

VIEWING AFRICAN CINEMA IN ART FILMS AND THE NOLLYWOOD VIDEO REVOLUTION THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

EDITED BY

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4 Islam, Hausa Culture, and Censorship in Northern Nigerian Video Film

ABDALLA UBA ADAMU

The rise of a vibrant video film industry in northern Nigeria during

the last two decades has brought the creative impetus of local filmmakers in direct collision with the Muslim religious establishment. Public criticism of the films as well as action by the newly established Kano State Censorship Board focuses on the depiction of female bodies as well as the camera's invasion of the Hausa Muslim woman's *Intimisphäre* (intimate, or private, space). Hausa popular film has thus become the site of a major confrontation between global culture (emanating from both Hollywood and Bollywood) and an equally "modern" assertion of values deriving from Islam and local culture.

The Folktale Template

"Premodern" (or precolonial) Hausa culture had its own "global" features, due to a long history of regional and trans-Saharan trade and the powerful presence of Islam. However these forces synthesized into something often called "the Hausa cultural mindset."¹ In historical Hausa popular culture, the *tatsuniya* (folktale) provides the narrative template for articulating this culture. Aimed mainly, but not exclusively, at children, the *tatsuniya* is an oral script aimed at drawing attention to the salient aspects of Hausa life and how to live it in a morally acceptable manner. Further, it is necessarily tied to female space, for as argued by Ousseina Alidou, "In Hausa tradition, the oldest woman of the household or neighborhood—the grandmother—is the 'master' storyteller. . . .

Her relationship with her younger audience of girls and boys . . . puts her in a position to educate, through her *tatsuniya*, about taboo topics such as sexuality, and shame and honor, that culturally prevent parents and children from addressing with one another."²

Thus the *tatsuniya* necessarily becomes a script on how to live a good life unthreatened by the corruptions associated here with male space. Strongly didactic and linear (without subtle subplot developments, considering the relatively young age of the audience), it connects a straight line between what is good and what is bad and the consequences of stepping over the line. The central meter for measuring the "correctness" and morality of a *tatsuniya* is the extent to which it rewards the good and punishes the bad. Its linearity ensures the absence of moral-conflict resolution scenes involving sexuality, which present unacceptable dilemmas for the unseen audiences. In cases where moral conflicts exist—for instance, theft—the narrator simply summarizes the scene. The reason for the linearity as well as the deletion, as it were, of conflict resolution scenes is attributed to Islam. As Ousseina Alidou further points out, "The impact of Islam on oral literary production in Hausa culture has been multi-fold. First, the inception of Islam in Hausa culture infused the themes, style, and language of Hausa oral literature with an Islamic ethos and aesthetics. Its mode of characterization also took a turn towards a more Islamic conception of personal conduct that defines a person as 'good' or 'evil.' Furthermore, many modern Hausa epics and folktales contain metaphorical allusions to spaces relevant to Islamic history and experiences."³

Space, Gender, and Morality

Female space is not only the site of much Hausa moral narrative but also one of its visual objects. The Hausa household, or *gida*, is the fundamental unit of residence, production, distribution, transmission, and reproduction. The *gida* is essentially an extended family farming unit and, at its mature stage, can contain multiple households of more than one generation including the family head, his married sons, and their children.⁴

Central to this structure is the *tsakar gida*, an atrium which in other housing types would serve as a largish living room. The *zauré* (a passageway) leads to a corridor that ends in the atrium. And as Labelle Prussin observes, "the door openings become visual foci, and all interaction becomes concentrated around these points in space. The doorways are staggered, preventing any direct view into the entrance way."⁵ This barrier serves to protect the *tsakar gida* from nonaccredited viewing. The atrium itself is a private space, an Intimosphäre, but accessible to accredited members of the household or those they allow; essentially female guests. Male guests are received only in the *zauré* chamber.

The latter have no access to the conjugal family space; the atrium is used to receive such guests.

