

Documenting Hausa Popular Literature

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From the earliest period of the production of printed Roman script books in the north of Nigeria, a primary concern was the economics of book production. The conundrum was how to break out of the 'chicken and egg situation' whereby it was not possible to 'create' a reading public unless there were sufficient, affordable, and readable books that a potential reader would want to read; on the other hand, without an existing commercial market for books, how could any publisher continue to publish? (East 1943). The main government-funded agency, the Northern Region Literature Agency (NORLA), that undertook the publication of the overwhelming majority of Hausa language books in the 1950s (Skinner 1970), was forced to close when its losses became unsustainable.

In the early 1980s it looked as if a breakthrough was about to occur. A new generation of young people were benefitting from the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1976, even if that introduction was less than 100 per cent effective. At the same time, the economic boom in Nigeria had meant that a large number of publishers had geared up to cash in on the schoolbook market, forming partnerships between existing or new local publishers and international conglomerates (Macmillans with the Northern Nigerian Publishing Company (NNPC); Hodder & Stoughton with HudaHuda Press; OUP with Ibadan University Press; Longman Nigeria). I remember being told in about 1980 that NNPC had a list of some 75 titles that they were preparing to publish over the ensuing years. The collapse of the Nigerian economy in the 1980s put paid to all that. Some publishers continued to publish on a much reduced scale; some like NNPC, the holders of the backlist which represents the bulk of Hausa publishing, pretty near stopped publishing at all, and have produced little or nothing new ever since. The economic measures which sent the Naira plummeting, cut back on Ministry of Education book purchasing budgets, severely reduced the buying power of public sector salaries, and brought state education to its knees, effectively kicked any prospect of a take-off in formal publishing well into touch. Babangida's nominal refusal to accept IMF terms for a financial deal, and his subsequent introduction of 'SAP' measures to meet their demands, put paid to a lot

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more than publishing. However, the young people who had been ten or twelve years of age when UPE had been introduced, were, by the end of the 1980s, in their early twenties. With a familiarity with reading, some money in their pockets, and with typewriters and then word-processors on their desks, some of them decided to do it themselves. It is bitterly ironic that when formal publishing collapsed, there was an explosion of writing in Hausa, surely not something the World Bank would have expected as a consequence of its carefully modelled econometric outcomes. Against all the odds, and the IMF, Hausa cultural creativity took a new turn.

In this short paper I will focus upon one of the facilitative mechanisms in this cultural movement – the writers’ club. Clubs and societies have played a significant role in the development of Hausa literature – poetry writing in the early 1970s in Kano, for example, was an activity fostered by two poetry circles, the Hikima Club (Furniss 1994) and Hausa Fasaha. The former was a functioning association where members met each week to read and discuss their poems; the leader, Mudi Spikin, exercised control over who was given access to the regular weekly radio slot that the Club had obtained on Kano radio, and he also led the debate over appropriate topics for public poetry and appropriate positions to take on a variety of moral and social issues. Fissiparous tendencies arose as a result of contention over the degree of control he exercised and through quarrels about relative status within the Club. The rival association at that time, Hausa Fasaha, under the leadership of Akilu Aliyu, hardly ever met, had a membership spread across northern Nigeria, and was essentially a mechanism for establishing relative status among poets who rarely if ever met under the auspices of the association. Poetry writing and performance was, and still is, a mechanism for public debate about many topical social and political issues – all within a strongly moralistic framework of debate. Forming clubs and associations for the purpose of status ascription rather than to pursue a particular activity is not uncommon. Reading and discussion circles (see the role of the Bauchi Discussion Circle in the early history of northern politics where Aminu Kano and Sa’adu Zungur debated the practice of colonial administration (Yakubu 1999: 33-44)) were a feature of early northern opposition to colonial rule. The establishment of groups of intellectuals to debate the nature, norms and prospects of society were not an innovation of the colonial era, however. The Islamic reform movement of the early nineteenth century was centred around a veritable intellectual hive of debate and discussion on Islam and society. Notable within that movement were a woman and

Burgess, Malami Buba and the participants in the Social Histories of Reading workshop, Cambridge, July 2000, for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

her sisters, Nana Asma'u, daughter of the Shehu, see (Boyd and Mack 1997; Boyd and Mack 2000).

