

# ADAMU HALILU SHAIHU UMAR



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*National Film, Video and Sound Archive in Jos, 2017*



## FOREWORD

### Stefanie Schulte Strathaus

The photo on the left was taken in May 2017 at the National Film, Video and Sound Archive in Jos while searching for reels from the film SHAIHU UMAR. Didi Cheeka had previously viewed the former rooms of the Colonial Film Unit, later Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC) in Lagos as a possible location for a cinema for the Lagos Film Society. There he came upon the remains of decades of old film culture, including one reel of this film. His immediate reaction was clear: this was film history that so far had only existed as a significant gap.

The restoration project was born before anyone had even seen the film or the financing had even been settled. The Nigerian Film Corporation, under the direction of Dr. Chidia Maduekwe, immediately threw in their support.

With the aid of the Federal Foreign Office and in the framework of the project "Archive außer sich," part of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt project "The New Alphabet," supported by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, it was possible to transport the reels to Berlin for restoration. The film was put together piece by piece. A film that narrates a chapter of the history of the slave trade which has received little attention, and which almost no one had seen, finally came to the screen four decades after it was finished. On October 26, 2019 it premiered in the cinema hall of the NFC in Lagos where the first reels had been found and which had been renovated in the meantime.

In 2017 a film scanner was installed in Jos, where there were other feature films, documentaries, and newsreels from the 1940s to the '90s. However, this was not only a digitization project, but also a wide-ranging research project. For this reason the University of Jos and the Nigerian Film Corporation, to which the National Film Institute and the National Film, Video and Sound Archive belong, started offering a practice-oriented archival master's program in October 2019. The first master's degree in film archiving and film culture anywhere in Africa is a cooperation with the master program "Film Culture: Archiving, Programming, Presentation" at the Goethe University Frankfurt, the DFF – Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum, the Arsenal, and the Lagos Film Society. The work to establish this program is funded by the DAAD in the program "Transnational Education."

The rediscovery of the film SHAIHU UMAR marks the start of a unique collaboration between many institutions and the beginning of a new configuration of past, present, and future. This above all also takes into account transnational archive structures and the power relations inscribed in them. For this reason, SHAIHU UMAR and the other films of the NFC that are still waiting to be digitized are not by any means the only films to play a role here. There are many films from Nigerian film history scattered all over the world in other archives, where they are languishing on shelves, unnoticed. The publication of this DVD is also meant as a call to track down this material and to bring it to the place whose history it tells, a history that is on the rise.

*Administrative building of the National Film,  
Video and Sound Archive in Jos, 2017*



*Building of the Nigerian Film Corporation  
in Lagos, where the first reels of  
SHAIHU UMAR were discovered, 2019*



## FOREWORD

Chidia Maduekwe

I first came into tangential contact with SHAIHU UMAR in 1977 during FESTAC '77. However, following my appointment on March 31, 2017 as the Chief Executive of the Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC), I have had more in-depth and better understanding of the exceedingly strong values in the storyline of SHAIHU UMAR. In 2016, Didi Cheeka from the Lagos Film Society together with the Goethe-Institut discovered the film in our archival holdings in Lagos and subsequently the Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art indicated interest in its restoration and digitization for expanded public viewing.

At that time, and being relatively new to the Nigerian film industry, the value of the film had not yet dawned on me. On further inquiry, I was surprised at the immense socio-cultural relevance of this film, particularly in the emergence of the Nigerian film industry as we know it today.

The book upon which this film was based is also of significance to us in Nigeria. It was written by the first Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa: a politician, teacher, and humanist who combined politics with intellectual pursuit, something which was novel at that period of our history.

Secondly, SHAIHU UMAR was the first feature film produced in northern Nigeria by the Federal Film Unit, and directed by the veteran Nigerian film director, Mallam Adamu Halilu. This Film Unit later metamorphosed into the Nigerian Film Corporation in 1979, which I now have the privilege of heading.

SHAIHU UMAR laid the basic norm of filmmaking in northern Nigeria. Its cinematography and soundtrack, which covered different creative styles, remains relevant to the art and aesthetics of filmmaking to this very day.

It is imperative for me to mention that SHAIHU UMAR drew attention to the cultures of the Hausa people, their language, tradition, and long-established interaction with the Arab world, which western historiography had consistently underplayed and neglected.

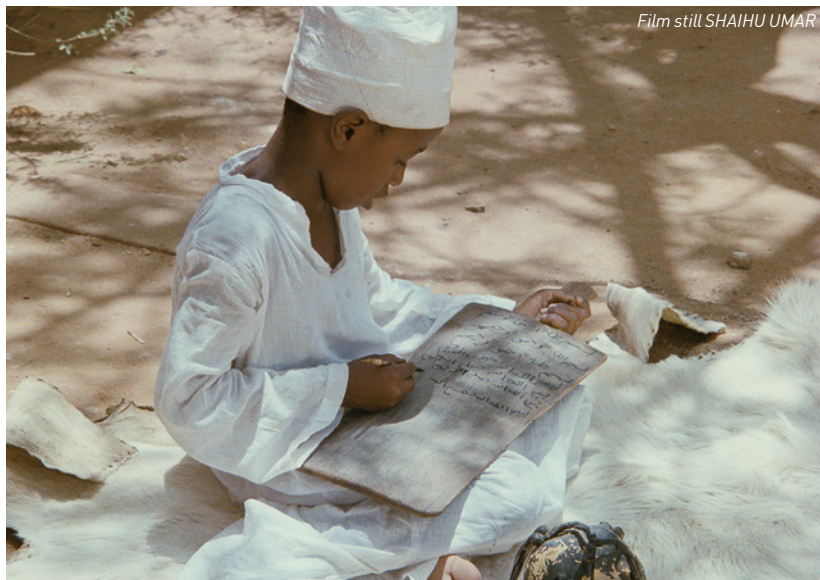
SHAIHU UMAR also shows that filmmaking in Nigeria has a longer history than the present Nollywood phenomenon. It is only apt that we recognize and revive the creative works of those who pioneered cinematic arts in Nigeria. This DVD publication is a first step in this process.

The production of this booklet from the restored and digitized film is another first within the Nigerian film context. Most of what is prevalent are adaptations of books into films, but we have not embraced the fact that great books can also come out from very good films.

For the Nigerian Film Corporation, this is also a first step towards the restoration and digitization of other great historical works that are in our National Film, Video and Sound Archive (NFVSA) so that they can be accessible to scholars, researchers, filmmakers, and the general public.

I commend the Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art, the Goethe-Institut, the Goethe University Frankfurt, and all those who have played a key role in bringing SHAIHU UMAR back to life as “film and literature.”

*Dr. Chidia Maduekwe is the Managing Director of the Nigerian Film Corporation.*



Film still SHAIHU UMAR

## SHAIHU UMAR

*Alternative title: SHEHU UMAR*  
Nigeria 1976, 142 min\*  
Original format: 35mm

**Director:** Adamu Halilu  
**Production:** Federal Ministry of Information  
(Federal Film Unit Kaduna, Nigeria)  
**Screenplay:** Adamu Halilu  
**Dialogue:** Umaru Ladan  
**Camera:** Yusufu Mohammed, Zakari Yusufu  
**Editing:** Edwin Apim  
**Sound:** Baba Gana  
**Production design:** Assad Yasin  
**Costumes:** Abdulkarim Mohammed Richard  
Tsavende  
**Technical supervisor:** Sunday Ibidun  
**Executive producer:** Fatai Kesington  
**Production manager:** Umaru Dembo  
**Location manager:** Zakari Yusufu

**With:** Umaru Ladan (Shaihu Umar), Mairiga Aliyu (Fatima), Husaini Mohammed (Umar, age three years), Umaru Dembo (Makau), Assad Yasin (Abdulkarim), Harira Kachia (Kaka).

**Also starring:** Hajara Ibrahim, Kasimu Yero, Mamuda Abdullai, Daudu Ahmed, Tuku Na'idde, Yahaya Mohammed, Muhammed Abdu, Zubeiru Danbatta, Dala Isa, Kulu Mashala, Abdulmumini Chiranchi, Mustafa Mohammed.

## SYNOPSIS

Set in northern Nigeria towards the end of the 19th century, SHAIHU UMAR starts with a discussion between Islamic students and their renowned teacher, the wise man Shaihu Umar. Asked about his origins, Umar begins to tell his story: he comes from a modest background and is separated from his mother after his father dies and his stepfather is banished. His subsequent trials and tribulations are marked by slavery, and he is put to any number of tests until he finally becomes the adopted son of his Arabic master Abdulkarim. He attends Koran School and is made an imam upon reaching adulthood. Following a particular dream, he resolves to search for his mother.

The film is based on the eponymous 1955 novel by Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, which has been reprinted many times. Balewa was prime minister of Nigeria from 1957 to 1966. The film was long believed to be lost, but the negatives and prints were rediscovered in the archive of the Nigerian Film Corporation in 2016. Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art restored the film with the support of the German Embassy in Abuja.

*Stefanie Schulte Strathaus*

**Films by Adamu Halilu:** *Mama Learns a Lesson* (1963), *Child Bride* (1971), SHAIHU UMAR (1976), *Kanta of Kebbi* (1978), *Moment of Truth* (1981), *Zainab* (1982).



Portrait of Adamu Halilu

**ADAMU HALILU** was born in the state of Adamawa, Nigeria in 1936. He studied screenwriting and editing at the Overseas Film and Television Centre and at the Shell Film Unit, both in London. Before returning to Nigeria, he worked for the Italian radio and television broadcasting company RAI in Rome. In 1963, he made his first feature film, *Mama Learns a Lesson*. In 1976, Halilu made SHAIHU UMAR, his first major project and one of the first feature films in Hausa, the most widely spoken commercial language in west-central Africa. Along with his work as a feature film director, Adamu Halilu also wrote screenplays and took part in the production of almost seventy documentary films. In 1978, he founded the production company Haske Films. From 1983 to 1985, he was general manager of the Nigerian Film Corporation, and in 1986 he was appointed director of the Nigerian Film Unit. Adamu Halilu died on September 1, 2001.

\*The duration refers to the original projection speed of 24 fps.

## WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO NIGERIA'S POST-WAR CINEMA?

Imagine if the entire collection of Italian Neorealist or German Expressionist Cinema were destroyed and the memory of them erased as if they were never there—not through war, but as an act of more-or-less conscious politically-sponsored forgetting. This is what has happened to Nigeria's post-war cinema [the war referred to is the 1967–1970 Nigerian Civil War, or Biafran War—ed.].

Until the war, Nigeria's audio-visual archive, which it inherited from the Colonial Film Unit [which existed from 1939 to 1955—ed.], was a fine example of how to keep a film archive. The need to erase the memory of war and subsequent military dictatorships led to the gradual abandonment of the country's house of history.

Imagine you are a film scholar studying Nigerian cinema. You want to do research on the classics—the pre-Nollywood, post-war cinema—and you have made a list of films you want to see: *Kongi's Harvest* (1970, directed by Ossie Davis and based on the play by Wole Soyinka), or *Bullfrog in the Sun* (1971, directed by Hansjürgen Pohland and based on the novels "Things Fall Apart" and "No Longer at Ease" by Chinua Achebe), or SHAIHU UMAR (based on the novel of the same title by Nigeria's first post-independence prime minister, Tafawa Balewa). Where do you go to watch and study these films? You try to connect with the archives and libraries and the answer is the same: no copy of the film seems to exist, or if there is one, nobody knows where it is kept

or who may be holding on to it. What do you do—simply settle for stills of the film and secondary materials published in academic journals and consider your primary material lost?

These questions were triggered some three years ago by the chance discovery of hundreds of decaying cans of films in the half-abandoned rooms of Nigeria's old Film Unit. Among the discovery was a supposedly lost film, SHAIHU UMAR, by Adamu Halilu. Considered one of the best, if not the best, of this filmmaker's works (naturally, a film scholar would want to see his body of work to make an informed judgment), it was produced in 1976, with financial support from the culture ministry. As we considered the vinegar-ruined [vinegar syndrome, the decay of acetate film base—ed.] prints before us, we asked ourselves in silent wonder why proper care was not taken of these films. The search led to the country's National Film, Video and Sound Archive (NFVSA) and the discovery of further prints and negatives in much better condition.

