Hausa Literature Debates Series 4

Emotions in Motion:
Sleaze, Salacity, Moral Codes and Hausa Literature

Professor Abdalla Uba Adamu
Department of Education
Bayero University, Kano

New Nigerian Weekly, Saturday November 6, 1999

What a befitting coda! Just as you thought the *Great Soyayya Debate* has died down, especially with the departure of Ibrahim Sheme, it is rekindled again by Muhammad {antala Aliyu in *The Write Stuff* of 25 September 1999. In the article I was accused of being the *enemy within* ('da [an gari akan ci gari') who holds the door open for the enemies of public morality, i.e. specifically contemporary Hausa writers, to lay to waste our pristine moral landscape. My crime — delightfully accepted — was an unbridled support for Hausa literary expression in whatever form in a crusade to further the cause of Hausa literature and cultural studies; a crusade which, not tainted by the impurity of being a specialist in the area, gives a me a vantage moral edge and cause to fight more convincingly.

Being an empiricist, let me state my analytical framework. I can easily measure the impact of alcohol consumption on the cellular structure of an individual and attribute the outcome to the alcohol consumed. However, I am yet to see an instrument that measures such absolute correlation between literature and behavior. So I look forward to the day the moral guardians will perfect a system of linking, say, reading *Jiki Magayi* with a bloodthirsty quest for vengeance as a behavioral trait; or proving that just because you wear a 2Pac Shakur T-shirt, then you are both morally corrupt and must have read El-Bashir Abubakar's *}afar Ungulu*.

So the debate shifts from what literature *is*, to what literature *does* (or *should* do). This time the main focus is not on whether the new Hausa prose fiction — from what I call the Millennium Generation —is real (*orijina*) literature or *gwanjo* (trash). It is on moral precepts. Like a Morse code, the moral meter keeps popping its head once in a while in debates about the moral values of the Millennium Generation Hausa writers, and yet no one seems to want to address it fully. Let us do it now, shall we?

Art, Literature and Morality

The moralist view of art generally holds that the primary or exclusive function of art is as a handmaiden to morality--which means, usually, whatever system of morality is adhered to by the moralist in question. Art that does not promote moral influence of the desired kind is viewed by the moralist with suspicion and sometimes with grudging tolerance of its existence. For art, including literature, implants in people unorthodox ideas; it breaks the molds of provincialism in which people have been brought up; it disturbs and disquiets, since it tends to emphasize individuality rather than conformity; and works of art are often created out of rebellion or disenchantment with the established

order. Ado Ahmad Gidan Dabino's *In Da So Da Kauna* (1990), was written out of such disenchantment; and because thousands shared his pain, it went on to become one of the most successful Hausa novels of recent times. Sixty years from now it would probably remembered as a classic — not for its beauty, but for its revolutionary fervor, condemned during its time, but glorified in retrospect.

When art does not affect people morally one way or the other (for example, much of didactic literature), it is considered a harmless pleasure that can be tolerated if it does not take up too much of the reader's time; but, when it promotes questioning and defies established attitudes, it is viewed by the moralist as insidious and subversive. It is viewed with approval only if it promotes or reinforces the moral beliefs and attitudes adhered to by the moralist.

Plato is probably the first champion in the Western world of the moralistic view of art — at least in *The Republic* and *Laws.* Plato admired the poets; but, when he was founding (on paper) his ideal state, he was convinced that much art, even some passages in Homer, tended to have an evil influence upon the young and impressionable, and accordingly he decided that they must be banned. Passages that spoke ill or questioningly of their deities, passages containing excessive sexual passion (and all works that would today be described as pornographic), and even passages of music that were disturbing to the soul or the senses (he certainly would not have listened to Tina Turner or Notorious B.I.G.!!) were all condemned to the same fate. Much of what is said in the *Republic* and elsewhere reflects the belief that the vital opinions of the community could be shaped by law and that men could be penalized for saying things that offended public sensibilities, undermined common morality, or subverted the institutions of the community. And this barrage was some four hundred years *before* the birth of Isa (AS).

Plato's concern here was with the purity of soul of the men who would become members of the council of rulers of the state; he was not concerned with censorship for the masses, but, since one could not predict which young people would pass the series of examinations required for membership in the council of rulers and since it was (and is) practically impossible to restrict access to works of art to a certain group, the censorship, he decided, would have to be universal.

It would be admitted, first of all, that works of literature can teach valuable moral lessons through explicit presentation: the genre that has this as its aim is didactic literature, as exemplified by *Pilgrim's Progress* by the English Puritan John Bunyan and *Back to Methuselah* by the Irish dramatist George Bernard Shaw. But most works of literature do not exist to teach a moral lesson: possibly, Shakespeare did not write *Othello* merely to attack racial prejudice or *Macbeth* to prove that crime does not pay. Literature does teach but in a far more important way than by explicit preachment: it teaches, as John Dewey said, *by being*, not by express intent.

