

## 10 Reimagining Gender Spaces in Abbas Sadiq's and Zainab Idris's Video-Film *Albashi*

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In Abdalla Adamu's paper "Private Sphere, Public *Wahala*: Gender and Delineation of *Intimisphere* in Muslim Hausa Video Films," he appropriates Habermas's theory of the public sphere to deal "specifically with the sub-national issue of Muslim laws of female identity in northern Nigeria" (2006b, 6). Summarizing points made by scholars of Islam on the public sphere, Adamu notes that Kian Tajbakhsh describes the "the public sphere [as] above all a space for the 'collective enforcement of public morals' rather than necessarily political" (2006b, 27), while Jon Anderson similarly argues "that for well over a generation, the public sphere of Islam has been an arena of contest in which activists and militants brought forth challenges to traditional interpretive practices and authority to speak for Islam, especially to articulate its social interests and political agendas" (2003, 887). In his own analysis of Hausa society specifically, Adamu implies that the realm of public discourse, made up mostly of men, has been defined as the public sphere, whereas the private sphere is located for the most part within the interior realm of domestic space—the realm of the secluded woman. Moreover, the focus on public theory versus secret practice, when ideally women are the inhabitants of the ambiguous "secret" places, creates a tension in how to interpret the role of women and what constitutes "moral behavior." In recent years, the focus on public morals versus private practice has been a major concern of Hausa artists in investigating exactly what the private/public division means for Hausa modernity. After a background on the emergence of these new forms of literature, I will look at the Hausa film *Albashi* (Salary), directed by Abbas Sadiq and produced by Zainab Idris, as a representative contribution to exploring the anxieties about gender spaces in contemporary Northern Nigeria.

The relationship of Hausa women to the public sphere has a long and complicated history. Beverly Mack points out in her chapter on "Royal Wives in Kano" that it was not until the Fulani jihad of the early nineteenth

century that women became "strictly secluded" (1991, 110). Indeed, the kingdom of Zaria had a long tradition of powerful female rulership, Queen Amina of the late sixteenth century being among the most well known. However, while the reform and official spread of Islam during the Fulani jihad brought about *auren kulle*, literally "locked marriage," in which women of the upper classes stayed, for the most part, within the walls of their compound, the seclusion of women was not considered so much a "locking away" as "a restriction and protection from the outside world" (Mack 1991, 110). In fact, the seclusion of women (which was really only practical for urban women of means) provided the freedom from menial tasks, enabling them to pursue further scholarship. The reformer Usman dan Fodiyo, whose wives and daughters were prolific scholars, pointed some of his strongest criticisms toward men who do not educate their wives and daughters:

O how astonishing! How they leave their wives and daughters and slaves in the darkness of ignorance and shadow, and yet they teach their students morning and evening . . . And this is a great error because the teaching of wives and daughters and slaves is obligatory, and the teaching of students is voluntary . . . O Muslim women, do not listen to the misleading words of those in error, who deceive you by commanding you to obey your husbands without commanding you to obey God and His Apostle . . . And they say that the happiness of a woman is in obedience to her husband. This is nothing but seeking their desire and their wish from you. (quoted in Wali 1980, 14)

Women's contributions to scholarly and creative written literature at this time, like those of their male counterparts, stayed within the structures of Islamic expression, articulating a strong concern for morality and reform. Usman dan Fodiyo's daughter, Nana Asma'u, became known as "*muwar gari*," mother of the city, and was responsible for organizing a system of women's education that paralleled the powerful community of women organized around the *bori* possession cult. Transforming and reinterpreting such an organization into an Islamic context, Asma'u translated women's roles into new religious and social functions (Boyd and Mack 1999, 8–10). By adding her voice to the public dialogue on Islam through her many writings, Asma'u defended the notion that women do not merely receive knowledge from their husbands and fathers but actually contribute their own interpretations. Although, as Jean Boyd relates, Asma'u had a close working relationship with her brother and husband, often collaborating with both of them on scholarly biography, history, and literary translations between Arabic, Hausa, and Fulfulde, she also seemed to be confident in making her own creative decisions about her scholarly and poetic work (1989, 13). Her brother Bello once asked her to "translate and versify" from Arabic to Hausa and Fulfulde his work *Kitab al-nashah* on the role of women in Islam. When she did so, she omitted

eight introductory pages of *hadith* on the "frailty of women" (Boyd and Mack 1999, 41–42). The difference between Asma'u's work on Sufi saints and the earlier works of her father, Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack claim, "is that Asma'u introduced the notion of women saints, calling on these individuals, whom she recognized as extraordinary and fully expected to meet in the Hereafter" (1999, 43). Moreover, "by choosing not to repeat in her poem Bello's admonitions about women's behavior, Asma'u makes clear the positive message she wanted to transmit to her contemporaries about women's potential roles in Islam" (Boyd and Mack 1999, 43).

Nana Asma'u founded a women's religious education movement that is still thriving today, and Balaraba Sule and Priscilla Starratt assert that the leaders of these sisterhoods "are an important indication in future trends in Hausa society because they form a transitional bridge between the private and public spheres of activity. In Muslim Africa, women are increasingly emerging from the private sphere" (Sule and Starratt 2004, 46). This emergence into the public sphere has much to do with the increasing numbers of women who are being educated both in Islamic schools and government schools and universities. The emergence of women from the separate domestic space into the public sphere of public education and careers is a marker of Hausa modernity that has been increasingly reflected in recent Hausa literature and film. Moreover the idea enacted by Asma'u that women could interpret and create their own understanding of Islam, while "leaving out" the attempts by men to "advise" or "authorize" them, is, I argue, key to understanding what current Hausa writers and filmmakers are doing in their works.

Throughout Hausa history, the simple ideological dichotomy of placing women into the realm of domestic space and men into the public realm of politics and culture has, of course, been complicated by the existence of the women scholars like Nana Asma'u, who engage in the public exchange of ideas with male scholars through their writing. However, female religious scholars continued to remain in the minority, and the powerful positions held by Nana Asma'u declined over the following century, a process likely assisted by the incursion of colonialism and Victorian conceptions of the domestic sphere. As Ousseina Alidou notes "In general . . . traditional (Islamic) colonial and postcolonial educational structures combined to disempower women. In this process, Islamic knowledge was continuously deployed to construct an ideology that justified the silencing of women, especially in the public sphere" (Alidou 2002a, 54:144). Connie Stephens explains that:

[r]eligious scholars teach that a virtuous woman always owes obedience to a man, either her father or her husband. Whereas men pray in public, women pray within the confines of their compounds because it is felt that their presence might provoke lustful desires in men for which women would be responsible . . . her husband can divorce her

by pronouncement, but she must go through a complex legal process to divorce him. Economically, her options for generating income traditionally are far less remunerative than those open to men. (Stephens 2004, 222–223)

Where there are few female scholars, Islam is used to reinforce oppressive customs. The new communication technology established during the colonial period furthered these tendencies. In "Ideology, the Mass Media, and Women: A Study from Radio Kaduna, Nigeria," Ayesha Imam notes that the mass media of the 1980s reinforced older patriarchal structures. Her study demonstrates how Hausa radio shows, geared toward an audience of secluded women, attempted to maintain the status quo: "The possibility that women could decide for themselves to pursue learning and develop their minds was . . . trivialized being seen merely as an excuse to leave the compound" (Imam 1991, 249). While the radio programs breached the private walls of the home, bringing the public exchange of ideas into the domestic realm, the male voices reinforced the structures of patriarchy. Male dominated colonial and post-colonial state-run media propagated an ideology that, through the ubiquity of new technologies, infiltrated even the most secluded domestic spaces.