Halilu's film deals with slavery in the trans-Saharan trade route and a mother's undying love. Sold into slavery, Umar rose to scholarly prowess and earned the title of Shaihu [related to the word "sheik"—ed.]. But one night, a dream about his mother, alone and wandering the desert, triggers his memory of her (by then she had been brutally sold into slavery in her search for him) and his lost homeland. Widely regarded as the first piece of Hausa

literature, "Shaihu Umar" positions Islam as a benign force in the region, with its participation in slavery incidental. There is, in this treatment, the possibility of approaching this film as propaganda "of particular interest," to quote from an academic journal, "essentially to a classical Muslim community, rather than to the general audience."

There is a different context within which to view this film, however, not as an embarrassingly direct piece of propaganda: as a landmark in Nigeria's pre-Nollywood filmmaking, SHAIHU UMAR extends insight into the practice and method of films made in an earlier era that ended in the late 1980s. Ever since the rise of Nollywood, international academic discourse has focused on that phenomenon without acknowledging—notwithstanding the unquestion-

able watershed that was the Nigerian home video boom—what came before.

Almost five decades ago, one of the pioneers of African cinema, Paulin Vieyra, spoke of the need for the "filing of filmed documents" and the possibility for the "establishment of a pilot archive centre in one African region."

In Nigeria, and in most parts of Africa, the use, access, and management of film archives is defined within a narrow, unsustainable framework and one is only able to reference an almost absent access. This screening at the Berlinale Forum, continuing and expanding the initiative that Paulin Vieyra and others began, offers a level of access to this post-war cinema.

*Didi Cheeka, January 2018*

*This article has been published in the Berlinale Forum online catalog.*



## ADAMU HALILU'S EPOCHAL FILM

Films like this one are what makes the Berlinale Forum so necessary. The re-discovery of this Nigerian film classic SHAIHU UMAR is an extraordinary event, moving, unsettling, meaningful. Adamu Halilu's epochal film from 1976 is based on the novel of the same name by the writer Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, who led Nigeria into independence as Prime Minister. After the military coup of 1966 Balewa was abducted and murdered. The film is legendary. It was, however, considered lost until the reels from several prints were discovered in the archive of the Nigerian Film Corporation two years ago, and were then restored by the Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art with the support of the Goethe-Institut and the Federal Foreign Office.

Like Balewa's novel, the film is a milestone in Nigeria's cultural history. It takes up a historical chapter that many African countries have not yet dared to tackle: the Arab and inner-African slave trade. The film tells its story in the most glittering images, even in digital copies the colors and the light shine as if one were looking at real film.

SHAIHU UMAR tells its story, which presumably takes place at the end of the nineteenth century, in the somewhat theatrical form that is particular to early African cinema. Once you give into the film, you quickly fall under its spell. A caravan arrives in a small town in the Muslim north of Nigeria, where the famous Sheikh Umar is teaching. The Koran students know and venerate him with fear and humility. "It

is quite amazing the way you are. Although your accent is Arabic, you do not look down on us." The sage tells them how he was stolen from his mother as a young boy, abducted by slave traders and sold. First to a childless Nigerian family, then to an Arab trader without a son of this own.

Using flashbacks the film steadily follows the path of the young boy's life, who after the trader's death becomes the student of a famous scholar. Time and again it pauses to show the world around the young boy. Life in simple villages with huts made of straw and clay, working with shepherds, childbirth, and wedding processions, the singing of women, the rituals of warriors. Then the slaves making their way through the desert. Nigerians were dragged from oasis to oasis, chained to one another, half starved, thirsting, exposed to the sun without any protection. Through Niger and Libya to Egypt. Always the same route. Bedouins, nomads, or Tuaregs rule the slave markets of Kano or Ber Kufa.

Certain images seem as calm and melancholy as still lives, others are overwhelmingly beautiful. Even the caravans travelling through the desert are extremely aesthetic. White camels cross the white sand on a diagonal. Such images are familiar from National Geographic photo books, only that in Halilu's film they are never aiming for exotic grandeur.

The film is pervaded by a conciliatory tone. Balewa was a conservative author, and the film as well embeds its theme in a ceremonial quality that is almost religious. Time and again it deferentially bows before the sheikhs and

the emirs, putting Koran schools and scrolls into the image, lauding the omnipotence of Allah. You may understand the Islamic faith in this film as the foundation on which the search for truth and reconciliation could be based.

The film testifies to an artistic and intellectual awakening in northern Nigeria, which would not be possible today. The north of SHAIHU UMAR has long come under the spell of Islamism. African authors who deal with the Arab slave trade today, like the Senegalese anthropologist Tidiane N'Diaye, are few and far between. And due to the spectacle by which Nollywood has flooded the video market, Nigerian film heritage is falling into oblivion. When SHAIHU UMAR was shown at the Delphi Cinema as part of the Berlin International Film Festival in 2018, attended by some of the Nigerians involved in the film, they spoke of the difficulties of establishing artistically ambitious cinema in Nigeria. They also emphasized that the country would have to come to terms with the old slavery so that people would not enter into a new, self-inflicted slavery in Europe. How right they are! But the slavery of today is not only self-imposed and not only European. Slavery in Arab countries and Arab households is still not being called out by name.

*Thekla Dannenberg, February 2018  
This article has been published on [perlentaucher.de](http://perlentaucher.de),  
and translated by Daniel Hendrickson.*



35mm film can of SHAIHU UMAR

# "SHAIHU UMAR", ABUBAKAR TAFAWA BALEWA

Excerpt from the novel

## CHAPTER ONE

God is the king who is greater than all other kings in glory, He is the most holy of all things, He is the king unto whom there is none like. Near the walled city of Bauci there is a little town called Rauta. In this little town there was once a certain malam, learned in the stars, in the Koran, and in the scriptures, and an upholder of the Faith. This malam was one of the men of this world to whom God has given the gift of knowledge, His name was Shaihu Umar. So great were his learning and wisdom that news of him reached countries far distant from where he lived. Men would come from other countries, travelling to him in order to seek knowledge. Before long the people coming to him foregathered, and became so numerous that they had no place to set up their compounds, so it became necessary for some of them to seek compounds in the little villages near to Rauta.

None who had studied under Shaihu Umar had ever known him impatient, nor had they ever known a day when they had come to study, and he had said that he was tired, except perhaps if he were unwell. And even if ill-health afflicted him, if it were not severe, he would without fail come out to teach. This Shaihu Umar was a man beyond all others, the like of whom is not likely to be found again. Whatever evil thing befell him, he would say, 'It is God who relieves all our troubles.' He never became angry, his face was always

gentle, he never interfered in what did not concern him, and he never wrangled with anyone, let alone did he ever show even the slightest cantankerousness. Why, because of this character of his, it came about that in the whole country no-one ever criticised him, and many people began to say, 'Certainly this is no mere man, he is a Saint.'

One day, just before evening prayer, after Shaihu Umar had been teaching his students, they were all sitting discussing the affairs of the world, when one student asked him 'Master, I would like to ask you a little question, but I hesitate in case you should think that it is disrespect towards you that makes me ask.' Shaihu Umar answered him, 'Why, knowledge is never made complete except by asking, and what is more, no man knows everything. So ask me whatever you need to know, and have no fear in your mind. As for me, may God grant that I know what you ask me.'

The questioner said, 'May God grant you his forgiveness Malam, the things I want to know from you are two. First, that you should tell me from whence you come, and that you should tell me about your country. Are all the people of your country as you are? For, as for me, you certainly amaze me. And not only me; whoever knows you will be amazed at you. Secondly, I want you to tell me your origin, for I see that you are not like the people of our country. You have learning and speech like that of the Arabs, yet I see that you do not give yourself airs as they do.'

Umar answered him, 'Certainly you have asked me very sensible questions, to which I can, without doubt, give you the answers. But you have asked for a long story, and one which will cause wonder and pity in all who hear it. Now I will try to tell you about my country and my origin, and about my wanderings, and the difficulties I endured before I arrived here in your town.'



Film still SHAIHU UMAR

## I AM A NATIVE OF KAGARA

Away back (began Shaihu Umar) I was a native of this country, but even so, I did not grow up and pass my boyhood here. It was far away in the country of the Arabs that I grew up. Long long ago I was a native of a certain country near Bida, and the name of our town was Kagara. My father was a tall light-skinned man whose craft was leather-working. My mother was a native of Fatika. Now when my mother was carrying me, my father died and left me an inheritance of six cows, three sheep, and his riding mare. At this time the mare was in foal. All these things were handed over to my mother, who was told to keep them until in God's good time she should give

birth, for they were the property of her son, since this husband of hers had no other relatives to claim the inheritance.

So things went on until one day I was born, and I turned out to be a boy. Now when the naming day came round, my mother had one of my rams caught and slaughtered, and the name of 'Umar' was whispered in my ear. Time passed until, when I was two years old (that is, the time for weaning), my grandmother on my father's side took me to wean me. I lived with her until the time came when my mother wanted to marry again. Then my mother said to my grandmother, 'You know that apart from you, I have no relations in this town besides this boy, and now I want to marry. What is more, many suitors have come forward to press their suit, saying that I must marry the one that I like best. I have come to you for advice. So-and-so and so-and-so seek my hand, but up to now I have not made up my mind which one I like best. I want first to hear what you have to say. Among them is a certain courtier, especially close to the Chief, called Makau.'

When my grandmother heard the name of Makau among the suitors, she said, 'My daughter, indeed God has brought you great good fortune! When there is one with good eyesight, would you marry a blind man? If you ask my advice, you should marry none save Makau. I know that he is a modest man, who is in no way mean-minded, and certainly if you marry him your home will be a happy one.'

My mother accepted this advice. The next day the marriage ceremony was performed, and a day was appointed upon which she was to move



into her husband's compound. When the time came my mother went to live in her own hut, and I remained with my grandmother. I lived happily with my grandmother, and then one day a fatal illness came upon her. When she realised that she was not to recover, she sent for my mother to warn her, saying: 'See now, I do not think that I shall rise again from this illness, so I want you to take this boy home with you, because I do not want to see him cry even a single tear. It would make me very unhappy to see that.' My mother replied, 'Very well.'

Shortly after we had left, my grandmother died. Many people assembled, prayers were said over her, and she was laid in her grave.

When this was all over, I was living comfortably with my mother in Makau's compound, when one day the Chief had all his courtiers summoned. When they

had assembled he said to them, 'The reason I have summoned you is this. I want you to make ready, and set out on a raid on my behalf to Gwari country. I am in dire need, and therefore I want you to make haste to set out, in the hope that you will return quickly.'

When the courtiers heard what the Chief had to say, they all went mad with joy. They were delighted, saying, 'Just give us half a chance, and we'll be off!' The reason for their delight was because, as you know, on a raid they would gain many cattle, and slaves as well, and then when they returned, the Chief would give them a part of everything which they had won. Thus if a man were to capture three slaves, the Chief would take two of them, and he would be allowed to keep one.

The reason for this raid that the Chief was planning, was that he wanted

to obtain some slaves. Some he would put with his own, and send to Kano so that clothes and saddlery might be bought and sent back to him, while others he would send to Bida in order to procure muskets.

Among the horsemen whom the Chief had appointed as raiders was Makau. When the time came for their departure, after the Chief had sought an auspicious hour from a certain malam, Makau came into his compound and gathered his family together. He said to them, 'Now you know that I am going on a raid to Gwari country, and I do not know when I shall return. Whether I shall be killed there, God knows best. For this reason I want to bid you all farewell, and I want you to forgive me for all that I have done to you, for any man in this world, if you live with him, some day you are bound to cause him unhappiness.'

His family all spoke up together. 'By God, you have never done anything to make us unhappy. We wish you a safe journey, and a safe return.' Thereupon all of us burst out crying, so that none of us could hear the other!