That which is in northern Nigeria now sometimes called Adabin Kasuwar Kano 'Kano Market Literature' (sometimes called Soyayya Books 'love stories'), and which here is generally referred to as 'Hausa popular literature' has been the subject of a long-running public debate in the newspapers, (particularly in the section of the New Nigerian entitled 'The Write Stuff' edited until recently by Ibrahim Sheme), and cultural magazines such as Garkuwa,² a debate led by journalists and university academics such as Ibrahim Malumfashi, Ibrahim Sheme, Yusuf M Adamu, Abdalla Uba Adamu, Muhammad Danjuma Katsina, and others. Ibrahim Malumfashi (personal communication) tells me these debates have been documented by Abdalla Uba Adamu through an 'Annotated Bibliography of Soyayya Criticism from Newspapers', deposited at Bayero University Library in July 1999. The literature has been written about by Brian Larkin (1997), by Novian Whittsit, and briefly by myself (Furniss 1996: 54-5) outside Nigeria. The popularity of cultural magazines such as Garkuwa and film magazines – Fim edited by Ibrahim Sheme, and Tauraruwa, attest to the widespread interest in many aspects of current forms of cultural production among particularly younger urban people in Nigeria.

The first question is how extensive is this literature? My own collection runs to about 400 titles; Ibrahim Malumfashi and Salisu Yakasai tell me (April 2000) they have a collection of about 450 titles. Following an assertion by Aisha Umar Yusuf in an article in the Weekly Trust that there were some 2500 KML titles, Yusuf M Adamu responded by indicating (in 1998) that a bibliography in the possession of himself, Ibrahim Malumfashi and Ado Ahmad Gidan Dabino indicated some 600-700 titles (Adamu 1998). Abdalla Uba Adamu, writing earlier this year (Adamu 2000) refers to his own catalogue of 443 books produced up to December 1999. In 1993, Abba Rufai told me he had purchased about 85 titles for the library of the Centre for the Study of Nigerian Languages (CSNL), part of Bayero University, in Kano, but in a more recent conversation in Kano it appears that the CSNL has been so starved of cash over the last years that they have not been able to keep abreast of the rate of publication. Very few of the books have ISBN numbers; there is, as far as I know, no central agency looking to establish a definitive collection, and the books themselves appear in the market and bookshops and then disappear just as quickly. The need for an authoritative and comprehensive listing is acute, as well as an

² According to Yusuf M Adamu (Adamu 1998) the 'soyayya debate' began in 1991 when Ibrahim Sheme introduced a literary column in the Hausa language newspaper, Nasiha, and two articles by Ibrahim Malumfashi

archive of texts. While volumes are apparently in preparation discussing the merits of the arguments on both sides of the 'soyayya debate' (see the interview with Abdalla Uba Adamu, New Nigerian Weekly, 29 April 2000), I am not aware of any published listing of works produced through this period of Hausa prose literature. Since private collections have been for centuries some of the most durable ways of retaining the heritage of Islamic manuscripts, it may be that private collections will be the saviour of this literature too. Nevertheless, any attempt to account for the range of writers and writing in this period would undoubtedly benefit from some published list and some known depository for texts.

Sometimes a book will run to 200 pages, but more usually a book of that length or longer will be split into parts and sold as separate sections, sometimes consecutively divided into chapters and so paginated but also sometimes renumbered in each part. In arriving at a guess at the extent of this literature, there are two aspects we need consider. First, according to Ibrahim Malumfashi, the more recent rise of a video film industry has begun to put paid to the production of such books, essentially not because there is a lack of readers, but because many of the authors have themselves gone into film production (Malumfashi 2000). This may mean that there has been a tailing off of book production, although this is disputed by others. Second, in regard to the production of books within the clubs, the way in which those clubs established their conventions for what goes into a book may help us to approximate the extent of their lists.