However, if men have long dominated written literature and its discussion of religion, politics, and history, and continued to control later mass media structures, women often subverted this authority through oral stories in the domestic realm. Stephens argues that while women's *tatsuniyyi* (stories) also reflect Islamic images, they focus more on social issues closer to home, suggesting that, "women in traditional family roles are not dependent and inferior, but rather independent of and even superior to their male counterparts. . . . [F]ar from playing dependent wives, many of these heroines consistently challenge and best their husbands" (Stephens 1991, 222–223). And if the newer technologies mentioned by Imam had allowed the permeation of the feminine private sphere with the male-dominated public sphere, then this invasion into the domestic space opened up portals through which women could observe and eventually cross the threshold into the public sphere.

Abdalla Adamu claims that from 1977 to 2003, NTA Kano (Nigerian Television Authority) showed 1,176 Hindi films. Adamu attributes the explosion of literary creativity in the late 1980s and early 1990s to the watching of Indian films: "From the first appearance of Hindi films on Hausa television stations, children and young school-age boys and girls became avid watchers of the films and gradually absorbed templates of behavior from screen heroes they wanted to emulate. By the early 1990s they had become novelists, moving into the home video arena towards the end of the decade" (Adamu 2006a, 137). The Indian films provided urban youth with alternative settings on which to explore possibilities not otherwise open to them, most significantly the exploration of love opened to a

public audience. Brian Larkin, re-formulating Appadurai's notions of alternative modernities, attributes the popularity of Indian films among Hausa audiences to their recognition of the construction of "an alternative world, similar to their own, from which they may imagine other forms of fashion, luxury, love and romance, coloniality and postcoloniality" (Larkin 1997, 66). But while Adamu and Larkin place great emphasis on how the urban youth "absorbed templates of behavior" from Indian films (Adamu 2006a, 37), Ousseina Alidou asserts that the love stories written by Hausa novelists and inspired by Indian films are layered onto older structures of oral-*(re)inventing* and *(re)interpreting* culture within a given space" (Alidou 2002b, 33:137).

Following Alidou, I argue that part of the reason Indian films appealed so much to Hausa audiences is because they recognized the pattern of the story as one that fits within their own cultural and literary structures. Jonathan Haynes and Onokome Okome have noted the affinities of Yoruba video-films to "oral narrative patterns and with indigenous conceptions of fate and destiny" (Haynes and Okome 2000, 59); perhaps the reason the Bollywood-style song and dance sequences have been so popular among Hausa audiences is because of their deep structural connection to Hausa oral performance. Larkin records that during his research he was "struck by the common refrain that Indian culture was 'just like' Hausa culture." Part of this, he surmises are the "many visual affinities between Indian and Hausa culture" in clothing styles, as well as the recognition of a more complex negotiation of the "tension of preserving traditional moral values in a time of profound change" (Larkin 1997, 412–413). This recognition of similarities extends not only to visual and thematic elements but also to the structure of the story itself. Abdalla Adamu acknowledges the similarity in structure between the *tatsuniyya* (folktales) and Indian films that form "creative convergence points for Hausa video filmmakers to use the *tatsuniyya* plot elements . . . couched in a Hindi film masala frame" (Adamu 2006b, 3). In the *tatsuniyyi* most often told and sung by women, the story moves forward through songs at crucial junctures of the narration. By appropriating Bollywood video as a template first in fiction and then in video, Hausa artists are responding to alternate ways of thinking about society in a modern context, but they are also reconnecting to old configurations of oral narration.

In discussing the influence of Indian film on Hausa film, it is important to note the progression of these influences from the Hausa novels of the late 1980s and 1990s to the films that began to spring up in the mid-1990s. The "soyayya" (love) novels, which were layered onto older oral structures and strongly influenced by Indian films, were revolutionary in that they opened up to the public gaze previously hidden domestic spaces. Alidou notes that: "Relatively confined to the domestic space, the love story became a new means of making public what in Hausa society belongs to the private space"

(Alidou 2002b, 147). Moving beyond the limited audience of the oral *tatsuniya*, the mass-productive potential of the novel exploded the “protected” private space of the domestic sphere, and created a profound dis-ease among male critics. Adamu notes in his unpublished “Critical Reaction (Gwagwar-maya): Annotated Bibliography of Soyayya Genre Criticisms from Newspapers, 1991–1999,” that: “Without exception the criticism centers around male-female interactions which were forcefully brought out into the open” (Adamu 2000a, 9).<sup>2</sup> If the novels created an anxiety about the corrupting influence of modernity, the video-films that rose out of them became even more controversial. While the novels often describe scandalous behavior, these actions stay within the bounds of individual imagination. The films, on the other hand, take the audience visually into the intimate sphere of the home, where men and women interact, and sometimes even into the bedroom. The initial experimentation in the mid-1990s with showing the private sphere resulted in the Kano censorship board.

Most critics focused their concern on the public mingling of men and women shown in the films, particularly on the singing and dancing that was condemned as immoral and not part of Hausa culture. As Abdullahi Mohammed relates, one of the first things the critics and subsequently the censorship board attacked was not only the portrayal of the bedroom in Hausa film but the mingling of young men and young women dressed in Western clothing in song and dance (Abdullahi Mohammed 2004, 237–242). Not only do the films invade the private space of the home, but they often bring women out of the home and into the public arena, where they mix freely with men. Graham Furniss has noted of the covers of the *soyayya* novels: “The image of a public couple is a marker of modernity and of the public presence of a relationship that would traditionally have been private” (Furniss 2005, 96). And if the image of a couple mixing freely is worrisome, critics found the moving images of men and women dancing together like Indian-film lovers downright scandalous. The films go beyond the static cover illustrations of the novels in what they can show. While the use of Bollywood-style music might be similar to the use of song in Hausa *tatsuniya*, Adamu maintains that “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” (Adamu 2006b, 3). Adamu’s argument implies that it is this mixing between men and women that is the source of anxiety over the contemporary Hausa films, in which men and women adopt so-called “Indian” forms of interaction between genders. The Indian influence was also another point of attack. As Adamu notes about the novelists in his bibliography of criticism, filmmakers were accused of “merely adapt[ing] Indian movie screenplays to Hausa settings,” using “settings, scenes and plots that are not characteristic of the Hausa society” (Adamu 2000b, 6).