Even though the atrium is a less private space than the conjugal area of the inner chambers of bedrooms, it is still a very restricted zone in a typical Hausa Muslim household. Nonmembers of the household need special permission to enter such an atrium. Even neighbors who need to fix the roof of their own houses—and who in the process might have a direct line of sight into the family atrium of a neighboring household—are required by cultural convention to announce their intentions as well as when they will be in this intrusive position. This notice enables members of surrounding households to vacate their own atriums—retreating into the conjugal space. This way the sanctity of the female space—for all these precautions serve to uphold such a value—is maintained.

The Adaptability of Folktales

The imaginative structure of the tatsuniya easily lends itself to transformation into visual narrative media, although the representation of gendered space in either television dramas or video films can raise problems. Since traditional Hausa tatsuniya tellers build their often complex plot elements using metaphoric animal characterizations, it is not difficult—on moral and literary, if not technical, grounds—to imagine them using animation for their stories. Indeed, the animations used in Hollywood cinematic offerings such as *Madagascar*, *Racing Stripes*, *Shark Tale*, *Shrek*, *Antz*, *Finding Nemo*—all aimed at metaphorically exploring the human psyche superimposed on the animal kingdom—could be seen as perfect renditions of the Hausa tatsuniya. A good example of this multi-form structure is the Hausa folktale “The Gazelle Has Married a Human,” in which a gazelle transforms into a beautiful maiden and entices a young man to marry her and live with her parents. When she is sent to the garden to fetch a vegetable for soup, she transforms into a gazelle again. She calls all her fellow animals and they dance with abandon with song-and-dance routines—a bit like scenes from the Disney film *The Lion King*.

Because, among other reasons, the most obvious Hollywood analogy to tatsuniya cannot be reproduced within the means available to Hausa filmmakers, their productions have always been based on live human actors. However, the animal themes are reflected in one of the genres of Nigerian television, the “situation comedies” created for Kano’s CTV 67 in the 1980s, which revolve around scams and tricksters. These include *Sabon Dan Magori* (New Dan Magori), *Kuliya* (Incorruptible Judge), and *Hankaka* (Crow).⁶ *Sabon Dan Magori* features a protagonist who might be considered a lovable rogue. *Kuliya* centers around a roguish family. *Hankaka* features a larger-than-life hero who regularly defeats rogues. As Louise Bourgault has pointed out,

Aesthetically, these “situation comedies” are very satisfying. Shot in rural areas they have authenticity as well as visual charm. Spoken in Hausa, they possess a verbal richness typical of the traditional tales told in West Africa. For example, many of the characters of the Hausa dramas bear metaphorical names, epithets which give an insight into their personalities. The name *Hankaka* literally means “crow”; and the name *Buguzum* suggests a strong person who beats or thrashes others. . . . Equally important to their success is resemblance of these “situation comedies” to the trickster and moral tales common throughout much of Africa. From observing the producers and actors develop these programs, and from watching audiences react to them, it becomes imminently [*sic*] clear that these “situation comedies” derive from the indigenous folktale tradition. And like oral tales, they serve to instruct, explain, advocate and reinforce Hausa values, as well as to entertain.⁷

The popularity of Hindi Bollywood films in northern Nigeria and their subsequent influence in creating a local video film style very different from southern Nigeria’s Nollywood may also be attributed in some part to their affinity with Hausa folktales. A study of the thematic classifications of the tatsuniya by Sa’idu Ahmad reveals plot elements that, interestingly, resonate with Hindi film plots and have created creative convergence points for Hausa video filmmakers to use the tatsuniya plot elements, if not the direct stories, couched in a Hindi film masala frame.⁸ These themes, according to Ahmad, include unfair treatment of members of the family which sees various family conflicts focusing on favoritism (as for example in the “Kogin Bagaja” folktale), unfair or wicked treatment of children (“Labarin Janna da Jannalo”), and disobedience to parents (“The Girl Who Refuses to Marry Any Suitor with a Scar”). This list is supplemented by the second theme of the tales, which include reprehensible behavior of the ruling class or those in positions of authority. Subthemes include forced marriage (“Labarin Tasalla da Zangina”), arrogance by members of the ruling elite (“The Daughter of a Snake and a Prince”), and oppression (“A Leper and a Wicked Waziri and a Malam”). Other themes deal with deceptiveness, personal virtues, and virtuous behavior. For further embellishment, some of tales in the tatsuniya repertoire contain elements of performance arts; the story lines merge into a series of songs—often with a refrain—to further add drama to the story. In contrast to Bollywood, however, the songs in Hausa folktales are controlled by the gender spaces that characterize the stories. It is either boys or girls dancing, rarely a mixture of the two.