In the next section I set out some information on three writer's clubs, two of which were based in Kano (Raina Kama (RK) 'Deceptive Appearances' and Kukan Kurciya (KK) 'The Cry of the Dove'), and one in Kaduna (Dan Hakin Da Ka Raina 'The Splinter You Ignore').³ The first Raina Kama and Kukan Kurciya books date from the late 1980s. Malumfashi (personal communication) suggests that Rabin Raina by Talatu Wada Ahmed was about the first. Wa Zai Auri Jahila? 'Who would marry an ignorant woman?' by Balaraba Ramat Yakubu of Raina Kama is dated 1990; Soyayya Gamon Jini 'Love that joins the blood' (?) by Ibrahim Hamza Abdullahi Bichi of Kukan Kurciya is dated 1987, and while these two contain mention of the group or have the group logo on the cover, a number of earlier books which make no mention of the groups are later incorporated into listings of group publications (e.g. Budurwar Zuciya 'The heart's desire' 1987 for RK by Balaraba Ramat Yakubu). Many of the books are undated. A rough

appeared, critical of the quality and worth of the emerging 'Kano market literature (KML)'; see also Larkin (1997:430-1).

³ I have not myself undertaken fieldwork on the operation of these clubs and the information I present here is gleaned from the books they have produced and from Nigerian newspapers such as the New Nigerian and the Weekly Trust, as well as magazines such as Garkuwa 'The Shield'.

dating can sometimes be obtained from a useful feature of many of the books produced in the early 1990s, namely the fact that lists are sometimes provided at the beginning or end of the book of other titles by members of the group. These lists are usually split into 'already produced' and 'forthcoming'.



Plate 1: From a Raina Kama book: LH: list of RK titles in print; RH: list of forthcoming titles

The lists, such as in Plate 1, are a useful way of building up a preliminary catalogue of the titles produced by the group, and 'forthcoming' items do sometimes then appear in later 'already produced' listings; however, the lists of 'forthcoming' items have to be treated with caution. The existence of some Raina Kama titles can be further verified by the miniaturised photocopied front covers that appear particularly in early volumes, see Plate 2.



Plate 2: From a Raina Kama book: photocopied front covers of RK titles.

In my own collection of Raina Kama works I have some 52 volumes, not all of which are separate titles, since, as I indicated above, a title is often split into a number of parts. Going on the basis of volumes that are listed in later RK titles, I estimate that I have about half of the known output of the group. A preliminary guess therefore would indicate that the 75 titles from the three clubs discussed here that are in my possession constitute perhaps half of an estimated 150 (roughly) total production. If the same proportions were to apply to my overall collection then the total corpus for the decade of the 1990s would be perhaps around 700. Larkin, however, (1997: 418) estimates 200 books at about the middle of the decade, so perhaps 450-500 is a closer estimate for the decade as a whole, much closer to Yakasai and Malumfashi's figure referred to earlier. Malumfashi (personal communication) indicates that a very recent study by one Kiyawa, 'Gudummawar kungiyoyin marubuta wajen habaka adabi: nazari daga birnin Kano' (Contribution of writers' groups to the development of literature: a study from Kano city) lists 71 titles from Raina Kama, 14 from Kukan Kurciya, and 17 from another group, Kungiyar Matasa Marubuta 'Young Writers' Association'.

The identification of a volume as being one produced by the group is most clearly evident in titles produced in the early 1990s, when there was often a logo (see Plate 3) on the front cover,



Plate 3: Writers' club logos: Raina Kama, Kukan Kurciya and Dan Hakin da Ka Raina

In addition to the listings of the titles on inside pages (see Plate 1) and photocopies of other covers (see Plate 2), a number of early RK titles contained a photograph of the six 'leaders' of the Raina Kama group, the woman writer, Balaraba Ramat Yakubu, and five men, Dan'azumi Baba Chediyar 'Yan Gurasa, Ado Ahmad Gidan Dabino, Aminu Abdu Na'inna, Hamisu Bature, and Aminu Hassan Yakasai (see Plate 4).



Plate 4: Photograph of Raina Kama leaders as it appears in numerous RK titles

Many RK titles also give a list of bookshops where the group's titles can be bought. In their desire to 'strengthen Hausa culture' they also included in some of the early titles an

explanation of a new orthography for Hausa which the group wanted to promote, using signs that were unlike both the Arabic script and the Roman script in which Hausa has traditionally been written; not only was there an alphabet presented, there were sample pages of text written by hand in this invented script, with an exhortation for people to take up a truly ‘Hausa’ alternative to Western or Arab influence (see Plate 5).