However, Hausa filmmakers and novelists challenge the notion that they are corrupting society, or that they are merely imitating other traditions.

One of the most popular actresses, Mansura Isah, defends her notorious dance moves, saying: “It’s modernization. They 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” (Isah 2005, 7). The new social context complicates the old segregated gender spaces. At the same time, the filmmakers respond passionately to critics who claim that their “modernity” has cut them off from their roots, and that their mixed-gender song and dance numbers are unimaginative imitations of Bollywood song and dance numbers. The actor and director Abbas Sadiq maintains that the song and dance numbers are layered onto “traditional” structures. In several interviews with me conducted in July and August 2006, he defended the use of song and dance in Hausa films as advertisements for the films by invoking stories his great grandmother would tell him about the importance of song in selling her wares in the market. He further compared the song and dances in contemporary films to the moonlit village play in which girls and boys “will get together and discuss their love affairs . . . They will sing to each other. They used to compete. If one girl comes out and sings for her boyfriend, a boy will come out and sing for his girlfriend . . . It is part of our culture” (Sadiq 2006).<sup>3</sup> By claiming that men and women “traditionally” interacted in song and dance, Sadiq undermines the criticisms that revolve around the mixing of genders. Not only does he imply that the songs and dances in the films invoke “tradition,” but he implies that the films can work to reform society. Like Mansura Isah, Sadiq maintains that the portrayal of corruption and immorality in films reflects contemporary society. By revealing secret corruption, the young artists challenge their elders and, arguably, work to reform a tarnished tradition.

#### ALBASHI: A STORY OF WOMEN EMERGING INTO THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Abbas Sadiq’s film *Albashi* (Salary) explores in a fictional form many of the tensions between artists and critics, youth and elders, that he addressed in his conversations with me. While Sadiq directed the film, he lists his colleague, the actress Zainab Idris, as producer. The pairing of a “public couple,” male director and female producer, on the video and vcd cover, acts as a marker of modernity that illustrates on an outer level the concerns dealt with in the rest of the film. The film is framed with a voiceover that plays the narrative role of a storyteller leading the audience into the imaginative world of dreams and possibilities. By invoking oral narration with the voiceover frame, and by layering the story onto the structure of the “traditional” dilemma tale, Sadiq and Idris’s exploration of women’s emergence into the public sphere follows patterns of questioning found in older

forms of women's storytelling. However, while using what is arguably a "woman's form," the male voiceover situates the film from a male perspective: the focus of the film is on the husband's reaction to his wife's career.

*Albashi* tells the story of the troublemaker Umar and his wife Binta, whose career as a doctor is complicated by Umar's jealousy. The story takes us through their school days, through marriage, divorce, reconciliation, and on to an uncertain future. Aspects of the film also legitimize modern women's recourse to Islam to explain their actions and defend their interests. The character Umar holds apparently "traditional" views on the role of women while still indulging in secret (and not-so-secret) vices. On the other hand, his modern wife Binta invokes Islamic justification for her behavior. In this way, while staying within acceptable structures of interpretation, *Albashi* complicates expectations about how men and women interact and what spaces they occupy in order to explore male anxieties about women's shifting gender roles.

Even before the opening shot of car and motorcycle headlights passing through a city street at night, the new public space of the urban environment is evident as the opening credits roll to the background of electronic synthesizer music and the repetition of the stanza, "*Albashi mun dauka*," "Salary, we've received it" sung by a male voice.<sup>4</sup> The title of the film, *Albashi*, encapsulates the conflict at the heart of the film. If the salary, or living wages, brought from the public sphere into the domestic space of the home was "traditionally" the responsibility of the man in Hausa society, the next sequence of shots in which the narrator introduces the students at Time University complicates these assumptions. If the university is the training ground for public leadership, then the inclusion of only one male in the introduction of five classmates is significant in collapsing the division between male and female learning. The classmates sit on stairs in a public university corridor. The presence of Umar's brother Ibrahim, in addition to belying any illusion that this might be a solely women's school, serves to highlight the outnumbering of male students, in the imaginary space of the film, by soon-to-be successful women.<sup>5</sup>

The assumption that women are merely spectators in the public debate of men is metaphorically deconstructed when, following a childish fight instigated by the main male character Umar, the all-male basketball game morphs into a Bollywood-style song and dance number. Here, the female students are transformed from spectators of the game to active participants as they dance alongside the men and join their voices to the song. In her explication of Zainab Alkali's novel *The Stillborn*, Linda Hunter suggests that dance is a metaphor that runs throughout the novel in signaling the junctures in the framing metaphor of life as a journey (Hunter 2006). Similarly, this opening dance sequence provides a challenge from the women to the men: a contest to see who is the best dancer: "Hey boys, come and learn a dance step. When I dance this way, that way, you follow the steps." When Binta, the powerful female protagonist of the film, dances across the screen, the female voice sings:

"Let's compete, and see who is the master. I am the best, therefore watch me." This opening provides a symbolic thesis statement for the rest of the film, in which women join the public world of men. The dueling call and response between male and female voices also indicates a balance that is achievable in the visual representation of a man and woman dancing together: A little later they sing, "we have something in common, so let's dance together," yet the challenge remains, couched between intimate stanzas about romantic love. Binta does, in fact, prove to be the master, in her subsequent marriage to Umar, who had interrupted the game with a senseless quarrel. The rest of the film heightens this conflict between Binta, as master, and Umar, as spoilsport, always in conflict with his peers in the game and dance of life, perhaps a subtle comment on the critics always "quarreling" with "modern" ways of life.

If the dancing of the women alongside the men metaphorically re-enacts the new competition in the public sphere between men and women, the movement of the women's bodies to "romantic" lyrics on an outside basketball court also openly acknowledges the sexuality of the female body, previously hidden in the enclosed domestic space.<sup>6</sup> Umar's anxiety over his girlfriend's public career manifests itself in a concern about her sexuality. This becomes clear in the following scene, when a group of male students knock on Binta's door and call her out of the privacy of her room into the public space of the common courtyard. At the university, the protective architecture of the conventional *zauwa*, gatehouse, that separates the women's domestic space from the outside public sphere is shrunk to a flimsy curtain which Binta shoves behind the door. The curtain serves to conceal the hidden space of her room, and the doorway, in which Binta positions herself, acts as the vestige of the *zauwa* as she listens to the advice that the men give her (to break up with her boyfriend Umar). Her lingering at the edge of the door in a public space is representative of her position as a woman emerging into the public sphere.