Literature achieves this moral effect by presenting characters and situations (usually situations of difficult moral decision) through which the reader can deepen his own moral perspectives by reflecting on other people's problems and conflicts, which usually have a complexity that his own daily situations do

not possess. *He can learn from them without himself having to undergo in his personal life the same moral conflicts or make the same moral decisions*. The reader can view such situations with a detachment that he can seldom achieve in daily life when he is immersed in the stream of action. By viewing these situations objectively and reflecting on them, he is enabled to make his own moral decisions more wisely when life calls on him in turn to make them. *Literature can be a stimulus to moral reflection* unequalled perhaps by any other, for it *presents the moral choice in its total context* with nothing of relevance omitted.

Perhaps the chief moral potency of literature lies in its unique power to stimulate and develop the faculty of the imagination. Through literature the reader is carried beyond the confines of the narrow world that most persons inhabit into a world of thought and feeling more profound and more varied than his own, a world in which he can share the experiences of human beings (real or fictitious) who are far removed from him in space and time and in attitude and way of life. Literature enables him to enter directly into the affective processes of other human beings, and, having done this, no perceptive reader can any longer condemn or dismiss en masse a large segment of humanity due to their perceived imperfections ;for a successful work of literature brings them to life as individuals, animated by the same passions as he is, facing the same conflicts, and tried in the same crucible of bitter experience.

Through such an exercise of the sympathetic imagination, literature tends to draw all men together instead of setting them apart from one another in groups or types with convenient labels for each. Far more than preaching or moralizing, more even than the descriptive and scientific discourses of psychology or sociology, literature tends to unite mankind and reveal the common human nature that exists in everyone behind the facade of divisive doctrines, political ideologies, and social mores.

This is not to say, of course, that those who read great works of literature are necessarily tolerant or sympathetic human beings. Reading literature alone is not a cure for human ills, and people who are neurotically grasping or selfish in their private lives will hardly cease to be so as a result of reading works of literature. Still, wide and serious reading of literature has an observable effect: people who do this kind of reading, no matter what their other characteristics may be, do tend to be more understanding of other people's conflicts, to have more sympathy with their problems, and to be able to emphasize more with them as human beings than do people who have never broadened their horizons by reading literature at all.

Thus in every literate society, the novelist frequently has to encounter those dragons unleashed by public morality or by the law. The struggles of Flaubert, Zola, and Joyce, denounced for attempting to advance the frontiers of literary candor, are well known and still vicariously painful, but lesser novelists, working in a more permissive age, can record cognate agonies. Generally speaking, any Western novelist writing after the publication in the 1960s of Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* or Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckenridge* can expect little objection, on the part of either publisher or public, to language or subject matter totally unacceptable, under the obscenity laws then operating, in 1922, when *Ulysses* was first published. This is certainly true of America, if not

of Ireland or Malta. But many serious novelists fear an eventual reaction against literary permissiveness as a result of the exploitation by cynical obscenity mongers or hard-core pornographers of the existing liberal situation.

Hausa Literature and Public Morality

The moral stand with regards to contemporary Hausa literature is fairly simple. According to the argument, as advanced by the Muhammad Dantala Aliyu's attack in *The Write Stuff* of 25 September 1999, the current moral corruption (whatever that is) of Muslim Hausa youth is caused by reading books written by the Millennium Generation Hausa prose fiction writers. The moral strand most often isolated for this is youth and sexuality. Hugs, kisses, heavy petting, and in some cases, downright (suggestive) penetrative sexual act were all claimed to be the main forte of these books, and since a significant portion of Hausa youth read them, they therefore acquire all unpleasant moral perversion from reading these books. The moral judgement is that such behaviors should not be reflected in literature aimed at youth. It seems Plato is still alive and kicking!

Agreed. But have we paused to ask of the *source* of such inspiration? Where do the new Hausa writers — not many of whom actually write about such things, anyway — obtain their source? It is often forgotten that it is the society that creates literature; not the other way round. There is no single scene, behavior, or act described in, say, Ado Ahmad Gidan Dabino's *Kaicho!* or Yusuf Adamu's *Idan So Cuta Ne* that is not a common mode of behavior in any society. Talking about them does not necessarily provide a template for readers to emulate; it merely draws attention to them and their unpleasant consequences. If every pervasive act detailed by a writer is a licence for behavioral photocopying, then by now all individuals aged 25 and above in any large urban cluster would have been excellent thieves and murders because of the huge amount of *James Hadley Chase* they read during their secondary school days. Similarly, such group would have been sexual perverts as a result of all the *Nick Carter* pulp fiction, full of sexual exploits, they have read. The fact that, ironically, it is this age set shouting the moral Morse code to protect the minds of readers reflects a series of lessons. First is *responsible reading*. Because some members of the society are perverts, the moral guardians tend to think that everyone is also likely to be a pervert. This ignores the factor of personal responsibility on the part of the reader to distinguish fiction from reality, and reflect on the implications, to reality, of fictional accounts.