The raiders all began to make ready, and in the early dawn they set out and made for the interior of Gwari country. They continued until they reached a small pagan village on a rocky stronghold in the forest. On their arrival in this place, they all dismounted from their horses, and lay down at the foot of some thick shady trees, where no-one could see them. At this season the rains had begun to set in, and all the farmers were about to clear their farms. Now there was no way that these pagans could sow a crop sufficient to feed

them for a whole year, so they had to come out of their towns and come down to the low ground to lay out their farms in the plain. Despite this however, they were not able to tend their farms properly, for fear of raiders.

When the raiders reached the village they hid on the edge of the farms. Early in the morning, just before the time of prayer, the pagans began to come out from their villages, making for their farms. The raiders crouched silently, watching everything that they were doing. They held back until all the people had come out. Then, after they had settled down to work, thinking that nothing would happen to them, the raiders fell upon them all at once, and seized men and women, and even small children. Before the pagans had realised what was happening, the raiders had already done the damage. At once other pagans began to sally forth, preparing to fight to wrest back their brothers who had been captured. Af! Before they were ready, the raiders were far away. They started to follow them, but they had no chance of catching them. Those in front got clean away, leaving their pursuers far behind. [...]

*This transcript is based on the 2016 edition of "Shaihu Umar" published by Markus Wiener Publishers.*

## AN INTERVIEW WITH UMARU DEMBO

**What was your background as an actor before you took one of the leading characters as Makau in SHAIHU UMAR?**

**UMARU DEMBO** I started with drama club in secondary school at Ahudahuda College PSS Zaria between 1959 and 1962. Then in the '60s in Kaduna the British Council gave us, myself and some young people mostly from radio, newspaper, and television, training in acting which was part of a training initiative of the British Council. At the same time the RTK, Radio Television Kaduna, was also showing television plays like a television series in which I participated every week.

**When was your first encounter with Adamu Halilu and how did you meet?**

I used to do voice-over for films for the Federal Film Unit where Adamu Halilu was director for the Kaduna department, but he was doing specialized

productions nationwide. I did the voices for both Hausa and English in Nigerian productions. He identified me as an artist of some scope.

**What can you tell us about the filming? Do you remember any specific challenges?**

For the whole process, including script writing, filming, and editing, it took us a long time, almost three years, maybe even more, if I remember correctly. Finance was another difficulty, I had to go to Lagos and see a Permanent Secretary, Information Ministry, Tafari Ali before getting funds to complete the production. It was funded by the Ministry of Information for FESTAC '77. I am not sure about the total costs. It was a big production then. I dare say the biggest in Nigeria of that time. The desert scenes were also not easy at all. We got lost once trying to identify a location in the desert of Niger. We used improvised blowers for desert effects etc. It was difficult.



*Umaru Dembo and Didi Cheeka at the Berlinale Forum, 2018 © Dario Lehner*



*Film still SHAIHU UMAR, Umaru Dembo as Makau*

**The music in the film is very striking since it covers a lot of different styles. Do you have any recollection of how the soundtrack came into being and if the pieces were written exclusively for the film?**

Adamu and Umar Ladan and myself and of course the sound recordist did most of the work on the music. But nothing written as far as I know. All we did was to produce the music. No writing or other formalities. The soundtrack was mostly formed by the director Adamu.

**How would you situate the story of "Shaihu Umar" within the social and political context at the time?**

"Shaihu Umar" brought about the need of education, especially Nigeria's Arabic and Islamic exposure to the Arabian

countries, despite the local beliefs and traditions of people in northern Nigeria.

**How was the film received after its premiere? Was the film released in different parts of Nigeria as well as internationally?**

The release was not done very well. It did not go through professional distributors then because the film was produced for FESTAC '77. Afterwards the government had no reason to care about the film anymore. Until now there has not been an official launch of the film. Only on TV and discs. There the film was well received, people are still itching to see the film again.

*This interview was conducted in August 2019.*

## REFLECTIONS ON “SHAIHU UMAR”

### Acting as an Archival Footage

So much development appears to have taken place between 1976, when the film SHAIHU UMAR was first produced, and 2017, when it was digitally restored. In spite of the over four-decade gap, the truth is that production quality, storyline, and acting skills in film are not infusing the expected strength and creativity and capacity that is required for international best practices. The focal aim of this article is to appraise the visual representations of one of Nigeria's earliest films, SHAIHU UMAR, in the wider socio-cultural settings of Nollywood (generally) and Kannywood (specifically) and its spectacle of acting, and to disclose how these visual representations have been historically and futuristically pioneered with meanings and realities that reside within and outside the film.

Acting as a shared ability of humanity's elevated and highly saturated experience is a complete culture that reflects on reality. Watching the film SHAIHU UMAR invoked many questions in me: what level of acting exposure/training did the actors have? What criteria were used to cast the actors? How appropriate was it to conform to Islamic injunctions and acting—particularly as Muslim women? How can a film shot in the late 1970s dimensionally bear foresight of the themes confronting contemporary Nigeria? How does the production of the film logically compare to production standards today? How do the elements of acting in the film make the viewer feel?

The overall engagement of this film with the anticipated audience (northern or Muslim Community) will be limiting it in its entirety especially because of the mise-en-scène incorporated in the film. Film preferences as a subject matter in film studies cover many varying angles based on actors acting, socio-demographic factors, and language competence. From this premise I make bold to say that SHAIHU UMAR is rated as a suitable film among viewers of different backgrounds and age groups. Despite it being enmeshed as a religious film, its relation between history (trans-Saharan slave trade), gender and motherhood, and the more recent terrifying acts of kidnapping or child abduction and human trafficking guarantees that this film can shed light on the broader understanding of acting and society.

I acknowledge that this film has the potential to convey religious values that the producers wished to nurture through the film to viewers; however, it is not my aim to discuss this but to state those high aesthetic qualities of the film that are synonymous with acting techniques.

Acting is the medium actors use to articulate the thoughts and feelings of the characters in metaphorical and symbolic forms while emotions/moods are the most appropriate channels through which the actor expresses those dialogues positioned deep within them. The actors' acting skills are what informs our attitude towards the film and the character the



actor interprets. The pleasure we derive from this is because of the impact of the actor's bodily presence on our emotions. It is this impact, which the actors in SHAIHU UMAR inspired in me, that has spurred me to write this article and as Małgorzata Marciniak points out: "The actors are what we most deeply remember of a film and what we most love or hate about it."<sup>1</sup> Acting therefore becomes the tool of communication where the actor's body language and gestures are expressed.

The acting details in this film were gesturally taken into creative consideration. For example in the introductory scene. Two strangers come to Rauta (they had journeyed one month and 11 days) in search of Shaihu Umar whose

fame had spread far and whose secret to wisdom they are seeking. Their first encounter with Shaihu Umar confirms all they have heard of him when he insists that they must be given hospitable accommodation to refresh themselves. The immediate facial exchange of the two strangers and their gestures of nodding is a symbol of their affirmation of all they have heard about this enigma, who they are now engaged with face to face.

It is this scene of encounter that shows Shaihu Umar unfolding his ordeal when the men seek to ask about his background. Their curiosity is also informed by the following dialogue: "It is quite amazing the way you are. Everyone who knows you admires you,

<sup>1</sup> Małgorzata Marciniak, *The Appeal of Literature-to-Film Adaptation*, 64.

[http://lingua.amu.edu.pl/Lingua\\_17/lin-5.pdf](http://lingua.amu.edu.pl/Lingua_17/lin-5.pdf)  
(visited Dec. 30, 2019)

and talks about your kind character. ... although your accent is Arabic, you do not look down on us. ... A lot of people think you are unique."

The action of Shaihu Umar at this declaration shows him looking down with eyes closed. This last statement in reference to his Arabic accent (in Hausa *har chen larabawa*) births a satisfied and humbling smile on the face of Shaihu Umar, and it leads to the buildup of the film where he takes on the role of the narrator, with the rest of the film being presented as flashback-analepsis.

The plot as portrayed in the film was arranged according to the values and interests of Islam, though it is controversial whether everything appeals to the taste of every faithful Muslim.

The film centers on the main character Umar who, in his acting style, doubles as the narrator of the story. In typical African storytelling style the film unfolds with Umar narrating his fate while the acting technique is patterned as a story within a story with analepses (flashbacks) used as interjected scenes that take the narrative back in time from the current story. [...]

While the distinction of the film assumes an outright invocation to promote Islam, the illumination of some scenes and characters may constitute a violation of the principles of Islam. The appearance of some female actors in the film—half-clad maidens like Rabi who was sent by Fatima's mother to call the midwife and the presence of all the women featured in this film—erased a misconceived and obscure notion about the belief that Islam forbade women to be seen, for they were in *Purdah*, a state of social gender

seclusion. How then is it that a film shot over forty decades ago is able to accommodate conflicting conventions of gender disparity and suppression, which were serious issues prevailing in the North where patriarchy rules as a cultural system?

Fundamentally it is important to stress that the clarified merit of this film for me is knowing and seeing that it is unavoidable not to note the representation of these Muslim women who actively interpreted their roles with an aura of believability—Fatima, Amina, Gogo—sending a strong reassurance that Muslim women were not restricted or bound by Sharia laws or patriarchal beliefs as is assumed in some communities. This is because the construction of gender—in this aspect of Muslim women acting is seen as *haram* (forbidden). The assumption that the viewer would envision the half-clad body of the women as a sexualized object is not justified. Therefore viewing the Muslim woman as an actor (among other issues discussed here) was suddenly a discovery I was eager to share and make public.

The majority of the cast in *SHAIHU UMAR* maintained character and performed impressively due to their character interpretation with the exception of some few like the fellow who stood smiling behind the Imam while prayer was held for Umar's father who had died before his birth. Also the scene where the young Umar was hidden by his abductor in the cave did not illustrate the case of a fearful child. Characters such as him or scenes like this tend to destroy the illusion of reality a film tries to project.

In acting it is expected that the actor achieves an internal and external relationship between his own emotions and that of the character he portrays. The ability to do this assures the quality of the entire film.

Fatima's predicaments were often expressed in cries—her drooling nose and red teary eyes speak of the woes of a mother. Her extraordinary resilience in enduring every form of hardship, journeying through the desert in the bid to find her son typecasts her as the typical African woman—strong-willed, hardworking, and sacrificial.

Abdulkarim the Arab merchant had the charisma of a wealthy but devoted faithful Muslim.

The protagonist Umar is a character that embodies deep personality. His accent and diction as an Arab scholar must be applauded. Though a Nigerian and a Northern with the tendency of having the Hausa intonation infiltrate his accent, Umar's effort at sustaining the Arabic accent, though not as flawless as should be, is highly appreciative especially if he had no professional coaching from a speech expert.

Judging from the merit of the actors' performance in the film and specifically in matters of their acting techniques, the actors do display some admirable competence arising, I would like to believe, from their understanding of Hausa culture and language. This may have been the major influence in them interpreting their roles effectively.

Their handling of the story and character, for example Fatima, Gogo-Kaka, Amina, Umar, and Abdulkarim, makes the acting relatable and convincing. It is a chain of relationships between

a mother and daughter (Gogo wisely counseling her daughter Fatima on her choice of husband), it is about commitment and loyalty in friendship (Fatima and Amina), mentorship (Abdulkarim and Umar).

It is also a crestfallen story of pain and betrayal (Makau banished despite his gallantry at war), it also tells an engaged story of man's aggressive inhumanity to man (3-year-old Umar abducted and separated from a mother's love, the enslavement of Fatima as a beast of burden) as tragedy (the sacrifice and death of a mother, Fatima).

Held to a contemporary social standard, the themes of the film, motherhood, child abduction, kidnapping, and intra-slave trading, enhance an overlapping intimacy between the characters, costumes, music, locations, and plot, and eventually mirror the society as it is.

The early representation of Muslim women in this film is a statement that arouses global debate about Muslim women in film industry today. Also my contribution is to how this film *SHAIHU UMAR* can be held up as template for teaching amateur acting classes while also recommending it as a history text.