Whereas Binta seems completely at ease interacting with the male students, her boyfriend Umar is thrown into a jealous rage at seeing the men gathered around her doorway. This tension between Umar's sexual reading of Binta's interaction with the male students and the general relaxed attitude of the other characters mounts throughout the rest of the film. On one hand, his jealousy would be entirely justified if the rules of the "game" were what they were fifty years ago. Binta should not be interacting so comfortably with an entire group of men unrelated to her. Indeed, the way the men called her as they knocked on her door, "Binta, Baby. Binta, Baby," seems overly familiar—a sobriquet taken from Western popular culture in which the woman is objectified into a "baby doll." On the other hand, in the modern university setting, Umar's jealous rage seems as unreasonable as his rage over his brother getting knocked down in a basketball game. Umar claims "traditional" values and cannot deal with the playful interactions of men and women in the public new "game" of modernity. Yet even this pretense of pious concern over his girlfriend being seen with other men is



Figure 10.1 Binta dances across the screen, singing "let's compete and see who is the master," setting up the extended metaphor of the competition between men and women that is followed throughout the film. However, the dancing together of men and women to provocative lyrics, as can be seen in the second image, also implies that this public competition between men and women has a sexual element. Permission for image granted by producer Zainab Idris and director Abbas Sadiq.

undermined by our knowledge that the men have just been warning Binta about Umar's questionable character. Umar's concerns, in fact, emerge not out of his devotion to "tradition" but out of his own bad behavior.

Throughout the film, in the tradition of the good sibling/bad sibling *tatsuniya*, Umar is contrasted against his brother Ibrahim. Whereas the younger Ibrahim is a brilliant student and popular among his classmates, the elder Umar has failed most of his classes and attempts to bribe other students to sit his exams for him. While Ibrahim comfortably interacts with his female colleagues by the "new rules" of modernity, even agreeing to work under the leadership of Binta at the hospital, Umar constantly denigrates the capability of women to responsibly perform "men's" jobs. His appeals for the community to come out and witness the hypocrisy of his classmates when he finds them gathered outside Binta's door, instead provide a dramatic statement on his own hypocrisy, as we soon discover in the outing of his secret attempts to cheat his way through university.

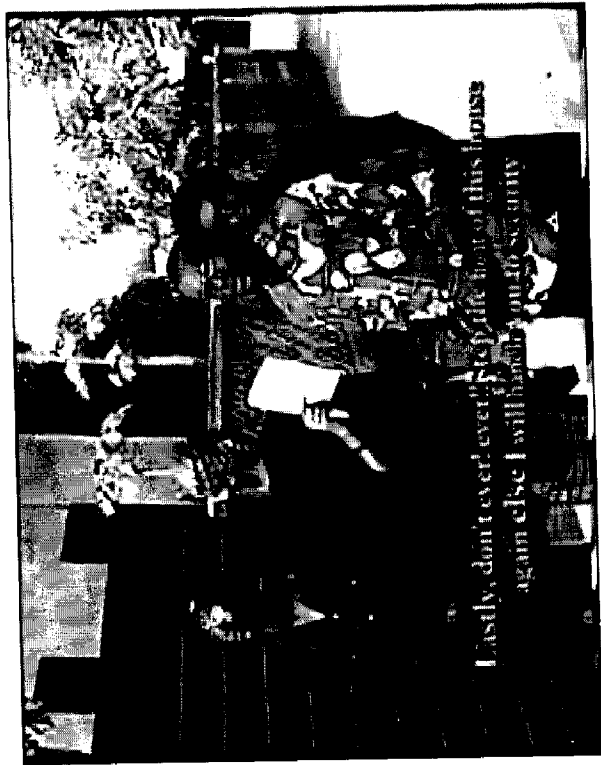
The disparity between Ibrahim's success and Umar's failure is highlighted when they meet in their mother's office. Whereas Ibrahim has finished his medical degree and his compulsory national youth service, Umar, in sunglasses and an over-the-top fake fur stole, has failed out of school and only begs her for more money. The folkloric precedent of good girl/bad girl or favorite wife/less favored wife is flipped here in the trope of good son/bad son, in which the mother (rather than the husband) favors one over the other. Whereas "Mum" praises Ibrahim in English, a marker of her education, "You are my boy," she curses Umar when he disrespectfully tells her that he is going to leave the house because of her favoritism.

Here a mother figure, rather than a father figure, represents authority and moral judgment. While strong mother figures with supernatural powers are frequent in Hausa folklore, the "Mum" in *Albashi* is different in one significant aspect from other folkloric mothers. She claims her moral authority over her sons not out of the mystical powers of motherhood arising from the domestic sphere but from her position in the larger professional world. During the course of the film, she is shown solely in the context of her office, seated on a large leather chair behind a large wooden desk, and she makes it clear to her sons that her salary has made their schooling possible. When Ibrahim shows her the photo of himself in his convocation gown, she thrusts the picture in Umar's face and points to her desk, shouting: "It's this type of education that qualified me for this seat." Here she makes a very old point in a new gendered context: the successful son follows in the footsteps of his mother; the failure does not. Her education and her career make her a role model to her sons and further intermesh her domestic responsibilities with her professional ones. Like her mixed Hausa-English, it is hard to tell where one ends and the other begins: all of her dealings with her family take place in or from the office. The private family quarrels and confidences are transferred out of the domestic privacy of the home and into the professional space of the workplace.



*Figure 10.2* The mother behind her large desk praises the son who succeeds in school and curses the son who has not brought her a diploma. In the second image, she reminds Umar that her education is what qualified her for her professional position. Permission for image granted by producer Zainab Idris and director Abbas Sadiq.