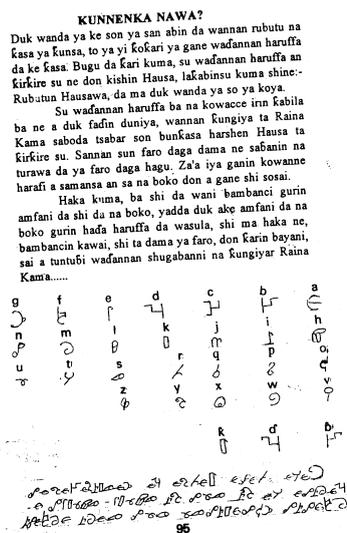


Plate 5: Raina Kama new script for writing Hausa

The most recent title I have that maintains the RK logo is from 1999, but it is interesting that a recent book by Balaraba Ramat Yakubu (Ina Sonsa Haka ‘I love him so’) bears no indication of Raina Kama membership, and the list of other titles is of her own earlier volumes only. It would seem that in recent years the presence of the Raina Kama writing group has become somewhat attenuated, perhaps linked to the fact that a number of members have gone their own ways in founding their own publishing enterprises and more recently, video film production companies, of which more later.

Kukan Kurciya similarly made use of a logo and group title listings, but not a photograph or other identifying feature. I have some 20 volumes that are marked as Kukan Kurciya that run up to 1999. Perusing the lists of KK titles and authors it is clear that membership of KK has been generally distinct from membership of RK, except that in one instance a volume by Ahmed

Mahmood Zahraddeen (Garin Masoyi, 'As lover/ the lover's town' (?) n.d.) lists Balaraba Ramat and her books as being of Kukan Kurciya.

Many of the books have little indication of how or when they were produced. Nevertheless, it is clear that in the absence of formal publishers, the early volumes in particular were produced by an arrangement between the author, and/or his or her agents, and a printer. So RK titles in the early 1990s were often printed by Bamas Printers, or by Gidan Dabino Publishers (the business name of Ado Ahmad?) and Nuruddeen Publications, while a number of RK titles in the later 1990s have the name of a bookshop, Garba Mohammed Bookshop, prominently displayed on the back. Balaraba Ramat Yakubu's books from an early period are produced by Ramat General Enterprises. The same Garba Mohammed Bookshop is prominently displayed on a number of the later titles from the Kukan Kurciya group, while another prime mover in that group, Ahmed Mahmood Zahraddeen, and others are printed by Zahraddeen Publishers (although interestingly his first (?) book, Kogin Soyayya, 'The river of love' is first printed in 1988 by Mai Nasara Printing Press) and it is only later that he is established with, presumably, his own press (going by the name). Clearly it has sometimes been the bookshop which has taken on the entrepreneurial role that would otherwise have been that of the publisher. Malumfashi (n.d.:5) puts it very succinctly, 'Within a span of less than 10 years, a powerful group of book sellers are now in control of this lucrative business. They buy books in bulk and pay the author/publisher in instalments. Right now the booksellers have become bookshop owners, publishers, writers and editors all in one. They not only buy published works but also scout for a promising love story and sponsor its publication, they may give a writer a story angle that they are sure will sell, and after the production of the text, they finance the publication and distribution.'

Both the above groups are based in Kano. The third group, Dan Hakin Da Ka Raina, is based in Kaduna and would appear to be a later association, in that the first volume I have that displays its logo dates from 1994. I have only 6 volumes that display the logo, but a volume from 1997 (Zainabu Abu 'Zainab Abu' by Umaimat Usman Ali) lists 30 other DHKR titles. A recent volume (Ko Ban Ce Ba...1 'Even if I don't say...' by Tanko Baba Kadara Gidan Kaura, 1999) names five elected officers of the group. While RK and KK seem to have less mention of the group in recent publications by erstwhile members, this group would appear to be still growing. An attack upon the leadership of such writers' groups accusing them of high-handedness and a lack of care with the group's resources is made in a recent issue of Garkuwa

(Umar 2000). Perhaps issues of control and status became an issue again, as with the poetry clubs in the 1970s.

In the early 1990s these books were selling at about 15-20 Naira, and as I indicated elsewhere, that compared with the cost, at the time, of a Coke at 5 Naira and a modest meal at 30 Naira (Furniss 1996: 55). The prices have, I believe, remained similar in relative terms, although a small volume will now cost 80-100 Naira or more. I do not know how writers were able to raise capital for the initial printing of their books, a great deal of work still needs to be done on the commercialization of the local book trade and the way in which local entrepreneurs saw the potential for investment in a profitable commodity. Clearly, when the move began some four or five years ago into video film production, a number of commercial enterprises were quick to exploit the urban market for both VHS video equipment and for Hausa language video films, which quickly began to squeeze the Indian video film dominance of the market, even though (or perhaps precisely because) much of the cinematography and singing styles directly mimicked Indian film (see Larkin (1997) and (1999) for an extensive discussion of the influence of Indian film).

