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THE HUNTER'S LENS: WOMEN IN HAUSA HEROIC HUNTING *KIRARI*

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Abstract

As a performative form common across cultures, not only the Hausa society, *kirari* requires delivery through staging for its realisation. In Hausaland, it is mostly a masculine vocation, even though a few women participate in it. This paper attempts to explore how heroic hunters revere women (mothers, wives and others) through praises during the realisation of *kirari.* Although women do not appear conspicuously in hunting, references to their heroism and roles in shaping men and the art of hunting are prevalent. Attention is paid to the place of 'hunting' in Northern Nigeria in an attempt to situate the art within the context of Hausa-Fulani culture and vocation. This article problematises the reduction of Hausa Muslim women to primary 'homely' duties by assessing their other cultural (sometimes political) roles, some of which they play from the shadows. There has been negligible attention to women's numerous roles, contribution and place in sustaining festivals and cultural practices, thus the need to bridge this gap by examining their roles and representations in *kirari* of some selected hunters. A mixed-research method is adopted in this paper, which allows for observations, interviews, and qualitative analysis of *kirari* as the primary data.

1. Introduction

Women do not feature prominently in the realisation of praise-epithets 'kirari', also called chants, largely due to the fact that the Hausa people view hunting and *kirari* as male-domains. This is not to say however that they do not feature at all. In some cultures within the region, they participate actively not just in preparing their men for hunting, but also in the hunting and *kirari* that accompanies it. They are equally subjects of praise by the male hunters. Hausa hunters, for example, venerate them (as mothers, sisters, and wives) in *kirari* to the level of associating their gallantry and feats to them. Though hunters present women as objects and subjects of men, they (on a second layer) subtly assert that there is no possible life or even heroism without them. Unearthing the salient layered roles of Hausa women is crucial if we are to understand the complexities of Hausa hunting culture, whereby women help

in solidifying men's glories/bravery. They play seminal and mostly hidden role in the way they fortify men's bodies through spiritual means (charms, herbs/concoctions), jealously guard spiritual or magical (*asiri*) powers, and recite the *take* (introductory praise) of the men. It is believed that the hunters who venture out without getting well prepared might get killed or harmed and women play central, although invisible, roles in preparing them for hunting, war, and chanting as part of the heroic culture. It is no wonder then women are eulogised in *kirari* more than any other subject – of course apart from the hunter himself.

Kirari 'praise-epithet' refers to words sung or shouted rhythmically and repeatedly. Mostly practised during hunting and cultural occasions, such as the durbar, *kirari* is an example of a performance-based oral art that is utilised for different occasions and by different groups. It entails the subject's penchant for adulation of the self 'koɗa kai', which usually leads to embellishment, exaggerations of events or physical features, and declaration of likeness or being something that one is not (animate or inanimate objects) (Bello 2023). This suggests that it is equally poetic-based. It is in essence a form that is interspersed with drumming, self-praises, dramaturgy and audience-engagement. In this article, the concern will be with how this art form is exploited by hunters 'mafarauta' to depict and by implication celebrate women. And to achieve this, the *kirari* of some mafarauta will constitute the primary data, but reference will be made to the art of hunting in itself as well as the roles of women in bringing it to life.

2. Kirari, hunting, and Hausaland

In Hausa societies the boundaries, if any, between heroism and leadership were not well marked off each other. In the past, hunters and great warriors were revered, and were even made leaders 'sarki' and charged with the responsibility of governing communities and providing security. According to legends leaders at times emerged through wrestling 'kokowa' bouts in what is today known as Katsina during the time of Kumayau, Rumba Rumba and Bataretare. Gallantry was cardinal to leadership and one of the means of asserting one's place among men was through *kirari*. Hunters, warriors 'yan-tauri', and boxers 'yan-dambe' utilise *kirari* to instil fear and recount their valour and bravery during hunting expedition and/or wars. Praise-epithets are usually dramatised before an eager audience, whether in the cities or in the bushes before, during or after hunting expedition or other occasions (Bello 2023). Several scholars have tried to locate the origin of drama in the African sense of the term to such performances and other forms of traditional and religious ceremonies. For example, Frye (1957) argues that, all the major genres of literature arise primarily from or are intricately related to primitive religious dramas objectifying the death and rebirth of fertility in nature.