Binta S. Mohammed, in "Male Chauvinism: A Major Factor in the Manifestation of Sexism in Hausa Home Videos," calls for women producers to challenge the stereotypical roles of women seen in many Hausa films, noting that: "Women producers formulate policies and control their films, depicting female characters as they see them rather than as male-oriented Hausa societies would want them to be. They portray themselves as dynamic, agile, and strong, traits usually portrayed as masculine in men's productions" (B. S. Mohammed 2004, 176). The mother in *Albashi* certainly reverses the stereotype of the shy, quiet Hausa woman, as do most of the other women in the film. One calls her classmates together before they graduate to tell them that a hospital has been built for them. She is later responsible for hiring Ibrahim, doubling the salary he was making at his former job. Similarly, another woman Umar pursues is shown as a powerful woman surrounded by armed guards. When Umar steals his brother's credentials and also attempts to steal his girlfriend, the woman plays along: after Umar expresses his interest in her, she interrogates him: "Do you have a wife? Do you have a job?" When he answers negatively to the first and positively to the latter (both of them lies), she gives him her business card and offers him a ride home in her large jeep. If her mastery of her surroundings does not seem "masculine" until this point, when she calls the driver and he responds with a salute and a "yes, sir," this is clearly an example of what Binta Mohammed describes as the use of film as a "psychological and



*Figure 10.3* The woman, to whom Umar has lied, preaches a sermon at him and has him thrown out of her compound by the guards. Permission for image granted by producer Zainab Idris and director Abbas Sadiq.

political tool for influencing ideas in the society." When the woman has Umar investigated and finds out he has lied to her, she uses the opportunity of his second visit to preach a moral sermon about how he should go and reconcile with his wife, after which she has the guards physically push him away from the gateway where they have been standing.

Although strong women play prominently in the film, there is a tension throughout the film as to the direction of authority. The main female character, Binta, is continuously showered with male advice. The male students come to her hostel room to advise her to break up with Umar. When her brother sees her talking with Umar, he too advises her to break up with him. After she marries Umar and he divorces her, her uncle and her brother order her to stay with Umar throughout the *iddah* waiting period, and later her friend's brother Sani advises her to take Umar back. However, similar to the back and forth dance that sets up the competition between the genders at the beginning of the film, the women who quickly attain superior social positions begin to reverse the direction of sermonizing. Multiple women characters enact this claim to moral authority: the mother who blesses one son and curses the other, Ibrahim's girlfriend who "tells off" Umar, and finally, the protagonist Binta, whose career as the director of the hospital places her in the paradoxical position of being both a wife and the symbolic "head of the household:" she is the one who brings home the salary to support her husband Umar.

The power reversal between men and women and its spatial implications is the most developed in the portrayal of the relationship between Binta and Umar. Up to the point where marriage is discussed, the film is shot entirely in public spaces, where men and women mingle freely. The first moment the audience enters the private sphere, along with the camera, is when Binta is talking to her girlfriend Sadiya about her hopes to marry Umar. The two women are shot close up, engaging in womanly talk about domestic issues. The implication is that once Binta marries, she will stay closer to home in the domestic sphere, a supposition reinforced when Umar goes to speak with her uncle, and the two men discuss the marriage outside the house before the uncle calls Binta out of the interior space, where she has been waiting, to tell her the news. As her uncle advises the soon-to-be-married couple, she lingers on the threshold of the doorway in a respectful crouch, implying a reversal of her earlier emergence into the public sphere of the university. The second scene shot in the private sphere occurs after the marriage between Binta and Umar: they sit close together on a couch looking at Binta's photos. In the following scene, the camera penetrates into the most private interior space, as it shows Umar climbing into the bed where Binta is lying.

The conjugal chamber is perhaps the most sacred space in the private sphere; however, in this space, we see that there is an even more intimate place the camera invades—that of the mind itself. Umar climbs into bed, yet the expected marital activities do not begin. Instead, he has in his hands the photo of a man that Binta had hung in the living room. When he asks her if the man is her relative, she repeats to him that the man is her



Figure 10.4 Binta lingers in the doorway as her uncle finalizes the marriage negotiations, implying a return to the domestic sphere with marriage. Permission for image granted by producer Zamab Idris and director Abbas Sadiq.

relative and that he should excuse her because, "I have an assignment in the office tomorrow."

Like Umar's mother who forgets her son's graduation because she is so busy, Binta excuses herself from social and sexual intercourse with her husband because she is "busy." The public sphere of outside "work" invades even the intimate space of the marital bed. While she sleeps, Umar stares at the photo, and the audience is transported from the bedroom to a flashback in which Umar sees the man from the photo on the street talking on his cell phone. Umar's anxiety about his wife's role in the public sphere manifests itself in the jealousy he has demonstrated from the beginning of the film: First, he was suspicious of the university boys he finds outside Binta's room at the hostel. Second, he accuses his brother Ibrahim as having designs on her when he finds the two talking in a university corridor. Third, after Binta finishes her youth service when Umar is planning to marry her he wonders about her relationship with his brother Ibrahim. His fantasy takes him into another Bollywood-style song and dance number, in which Binta dances provocatively between Ibrahim and Umar as they all sing about the salaries they will receive. After their marriage, he grows jealous of any man she speaks to, and even after their divorce, he lurks around corners hoping to tackle men he thinks must be her lovers. Finally at the end of the film after the couple's uncertain reconciliation, Umar's jealousies manifest themselves in another song and dance number in which he imagines her dancing with another man who has a "salary."





*It seems you just want us to be dressing and I have an assignment at the office tomorrow, have a nice night.*

Figure 10.5 Binta's job invades even the conjugal bedroom. Permission for image granted by producer Zainab Idris and director Abbas Sadiq.

Umar's anxiety about the reversal of roles in which his wife earns the salary and provides the house is foreshadowed in the song about the salary and reinforced by his friend Kallamu, who asks him when he tells him of his upcoming marriage: "Don't you think this girl is too rich for you. . . . She is educated, employed, rich. Remember even that the hospital is about to be handed over to her." When he sees the man from the photo talking on the phone, his insecurities about his own position makes him fear that the man might be talking to his wife. And indeed the camera shows Binta dressed for bed in a darkly lit interior room talking on the phone to the man from the photo. It is unclear whether Umar is imagining this or whether it is actually happening, but the earlier fantasy dance sequence implies that the invasion via new cell phone technology into the wife's intimate space is likely his own fantasy.

The cell phone, a signifier of modernity, is a profound source of anxiety to Umar because it is able to penetrate the once sacred private sphere of the home. Binta's easy social intercourse with men at both the university and now in the workplace continues at home via the telephone. His jealousy is directly tied to her job outside the home. Emerging out of the flashback back into the bedroom, Umar is left with a ringing echo in his ears: his friend's words, "Don't you think this girl is too rich for you," alternate with Binta's protest that "This man is my relative." Because Umar cannot reconcile himself to her role in the public sphere, social intercourse becomes conflated with sexual intercourse. He is jealous of every man who speaks

to Binta, from the boys at the university, to the man in the photograph, to his own brother who comes on a professional visit to submit his credentials to Binta as part of a promotion application. He cannot believe that Binta could actually be responsible for administering his brother's promotion. When, eavesdropping on a phone conversation, he is finally sure that he has found the man he believes she is having an affair with, he grabs the phone away from her to abuse the man, only to find out that it is her brother. Binta treats every man she comes across in the public sphere as a brother. Umar treats them like lovers.