Secondly, *responsible parenting*. Faced with the struggle for daily subsistence, many parents are happy to throw away the moral responsibility for their children's upbringing, and consequently expect the society — full of real-life weirdoes and freaks — to act as the moral guardians for their children. Massive reading of Chase and Nick Carter in the 1970s and 1980s did not produce a 1990s society of thieves, gangsters, murderers and sex freaks. This was because of responsible parenting of 1950s and 1960s: a code many parents have now abandoned.

Further, often perverted behaviors emanate from the same guardians of public morality in the society — thus sending wrong signals to youth. Else how do you justify a 52-year man — "decent" and perfectly "respective" with children and grandchildren of his own — raping a 12-year girl, as happened recently in

one of the cities? From which book did he acquire such sickness? What of the numerous commercial sex-workers, many of whom were little girls, given safe havens by irresponsible adults to operate brothels in many large as well as peri-urban clusters? From where did they read about their trade? And have you read how someone in Kano in summer raped an eight-year old girl and broke her neck? Did the devil made him do it (as he claimed) or did he read Bilkisu S. Ahmed Funtuwa's novels?

Thus that is where we face the main problem: proving that by reading a description of a behavior, the reader acquires the behavior. If we follow this argument, then we do not need any contemporary Hausa prose fiction to corrupt the minds of the Hausa youth. Their minds are being corrupted everyday by newspapers and radio newsreels in which stories about horrid crimes are routinely reported. Dantala, a student of Mass Communications, is thus guilty of perpetuating the moral corruption of Hausa youth by mere reportage of salacious, sleazy and immoral events. Copycat mass murders as recently happened in the United States, for instance, were more on media coverage of similar horrors, rather than reading any trashy paperback.

Other aspects of morality such as corruption (where a leader stashes away billions of public naira in foreign accounts), murder (hired assassinations are the in-thing now), rapings, betrayal of trust, child abuse, child hawking and begging, not being the main concern of the new Hausa writers, were not seen as menace to public morality. When we read about them in the papers, we just shake our heads and thank God that such things are happening to other people, not us. I thus look forward to the day when newspapers will report the daily activities of a secondary school, present a special ten-page pull-out on how to landscape your garden, write special features on edibility of mushrooms, print a five-page supplement on traditional poetry, etc instead of reporting perverted crimes, grisly murders, large-scale looting of public treasury — which can serve as templates for youth and those in position to emulate.

Thus the correlation between cause and effect is what makes statements about any aspect of knowledge credible. So far of all the moral critics, no has one proved that the salacity, perversion and downright oddness that occurs in mainstream society is more repulsive that what is written in the new Hausa novels. Further, it is not clear what aspect of morality the moral critics were worried about. This lack of clarification clearly reveals confusion on what constitutes morality in human psycho-social development. Morality embraces a person's beliefs about the appropriateness or goodness of what he does, thinks, or feels. So what aspect can we, with all fairness, accuse Hausa novelists, of corrupting?

Throwing Stones in the Vicinity of Glasshouses

As I argued earlier, the moral criticisms against the new Hausa novels center around male-female interactions which were forcefully brought out into the open. This is scandalous to a society conditioned to masking its emotions. Thus scenes of gamboling, frolicking and swimming in bikinis and trunks (e.g. in Bala Anas Babinlata's *Kulu*) were all labeled *kafirci* and influences of Euro-American cultural perversion — this from the same critics able to condone military dictators stashing away billions of the country's currencies in foreign banks.

Sometimes it befuddles the mind to wonder about the source of criticisms and the inherent reversed racism in them. In 1933 *Jiki Magayi* was not only hailed as a classic, but was also awarded a prize by the colonial administration. Yet it deals with the same themes considered repulsive in contemporary Hausa fiction. A boy loves a girl, but she is swept away by someone richer. When Ado Ahmed Gidan Dabino explored the *same* theme in his *Idan Da So Da Kauna* (1990) it becomes a moral punch bag for the critics. Was it because it was not endorsed by a Svengali white editor?