TV Dramas

The forerunners of contemporary Hausa video films were family dramas produced for local television, beginning in the 1960s. Like earlier American radio

soap operas, these programs were sponsored by companies manufacturing essentially household products—detergents, food seasoning, bedding materials, various lotions. These companies included Paterson Zochonis, Lever Brothers, and Greiner Bio-One. Aimed exclusively at females, these drama series, in promoting the goods and services of their sponsors, merely reinforced the traditional configuration of the Hausa spatial structure—with jingles and advertisements always showing women washing clothes and dishes, cooking food and serving it to their husbands, who appreciatively salute the wife's excellent cooking—which was made possible, of course, through ingredients manufactured by the sponsors of the program.

The most popular of these productions depicted current urban lifestyles in often bucolic or simplified fashion. They drew directly on plot structures of a different set of Hausa folktales, then the later situation comedies, and adopted the methodologies of their story lines. In translating Hausa oral culture to visual media, the drama series producers faced a potential problem of protecting the sacredness of the Muslim female conjugal Intimissphäre, a space only imagined by the audience of oral tales but now made publicly visible.

The problem was resolved in this early film era by not only emphasizing delineated spaces for the genders but also imposing this distinction on viewers, who subsequently came to approve it. The filming technique dictated that domestic scenes were mainly shot outdoors—in the tsakar gida, or at the frontage of the house immediately outside the zaure—with little emphasis on bedroom shots. Hausa TV drama series never moved farther indoors than the atrium, a semipublic space in which household members were allowed to entertain male guests, albeit only accredited ones. The real challenge to such decorum came only with the transition from television drama to video films inspired by Hindi and American cinematic styles.

The Hausa Video Film Industry

When, in the 1990s, the video film emerged as the most powerful—and eventually the most influential—mode of social interpretation, the morality of the messages conveyed became problematic. Early Hausa videos mostly explored family tensions in a melodramatic fashion. This was because right from the start their target audience was female—building on the domestic dramas of the earlier TV series. But in this new medium the exploration of family affairs brought to the fore the tense relationship between the private and public spaces in Hausa cultural life. In dealing with themes derived from foreign models rather than local folktales, the films dwelled on elements of domestic conflict and ways of resolving them. This required the depiction of what had previously been perceived as “unpalatable” scenes. Thus the private—the conjugal family configuration—was made public.

Hausa video film production started in Kano in 1990 with *Turmin danya* (Hog plum), the story of a boy in love with a girl whose parents do not approve of the match. This is a classic film motif reflecting the social realities of a conservative milieu in northern Nigeria, where parents believe, on the basis of one particular interpretation of sharia, that they have the right to choose the life partner of their daughters (rarely of their sons). The success of this first video film was due more to its portrayal of daily realities of many women in forced marriages than to its cinematic techniques. It opened, however, the floodgates for imitations.

By 2000 a video film industry had been formed with three main story line characteristics—love triangles (where two boys court the same girl, or two wives fight over the husband they share), *auren dola* (where a girl or boy is forced to marry someone not of their choice), and song and dance (over 98 percent of Hausa video films are expected to contain at least two to or three song-and-dance routines). All these elements were directly copied from Hindi cinema—to which the Hausa had been exposed through television stations in the cosmopolitan cities of Kano, Kaduna, and Jos—and from theater releases of Hindi commercial cinema directly imported by Lebanese resident merchants in northern Nigeria.

