD, drug abuse, reformative self-evaluation, etc). The *soyayya* genre has opened the door to the minds of youth: all it requires — the main focus of the discussant's comments — are more imaginative writers to build these messages in their tomes.

Whether the books are being analyzed from the perspective of critic, writer, expert, or lay-man, their over-riding focus on youth makes them universal commodities to anyone concerned with youth and adolescent development from whatever discipline.

To wrap it up, Ado Ahmad Gidan Dabino (who was quite vocal in the discussions) was granted a special request to make a presentation on the same theme at a later date. Thus we await Titanic Part III!

