

## **Protest Arts, Gender, and Social Change: Fiction, Popular Songs, and the Media in Hausa Society across Borders by Ousseina D. Alidou. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2024.**

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The over 250-page book, authored by the esteemed feminist scholar known for her critical works on Muslim women in Africa, Ousseina D. Alidou, a distinguished professor at Rutgers University, is a must-read for both specialists and non-specialists. In *Protest Arts, Gender, and Social Change: Fiction, Popular Songs, and the Media in Hausa Society across Borders*, Alidou has come out with another groundbreaking work on gender, protest and social change and transformation.

After a thorough reading, several issues for critical reflection arise. The first is the question: What is Hausa? The book raises important questions about the meaning of Hausa and what is embedded in *Hausaness*. These two are entangled with several ideas from folklore, cultural heritage, nativity, colonial history and colonial experience.

However, the one thing the author underscores strongly in the book, which is sometimes glossed over by existing scholarship, is the issue of Hausa or Hausaness being equated with religion, Islam in this case. The book makes it clear that Hausaness transcends religion, because Hausa speakers across borders follow three distinct religions: Islam, the majority religion; Christianity; and traditional Hausa religions, called the *Maguzawa*. Scholars of religion would view the Maguzawa as one of the variations of African Indigenous religions (Nrenzah 2024). In this regard, Hausa represents a shared space of all religions with the Hausa language and culture as the basis of Hausaness.

Here the book makes readers aware that being human first, and embedded in the Hausa tradition second, symbolises Hausaness, thus opening a critical area of academic debate and reflections on the question of religion

and Hausaness. This is vital because, as the book demonstrates through the prism of Boko Haram, religion is a tool used by all forms of individuals and groups to achieve certain aims. The tactics of Boko Haram are particularly devastating, but sadly, this is used to condemn all Hausa speakers irrespective of their ethnicity or religious affiliation.

Further, religion – Islam, Christianity and Indigenous religion – appears also to be a tool for confronting the pandemic of gender-based violence by deploying Hausa folklore, fiction and songs. Here, the three religions – Islam, Christianity and Maguzawa, the traditional Hausa Bori religion – tap into the language and culture of Hausa to protest gender-based violence, as one of the pandemics confronting Hausa society. Folklore’s use of Christian gospel music, as well as Hausa Islamic sermonic songs, is aimed at sending particular messages to Hausa speakers irrespective of their religious affiliation.

Thus, Hausaness creates the possibility of unifying Hausa speakers. If Hausaness is also riddled with gender-based violence, as the book demonstrates, then, as elsewhere, the violence against women and girls has precipitated female rebellion as Mernissi (1996) puts it.

Further, the book makes a clear contribution to discourses on what is called “the public sphere” (Eickelman and Salvatore 2002). It specifically addresses the Hausa “public sphere,” which is dominated by several individuals and groups with varied interests. However, as with any form of “public sphere,” contestations and rebellions inevitably occur. On the one hand, contestations occur between the Hisbah group which, with political backing, has proclaimed itself the custodian of “the sharia” (Issaka-Toure and Alidou 2020) and on the other hand, lay Muslims, who use other mediums to reach out to the Hausa population across borders. In doing so, they evade the censorship of the Hisbah sharia boards and authorities, birthing competing publics and public spheres. Through this process, they diversify the public sphere via protests and artistic expression in Hausa societies across borders, with the explicit aim of transforming these societies.

Moreover, the author continues her sustained critique of the Structural Adjustment Programme of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, building on threads from her previous works. This is well demonstrated both in her *Engaging Modernity* (2005) and *Muslim Women in Kenya* (2013).

Both books emphasise the specific ways in which the Structural Adjustment Programme increased poverty in Africa, specifically entangled with the abuse of women and girls in Hausa societies across borders. However, here Alidou, the astute theoretical linguist, employs intersectionality to highlight the challenges society faces, particularly women and girls, who bear the brunt of the Structural Adjustment Programme, which she calls one of the “pandemics”, including entrenched patriarchy, HIV and the coronavirus.

The above notwithstanding, another critical intervention of the book is its focus on women’s agency within specific cultural norms. This highlights the insightful contribution of Mahmood’s works on the ways in which gender norms are not merely reactions aimed at transforming a thing or person, but also reflect the specific capacities of individual women within a given cultural context and its constraints (Mahmood 2005). It ultimately links to the broader notion of feminisms including African feminisms (Decker and Baderoon 2018) and Islamic feminism within the sub-strata of African feminisms (Decker 2015; Edwin 2006; Badran 2011). All such feminisms speak and challenge western feminism which comes with its own cultural, racial and contextual issues that do not necessarily reflect other contexts, religions and individuals. It is here specifically that Alidou’s work makes another critical intervention.

Finally, the book offers a reverse reading of Said’s *Orientalism* (1979), in which Alidou demonstrates how one can describe one’s own societies and culture using one’s own language as a resource. Overall, the book offers, in addition to the above, a vital resource for scholars and activists. Scholars of linguistics, languages, cultural studies, Islamic studies and religious studies, as well as students, will find the book useful.

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