As a performative art form, *kirari* is a traditional theatrical performance, because it involves the restaging of hunting expedition or wars through a mimetic depiction of conflict or human feats, incorporating space, dramatis personae, impersonations,

spectacle, costumes, props, plot, spectators (whether participatory or not), singing, and drumming (Bello & Baum 2020). Other traditional and religious Hausa practices such as children's doll play 'yar-tsana', folktale 'tatsuniya', hubby horse 'danda-dokin kara', and spirit cult 'bori' have not fallen short, for they are equally performances with dramatic elements. *Kirari* features in at least three (3) traditional practices, hunting 'farauta', boxing 'dambe' and spirit cult 'bori'. In the practice of hunting and boxing, the subjects are human beings. In the spirit cult, however, the subjects of praise are spirits (Kings 1967). The concern in this paper is with heroic hunting by men, which is the medium through which the roles and representation of women will be examined.

Hunting is the art and practices of pursuing any living organism, normally wildlife or feral animals, by humans for food, trade, or recreation. Although poaching, which is the killing, tapping, or capture of the hunted species contrary to applicable law, has been banned in many societies, in Hausaland, especially in the past, hunting 'farauta' is regarded as lawful. The species that are hunted are called 'game', and are usually mammals and migratory and non-migratory game-birds. In the northern region, the hunting culture enjoys a long history, even dating back to the early Hausa people in the area. (Hunting is actually one of the oldest practices associated with almost all cultures). It was sustained because of its revered nature, even though most of the thick forests in the region that used to house these games have either been taken over by bandits or encroached/destroyed through one human activity or the other. Hunting, blacksmithing, farming, and dyeing were time-honoured occupations of the Hausas (Sabiu, Zainol & Abdullahi 2018; Olugunwa 2014).

Kirari, like other literary forms, is transmitted through the language of poetry, and uses tropes that, in turn, defamiliarise our everyday understanding of language and the world as we know it. It involves a degree of embellishment of language, through the usage of simile, metaphor, hyperbole, and alliteration. It is a category of heroic praise poetry, which for Kunene (1971) is used to eulogise the deeds and adventure of its subject-hero. Unlike in Classical and European models, heroic poetry narrates the warrior's ferociousness and bravery in war or other platforms like hunting that reveals his uncommon courage. Qualities and deeds such as those mentioned qualify the warrior as worthy of poetic oratorical praises. These heroes are not regarded as extraordinary or descendants of some gods with some supernatural powers, thus their valour can be proven. Kunene (1971) argues that, they are not superior beings, unlike those celebrated in the classical epic poetry of Homer (Iliad and Odyssey).

Despite their frailty and mortality, these heroes nonetheless celebrate themselves and are in turn celebrated and praised by poets or bards. Their acts of bravery are decorated with metaphorical and rhetorical tropes, literary devices that transport the ordinary to a level of extra-ordinariness. The 'embellishment' of their deeds is

mostly meant to be figurative, though in heroic hunting 'farautar jarumta' claims of superhuman feats are put to the test (Batic 2019; Bello 2023). Heroism was viewed with respect, becoming the order of the day, in Hausaland during its years of wars. What is today known as Northern Nigeria, and some parts of Niger Republic, went through incessant wars, mostly between neighbouring communities in the area. The people are largely Hausas, but there are a number of other ethnic groups.

The Hausa people – also known as Hausawa – are one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa. They are found in the Sahelian areas of Northern Nigeria and South Eastern Niger, with a large number living in parts of Cameroun, Ghana, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire and Sudan (Greenberg 1966). Hausa communities are scattered throughout West Africa and on the hajj routes across the Sahara desert especially around the town of Agadez. The Hausa people were – at one time – called 'maguzawa' (followers of traditional spirituality) with majority of them engaged in farming and hunting. It is reported that the (maguzawa) mostly lived in rural areas around Kano and Katsina and were known to have facial mark similar to those of the early rulers of Kano and Katsina. Harold (1946) argues that although the maguzawa differ from some of the Hausa groups living around the area, they share similar social organisation, such as leadership (all were led by a *sarki*) and houses (living in scattered compounds). Prior to colonization, the Hausas had an organised system of government led by a *sarki*, a degree of division of labour and strict societal prescripts.