By the mid-1990s the Hindi cinema had departed from its cultural roots, adopted a more globalized blend of Hindu representations, and come under the influence of American movies. When Hausa filmmakers started full production, in 2000, they tilted in the same direction as Hindi filmmakers, targeting the non-cerebral part of the market, with a strong dose of surrealism spiced up with lots of mixed-gender song and dance, often presented in structured choreography. Fig. 4.1 presents the number of Hausa video films in which song-and-dance routines are declared as the main element in the official directory from 1997 to 2001.⁹

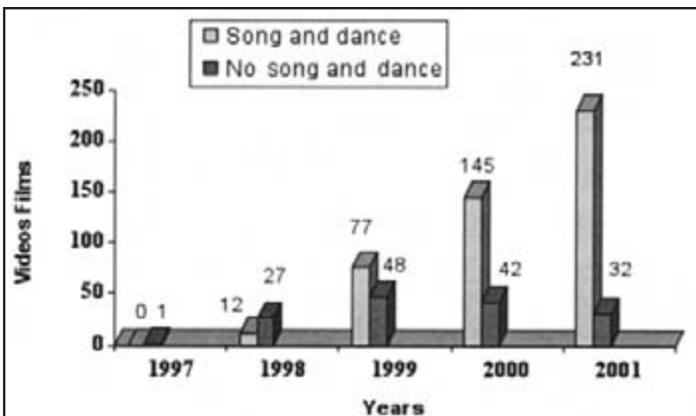


FIGURE 4.1. Song-and-dance routines in Hausa video films.

The more specific defiance by Hausa video filmmakers of cultural restrictions on the female Intimissphäre came in two waves. The first wave occurred in the mid-1990s, with the depiction of spaces that should be reserved strictly for the conjugal family. Examples of these transgressions were the videos *Soyayya kunar zuci* (The pains of love, 1995) and *Alhaki kwikwiyo* (Retribution is like a puppy, 1998), which show a lot of bedroom scenes—a practice religiously avoided in Hausa TV dramas.

A second group of films, released just after newly imposed sharia codes sought to impose stronger moral restrictions than were already in place, rely mainly on erotica by emphasizing the female body, especially in dance sequences. More generally, Hausa video filmmakers focused on the female Intimissphäre as a tapestry for painting what they perceived to be the sexuality of the urban, transnational, globalized Hausa woman. *Sauran kiris* (Just about . . . , 2000) was the first Hausa video film to show an on-screen kiss in a bedroom. *Jalli* (Trading capital, 2002) uses many bedroom scenes, with a husband and wife taking their clothes off and lying down on the bed as the scene fades to black. In *Daren farko* (The nuptial night, 2002) a bride complains to the husband about lack of sexual attention. In *Kumbo* (Rocket, 2003) the male and female principal characters are shown putting their clothes back on after clearly having “slept” with each other. *Gidauniya* (The vat, 2004) is as explicit as could be allowed; it shows an attempted rape.

In exploring the female private sphere, the sexual focus of these Hausa video films merely replicates the early Hindi film exploration of human sexuality. Examples include the romantic scene between Rani Mukherjee and Abhishek Bachchan in *Yuva* (2004), Priyanka Chopra kissing Akshay Kumar in *Andaaz* (2003), and Karishma Kapoor kissing Aamir Khan in *Raja Hindustani* (1996). As further observed by Saibal Chatterjee, with these tendencies in Hindi cinema, “the expression of sexual desire has come out of the Bollywood closet. Over the past year, Hindi films have dealt with lesbian lovers, gay men, over-sexed priests, cuckolded husbands, spouse-swappers, nymphomaniacs and other perceived deviants. And all this has happened in the comfort zone of the usually status quoist mainstream cinema.”¹⁰

The Moral Debate

In 2001, during the same year when the core Muslim states in northern Nigeria reintroduced sharia as a legal code, the Kano state government established a censorship board aimed essentially at reducing what it sees as indecency in Hausa films, literature, and songs produced for local sale. However, the first attacks against the new sexual permissiveness of Hausa video films came from what may be called in Habermasian terms the public sphere of civil society,

as opposed to government or even clerical authorities. One medium for such discourse was the world of northern Nigerian popular-culture magazines. One reader's letter to the journal *Film* read,

We the fans of Hausa video films have come to realize that it is the producers and the directors that are responsible for the corruption of culture and religion in these films. You know very well that every section of a woman is private. For instance, they are fond of allowing actresses without head covering, and straightening their hair; also making them wear skimpy Western dresses which reveal their body shapes, etc. In our awareness and education, we know these behaviors are immensely contrary to Islam. Don't such actresses ever think of the Day of Judgment? Don't forget their claims that they [are] educating or delivering [a] vital social message. Is this how you educate—by corrupting Islamic injunctions? Please look into this and take remediate measures immediately.¹¹