Umar's disorientation is also tied to his powerlessness in relation to his wife. She finished university and has a powerful job. He never finished school and does not have a job. The masculine and feminine roles in their marriage have been completely reversed. As Binta reminds him when he tells her she must quit her job: "I want you to remember that this house we are living in, the food we eat, the clothes we are wearing, everything is because of my work at the hospital."

His impotence is reinforced in a scene where, like the idealized Hausa wife, he sits at home flipping through magazines. This private space is interrupted when a neighbor rushes in with his heavily pregnant wife asking for Binta. Umar's response is classic: "Is this a hospital?" Umar acknowledges the ambiguity between the private and public space that his wife's career has brought into the home.

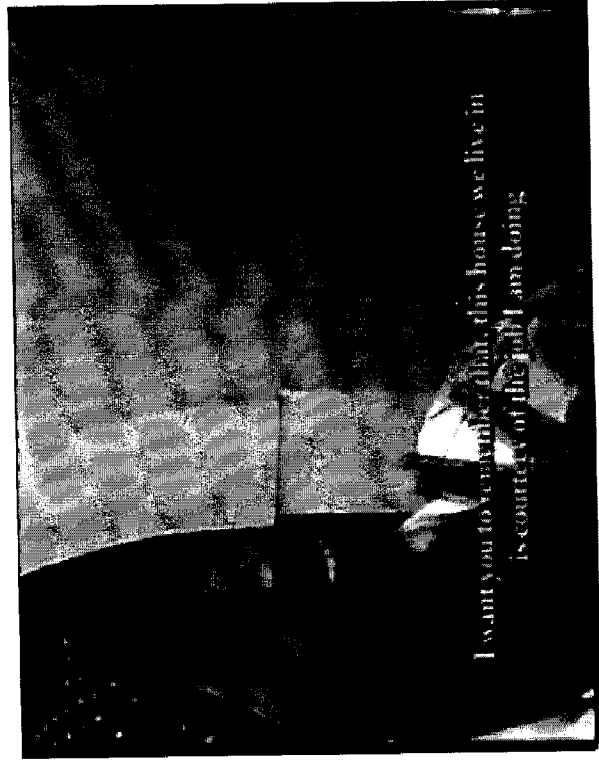


Figure 10.6a Figure 10.6a and 10.6b illustrate the juxtaposed gender roles. Binta has a powerful career as a doctor. Permission for image granted by producer Zainab Idris and director Abbas Sadiq.



Figure 10.6b Umar stays at home reading magazines. Permission for image granted by producer Zaimab Idris and director Abbas Sadiq.



Figure 10.7 When Umar tells Binta to choose between him and her job, she reminds him that their way of life depends on the salary that she brings home. Permission for image granted by producer Zaimab Idris and director Abbas Sadiq.

When she is in bed with him, she thinks of the hospital. When she leaves for work, he remains in seclusion “like a woman.” Umar’s social impotence becomes sexual impotence, which gives some clues as to why he interprets her popularity and competence in the social and professional realm as indications of sexual promiscuity. When Binta finally comes home after a long day at work, he expresses doubt that she could have gotten the job administering the hospital without having slept with someone to get it, and demands that she choose between him and her work. When she tells him she “honestly does not know the answer,” indicating that her career is just as important to her as her marriage (a revolutionary change in the expectations for what Hausa women desire), he divorces her. In this case, the three month *iddah* waiting period reinforces their reversed roles. Although her uncle and relatives tell her to “stay in his house for your *iddah* period,” it is in fact *her* own house and one over which she maintains control at the end of the *iddah* period.

Aminu Fagge Mohammad notes that: “[i]n many Hausa films, women who played the ‘bad woman’ role often ended up paying a heavy price: They get divorced, lose their lover (or husband) to another woman, become mad, are sent to jail or they die. The men, however, rarely have to pay any heavy price; and when they do it appears small when compared to the woman’s fate” (2004, 183). Interestingly, *Albashi* follows Binta S. Mohammed’s call for a reversal of masculine and feminine roles in this area as well. If the “bad wife” in many Hausa films pays a heavy price, this time it is the “bad son/bad husband,” who pays the price. Almost every penalty mentioned by Aminu Mohammed happens to Umar. While the divorce is his own doing, he ultimately (at least in his mind) loses his wife to another man, spends some time in jail for stealing his brother’s credentials, and goes mad. Gender roles and gender stereotypes are turned upside down.<sup>7</sup>

While those who interpret what constitutes moral and immoral behavior in Islam have been overwhelmingly male and men are expected to educate their wives in Islam, in this case Binta continues the reversal of “moral education” begun by Mum and Ibrahim’s girlfriend. Umar does not educate Binta in Islamic law, as traditionally expected; instead, she becomes the teacher. When Umar attempts to sneak back into her room after her *iddah* period has expired, he appeals to masculine authority, claiming “this marriage union is still in my hands.” Binta counters with religious language: “my *iddah* has expired since yesterday, so there is no marriage between us. . . . You can’t make me do anything, because Islam forbids adultery.” This powerful moment where the woman claims moral and sexual right is followed by an ambiguous event that simultaneously reinforces Umar’s fears and dismantles his authority.

In the middle of their argument, a mysterious man calls and proposes marriage to Binta, telling her, “I hope I’ve not done anything wrong, since I know your *iddah* expired yesterday.” Incensed, Umar grabs the phone and shouts at the caller asking, “What kind of hypocrite would call another

man's wife in the middle of the night?" However again, Umar is wrong. Umar himself is on the verge of trying to force his ex-wife into adultery. The mysterious man who has invaded the intimate sphere of Binta's bedroom through her cell phone chews him out, "Worthless fool. Allah has blessed you with a good wife and you are not thankful. I will snatch her from you and even marry her in your presence and you must regret it." Umar's greatest fears about the penetration of the cell phone may have become realized, but they are realized within the structures of what is "proper." The man did not call Binta while she was still married, but observed, as did Binta, the Islamically decreed waiting period.

This scene is one of several that undermine patriarchal assumptions about the interpretation of Islam through the development of the characters. Umar holds conservative beliefs about the role of women, but he has no legitimate complaint. The rightful interpretation of Islam and proper morality is with the woman. Although Binta holds a job in the public sphere, she has followed all the rules. As the mysterious caller tells Umar, Binta has been a good wife and she has followed the precepts of the *iddah* waiting period. Her only crime is that of her life in the public sphere, having a career outside the home, which in her interpretation is not prohibited. As she tells him when he demands that she quit her job, "If you remember, I told you about my job before we married, and you said there was no problem."