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## ON THE AFTERWARDNESS OF ADAMU HALILU'S "SHAIHU UMAR"



Film still SHAIHU UMAR

*History, which always precedes us,  
knows more than we do and knows us  
before we do.*

– Jean-Louis Comolli, “Une Terrasse en Algérie”

Most films are quickly forgotten, and many films are irretrievably lost. Four out of five films produced before the advent of sound, for instance, no longer exist in physical form. But if a lost film reappears, like Adamu Halilu’s SHAIHU UMAR, it becomes a time capsule. Like a box lodged in the foundation of a building and containing objects from the time of construction, the film acquires a new form of historical

agency once it is brought back to light through the work of restoration and projection. With a term coined by Sigmund Freud, we can speak of a rediscovered film’s deferred action. Having lain dormant for decades, like the seed of a symptom, it now no longer simply tells a story, but enters into history, connecting past, present, and future in new ways, challenging our knowledge of history and potentially changing its

course. More specifically, the story that SHAIHU UMAR tells belongs to a part of history that still attracts too little attention but continues to shape the destinies of not just Nigeria, but Africa, the history of the centuries-old slave trade across the Sahel and the Sahara. Furthermore, Adamu Halilu’s film speaks not just to the experience of that history, but to what we might call the shape of history. Framed as the reminiscence of a scholar of scripture and filmed with the pace and splendor of a historical pageant, the cinematic form of SHAIHU UMAR exemplifies how history is experienced and transmitted through a convergence of written and oral records with dramatic arts in a symbolic space of community. It shows how, in the African realm and beyond, historiography is not just the prerogative of a caste of professionals—of professors and state-appointed teachers—but an artistic and communal effort.

“If the history of African peoples has no significance, then the continent’s present claims to existence are sham and do not matter to anyone,”<sup>1</sup> writes Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka in his book-long essay “Of Africa” from 2012. This is an indirect rejoinder to an infamous speech delivered in Dakar in 2007, in which then-French president Nicolas Sarkozy claimed that the “tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history ... They have never

really launched themselves into the future.”<sup>2</sup> The question is of course not whether Africa has “fully entered into” some sort of genteel positivist notion of history as inexorable progress, but how Africa’s history, or rather histories, can be acknowledged and made to count as forces that the African peoples have to reckon with. In his essay, Soyinka addresses a pressing and current case: the ongoing ethnoreligious conflicts in Sudan, Darfur, and what is now the sovereign nation of South Sudan, which he connects to the history of the trans-Saharan slave trade. “It is short-changing the power of history,” writes Soyinka, “to pretend that the events in the Sudan are not based on a perception that dates back to a relationship rooted in the history of slavery.”<sup>3</sup> The history of the African slave trade, or more specifically, the slave trade across the Sahel and Sahara to the Maghreb and the Middle East, dates back to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which means, among other things, that it starts earlier and lasts longer than the transatlantic slave trade. Slavery is abolished in northern Nigeria only in the early twentieth century as part of the power-sharing agreement of the British colonizers with the Sokoto caliphate, which allowed the British to expand their control over the entirety of the territories that were bounded together in what is now Nigeria in 1914. In a recent study of West African empires and

1 Wole Soyinka, *Of Africa*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2012, 18.

2 Diadie Ba, “Africans still seething over Sarkozy speech,” Reuters September 5, 2007.

<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-africa-sarkozy/africans-still-seething-over-sarkozy-speech-idUKL0513034620070905> (visited Dec. 24, 2019).

3 Soyinka, op. cit., 73.

the emergence of the slave trade, historian Michael A. Gomez defines race as the “culturally orchestrated, socially sanctioned disaggregation and formulation of the human species into broad, hierarchical categories reflecting purported respective levels of capacity, propensity, and beauty ... often tethered to phenotypic expression.”<sup>4</sup> As slavery emerged as an important factor of the sub-Saharan and trans-Saharan trade, race and slavery became “inextricably interwoven and mutually constitutive,”<sup>5</sup> with long-term deleterious consequences. As Soyinka writes:

“The yet unexpiated history of the trans-Saharan slave trade, that is, the centuries-old history of the relationship between two races on the African continent, has coalesced into a master-slave tradition, one that establishes one part of the population as its subhuman sector, subject to permanent humiliation through neglect, double standards of governance, uneven application of the law, and enthronement of impunity, leaving such a sector prone to elimination if and whenever it insists on a revision of its social status.”<sup>6</sup>

To reconstruct this history and to give it significance is an existential social and political challenge for Africa. It is a challenge among other things because it requires the kind of painstaking historiographical work that Michael A. Gomez demonstrates in

his study, which is based on written sources in Arabic as well as regional oral traditions and mythologies transmitted in dramatic form. Against this backdrop, Adamu Halilu’s SHAIHU UMAR is significant not just because it is one of the few films in existence to tell a story of the slave trade, but because of how it tells it.

SHAIHU UMAR is based on the eponymous novel, which was first published in the early 1930s and written by Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. Balewa, then a recent graduate of the first British institution of secondary education in northern Nigeria, later served as Nigeria’s first prime minister after independence. He came to an untimely death in the military coup of 1966, which led to the Biafra war (1967–1970). Balewa became a novelist practically by accident, through a curious turn in the education policy of the British colonial administration.

Substituting the supposedly superior culture and language of the colonizer for the language and culture of the colonized was a routine element of colonial educational and cultural policy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. After the annexation of Lagos in 1861, the British established an English language education system across what is now southern Nigeria, to which the Yoruba and Igbo elites in particular quickly adapted. The situation was

different in what became the protectorate of Northern Nigeria in 1900. Here, the British were confronted with an existing power structure, the Sokoto caliphate, which was established in the Fulani conquest and Islamic revival in the early nineteenth century. In the Sokoto caliphate, Hausa was the lingua franca and Arabic the language of elite culture and learning. English, on the other hand, quickly became associated with Christianity, and learning English was regarded as an “irreligious enterprise,” which was “forbidden to the true Moslem,” as historian Adekunle Adeniran notes.<sup>7</sup> Under the High Commissioner of the Northern Protectorate, Frederick Lugard, the British chose a cautious approach of indirect rule, which left the power structure of the Sokoto caliphate largely intact. This included an educational policy which was formalized

in 1925 through a memorandum of the British “Advisory Committee on Native Education in Tropical Africa,” which recommended elementary education in the mother tongue and limited English in secondary education to English, Science, and Mathematics.<sup>8</sup> Only in the 1940s, and increasingly at the behest of northern elites, did English become mandatory in primary and secondary education, paving the way for English as the national language of the newly independent nation state of Nigeria in the 1960s. Today, Hausa is the native tongue of about 40 million people in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Benin, and together with Yoruba (35 million native speakers) and Igbo (30 million) one of the most important languages in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as the numerically most important of the roughly 400 languages spoken in Nigeria.

4 Michael A. Gomez, *African Dominion. A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2018, 56.

5 Gomez, op. cit., 55.

6 Soyinka, op. cit., 84.

7 Adekunle Adeniran, “Personalities and Policies in the Establishment of English in Northern Nigeria During the British Colonial Administration, 1900–1943,” in: *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1978), 111.

8 Adeniran, op. cit., 119.



Film still SHAIHU UMAR

In the early 1930s, R.M. East, a former colonial officer then working for the education office in northern Nigeria and tasked with implementing the Advisory Committee's recommendations from the mid-1920s, decided, as Hausa scholar Joanna Sullivan writes, that "not enough reading material existed to promote literacy in the Hausa language."<sup>9</sup> East organized a literary contest in which he solicited imaginative prose manuscripts from malams, learned scholars, many of whom, like Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, were the scions of the northern Nigerian elite.<sup>10</sup> The Hausa language had a rich literary tradition, partly in writing and partly oral, which was aimed at spiritual edification and education. To the malams, the custodians of this tradition, the idea of fiction, of an imaginative form of literature, "seemed strange," according to East.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, however, five novels were selected for publication, of which "Shaihu Umar" was the most successful and the most enduringly popular. It

is still taught as part of the school curriculum in Hausa territory. As literary scholar Graham Furniss argues:

"Cradled within a colonial logic, and elicited from northern Nigerians who were from an elite which had, by turns, resisted and accommodated itself to the colonial presence, and who were, as individuals, now closely enmeshed in colonial society as clerks, teachers, and students, these novellas would seem to be prime material for an examination of an indigenous perspective on the colonial encounter."<sup>12</sup>

One could argue that "Shaihu Umar" negotiates the tension between resistance and accommodation by telling the story of a malam who is an exemplary scholar, teacher, and man—a man so flawless, in fact, that he appears more as an exemplar than the character of a novel. As Joanna Sullivan writes, "the story created the perfect Muslim, thus closing the topic to further discussion,"<sup>13</sup> while hedging the potential frivolity of the genre of imaginative

prose by anchoring the story in the older Hausa literary traditions of educational writing and spiritual uplift. It may also be seen as a tribute to these traditions that in "contrast to the 'hypersexualization' that pervades Western and Arab representations of black Africans, 'Shaihu Umar' downplays the sexuality of its black heroes," as historian Rudolph Gaudio writes. Novel and film only allude to the sexual exploitation to which the mother in particular would have been subjected had she been a historical figure rather than a fictional character, thereby avoiding any direct confrontation with "one of the more complicated legacies of the trans-Saharan trade: the sexual use and abuse of black African women and men by (usually) lighter-skinned Arabic-speakers, and the hierarchies of race, ethnicity, gender, and class that emerged therefrom."<sup>14</sup>

However, in terms of content and historical setting, Balewa's novel is also remarkable for what may at first sight appear like another omission. It is a product of colonialism that fails to explicitly address the experience of colonialism. Many of the key works of Anglophone Nigerian literature, most notably Chinua Achebe's 1960 breakthrough novel "Things Fall Apart" and Wole Soyinka's plays such as "The Lion and the Jewel" and "Death and the King's Horseman," deal with the

impact of colonization on the Igbo and Yourba peoples. "Shaihu Umar," by contrast, is set in the late nineteenth century, before the arrival of the British, and the power structures at play in the story are those of the Sokoto empire. As Mervyn Hiskett writes, "Hausa marriage custom, court life, and the institution of slavery govern the lives of Umar and his mother."<sup>15</sup>

In her introduction to the American edition of the novel, Africanist Beverly B. Mack writes that "the book is an entertainment that presents the history of Northern Nigeria at the turn of the century, without ever seeming like a history lesson."<sup>16</sup> Mack introduces a distinction between entertainment and historiography which only makes sense against the backdrop of the Western differentiation between scholarship and art and the institutionalization of professional historiography since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, even while she acknowledges that historiography and narrative or dramatic form remain inseparable in Balewa's novel. It is a history lesson, but it does not seem or feel like one to an observer who knows all too well what a history lesson is.

Considering that "there was no pre-existing tradition of imaginative prose writing within Hausa culture," one can of course argue that the form of the novel "itself would seem to bear examination as a colonial creation."<sup>17</sup> The

9 Joanna Sullivan, "From Poetry to Prose: The Modern Hausa Novel," in: *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2009), 311. Cf. also Chaibou Elhadji Oumarou, "An Exploration of the Canon of Hausa Prose Fiction in Hausa Language and Translation: The Literary Contest of 1933 as a Historical Reference," in: *Advances in Literary Study*, 5 (2017), 1–16; Donald J. Cosentino, "An Experiment in Inducing the Novel among the Hausa," in: *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1978), 19–30.

10 As historian Max Siollun writes, as prime minister, Tafawa Balewa, who had a reputation as a humble man and a man of integrity, had a difficult standing for two reasons. He was considered a mere lieutenant of Amadou Bello, the Sardauna of Kaduna and de facto leader of the North and the Hausa-Fulani, the largest ethnic group in Nigeria, and his level of educational attainment was seen as insufficient. "The fact that many of

the Southern politicians, such as [Igbo leader Nnamdi] Azikiwe and [Yoruba leader Obafemi] Awolowo were extremely erudite intellectuals, while Balewa and Sardauna did not have university degrees, made some Southern politicians feel that the Northern politicians were not intellectually fit to rule the country." Max Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence. Nigeria's Military Coup Culture (1966–1976)*, New York: Agora 2009, 13. —Incidentally, Balewa's son Saddik Balewa is an accomplished documentary filmmaker.