An important element in the early development of Kano market literature was the intervention of university academics, particularly from Bayero University in Kano. Many acknowledgements in these books provide fulsome thanks to academic staff who clearly provided encouragement, proof-reading, and other advice to these budding writers. Notable among these figures were the late Ibrahim Yaro Yahaya, a mainstay of Hausa cultural studies in the University, and Dr Sa'idu Muhammadu Gusau, the bulk of whose own work had been on court praise singers, but who clearly was a key figure in encouraging these writers of fiction and who provided many a preface to their books. It is some of these same academics who have engaged not only in the 'backroom' role, but have led a debate in the newspapers and magazines about whether this literature represents ephemeral, unworthy, frippery that will quickly fade away, or is the beginnings of a serious and important cultural movement. Opinions differ, however the pivot of the argument is the issue of whether this literature is properly promoting Hausa customs in conformity with Islam or is a corrupting influence.⁴ Attack and defence are often framed in these terms. Even more is this a burning issue with the advent of video films.

Women have been prominent in the development of this writing, and they have been equally significant as readers. While only 20% of the publications in my Raina Kama collection

are by women, recent years have seen a rise in the proportion of books that are written by women, not necessarily within the framework of a writers' club. Ibrahim Malumfashi (personal communication) has documented about 70 women writers of Kano Market Literature and their titles in a paper presented at the 17th Conference of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria, 1999, held in Zaria. I was told in Kano in April (2000) that the high number of Mills & Boon style romances is a reflection of the demand coming from women readers. Perhaps the most significant public presence of women is as stars within the video film industry and also, as in the case of Balaraba Ramat Yakubu, as writers/directors/ producers.

A further comment made to me in April was that the model provided by the rise of video hire shops (membership fee and then rental for individual items) has been directly borrowed and translated into the world of books. Abdalla Uba Adamu, writing in the *New Nigerian* refers to 'commercial libraries' where a book can be hired for five Naira (Adamu 1999).

One of the most remarkable transitions in recent years has been the move from books into video film. Many of the stories in the books now known as Kano Market Literature or Hausa Popular Literature are built around dialogue and action, a characteristic that was also present in earlier prose writing of the 1940s and 1950s. Such a writing style made it relatively easy to work from a story to a TV drama, and a number of the Hausa TV drama series ('*Magana Jari Ce*', for example) derived their story lines from texts. With the experience of staging comedies and social commentaries that had been accumulating in the TV stations and in the drama department of ABU, for example, it was not difficult conceptually to move into video film. I am not familiar with the story of how Raina Kama writers made the transition into film but it is clear that when Balaraba Ramat Yakubu became Ramat Productions, so also Ado Ahmad became part of Gidan Dabino Video Productions, Dan'azumi Baba became part of RK Studios, and many other film production companies mushroomed in the late 1990s. 'Films of the book' included Wa Zai Auri Jahila 'Who will marry an ignorant woman?' and Alhaki Kwikwiyo 'A misdeed is like a puppy...' by Balaraba Ramat Yakubu, In Da So Da Kauna 'Where there is love and desire' by Ado Ahmad, Jidali 'Struggle' and Kyan Alkawari 'The beauty of a promise...' by Dan'azumi Baba, Kwai a Baka 'An egg in the mouth...' by Aisha Chediyar 'Yan Gurasu, Rikicin Duniya 'This deceptive world' by Dan'azumi Baba became 'Bakandamiyar Rikicin Duniya'. Malumfashi (n.d.:5) indicates the scale of the enterprise involved, 'the KML

⁴ Larkin (1997: 430-2) discusses the origins and nature of the debate sparked off by Ibrahim Malumfashi and others in 1991.

group has over 300 video cassettes to their credit, using of course some of their best selling novels as source material’.