The filmmakers defended their art by pointing out that they were merely reflecting society. Mansura Isah, a Yoruba girl living in Kano and the most visible of the erotic dancers, suggested that such dances reflect changing times:

It's modernization. [The viewers] may not approve, but they still like it, you understand? It's modernity. We are only reflecting what is happening in the real world. You will see young girls and boys in real life going to a party and getting down; well we are only showing how they do it. And I can tell you the audience like the way we get down in the films. If not, they would not have bought them. If a film is to show all the girls in hijab (Islamic dressing) and no getting down, I swear the film will flop. . . . But if you make a trailer of a film showing nubile girls dancing and getting down, the audience will whoop with approval; yet those who abuse us are those who will go the market and buy the films.¹²

Thus the Hausa filmmakers have noted that films that are traditional to Hausa societies simply do not sell as well as those with heavy doses of Westernization, no matter how that is defined (but most especially in song and dance, which is an opportunity to show off cleavages in both spheres of the female body) (see fig. 4.2).

Film and Hausa Civil Society

The responses of Hausa filmmakers to the moral critique of their work most immediately evokes the classic Marxist concept of civil society as a reflection of capitalist market economies. Hausa video films transform the conjugal spaces of the family and the female bodies that they display into virtual commodities,

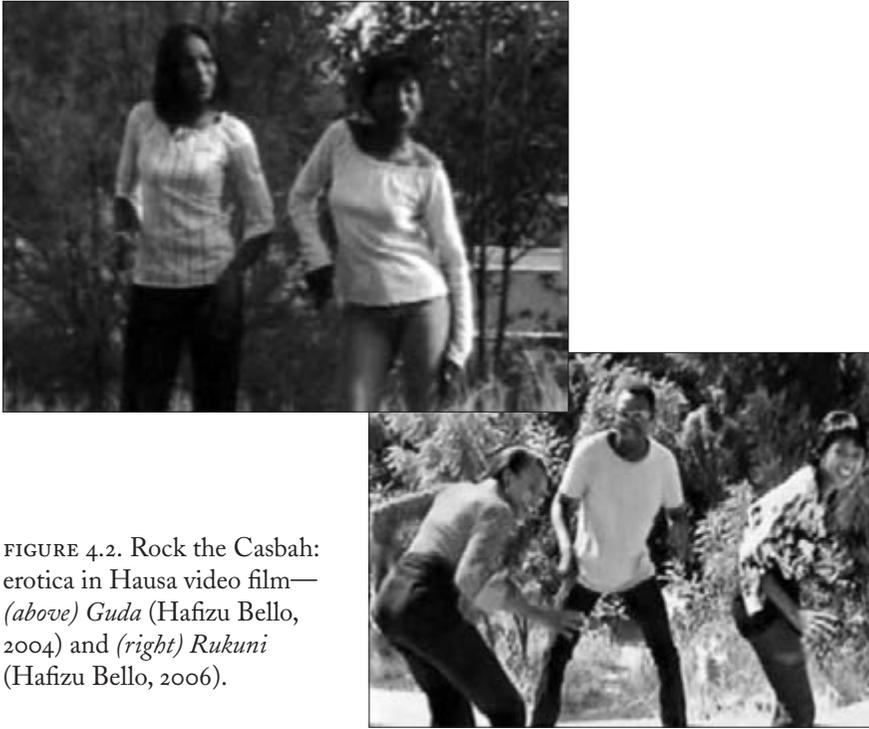


FIGURE 4.2. Rock the Casbah: erotica in Hausa video film—*(above)* *Guda* (Hafizu Bello, 2004) and *(right)* *Rukuni* (Hafizu Bello, 2006).

driven by a need to compete with other forms of visual entertainment already available to their consumers.