11 Sullivan, op. cit., 311.

12 Graham Furniss, "Hausa Creative Writing in the 1930s: An Exploration in Postcolonial Theory," in: *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (1998), 88.

13 Sullivan, op. cit., 312.

14 Rudolph P. Gaudio, "Trans-Saharan Trade: The Routes of 'African Sexuality,'" in: *Journal of African History*, Vol. 55 (2014), 317–330.

15 Mervyn Heskett, "Introduction," in: Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, *Shaihu Umar*, Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers 2016.

16 Beverly B. Mack, "Introduction to the American Edition of *Shaihu Umar*," in: Balewa, III.

17 Furniss, op. cit., 88.

SHEHU UMAR.....1

Wellcome to Rafta, the Town of Shehu Umar [Town center and Market place noises]

SP1.....Peace be with you.

SP2.....Peace be with you.

SP1.....How are you,

SP2.....Very well, thank you and wellcome. oh, you must have had a long journey.

SP1.....Very much so; today is exactly one month and eleven day we have been tracking day and night.

SP2..... That must be a long journey, I hope everything is fine.

SP1.....Well....you can say that. As prophet Mohammed peace be with him said;  
SEEK KNOWLEDGE EVEN IF YOU HAVE TO GO AS FAR AWAY AS TO CHINA' this is the purpose of our visit in this town.

SP2.....This is true, rough storms and rain, hurricanes and earthquakes can not wipe this. I think you should come with me.

SP1.....Thanks be to God ALLMIGHTY.

SP2.....You see I was myself his student.

SP1.....I see,

SP2.....Only the God allmighty knows when I can detach myself from this man of wisdom, Malam Shehu Umar.

SP1.....God is great. you have been very kind, and we have been very eager. You see we have been hearing about him for several years.

SP2..... You better come with me.

READING FROM THE KORAN

SHEHU;...Wellcome, wellcome. How are you, thanks be to God allmighty. ....Malam Ibrahim.

M. Ibrahim;...Yes sir,

SHEHU;...kindly arrange accommodation for our guests, I mean can your house accommodate additional eleven people.

M. IBRAHIM;...Your gracious, I think it can be arranged.

SHEHU;...Thank you. I think you should first see your accommodations, I will later after the late afternoon prayers come and see you.// I think we should finish the day as for those of you who have family and other businesses to attend to. let us pray.

PRAYERS

SHEHU;...I hope everything is alright.

SP1.....Everything is fine, we just wanted to ask your gracious a few questions and hope that you would not mind us asking.

SHEHU;...Not at all, I will be willing to answer your questions, there is a proverb that 'he who asks questions can never get lost.' therefore do not hesitate to ask any question you want to ask me. may God help me supply you with the right answers.

2.

SP1.....It is quite amazing the way you are, the way you behave, the way you conduct your self and above all your kindness and sense of fairness. everyone who knows you talks only about your good and kind character. You are so different from all of us. Although your spoken accent is purely Arabic, you do not look any different from us in terms of skin complexion

SP2.....This is true, we do not simply say that as a matter of praise to carry any favours from you, if you do not mind, we are just curious to know about your background origin; are all the people from your hometown the same as you/ a lot of people think you are unique, some are even saying that you are a SAINT..

SHEHU;...No doubt these questions are important questions, the story you are about to hear is a very long story and a sad story indeed. I was born in this country but I was not brought up here, I grew up in the Arab world. I hope you are following. I was born in a small village called KAGARA, near BIDDA. My mother was born in another village called FATIKA. My father was quite a humble poor man. He was a farmer during the rainy season and he sold firewood during dry season. It was because of poverty and lack of savings that he did not marry early. When my father was able to save enough to marry he soon felt ill with a terminal disease. It was around this time that my mother got pregnant, but instead of happiness as a result of this pregnancy my father my father's deteriorated and he became very sad indeed. One of the reasons is simply because he did not have any savings for child to inherit after his death, God allmighty is the greatest. But my mother happened to be a very strong lady, so much so that my father was forever full of praise for her, he always prayed for her and for whatever was to be born.. May his soul rest in peace. He died just a day before I was born.

DEATH OF SHEHU'S FATHER

WOMEN;...NOISES, CRIES.....May his soul rest in peace, when the end comes there is no choice. You only have to accept fate with grace. Death is with everyone of us is the last gift from God to his servants. Try and have faith. Oh dear she relapse into labour. Rabi, please call Rabi to go and get the midwife. thanks be to God allmighty she has delivered without any complication.

BABY CRIES AND THUNDER STORM

SHEHU;...God acts in mysterious ways, the ways he so wishes. I was born on a Friday and as it has always traditionally been, the following Friday people were called to a congregation for my naming ceremony, where I was named Umaru. when I was two years old I was sent to live with my grandmother. I stayed with my grandmother all the time my mother was a widow.

AUNTIE: Fatime,

FATIME: YesAUNTIE: I wanted to ask you a question, Amongst all your suiters, have you decided yet as to who you want to marry?

same case can be made perhaps even more forcefully for cinema. Adamu Halilu, the director of the film version of “Shaihu Umar,” received his training in London at the Overseas Film and Television Centre and at the Shell Film Unit,<sup>18</sup> and Manthia Diawara detects the legacy of colonialism in the very pacing and narrative structure of Halilu’s film, arguing that following the “very racist tendency of Notcutt” the film is “edited, with almost no ellipses, in order not to confuse their African audiences.”<sup>19</sup> Diawara’s argument, however implicitly, appears to be that Africans are entitled to their own modernist montage aesthetics along the lines of the Soviet avant-garde. This is ironic not least because Eisenstein’s conception of montage is in itself highly didactic and aimed at presumably illiterate audiences, and it can be read against a backdrop of what cultural historian Alexander Etkind has proposed to call the “internal colonization” of the Russian Empire and its successor state, the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup>

And lest we suspect, with Diawara, that the style of SHAIHU UMAR is not so much a matter of artistic choice but a reiteration of the patronizing attitudes of colonial pedagogies, it might be useful to compare and contrast Adamu Halilu’s approach to the style of films produced by the Nigerian video industries, which have been prospering—without any government support—

since the early 1990s. As is well known, Nigerian video films are the result of South-South transfers of technology and knowledge: Traders of consumer electronics like Kenneth Nnebue produced films to drive sales of Taiwanese and Korean-produced VHS players, while their films combined the traditions of Igbo and Yoruba theater with templates from Brazilian telenovelas and Indian films to provide hugely popular entertainments. These films are never short on moral lessons, neither do they try to live up to the standards of modernist montage aesthetics.<sup>21</sup> In that sense, SHAIHU UMAR may belong more properly to an African film history than Diawara seems to allow—whose book incidentally appeared the same year as Nnebue’s *Living in Bondage*, the film often credited with starting Nollywood.

On the other hand, if modernist aesthetics are maintained as the criterion for relevance and value, one could argue that the novel “Shaihu Umar” is a casebook study of mise-en-abyme or reflexivity, as it is the work of a malam (Balewa) telling the story of a malam (Umar) telling the life story of a malam (himself). In fact, while “native African life and custom are seen to underlie the whole plot,” as Mervyn Hiskett writes, the story “appears at first sight to owe less to the indigenous African literary tradition” than the other novels published as a result of East’s liter-

ary contest.<sup>22</sup> “Shaihu Umar” is also a *Bildungsroman* of sorts, the story of a boy abducted into slavery who emancipates himself through education, by becoming a hafiz, a learned man who knows the Q’uran by heart, and who returns to his homeland as a famous malam. We can add to this modernist pedigree an element of post-colonial and even anti-colonial aesthetics, if we consider that the book led to a play, which in turn served as the basis for the film. The play was written by Umaru Ladan and Dexter Lyndersay, who at the time were teaching drama at Amadou Bello University in Zaria, which was founded as the University of Northern Nigeria in 1962. Dexter Lyndersay is of particular interest here, as his trajectory exemplifies the cultural flows across the Global South without the intercession of the metropolitan centers of Europe, whether they be London, Paris, Madrid, or Moscow. Lyndersay was born in Trinidad and Tobago in 1932, incidentally the same year as his compatriot V.S. Naipaul, who relocated to London in the 1950s and quickly became part of Britain’s literary establishment (and later the first Nobel prize winner from the Caribbean), and the same year as Wole Soyinka, who also first made his name in the London literary scene and on the London stage. Lyndersay, by contrast, started his career in theater in Trinidad and earned a master’s degree in stage craft at the Yale School of

Drama in 1965<sup>23</sup> before relocating to the University of Ibadan. There, in 1967, he produced a stage version of “The Black Jacobins,” C.L.R. James’ groundbreaking history of the slave rebellion led by Toussaint L’Ouverture in Haiti from 1791 until 1804, which was the first such history written by a Caribbean author and which James himself adapted for the stage in collaboration with Lyndersay. Rachel Douglas touches upon this production history in her recent comprehensive study of “The Black Jacobins,”<sup>24</sup> but a further study of Lyndersay’s work in Nigeria would be warranted.<sup>25</sup> It is safe to assume, however, that the stage production of “The Black Jacobins” was also a case of an entertainment teaching history without, in Beverly Mack’s words, “seeming like a history lesson.” Lyndersay’s work on “The Black Jacobins” and “Shaihu Umar” thus connects not only the histories of the Atlantic and the Saharan slave trade, but illustrates and reinforces the importance of dramatic form as historiography.

As for the slow pacing and the “Notcutt” style of Adamu Halilu’s film, one way of illustrating the logic of deferred action in film history would be to argue that the style, which appeared condescending and racist to Manthia Diawara in the early 1990s, could be qualified as an early example of “slow cinema” according to one of the key categories of early 21<sup>st</sup> century film criticism. Adamu Halilu

18 Tom Rice, *Films for the Colonies: Cinema and the Preservation of the British Empire*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2019, 238.

19 Manthia Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1992, 10–11.

20 Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2011.

21 Jonathan Haynes, *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2016.

22 Heskitt, op. cit., 3.

23 “Creative Arts Centre for Trinidad and Tobago; A Preliminary Study in Functional Design, 1965,” Archives at Yale. <https://archives.yale.edu/agents/people/4932> (visited Dec. 24, 2019).

24 Rachel Douglas, *Making The Black Jacobins: C.L.R. James and the Drama of History*, Durham: Duke University Press 2019.

25 Lyndersay later returned to his native Trinidad and worked in theater until his death in 2006.

can thus appear alongside the likes of Tsai Ming-liang, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and Béla Tarr.<sup>26</sup> To include SHAIHU UMAR in this list means to both engage in and subvert what Wole Soyinka has mockingly called the “period dialectics” of European art. In a chapter on “Drama and the African World View,” which incidentally was published in 1976, the same year SHAIHU UMAR came out, Soyinka distinguishes between “two world-views, a difference between one culture whose very artifacts are evidence of a cohesive understanding of irreducible truths and another, whose creative impulses are directed by period dialectics.”<sup>27</sup> The European history of art, at least since Vasari, is one of a succession of innovations of form or, as Soyinka has it, a dialectics of period against period, in which artists distinguish themselves by progressively refining their technical sensibility and that of their audience, thus setting themselves apart from their historical predecessors. It is a history according to which a work can be at the forefront of history (it is then qualified, with a military term, as “avant-garde”), at the height of his time, or falling behind it. To be an actor in this history, the artist has to meet president Sarkozy’s standard for historical agency and “launch himself into the future.” To insert SHAIHU UMAR in the slow cinema canon would be to argue that it was ahead of its time when it first came out

in 1976, and that other parts of the world have since been catching up, which is the highest of compliments from a European history of art perspective. From “insufficiently modernist, to the point of being racist” to not just avant-garde, but avant la lettre: an assessment which is reminiscent not least of recent novels like Abdourahman A. Waberi’s “Aux Etats-Unis d’Afrique” (2017) or Léonora Miano’s “Rouge Impératrice” (2019), which reverse the history of colonialism and cast Europe as an underdeveloped periphery of Africa.