The themes of this literature circle around the perennial issues of crime, violence, money, power, status, love and marriage. Running through these themes are debates about modernity and tradition, often graphically represented on the front covers of the books – fighting and criminal activity is at one moment in a world of warriors on horseback brandishing cutlasses, and in another dominated by AK 47s, shotguns and shades, with the occasional admixture of both worlds. Money, power and status are most graphically represented through the activities of rich businessmen, contractors and officials. Here the trappings of satellite television, mobile phones and the ubiquitous Mercedes are the markers of the powerful elites and their ill-gotten gains. It is on love, marriage and power that the majority of stories are focused. The stories of true love between age-mates thwarted by the intervention of a rich and powerful man are legion, with the conflict between obedience to parents and true love being the hook on which much anguish turns. The explosion into public culture of issues which were hitherto less generally apparent has been accompanied by the establishment of public profiles for many women as writers and latterly as actresses, directors and producers.

While this short essay has focused upon the problems of documenting ‘Hausa popular literature’, the issue of the documenting of the mushrooming video film industry is equally as pressing. Hausa language video films have created a new cultural market and have pushed Indian films on video out of their dominant position, and they have reduced the importance of the cinema through the growth of a TV watching culture, not only in private homes (where women particularly can gather) but in bars and other semi-public places. Indian film-makers (as well as video film-makers from southern parts of Nigeria) are apparently looking to bring their expertise and investment into northern Nigeria, and there have been calls to resist, although many Hausa video films both imitate singing styles and romantic interludes directly from Indian films (for further discussion of cinema and video film see, for example, Larkin 1999 and 2000). The rate at which Hausa video films were being produced by March 1999 prompted the Association of Video Retailers in Kano to call on the producers of video films to limit their launching of films onto the market to no more than two per week because the video retailers could not cope with trying to ensure supply (Fim 1, March 1999, p. 14).

⁵ This title is summarised and discussed by Larkin (1997: 425-9), along with another book, Kishin Kumallon Mata by Maryam Sahabi Liman.

The conundrum that faced the early producers of Roman script literature was two-fold: how to create a critical mass of readers to sustain an economically viable literature industry, and how to create a virtuous circle of communication and development such that the readers of literature became discussants of literature and in turn writers of literature.⁶

In examining cultural production as manifestations of civil society lodged between the apparatus of the state and the economic forces that drive the collapse or growth of a country like Nigeria, we can identify elements that seem, at least at first glance, to have come together to provide a perhaps unexpected dynamism. At the level of our first conundrum, government policy in education produced an urban critical mass of young potential readers – readers who were familiar with popular English-language literature circulating in Nigeria but who were also familiar with, and clearly taken by, the narratives, the romance, and the cultural styles of Indian film. Access to formal publishing houses was not necessary to reach that market, printing presses were sufficient for the Kano entrepreneurial spirit to succeed. As Larkin describes, groups of writers began to address problems and issues from their own personal lives in their writings – issues with which other people in urban northern Nigerian could identify. At the level of our second conundrum, this new arena of cultural production, which later slipped sideways into video film (with a number of consequences, for example relating to the public prominence of women as stars and writers), was itself the subject of another superstructural level of public debate – a debate about the content of books and films, an interpretative process that now covers content, writers, producers, directors and assesses them and their products in terms of wider issues concerning the values, purposes and constraints of ‘Hausa culture’ and, crucially, their legitimacy and appropriateness within Islam. In this interplay between generations of university people, journalists and writers, we see perhaps one of the virtuous circles which go to make up an essential component of a sustainable civil society.

Kano has been the city at the centre (but not the only place), of the debate, not because it is the only city with an intellectual elite to take the debate forward, but because the interest among the general population of this largest city in the northern states has meant that there has been a ready market for first the literature, then the video films and now the cultural magazines too. As commodities, books and videos have been profitable and in demand, entrepreneurs have invested, writers, actors, directors, and publishers have gained fame (and notoriety), critics have sustained long running debates about books and films, religious leaders have endorsed and

⁶ The biography of one of the first writers of Hausa novels, Abubakar Imam, is illuminating in this regard (Mora 1989).

warned, and the habits of reading, and artistic production have become entrenched. Civil society may be under strain from the dire economic conditions of contemporary Nigeria, and the political tensions may be extreme as Nigerians expect reform and renewal from a civilian government, but debate about people's hopes and aspirations, and their view of what is happening to society proceeds undiminished in new forms and with new voices.

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