The critical reaction to these films, whether through the northern Nigerian popular press or the actions of government, censorship board, and their supporting mechanism of police and the magistrate courts, are driven by values seen as antedating modern capitalism. Thus the running battle between youthful sexuality and the implementation of sharia may be viewed as another front in the moral confrontation between Islam and personal freedom, particularly that of women. At the same time, Islamic protection of the “private,” for scholars like Salma Nageeb, becomes a voluntary option that allows women to “use the spaces [both the workplace and the private space of the home] to enhance their gender-specific power.”¹³

While Nageeb’s study is rooted in actual life strategies of Sudanic women within Islam-defined space, my study focuses on struggles over the filmic representation of such spaces; thus the consequences for the gendered boundaries between private and public spheres or even their analytic definition can only be inferred. Moreover, the debate over the application of Habermas’s conception of a fully secularized public sphere and its relevance to Islamic, as opposed

to European, modernization, is far too complex to be incorporated into the present argument.¹⁴

What can be concluded is that the transgressions of local norms of privacy by Hausa video filmmakers have both created and revealed tensions between media globalization and Hausa Muslim culture. These tensions have resonances with larger issues in the wider Islamic world as well as interregional relations within Nigeria. In one sense the debate over video films only reflects these more general issues; but at the same time the question that lies at their core, the delimitation of the private domain from what is regarded as public, is also at the center of what it means to be a Muslim in the modern world.

Notes

1. Anthony H. M. Kirk-Greene, *Mutumun Kirki: The Concept of the Good Man in Hausa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974); Habib Alhassan et al., *Zaman hausawa* (Zaria: privately published, 1982).

2. Ousseina Alidou, "Gender, Narrative Space, and Modern Hausa Literature," *Research in African Literatures* 33, no. 2 (2002): 139.

3. Ousseina Alidou, "A 'Cinderella' Tale in the Hausa Muslim Women's Imagination," *Comparative Literature* 54, no. 3 (2002): 244. This argument is based on Neil Skinner, *An Anthology of Hausa Literature in Translation* (Zaria: Northern Nigeria Publishing, 1980); Priscilla Starratt, "Islamic Influences on Oral Traditions in Hausa Literature," in *The Marabout and the Muse: New Approaches to Islam in African Literature*, ed. Kenneth Harrow (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), 159–75.

4. Eric J. Arnould, "Marketing and Social Reproduction in Zinder, Niger Republic," in *Households: Comparative and Historical Studies of the Domestic Group*, ed. Robert McC. Netting, Richard R. Wilk, and Arnould (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 130–62.

5. Labelle Prussin, *Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 212.

6. The reader should be aware that the glosses for the Hausa film names that I provide here mean less than they suggest, because the convention in this respect differs markedly from the Euro-American one. Hausa film titles are not always connected to the content of the story. The director, writer, or producer finds a name that is simply catchy, unusual, and easy to remember, without regard for its thematic appropriateness. In one case, the director even told me that he did not know the exact meaning of the title of his film.

7. Louise M. Bourgault, "Television Drama in Hausaland: The Search for a New Aesthetic and a New Ethic," *Critical Arts* 10, no. 1 (1996): 2.

8. Sa'idu B. Ahmad, *Narrator as Interpreter: Stability and Variation in Hausa Tales* (Abuja: Spectrum, 2000). Masala is a filmic style combining different genres.

9. Based on analysis of 615 Hausa video films, as listed in Nigeria, National Film and Video Censors Board, *Film and Video Directory in Nigeria*, vol. 1 (Abuja: NFVCB, 2002).

10. Saibal Chatterjee, "Skin Show: The Veil's Slipping," *Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), March 18, 2005, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Homepage/Homepage.aspx>.
11. Aisha D. Muhammad, *Fim*, March 2004, letter page.
12. Mansura Isah interviewed by Aminu Sheriff, *Mudubi* 11 (July–August 2005): 7.
13. Salma Ahmed Nageeb, *New Spaces and Old Frontiers: Women, Social Space, and Islamization in Sudan* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2004), 6.
14. Jon W. Anderson, "New Media, New Publics: Reconfiguring the Public Sphere of Islam—Part IV: Media and Information," *Social Research* 70, no. 3 (2003): 887–906; Nazih N. Ayubi, "Rethinking the Public/Private Dichotomy: Radical Islamism and Civil Society in the Middle East," *Contention* 4, no. 3 (1995): 79–105; Craig Calhoun, introduction to *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 1–50.