Several traditional practices and customs that were once valued by the people had to give way over time due to modernisation, including the hunting culture, which was once a major occupation of the Hausa people. Hunters now struggle for acceptance in a culture that once revered them. Changes have swept across the land, such that people no longer rely on hunting to feed their families, there are no communal wars, and lineage, instead of heroism, is now the main determinant of succession. In fact, hunters – who are largely *'yan-tauri* 'hard men with knife blades' – are viewed with disdain and considered as threats to public peace. Although a number of them have turned out to be miscreants 'ƙauraye' engaged in nefarious activities, many others have managed to remain relevant by serving as local guards and vigilante 'yan-banga' members in communities. And with the spate of banditry, and other crimes, in rural areas of Katsina, Zamfara, and Sokoto, they help in restoring order, containing the violence, and aiding security personnel in operations. Importantly also, they serve as conduits through which the culture of hunting and art of *kirari* are sustained. In subsequent section, the *kirari* of some select hunters will be analysed to gauge the depiction of relevance of women in the lives of the hunters, as well as their place in the society.

3. The man's lens: women in kirari

Heroic hunting culture 'farautar jarumta' of the past involved several participants; including hunters, who received kola nuts as invitation, praise singers like

Abubakar Kassu Zurmi and Muhammadu Gambu, who recited the introductory praises 'take' of the hunters and provided the invigorating tempo and rhythms with their music that intensified rival clashes, drummers, and flutists (Na-Ahmadu 2012). Together, the participants create the needed excitement and tension, pushing hunter-performers to an ecstatic point, which is usually the climax of the performances. To appreciate *kirari*, there is the need to not only listen to it, but also see it performed. As a folk art, it is given life through spectacle. Although *kirari*, especially in the past, is not sacred it is also not secularised. Dasylva (1997) maintains that forms of this nature (loric traditions) exploit the fullest resources of drama. It was *kirari's*, somewhat, sacred nature that exempts women from actively participating, although with time a few of them were able to break the circle. Although women were not part of the actual performances – in the sense of participating in the hunt and dispute over the game 'kazar ɓarfi' – they help in preparing the men for hunting and, at times, recite their introductory praises 'take' before they set out. They also 'jealously' guard the secret of their magical 'asiri' powers (Malalo 2012). This explains why some hunters relate their uncommon feats to their wives, thereby praising them in their *kirari.*

As identified earlier, hunters deploy allusions, references and other tropes in their *kirari.* Hyperbole 'kambamar zulaƙi' is one of the most common tropes that are used by hunters to either exaggerate or stress a claim. The claims are mostly meant to be metaphorical, as can be seen in the manner they associate themselves to animals or weapons. In order to create such associations, they use what Kunene (1971) calls eulogues, an all encompassing term that embraces all forms of praise phrase as well associations, including the hero's connection with other people, mostly his relatives. Oumarou (2018) views Hausa *kirari* in this regard as an autobiographical conduit – a window through which we can view the life of the hero. In this context, eulogue will be used as a generic term for a host of associated references. Of concern however is the category of affiliation of the hunter to a wife, mother or sister, generally to people related to him by blood or marriage.

The affiliation eulogue category is used in this case to refer to the connection that exists between a hunter-performer and certain women, as shall be examined in the *kirari* texts to be studied. Tsoho (2014) identifies that the layers of relationships include blood, marriage, and friendship. In establishing these ties, Hausa words like *ɗan* (son of), *jikan* (grandson of), *mijin* (husband of), *wan* (brother of), *sirikin* (in-law of), among others, are used. In *kirari*, hunter-performers exploit the first layer of their praises (given interpretations) to 'reduce' women to sources of comfort (as in wives) or containers/means of birth (mothers). On the second layer, it is suggested that they are heroic in themselves and, one can say, roots of the hero's courage, as can be discerned from Na-Ahmadu's *kirari* "kura kahurin kare" below.

(1) *Ni ar Na-Ahmadu Kwabre [...]*
I am Na-Ahmadu Kwabre [...]