Perhaps the most controversial Hausa classic is *Dare Dubu Da Daya*, published in five volumes. This, as we are all tired of hearing by now, was a translation of Arabic *Alf Laylah Wa Laylah*, a collection of Oriental stories of uncertain date and authorship whose tales of Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sindbad the Sailor have almost become part of Western folklore, and translated into English by Sir Richard Burton as *The Thousand Nights and a Night,* 16 vol. (10 vol., 1885; 6 supplementary vol., 1886-88). The raw sexuality of some of the stories, especially in the Hausa vol. 5, was glossed over by critics of the new Hausa novels. Containing gory salacious details of penetrative sexual promiscuity, it nevertheless became accepted as an adult text in a prudish Hausa society of the 1930s when it was translated by Mamman Kano and Frank Edgar. In the 1980s it was even being read over the radio! They stopped reading it as a result of pressure *from youth* who felt embarrassed to be listening to such raw sexuality in the company of their parents from what is a family program. And yet to date, there is no single *soyayya* book that described the lurid details of sexuality as in some of stories of *Dare Dubu Da Daya*.

Further, other accepted novels (they were even awarded literary prizes) such as *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.

For instance, *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 observers 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).

The Children, Themselves

Finally, so much spleen has been vented on the alleged corrosive influence of the new Hausa novels on youth. Yet to date, no one has bothered to *empirically* measure the extent of this influence. To do this effectively, you need to first determine what you consider moral outcomes as variables. Then determine how to measure them, before attempting to link their acquisition to reading specific texts. I welcome any development of such analytical tool

which may lay down to rest, once for all, the issue of pervasive influence of literature on moral behavior of (presumably) impressionistic youth.

But while we are waiting for its development from the moral guardians, we decided to simply ask about 1,100 secondary school students in Kano (the most "pervasive" source of "Kano Market Literature") average age of 18 to tell us whether they read Hausa novels (note, we did not say *recent* Hausa novels) and their reasons. While the data is still being analyzed (and will be published at a later stage), a sampling of the reasons for reading/not reading the novels reveal an extremely interesting trend, as reflected in the Table below.

Adolescent Hausa Prose Fiction Reading Habits: Kano Sample

S/N	Reading	Not Reading
1.	Teach various lessons	Too vulgar
2.	Teach patience	Not required reading in school
3.	Encourage reading habit	No time
4.	Teach good modes of behavior	Not interested
5.	Teach good manners	Useless
6.	Teach proper lifestyles	Aimless
7.	Teach how to converse well	Corrupt culture
8.	Teach how to seek for salvation	Corrupt lifestyle
9.	Teach how live in the community	Encourage bad habits
10.	Teach supplications and prayers	Too playful
11.	Teach how read in Hausa	Stops students from reading school texts
12.	Teach Hausa proverbs	Impediment to learning English
13.	Teach how to become a good writer	Makes youth ignore their parents
14.	Makes you more intelligent	Makes youth impertinent
15.	Learn about different things	Prevents youth from household chores
16.	They depict the events of real life	Prevents youth from praying

Source: A. U. Adamu (1999), *Critical Reaction: Youth and Hausa Prose Fiction in Northern Nigeria*, a work-in-progress survey of 1,100 adolescent youth reading habits.

These responses are sampled based on frequency of appearance in the questionnaires from the Kano sample. And although sixteen from each category are listed above, the responses in the actual questionnaires were not even. About 46 reasons were given for reading Hausa novels, and 29 for not reading them. Interestingly, more suggestion were given by readers of the novels on how to reform the books than by those who do not read them. And of the well-known authors, only Alhaji Abubakar Imam was listed, while *Magana Jari Ce*, *Ruwan Bagaja*, *Ilya Dan Maikarfi*, and *Shehu Umar* were the only books listed from a previous generation (most of those choosing these books could not tell the author, except for *Magana Jari Ce*). The rest of some 130 novels most frequently read by the Kano sample are all written by the Millennium Generation.

As this is still a research-in-progress, I will not comment on these preliminary trends (moreover, the SPSS processor is still chewing over the tests of hypotheses). But let us reflect on them. Another instrument seeks teacher and parents views of the entire issue; but then we do know those, don't we?

What this points out to, however, is that if we want sanitize Hausa literature, then we must sanitize the Hausa society, for literature is a reflection of society

and is a creation of society. We must acquire the habit of *responsible parenting* that enabled a high school girl in the 1970s to read Denise Robin's *The Flame and the Frost*, yet put it aside and read her *Chemistry: A Functional Approach*, and pray at the appropriate times. We must find ways of controlling the freaks, sex weirdoes and monsters — the real enemies within — that are prevalent in our society hiding under the façade of moral purity. So long as these perverts exist, they will continue providing endless source of inspiration for writers. Delete them from the hard disks of our lives, reformat them, and your Hausa literature becomes sanitized — whatever that may mean.