On the other hand, Umar's claim to virtue when he accuses Binta and everyone else of being hypocrites has no validity. He is the hypocrite, duplicitously marrying her with the intent to divorce her if she does not leave her job, stealing his brother's credentials, lying to woo another woman. Finally, following the moment when Binta throws him out of "her" house, Umar goes mad, unable to deal with his reversed role—the man having to leave the woman's house rather than the other way around. His madness has been building throughout the entire film as he gradually loses more and more control over his (and his wife's) life; however, this condition, which can be read on a metaphorical level, is also tied tangibly to a secret vice. In the scene where he finally loses his mind, Umar screams at the approach of his brother and ex-wife: "Wayyo, wayyo, you can't see me, you can't see me," before confessing, "Ok, wait, let me tell you what happened. It's one Kallamu who used to give us drugs, and he said that if we take it, we're in for it." Umar's initial attempt to hide from his wife and his brother indicate a secret he does not want revealed. In fact, his paranoia about Binta's role in the public realm reflects his own secret sins of the private realm. The man who calls everyone else a hypocrite is a secret drug user.

At this point, the moral of the story has been made: the virtuous and successful woman has won the game, and her duplicitous failure of a husband has lost. In contrast to the films that reaffirm patriarchal values, as described by Aminu Mohammed, the roles are reversed, and it is not the "bad wife" but the "bad husband" who goes mad. The next scene comes to

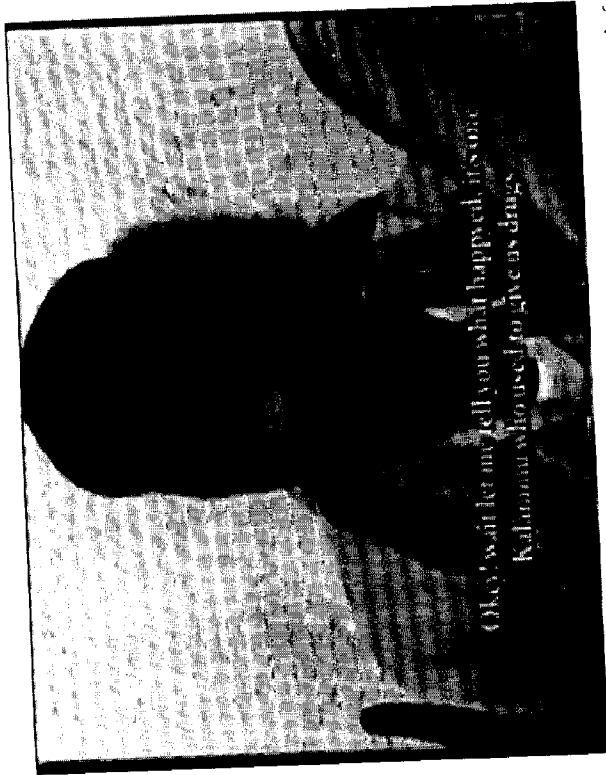


Figure 10.8 Umar goes mad and confesses that he has been using drugs, reinforcing the hypocrisy he has exhibited throughout the film. Permission for image granted by producer Zainab Idris and director Abbas Sadiq.

a classic resolution, with the "bad" son Umar begging for God's, his mother's, and his wife's forgiveness. However, as the narrative voice returns to close the story, this "balanced" ending is complicated into a different kind of folktale: "To, but some stones are left unturned." The resolution does not imply a return to status quo. After Binta and Umar return home, Binta remains the "master" of the household. Seated outside on the lawn, as opposed to the intimate interior space of the house, she tells him that the only reason she took him back was because she respects his mother and she wanted reconciliation between them. In a public role as the head of the house and in her professional role as doctor, she tells him he must take his medicine.

Umar, looking disoriented and frightened, holds his head in his hands, as the narrator's voice returns explaining that Binta's friend Sadiya is doing everything she can to see that her brother Sani, who was both the mysterious man in the photo and the mysterious voice over the phone, snatches Binta away from Umar. The narrator ends the film with a question: "If you were Umar would you agree [to this]?"<sup>8</sup> The tale becomes a dilemma, opening the story up to the audience. From Umar's head-grasping look of confused despair emerges one of the most provocative song and dance numbers in the film: this time Binta and Sani dance together again singing about the salary that has been collected. Sani sings "I have received my salary, come let's go shopping, celebrating love."



Figure 10.9 The open-ended question of the dilemma tale leaves Umar in the middle of a confused fantasy about Binta dancing with another man, Sani, who has a salary. Permission for image granted by producer Zainab Idris and director Abbas Sadiq.

The film ends not with the neatly tied up balance of the repentance scene, but with an appeal to the audience to help solve a puzzle. Is this yet another tortured fantasy built into Umar's private madness, his equitation of his wife's powerful position outside the home with sexual prowess? Another obsessive fear that his inability to bring home a salary will result in another more successful man snatching his wife? Or is it indeed a declaration of love between the once again married Binta and the man who had, with the help of his sister, helped to drive Umar mad? The dance scene creates tensions between old and new interpretations of the "rules." Binta, dressed in tight leather jeans and a shiny satin blouse, dances with Sani and three other male backup dancers. The mingling and dancing together of the sexes in an open public space is one of the most criticized elements of the new Hausa films, yet while dancing together with Binta, Sani sings, "Oh, Lord, my creator, you know what is in my heart. You alone know every single thing that moves on earth. I say this with pride because you provided me with my true lover. You alone know everything on earth, and the one I will marry." Combining the raw sexuality of the dance with an invocation to God is an edgy challenge to "traditional" interpretations of morality. On a physical level, the provocative performance of the couple brings sexuality and desire out into the public. On a metaphorical level, the dance between the man with the salary and the woman with the salary indicates a more blessed balance than that of the obviously uneven match of Umar

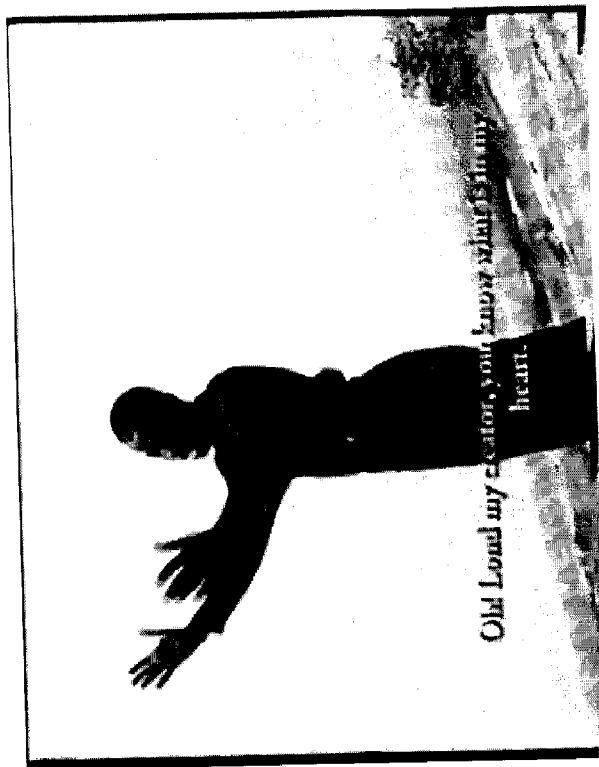


Figure 10.10 In the middle of a provocative song and dance number, Sani invokes God's will in the matter of love. Permission for image granted by producer Zainab Idris and director Abbas Sadiq.

and Binta. In the words of the first dance sequence of the film: "We have something in common, so let's dance together."