It is also possible, however, to locate SHAIHU UMAR within the first part of Soyinka’s dichotomy and read it as part of a “culture whose very artifacts are evidence of a cohesive understanding of irreducible truths.” To a European eye, the splendor of SHAIHU UMAR’s pageantry, along with the story’s focus on the adventure of a man of saintly qualities, can be reminiscent of such works as Vittore Carpaccio’s cycle of wall paintings dedicated to the life story of Saint Ursula, which is now on display at the Academia in Venice. Long considered a proponent of a simplistic, overly popular approach to religious motives, Carpaccio was reappraised by European romantics of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century like Chateaubriand as a powerful apologist of the medieval Christian faith. For them, “the ingenuity of his style became a vehicle for the



edification of the soul,” as art historian Alessandro del Puppo writes.<sup>28</sup> A similar case could be made for Halilu’s film and the figure of the “perfect Muslim.” To reference the European Renaissance could suggest that SHAIHU UMAR represents an African cinema belatedly catching up with the history of European painting rather than anticipating contemporary cinematic trends by several decades. But the reference could also mean something else. Carpaccio’s cycle of narrative paintings represents a convergence, or rather coherence, of art and historiography, of visual and oral traditions, which has been lost in the modern European division of labor between historiography and art. It only resurfaces in the historical epic in cinema, where it is subject to policing from professional historians, who routinely object to cinema’s alteration of histor-

ical fact in the interest of telling a better story and reaching a broader audience.<sup>29</sup> Not separating historiography and the dramatic arts may be seen as a problem from a European perspective. But it may also be a strength.

What survives in a film like SHAIHU UMAR is a sense of dramatic space as “a symbolic arena for metaphysical contests,” to quote Soyinka once again. The afterwardness of SHAIHU UMAR, its deferred action, may well be to contribute to the reemergence of that space and with it, of the significance of the history of African peoples.

And maybe SHAIHU UMAR can even become a citizen of both worlds of which Soyinka speaks, and an agent in multiple histories.

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December 2019

26 Tiago de Luca (ed.), *Slow Cinema*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2015.

27 Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1976, 38.

28 Alessandro del Puppo, “Vittore Carpaccio: La Fortuna Moderna di un Maestro Antico,” in:

*Saggi e Memorie di Storie dell’Arte*, Vol. XXXIX (2017), 205. Translation mine.

29 Cf. Vinzenz Hediger, “Aufhebung. Geschichte im Zeitalter des Films,” in: Lorenz Engell, Oliver Fahle, Vinzenz Hediger, Christiane Voss, *Essays zur Film-Philosophie*, Munich: Fink (2015), 169–232.

## MIGRATION, RETURN, AND THE ENACTMENT OF MEMORY

### SHAIHU UMAR and the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade

Every year, hundreds of migrants, fuelled by alienation, estrangement, a sense of disconnect with their place of birth, the place handed them by fate, a semi-conscious yearning for an ideal that has come to seem more real than the reality itself, make their way to Agadez—the last frontier town on the edge of the desert, accessible without a visa—in answer to an age-old call: the call of far-away places. Even though the concept of migration haunts the political and cultural discourse, unlike migration from North Africa into Europe across the Mediterranean, the perilous journey crossing the desert—estimated to be larger and more deadly—is not

given enough media focus. Although trafficking from West Africa to Europe is still poorly understood and discussed, and the exact figures are still not clear, it is estimated that, for every migrant death in the Mediterranean, there are, at least, two in the Sahara.

How can you talk of migration without talking about its history?

Agadez, long a centre of the cross-Saharan trade, is witness to renewed cross-desert trade in black bodies from all of West Africa—black bodies in motion and in pain is an old song across the Sahara. The consensus is that the trans-Saharan slave trade lasted more than its Atlantic counterpart and

involved a greater number of enslaved bodies, and yet, this, the desert slave route, is less talked about. In 1993, responding to pressure, UNESCO's general conference at its 27th session had approved the "Slave Routes Project: Resistance, Liberty, Heritage"—a research project whose aim, among other things, was to promote pluralism and intercultural dialogue among nations on the subject. The Nigerian-based Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC) decided, as a fallout of this dialogue process, to organize an international conference, "Slavery, Slave Trade and its Consequences"<sup>1</sup>—with most of the papers presented at the conference focusing mainly on the trans-Atlantic slave trade and silence on the trans-Saharan trade.

Some few years back, in response to its less-talked-about status, scholars within and outside Africa gathered—in a southern Nigeria former slave coast—in a seminar co-organized by UNESCO and CBAAC, to talk about and break the silence over one of humanity's greatest inhumanities: "Slave Trade and Slavery in the Arab Islamic World: Untold Tragedy and Shared Heritage."<sup>2</sup> (The aim, as declared in the opening address by Toyin Falola, professor of history at the University of Texas, Austin, US and vice-chair of the UNESCO sci-

entific committee on the "Slave Route Project," was not aimed at casting aspersions on any religion or culture, but, rather, to promote "research and initiatives on slave trade and slavery in regions insufficiently covered, within Africa and the Arab-Muslim world among others.")

It is this, which is not usually spoken of, trans-Saharan slave trade that Adamu Halilu's film deals with. Perhaps it's correct to say that this film—in its focus on a migrant's awakened yearning for homeland and memory of his slave journey, as well as a mother's quest for a long-lost child—deals with its subject matter tangentially. Sold into slavery, Umar, having risen to scholarly prowess and earning the title of Shaihu, dreams one night of his mother, alone and wandering the desert. "Now you know what a boy is like," writes the narrator in the eponymous novel, "as the days went by I began to forget our country and my kinsfolk, and even my mother."<sup>3</sup> This dream—which, from the perspective of psychoanalysis might seem unsurprising, from the point of view of the inevitable return of the repressed and return, in memory, to origins—triggers his memory of her and his lost homeland. (It could be argued, of course, that the mention of psychoanalysis



Film still SHAIHU UMAR

1 Tunde Fatunde, "Scholars focus on the Arab trans-Saharan slave trade," *University World News*, April 13, 2012. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20120413180645205> (visited Oct. 14, 2019).

2 "International Conference on 'Slave Trade and Slavery in the Arab Islamic World: Untold Tragedy and Shared Heritage,'" *The Harriet Tubman Institute*.

[http://www.tubmaninstitute.ca/events/international\\_conference\\_on\\_slave\\_trade\\_and\\_slavery\\_in\\_the\\_arab\\_islamic\\_world\\_untold\\_tragedy\\_](http://www.tubmaninstitute.ca/events/international_conference_on_slave_trade_and_slavery_in_the_arab_islamic_world_untold_tragedy_) (visited Oct. 14, 2019).

3 Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, *Shaihu Umar*, Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers 2016, 63.

surpasses, by far, the narrative or aesthetic merits of a film viewed among a wide layer of African Studies academics, as being of particular interest—especially as a bad marketing tool for Islam—essentially to a classical Muslim, as opposed to a general film, public.)

There are reasonable grounds for the charge of propaganda—and, by extension, the mention of psychoanalysis. In this sense: if the Arab/Muslim invasion of Hausaland transformed the history of the Hausa as non-Muslims, who had previously opposed their conquest, into the history of the Hausa-Fulani, whose destiny is inextricably bound with Islam and the Arab world, then Umar's act, of departing from Egypt, is not a departure from Islam and Arabic ties and a return to Hausa origins—expressed in the closing lines, "[...] eventually God brought me to this town of yours, Rauta. Here I heard the news that Makau has died. I had no other relative to go and see, so I settled here, teaching the Koran."<sup>4</sup> Among the Akan people of Ghana, there is a female name, Sankofa—usually depicted by a bird with its head turned backwards, it means: it is not taboo to return; or, the way I prefer it, in order to move forward, we must return to the past. Both the novelist and the filmmaker, through Umar's choice to stay back in Rauta, rather than return to where he started his journey, seem to indicate that return is not only impossible but, also, not to be desired.

Here, I wonder if I can connect the legend of Bayajidda—whose lineage is said to have founded the original sev-

en Hausa States. Bayajidda is said to have slain a huge snake inhabiting the well in the queendom of Daura, which terrorised the inhabitants and deprived them of water. The queen, Daurama, in fulfilment of her pledge, offered him half her queendom, but he, rather, asked for that which was taboo: her hand in marriage. Daura, up till then, had only known queens and a co-habiting husband was unheard of—much like the legend of Queen Amina and her one-night lovers. The queen, in compromise, offered him a palace maiden who named their son in reference to forcefully snatching the queendom. Daurama, worried by the implications of this new development, broke tradition and had a son by Bayajidda whom she named in reference to taking back the queendom. Thus, the legend of Bayajidda—his marriage to Daurama—signifies the overthrow of mother-right, that is, matrilineal, to father-right, that is, patriarchal society. (Thenceforth, it was sons, seven of them—or fourteen if you include the so-called bastard seven from the palace maiden-turned-concubine—who now founded cities: with the advent of Bayajidda, the Daura monarchical heritage was now snatched by males from its exclusive female ownership.) We will see how this change in female status, this enthronement of father-right and patriarchy shaped the character of the trans-Saharan slave trade.

The question which underlines the narrative and with which Adamu Halilu, following Balewa, refuses to frame his film—which also underlines both

their historical situation and vicarious culpability, as Islamic writer and filmmaker, within their own narrative—is: in what way is the history of Islam, in northern Nigeria, connected with the trans-Saharan slave trade? In the sense that "Shaihu Umar" could be considered as thinly-veiled propaganda in its treatment of, or refusal to consider this question. Umar's re-settlement in Rauta becomes, therefore, not a departure or questioning, but, rather, fidelity to the narrative trajectory: an act of God. Balewa begins his novel thus: "[...] there was once a certain malam, learned in the stars, in the Koran, and in the scriptures, and an upholder of the Faith. This malam was one of those in this world to whom God has given the gift of knowledge. His name was Shaihu Umar. So great were his learning and wisdom that news of him reached countries far distant from where he lived."<sup>5</sup> Halilu's film begins with men coming to consult Shaihu Umar regarding this knowledge and wisdom.

First published in 1955, and reprinted six times by 1976, "Shaihu Umar"—considered the first novel in the Hausa language—emerged from a contest organized in the 1930s by the colonial administrator of Northern Nigeria to find and publish works by budding novelists. Translated in 1967 into English—it quickly went into a reprint the following year—it was adapted into a film in 1976 by Adamu Halilu, whose directorial sensibility was conditioned

by Colonial Cinema. "Shaihu Umar" extends beyond its artistic worth to consider how we can have access to our own historical experience, to a history that, owing to an imposed amnesia, admits no easy access. There is a reading of the Bayajidda legend that views the marriage with Daurama as symbolic of the merger (why is this read as merger, rather than penetration?) of Arab and Berber tribes in North and West Africa. This reading elides the question: why did this merger lead to the enslavement of black bodies and the concubinage of the black woman to Arab males? (As an aside, if we accept the notion of Hausa history as a history of the arrival of a stranger from Baghdad, that is, the idea that Bayajidda created the Hausas, then, perhaps, it is fitting that the major black slave revolt against Arab slavery, the Zanj Rebellion, occurred in Baghdad.)