(2) *Kuma ni ar kura kahurin kare na malan Mamman*
I am the hazardous and violent hyena, a relative to malan Mamman

(3) *Kuma ni ar kura kahurin kare mijin Hanne mai ban tsoro*
I am the deadliest and furious hyena, the husband to the dreadful Hanne.

Na-Ahmadu uses the word 'na*'* in the excerpts above as an open association class, in such a way that any sort of association can be attached to it; it can refer to a wife or sister, or, more broadly, even a friend, depending on how it is used in context. In verse (2) for example, it connects him with his brother, Mamman, which reveals the importance of family units among Hausa people. In verse (3) he uses *mijin* (husband of) to not just paint his wife, Hanne, as a 'submissive' and 'weak' woman but a fierce and dreadful one as well who should equally be feared. As a wife and guardian of his magical 'asiri' secrets, she can make or mar him. Na-Ahmadu (2012) confessed that, Hanne herself can withstand a fierce brawl with a man, because she also possesses magical powers, courtesy largely of course of her husband's vocation as hunter and *ɗan-tauri* (hard man with knife blade). In the full text of his *kirari* Na-Ahmadu also exploited other 'relative' eulogues by associating himself with his parents, children, wife, brothers, sisters, and other relations, in an autobiographical style, ultimately relating his prowess to his family, which was known for gallantry in hunting and war.

Lineage is important in heroic praise poetry. As a descendent of a great family line, Na-Ahmadu traces his forbears with pride. He also considers the accomplishments of his family as epic, thereby claiming that even the women in the family are daring and courageous. By implication then, even the women that marry into the family can attain such height. The fierceness of the women in his family is not defined by age, as Na-Ahmadu will have us believe in the following excerpt.

(1) *Ni ar kura kahurin kare na gwamma tsiwa*
I am the deadly hyena, a relation of gwamma the insolent.
In verse (1), Na-Ahmadu associates himself with the old gwamma, which in Hausa is used to refer to a paternal aunt, but one specifically older than one's father. In an attempt to paint her nature, he utilises a 'literal' eulogue, which is used in *kirari* and generally praise poetry to describe the habit, character, physique, or temperament of subjects of praise, to reveal her insolent, discourteous and temperamental state and nature. Although insolence 'tsiwa' is associated with women, Na-Ahmadu utilises the word to suggest that despite her old age she is still as explosive as a young man in his prime. Typical of men engaged in hunting and other manly vocations, however, Na-Ahmadu could not escape misrepresentation of women through the use of banal and sexually suggestive words in "kura kahurin kare" as in the following verses.

(1) *Yaro na ganin gato ga uwatai*
The boy who sees his mother's vagina

(2) *Ya kwana lallashin bura tai*
Will spend the whole night consoling his penis

Na-Ahmadu exploits suggestive sexual images in verses in (1) and (2) to show that a vagina is almost always expected to generate a reaction from a man, especially lads. Although the imagery is trite, he creates an Oedipus-complex situation, suggesting incest since a boy is not expected to be sexually attracted to his mother in any way – especially given the cultural and religious orientation of the Hausa people. Sexual imageries of this nature depict women as subjects of sex appeal, and can be said to constitute a misrepresentation. Actually, these imageries and words are common in the Hausa language. Attempts have been made to rid it of such imageries, but they have taken deep root and appear prominently. In proverbs for example it is common to hear: *haihuwa ɗaya horon gindi* (the first childbirth nurtures a vagina for future deliveries) and *da zaman banza gwamma susar golaye, inji kare* (the dog says that it is better to scratch your scrotum than to sit around doing nothing). The language is steeped in these sexual images and hunter-performers exploit them to the fullest. As a paradox Na-Ahmadu conclude his *kirari* by relegating of women, some of whom he elevated earlier, in the verses *taurin mai ɗan ƙarhi wahala ne* (it is futile to claim bravery when you are not man enough) and *yaro tsaya gida kayi tsiwa* (stay at home boy and continue with your insolence) by associating weakness with insolence, which is a feminine trait.