The appeal to God, right, morality, and the sphere of religious justice is made by the woman and her lover, while the rightful husband has been implicated in secret sins. If we think of this as a modern manifestation of an oral tale, it does not follow a clearly linear folktales structure that teaches a moral and then ties up neatly at the end. Instead, it blurs the boundaries between the man's world of public commentary and the woman's world of private loves and desires. The two are combined in a particularly potent mixture where public and private thoroughly interpenetrate each other. As women have entered public spaces and have gained positions of power, the private sphere has retreated to the terrors of the man's mind who cannot accept a changing world. And even his private fears are opened to the public commentary of the audience.

Structurally the tale has been told from a male's perspective. The voiceover is performed in a male voice. The song and dance number that sets up the competition between the men and women students is followed by a montage in which both male and female graduates work together during their National Youth Service Corps. Both of these musical interludes set up the public spaces shared by both genders. However, the next two songs emerge out of Umar's paranoia about Binta's sexuality. He fantasizes about her liaisons with other men. His anger seems to spring out of his powerlessness. Although Sadiq told me that in *Albashi*, he wanted to show that "Anything that a man can do a woman can do," and that "I want to show the world that no one can disrespect a woman," the film is not merely a work of propaganda for women's empowerment, but instead explores the tensions that contemporary youth face over rapidly changing gender roles.

The ambiguity of the ending, rather than providing the answers that seem to be so frequently handed out by the patriarchy, instead leaves only questions. What is legitimate Hausa masculinity in a time when all rules have been turned upside down? When the wife is the one earning a salary and the marriage/domestic space is permeated by technology that allows more successful rivals to enter the intimate space?

Larkin follows Michael Jackson's argument that "narratives promote ambivalence and ambiguity as a way of allowing readers to imaginatively explore social tensions in their multiple connotations" (Larkin 1997, 429). This questioning of the certainty of the masculine text opens up a space for interpretation. Although I have explicated only one text, the tensions and characters explored in *Albashi* are common to many other Hausa films. Indeed, although we are presented with the dilemma tale at the end of this film, we are teased with the text at the end promising "Wait for part 2." While part 2 takes the story in one particular direction, there are many different directions that the narrative can take: possibilities opened up by the question at the end. Larkin continues that, while:

Jackson argues that this process occurs in the development of a single narrative . . . it is my point that the mass culture of *soyayya* books and Indian films develops the process of ambiguity by presenting various resolutions of similar predicaments in thousands of narratives extending over many years. By engaging both with individual stories and with the genre as a whole, narratives provide the ability for social inquiry." (1997, 429)

The filmmaker opens the "resolution" of the film out to the public sphere of discussion and debate that goes beyond the family living room where the film will be watched and into the street. In this way, *Albashi* duplicates older folkloric forms, while using new technologies to expand the audience beyond the single family domestic sphere and into a large complex public discourse, blurring the boundaries between public and private.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful for the support of the U.S. Department of Education Foreign Languages and Area Studies fellowship during May through August 2005 in Sokoto, Nigeria, which is where I first encountered the film *Albashi*. I am also grateful for the West Africa Research Association predissertation fellowship during May through August 2006 in Kano, Nigeria, which made possible my subsequent research on Hausa film.
2. A revised version of the unpublished bibliography Abdalla Adamu gave me and from which I am quoting can be found on his blog *Nisbad'in Hutulu* (*Hausa Popular Culture*).
3. These quotes are taken from a series of conversations I had with Abbas Sadiq from June 22, 2006 to August 2, 2006, in Kano, Nigeria. To questions about how Hausa films obviously mirror Indian films and American hip-hop, Sadiq claims: "art is all about getting something from someone and putting it in a different way . . . Now they say we are imitating Americans. That is part of it, but it is also the way *gambara* musicians sing. That is a part of Hausa culture." He compared the insults traded in the hip-hop songs of Tupac to the same kind of insults traded in older Hausa songs. Take the example of the popular Hausa traditional musician Ado Mai Gambaru in Jos, he told me: "If he attends a wedding, he'll rap. He's old. He has on a babban riga, but that's rap. He's singing in a funky rap way and manner." Here Sadiq challenges critics who see hip-hop, like Indian film, as a foreign influence. By claiming an "indigenous" hip-hop, he maintains that contemporary popular music is continuing tradition rather than breaking with it.
4. The film is in Hausa with English subtitles. I have quoted from the English subtitles except where noted.
5. After presenting an earlier version of this paper on July 12, 2006 at a conference on "Communication, Media, and Popular Culture in Northern Nigeria," held at the Mambayya House, Kano, an audience member challenged my reading of the film, claiming that the film did not reflect "reality." The director and producer of the film, of course, do not feel obligated to stick to "realism." The powerful public positions of women in the film, the idea that a hospital would be built for the recently graduated students; these are fantasies that are not necessarily reflected in contemporary Nigerian society. Following Arjun Appadurai, perhaps I should call these "unrealistic" moments,

"imagination" rather than "fantasy." As Appadurai notes in *Modernity at Large*, "the imagination, especially when collective, can become the fuel for action. . . . The imagination is today a staging ground for action and not only for escape" (1996, 7).

6. I am grateful to Dean Makuluni for pointing out and complicating my thinking about this element of sexuality in the dance.
7. *Albashi* is not alone in overturning these gendered outcomes. Other novels and films similarly turn the punishment onto the man, such as in Balaraba Ramat Yakubu's 1990 novel *Albaki Kuykuyo Ne*. Here, a husband throws his first wife and children out of the house when they quarrel with his new wife, an old prostitute. The virtuous first wife finds a successful life outside of marriage, supporting herself and her children through her own small business of cooking and selling snacks out of her rented house. Eventually, as the former wife becomes more and more successful, the wicked husband goes mad after he loses everything he owns in a market fire, his car is stolen, and he finds his wife, the old prostitute, in bed with the gardener.
8. I have added "to this" to the English subtitle to better reflect the nuance in the Hausa, "*Za ka yarda?*"

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*Dr. Adérónké Adésànyà of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria:  
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