"I have precisely begun with the impossibility of telling this story," Claude Lanzmann writes of *Shoah*, his film of Holocaust testimonies. "I have made this very impossibility my point of departure."<sup>6</sup> This is probably not Halilu's point of departure and I mention this film only in connection with the questions: how possible is it to narrate the trans-Saharan slave trade—how do you listen to an impossibility? This is how SHAIHU UMAR begins—with him narrating his slave-caravan journey across the Sahara. How do you begin with a supposed impossibility? By collapsing the force of witnessing in its under-

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>6</sup> Cathy Caruth, "Introduction," in: Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1995, 154.

standing: it is the will of God. Perhaps the filmmaker experiences the story of "Shaihu Umar" as an ethical dilemma, a betrayal? Betrayal, not about what was done in the name of the Faith, but in the telling of it, in the attempt to tell what was actually done. In Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour*, after telling the story of her past for the first time to her Japanese lover—of her love affair with a German soldier during the Occupation, of his death on the very day they were to run away together, of her subsequent punishment by the French townspeople, who shave her head, and by her parents, who trap her in a cellar, and finally of her ensuing madness—the French actress, who has come to make a film in Hiroshima, feels her telling as a betrayal and addresses her dead German lover thus: "I told our story. I was unfaithful to you tonight with this stranger. I told our story. It was, you see, a story that could be told."<sup>7</sup>

The dilemma at the heart of "Shaihu Umar" is between what we are told, what we are shown, and what we actually know about the history of the trans-Saharan slave trade. (What do we actually know of this?) That is, to what extent are what we are told and shown in correspondence with actual reality? The dilemma, for the filmmaker, appears to be not the possibility of knowing history, not what we know of what happened in history, but the telling of it. It is this that constitutes a betrayal—not of the Faith, though. What did the narrator see from Niger,

Libya, Egypt? In the novel, we are told, concerning the bound slaves from northern Nigeria: "Whenever I looked at them, I would see them toiling along through the sand, bent double, their buttocks swaying side to side [...]"<sup>8</sup> The impression you get is that the trans-Saharan slave trade involved an absence of witness, that the narrator and filmmaker, involved as they are in the Faith of the Arab slave-traders, are refusing the historical imperative to bear witness. What we see carries within it, therefore, the force of a lie—glossed with that strikingly realistic rendering, in real time, of a Muslim prayer session. The choice, it seems, is either a betrayal of belief or betrayal of the past—in this hierarchy of choice, it is history that suffers betrayal.

Telling the story of Shaihu Umar, telling, specifically, the story of his acquisition of Islamic knowledge, is, for the enslaved unbelievers, who suffered and died, a betrayal of those who live and listen—for being believers of the Faith. What Shaihu Umar narrates is not the crime of slavery and is a betrayal, specifically, because it glorifies, defends, and solicits admiration for a belief under whose banner the crime was perpetuated. The possibility of confronting the Arabic incursion into northern Nigeria, through this film, raises not just the ethical dilemma of how not to betray the past, but the troubling question: how do we talk about the trans-Saharan slave trade? I mean by this that since the question of history

in this film is not just a matter of what we are told and what we see—a slave's achievement of enlightenment and his rise in status as a revered scholar, how ethical is it not to tell about the price—the million others who did not achieve status and enlightenment. If, as is the case, the action of the film is itself the story of a telling, how complete is the story that is told?

What is not in contention is that slavery is a historically evolved mode of production and existed before the trans-Atlantic and trans-Saharan slave trades—some African empires were active suppliers of slaves to external traders of the human body. The trans-Saharan slave trade is said to have begun late in the 7th century when Abdallah (which, incidentally, means slave to Allah) Ben Said, the King of Islamised Egypt, conquered,

via Jihad, the Sudan—called "land of infidels"—and imposed, in 652, a treaty known as Bakht on King Khalidurat of Sudan, among which clauses was the compulsory annual supply by the latter of hundreds of black slaves to the Muslim king of Egypt. (History places the European trans-Atlantic slave trade some 10 centuries later, from 1693 until 1884, as compared to the trans-Saharan slave trade which lasted some 13 centuries from 652 until 1960.) In much the same way the Bible was used in the trans-Atlantic trade, some Arab scholars justified the trans-Saharan slave trade by interpreting sections of the Koran—but why could not Shaihu Umar function as the Arabic equivalent of Enlightenment scholars who condemned slavery?

Two main features of the trans-Saharan slave trade, absent in "Shaihu



Film still SHAIHU UMAR

7 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press 1996, 26.

8 Balewa, op. cit., 59.

Umar": concubinage and castration. Unlike the trans-Atlantic slave trade—in which male slaves outnumber females—two in every three slaves crossing the desert are said to be females. In his travels through Mali, Ibn Battutah had written of "[...] women servants, slave girls and young daughters" who "appear naked before people, exposing their genitals. Women who come before the Sultan are naked and unveiled, and so are his daughters."<sup>9</sup> This description contributed, for generations of Arabic speakers, to the formation of the stereotyped untamed and insatiable allure of the black female body. It is significant that the beginning tale of Scherazade's Arabian Nights involve a Sultan's rage that his wife has been intimate with a black slave—so embedded is the fear, the sexual threat of the black male body that the Sultan's suspicion of this transgressive desire is rendered as false. On the one hand, the allure and male desire for the black female body led to concubinage—in a way, it is this that is expressed in the myth of Bayajidda: the process of cultural Arabization, an expression of Arab conquest, in which inter-ethnic coupling involved an Arab male and non-Arab, black female. On the other hand, the sexual threat of the black male body and fear of the transgressive desire of the Arab female for this body led to castration.

What has this to do with Shaihu Umar—saintly, asexual—and his mother—whom we're shown as having lost her

good looks through her wanderings and enslavement? Were the book written and the film made by Arabs, the title character would correctly be read as Noble Savage—instead what we have is a process of internalization that allows him to redeem himself and his race through piety and submission to the will of God. The narrative fails to present the troubling issue of the (sexual) use and abuse to which the black male and female bodies were subjected by Arabic-speaking Muslims. Perhaps we could make Shaihu Umar say to his dead mother, words the French actress said to her dead lover: "I told our story. I betrayed your memory today with strangers. I told what they did to you, what they did to me. It was, you see, a story that could be told." Perhaps, it would have been a betrayal. Perhaps. But, today, with two main features of the trans-Saharan slave trade playing out in Agadez—the last frontier, accessible without a visa—to which young black bodies, a good number of them female bodies, are daily drawn in answer to the call of far-away places, it would not be a betrayal of the past.

*Didi Cheeka [Co-founder of Lagos Film Society, film critic, and filmmaker]  
August 2019*

*This text is part of his book "Encounters in the Archive—The Struggle to Reanimate Nigeria's Audiovisual Archives," which will be published by the Arsenal at the end of 2020.*

## A LOST FILM'S SEVERAL LIVES

The date is 6 December 2018. The venue: Jabi Lake Mall, Abuja, Nigeria—a packed hall, abuzz with chatter. The occasion is the Nigerian Film Corporation-hosted 9th ZUMA Film Festival, whose 2018 theme, "Archiving for Creativity," has been chosen, in the words of NFC Managing Director Chidia Maduekwe, to "reignite consciousness" of film's part in "preserving Nigeria's memory for future generations." The speaker is the off-Nollywood filmmaker, critic and Lagos Film Society (LFS) founding member Didi Cheeka, in Abuja for a screening of the film whose digital restoration he has helped initiate, Adamu Halilu's SHAIHU UMAR. This legendary lost film was rediscovered in 2016 during an LFS project on the Nigerian film archive. Cheeka himself has described the retrieval of the archive as a practice of history-making on which the Nigerian industry, but also the country's diverse cinema audiences might build to forge common understandings of the African and global present. In a context of creeping historical amnesia, where schools did not teach history as a stand-alone subject until its reintroduction in 2018, it is Cheeka's conviction that the moving image has a special role in uniting diverse audiences in a vivid experience of a shared past, present and future.

From 2016, this insight took concrete form in a remarkable multi-institutional programme of archival retrieval aimed, among other outcomes, to reactivate traces of the independent film culture that flowered in Nigeria in the two decades between the

end of the civil war in 1970, and the post-1990s Nollywood and northern Nigerian Kanywood video boom. Projects across a range of Nigerian and European institutions have included a 2016 British Council and Goethe-Institut Nigeria-supported LFS symposium "Reclaiming History, Unveiling Memory;" the 2019 initiation of an MA in film archiving based on a cognate programme at the Goethe University Frankfurt and launched in partnership with the NFC and the University of Jos in cooperation with the Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art and the Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum; the Lagos opening of a reclaimed arthouse cinema and independent film hub, the Nigerian Film Corporation Old Film Unit; and the cooperation of partners including the NFC's Jos-based National Film, Video and Sound Archive (NFVSA), the Arsenal and the German Embassy on the digital restoration and transnational recirculation of SHAIHU UMAR.

On the platform he shared at ZUMA with further collaborators including the Cairo Cinematheque – Alternative Film Centre, Cheeka gave a talk punctuated with extracts of newly digitized NFVSA historical film footage. Documentary passages from the post-independence archive attracted mild interest from an occasionally restive audience. The mood turned when the first bars sounded from the theme tune of a 1980s television drama. *Cock Crow at Dawn* was a half-hour National Television Authority weekly serial, broadcast nationwide from April 1980

<sup>9</sup> Ibn Battutah, "The Country of the Blacks," in: Tim Mackintosh-Smith, *The Travels of Ibn Battutah*, London: Picador 2003, 290.



in a mix of conventional and Pidgin English, with each of over a hundred episodes prefaced by popular music star Bongos Ikwue's hymn to rural Nigeria, the eponymous "Cock Crow at Dawn." Cheeka's extract galvanized the ZUMA audience, prompting a glorious singalong from a crowd of several hundred, and a standing ovation for Cheeka as the song faded and the discussion session closed.

The surge of shared feeling evoked by this small film fragment highlights the power of the archived moving image to prompt for contemporary audiences an emotionally charged retrieval of lost or buried time. In *Cock Crow at Dawn*, the cyclical time of rural popular narrative is first translated into the repetitive time schemes of

a weekly soap, then viscerally re-experienced as shared musical rhythm in a communal rendering of the series' title song. SHAIHU UMAR generates an analogous, if differently structured experience of reanimated time. The digitally restored version of this 1976 Federal Ministry of Information production has been praised for the restorers' skill in breathing new life into abandoned celluloid—or in the eloquent words of NFVSA archivist Esther Jemila Chukwuma, "making these dry bones work." The new version premiered at the 2018 Berlin International Film Festival and was shown at ZUMA 2018 in a raucous screening during the main archiving workshop event. Directed by Adamu Halilu, who trained in the UK before returning to Nigeria to begin a

prolific career in feature and documentary film and TV production, SHAIHU UMAR traces stages in the life of a Hausa imam, Shaihu Umar (Umaru Ladan), whose story is recounted in a series of flashbacks, starting with a childhood marked by family rupture and abduction into slavery, progressing through Umar's adoption by the Egyptian Arab master Abdulkarim (Assad Yasin), and ending with a return to the northern Nigerian village where the imam narrates his own story to two inquisitive Koran school pupils.

Never commercially distributed in 1970s Nigeria, the film sustained, until its 2016 rediscovery, only a phantom existence in film-cultural memory and occasional written records. Its status as a literary adaptation from a novel in the Hausa language by Nigeria's first prime minister, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, did however establish SHAIHU UMAR's significance for Nigerian film history. The film's production history shows SHAIHU UMAR enjoying from its inception a status as prestige national project. Halilu's film was commissioned as Nigeria's official entry for the cinema strand of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), held in Lagos in January and February 1977, and featuring contributions from 57 nations across Africa and the diaspora. FESTAC '77 mirrored the global reach of the First World Festival of Black Arts (Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres: FESMAN), a three-week event staged in 1966 in Dakar, Senegal, with performers and invited guests from 37 countries including Duke Ellington, Josephine Baker, dancer-choreographers Alvin Ailey and Mestre

Pastinha, Nelson Mandela, writers Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, and Nigeria's Wole Soyinka. SHAIHU UMAR matched the grand scale both of FESMAN 1966, and of the 1977 Nigerian follow-up. Halilu shot the film in luminous colour on 35mm, and spliced together location sequences filmed across northern Nigeria and Niger with occasional archive footage to stage epic journeys back and forth across the Sahara between Nigeria, Egypt and the Arab-Berber territories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Maghreb. The film's transnationalism resonated with the ambitions of FESTAC's Nigerian organisers, who distanced themselves from the ethos of global black consciousness (négritude) that had infused the 1966 Dakar event, insisting instead on a trans-Saharan approach that welcomed representatives of North African arts and culture into the Festival programme. A dispute ensued between the Festival Grand Patron, Nigeria's then newly installed 1976 military head of state Lt. Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, and the organizing committee's Senegalese representatives; and by May 1976, Senegal had withdrawn from the FESTAC committee on grounds of the country's opposition to North African participation in a colloquium on Black Civilization and Education.