The practice of hunting has changed over time, such that hunting performance now occurs during ceremonies (weddings, naming events) unlike in the past when hunters staged expeditions and performed their *kirari* in thick forests. This allowed women to participate as audience members. They also occasionally participate in the stage performances. As identified earlier, the hunters' eulogise women, highlighting their significance in the *kirari* tradition. In the *kirari* of Sarki Shehu, a skilled hunter in Danja, there is reference to a woman named Abu, who is presented in the *kirari* as a daughter of one of the hunters who is particularly close to the hunter-performer using the associative reference 'na' as in the following verse.

(1) *Ni sha kwaramniya na baban Abu*
I am the hustler, an ally of Abu's father

The reference in this case is to a daughter of another hunter. In Hausa societies, fathers' names are fondly associated with their daughters' and so it is very common to hear *baban Abu* (father of Abu) or any female name for that matter. This shows the level of bonding between them. The importance of women in the lives of men in these societies cannot be overstated. No matter how patriarchal the man is, women (wife or daughter) often enjoy a soft spot in his life. This is demonstrated in *kirari* of Muhammadu Haruna, a seasoned hunter from Hunƙuyi.

(1) *Ni sha kwaramniya nike, uban Safiya da Habiba*
I am the hustler, the father of Safiya and Habiba

(2) *Uban Ruƙayyatu da Sulaimanu*
Father of Ruƙayyatu and Sulaimanu

(3) *Angon Adama da Asabe*
Bridegroom of Adama and Asabe

(4) *Na Basira bada kanka a sare*
The lover of Basira who can lose his head for her sake

(5) *Kaje gida kace ya fadi*
And declare it missing when I get home

The excerpts above demonstrate the hunter-performers love for the women in his life, an attachment the audience, most of who know him, can testify to; it is beyond mere eulogies or claims. In verses (1) and (2), he proudly depicts himself as a loving father to two daughters and a son, using the eulogue *uban* (father of), and in verse (3) he paints himself as a loving husband to two women using *angon* (bridegroom of). The English word 'bridegroom' means a newlywed man, but in Hausa the word 'angon' is used to refer to both a newlywed man and one who still holds on to his vows even after years of marriage. In (4) and (5), there is a reference to the most endearing of his wives – one that he is willing to bend and break for, to the point of losing his head in the process. Despite Haruna's declared preferences for Basira over Adama and Asabe, his *kirari* reveals that he holds the family unit in high regard. During an interview, he shared that his wives and children constantly pray for his safe return when he goes on hunting expeditions and always returns to their warm embrace.

Ibrahim Taiyo, known as *sarkin dawa* (king of the forest), also extols the virtues of his wife, Uwale, who he equates to about ten women in a poignant verse: *ni na Uwale tamkar da goma* (I am Uwale's husband, a woman equal to ten others). Uwale's sense of importance and place in the life of the hunter is exaggerated in this verse using hyperbole 'kambamar zulaƙi'. This statement may also be intended to stress a claim (ƙarfafa zance). Exaggeration feature frequently in Hausa poetry, especially under the praise poetry category. Claim to invulnerability and ability to withstand strikes of vicious hunters for days can be found in the *kirari* of several hunters. In Shata's "Hassan Sarkin Dogarai", the bard exploits it to equate the subject's height with a hut/roof, his strength to that of the horse, and his prowess to that of four-and-a-half men (Bello 2019).

4. Conclusion

Hunting has always been associated with men. Though the vocation had given way to other trades due, largely, to modernisation and other factors, it is still practiced in some parts of Northern Nigeria. *Kirari* had equally survived even as the heroics and escapades attached to it have waned. It had been argued in this paper that, women act seminal roles preparing men for hunting, guarding and passing magical

powers to progenies, praying for the safety of their men and providing comfort to them. It is also argued that they also participate in *kirari* as spectators and participants in the conflicts that accompany it. Importantly, the paper tried to assess how women are depicted in praise-epithet using the *kirari* texts of some male hunters. The analysis revealed that, hunter-performers utilise relative and literal eulogues to show their importance as wives, mothers and daughters. It also identified that literary tropes such as hyperbole and paradox are exploited in embellishing the status of women in the lives of men and the society as a whole. It is argued that the *kirari* as a type of autobiography enables the subject to present his life using a number of eulogues of association. It is through the hunters' lenses, therefore, that the analysis was able to locate the status of women in Hausa societies.

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