Though later resolved, the FESTAC dispute situates SHAIHU UMAR within a broader, and contested, history of Arab-Berber cinema in the context of African and global Black arts. The FESTAC title, encompassing "Black and African," as opposed to merely "Black" Arts and Culture, is one signal of the Pan-Africanist

35mm print with English and French subtitles,  
faded to red, scan test after dehydration treatment



cultural vision that motivated the commissioning of SHAIHU UMAR for the 1977 event. Yet we do not need to know SHAIHU UMAR's production history to discern a trans-Saharan sensibility in this film. Its rooting in a North and West African cultural territory conjoined through shared religion (Islam) and a common Arab-African culture is evident in numerous passages when the action plays out against a soundtrack of voices murmuring Koranic verses; in tableau shots of Koran students ranged deferentially around Shaihu Umar as their teacher and religious guide; or in close ups of Koran school scholars, their heads bowed in quiet contemplation of pages of Arabic script. This emphasis on a literate civilization forged through Arab-African transcultural contact is reinforced by the film's use of Balewa's 1955

Hausa novel as its pre-text. Adamu Halilu was one of an early generation of northern Nigerian feature film directors [others include Saddik Tafawa Balewa, Sule Umar, Remalan Nuhu and Shehu Halilu] who draw on Hausa prose fiction as a literary source. Hausa fiction itself had emerged as a syncretic Arab-Western literary mode during the late colonial period, when the British authorities began to sponsor translation into Hausa Roman script of Arabic works. "Shaihu Umar" became a product of those efforts when its author Balewa won a 1933 short story prize sponsored by the British authorities' northern Nigerian Translation Bureau, which had used its base in the region's ancient cultural and commercial centre, Kano, to foster local translations of Arabic texts, while also drawing on this trans-



35mm reel, colour print,  
end state of decay (vinegar syndrome)

lated treasure trove to promote new forms of indigenized literary fiction.

SHAIHU UMAR's embedding in this peculiarly British colonial mix of Orientalist and Africanist literary culture, as well as the film's unhurried pace and pictorial aesthetic, led some early commentators to criticize it as a production in thrall to British colonial conventions. The documentary and educational film that dominated early Nigerian-based production under the British Colonial Film Unit (CFU) used a slow-paced style that British administrators defended on the racial grounds of supposedly underdeveloped cognitive capacities amongst African audiences. Halilu's directorial training first at the Colonial Film School in Accra, Ghana, later at the CFU's London-based successor, the Overseas Film and Television Centre,

was seen by early critics to have rooted SHAIHU UMAR in a colonial film history that eschewed complex film language and was mired in racial assumptions of African cognitive deficit.

Viewed through the lens of a 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian cinema seeking to retrieve its own buried past, Halilu's restored film appears however as a much more ambitious experiment in postcolonial narrative and film-aesthetic form. SHAIHU UMAR's handling of place and space is a first conspicuous feature of the film's commitment to a poetics of transcultural belonging in the pan-African spirit of FESTAC '77. The film is notable for regular slow pans in long shot that scour landscapes from the hills of Nigeria's central plateau, to the Kano savannah and the Sahara desert's undulating dunes. Historically connected through

multiple circuits of migration, trade and cultural traffic, those spaces are linked in SHAIHU UMAR by the embodied movement of figures on screen; so Halilu's travelling camera pursues the film's protagonists—Umar, his mother Fatima (Mairiga Aliyu), his father Makau (Umaru Dembo), his mentor Abdulkarim—via long journeys on foot, camel or horseback, mapping in the process a multiply interconnected landscape linked both by the film's travelogue narratives, and by the long histories which those narratives embody of trans-Saharan cultural, religious, social and economic exchange.

The violence that haunts cross-border contact is underlined in the film in cameos of slave raids, trans-Saharan slave caravans and markets, or images of brutalised slave bodies, including at one point the bruised and shackled frame of Umar's mother Fatima. But the violence is contained, in part by a flashback structure that cuts repeatedly back to Umar, his speaking voice and tranquil visual presence restoring order to the film's assorted narratives of familial rupture and territorial displacement. The film's vesting of narrative authority in an African voice accented by diasporic experience (in Umar's case, a Hausa speaking voice whose Arabic inflection is the subject of comment in one opening scene) emerges further in SHAIHU UMAR's handling of performance and the camera frame. The scenes of human mobility that give the film its forward drive are punctuated by more static sequences: passages of often exceptional beauty where Hausa villagers catch moments of

respite from the slave-raiding or common banditry that is a feature of life beyond village compounds and city walls. These painterly tableaux have a show-and-tell quality that seems to derive more from a storyteller's delight in performance than from the ethnographic or exoticist impulses of colonial film. Certainly, a gesture of self-display is evident in scenes where actors assemble in clearly choreographed formations, accentuating with their performing bodies the camera's pictorial framing, and drawing attention in so doing to the image's fabricated quality, its staging of history as story not revealed or documented fact. The handling of the close-up too draws attention to the film's performed quality, showing actors in studied poses that the camera explores in slow zooms and tracks, emphasizing the sculptural aspects of the human face and body, and situating the actors' performances as tableaux vivants restaging not a documentary history of 19<sup>th</sup> century Hausa experience, but a history filtered through the memory and sensibility of a Hausa imam.

The drive to exhibitionary display that fuels this film does not however condemn its subjects to the cultural death of the museum curio or ethnographic artefact. SHAIHU UMAR is notable for vibrant colours that jolt the restored version into uncannily present life, reportedly moving one Jos archivist to tears during restoration work on the first fragments of rediscovered footage. The restored version's revivification of celluloid fragments left for dead in the archive is especially affecting in Halilu's handling of black

African faces and bodies. Warm light and a colour palette that sets off black skin against lustrous costume and sets are just some of the features that show Halilu working against long-standing lighting and mise-en-scène conventions that take white skin as the norm. Retrieving his African characters from their status in western cinema as shadows or visual foils defined against an assumed white standard, Halilu uses complex lighting and saturated colour to bring his black figures into full and living visibility—so we achieve an intimacy with Shaihu Umar that derives as much from the tactile immediacy of his textured features as from his place in the film's narrative as storyteller and central protagonist.

And then there is the sound. If one achievement of this epic film is its visual mapping of a trans-Saharan territory linked by long histories of traffic in goods, words and images, cultural and religious values, and human bodies, another is the more quotidian sonic experience that SHAIHU UMAR affords. The film is remarkable in its attention to sonic detail—so bird, insect and animal sounds provide exterior sequences with a living, breathing soundscape, while more intimate interiors murmur with the delicate sounds of everyday domesticity: grains swishing against kitchen bowls, footsteps padding, crockery chinking as drinks and food are amicably shared. If SHAIHU UMAR and Didi Cheeka's fragment from *Cock Crow at Dawn* are worlds apart in genre terms—one a weekly TV soap, the other an arthouse feature on an epic scale—they share a common delight in rural sonic experience;

so the *Cock Crow* title song opens, just like SHAIHU UMAR's location sequences, with a pastoral evocation in sound of northern Nigerian rural landscapes: birdsong, rushing water, and of course, the cock crow at dawn.

SHAIHU UMAR shares with *Cock Crow*, then, a soundtrack that anchors its narrative in everyday experience, engaging audiences now as in the rare moments of its earlier screenings in the immersive aural pleasures of environmental and domestic sound. In SHAIHU UMAR there is, to be sure, also an agony in re-remembering the film's familiar stories of quotidian life. All too recognizable is the savagery of the slave trade that ravages lives not just in SHAIHU UMAR's fictive past, but in the present time of the film's restoration. Modern slavery is as rife across Nigeria and globally as is the gender violence evoked in this film by the fate of Umar's mother Fatima. Sharply poignant too in a 21<sup>st</sup> century moment of violent Islamist insurgency is the film's evocation of a contrasting tradition of peaceable and moderate Islam. Just as important as SHAIHU UMAR's restoration is then the conversation the film can spark not only on and for Nigerian cinema, but on African memory and history in a national and global frame. With this DVD, the conversations can begin.

Erica Carter (Professor of German and Film, King's College London)  
October 2019

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## NOTES ON THE RESTORATION

The first contact with the Nigerian Film Corporation took place in 2016 through an invitation by the Goethe-Institut in Lagos. The institute's director at the time, Marc-André Schmachtel, and Didi Cheeka from the Lagos Film Society discovered by chance the film holdings of the former Nigerian Film Unit (now: Nigerian Film Corporation, the NFC). They invited the Arsenal to Lagos to support them in overviewing the condition of the film material and developing a concept for its rescue.

Due to the better climate conditions, the majority of the film holdings had been moved to the new premises of the National Film, Video and Sound Archive (NFVSA) in Jos around the 1990s. But two rooms full of rusty film cans still remained in Lagos. The NFVSA holdings encompass newsreels, documentaries, educational and feature films that were produced between the 1950s and '80s, hence before the Nollywood era, which makes this collection enormously precious for the history of the country.

While inspecting some of the reels, Didi Cheeka discovered a 35mm can of SHAIHU UMAR and pointed out that this was a film that had been considered lost for a long time. Many people knew about the film, but nobody had seen it. As the smell in the room suggested, a large number of the reels had already suffered great damage due to vinegar syndrome (the decay of acetate film base that creates the characteristic vinegar smell). Further positive reels of the film were found that day—all of them in the same precarious condition. The search continued at the NFVSA

in Jos, bringing to light several 35mm negative reels and a 16mm print. Since there were no digitization facilities in Nigeria at the time, the 29 cans of SHAIHU UMAR were shipped to Arsenal in Berlin with the support of the German Embassy in Abuja at the end of 2016.

After the inspection of all cans it became clear that the film was far from being complete. Reel numbers were missing, and part of the heavy decayed material was beyond remedy. Tests were conducted to evaluate what could be saved and used to reconstruct the film. L'Immagine Ritrovata in Bologna, a lab specializing in film restoration, proceeded with dehydrating and rehydrating measures. These treatments allowed for digitization tests (The image on pp. 44 and 50 show two examples).

Further investigations led to the assumption that more material of SHAIHU UMAR had to exist. The second trip to Jos took place in mid 2017, and this second search brought to light another 60 cans of SHAIHU UMAR: the almost complete 35mm original camera negative (image), the complete dupe negative (image), as well as the soundtrack negative.

All elements were well preserved. A combination of both picture elements allowed a complete restoration of the film, which was undertaken by ARRI Media in Berlin and Munich in 2017 and 2018. The sound restoration was undertaken by L'Immagine Ritrovata in Bologna. The premiere of the digital restored version took place at the Berlinale Forum in 2018 in attendance of the NFC's Man-

*Dehydration treatment of a 16mm positive reel affected by the vinegar syndrome*



aging Director Dr. Chidia Maduekwe, one of the leading actors, Umaru Dembo, and Didi Cheeka. In December 2018, SHAIHU UMAR was screened at the ZUMA Film Festival in Abuja, and in October 2019 as part of the archival festival "Decasia" in Lagos.

SHAIHU UMAR was the first of a series of collaborative projects with the Nigerian Film Corporation. At the end of 2017 and through funding from the Foreign Ministry in the Cultural Heritage Program, Arsenal was able to install a film scanner in Jos and conduct a training with the NFVSA's archival staff. To consolidate the archival work, the University of Jos in collaboration with the National Film Institute (a training arm of the NFC) established the master's program Film Culture and Archival Studies

in 2019, the first of its kind in Africa. The Jos program was established with support from the DAAD and in collaboration with Goethe University Frankfurt, DFF – Deutsches Filminstitut & Film-museum Frankfurt, Arsenal and the Lagos Film Society. Designed to train scientific personnel for film archives and institutions of film culture, the master program is modeled after the Frankfurt master's program "Filmkultur: Archivierung, Programmierung, Präsentation." It aims at training a new generation of students from within and outside of Nigeria to secure and make accessible for audiences and researchers the audio-visual heritage.

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October 2019  
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All film stills of SHAIHU UMAR  
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# New Facts in Nigerian History

Slave trade in Nigeria was not just a transatlantic human trafficking restricted to the south of Nigeria, using Lagos, Badagry and other coastal ports as slave markets. It was also fully a trans-Saharan business in human beings conducted in the north of Nigeria. This is the historical fact that our history is silent about ... Watch SHAIHU UMAR for these details.

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October 2019*

