

Tashen Corona: A Recasting of Hausa Traditional Pantomime by the COVID-19 Pandemic

*The artist...responds with total personality to a social environment, which changes all the time. Being a kind of a sensible needle, he records with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society.*²

Abstract

In 2020, the global pandemic impacted all areas of life, with the age long Hausa culture of *tashe* performance no exception. This culture is practiced during the Ramadan period and entails young men and women as well as children dressing up in comical costumes and going into houses to entertain inhabitants with melodies and drama and getting a token or grains in return. This cultural performance goes in tandem with contemporary issues in society; therefore modern day *tashe* is full of dramatic content reflecting contemporary events. Thus its coincidence with the COVID 19 pandemic was a recasting of the traditional pantomime to reflect the pandemic.

Keywords: *Tashe*, COVID-19 Pandemic, Hausa Culture, Performance, Ramadan.

Introduction

Tashe is an age-long Hausa culture practiced during the month of Ramadan. It derives its name from the necessity to rouse the Muslim faithful (*tashi* – “to wake up”) before dawn so that food can be taken before the fast begins each day. Even though Ramadan is one of the holiest months of the Islamic calendar, young men and women as well as children find a way to make it fun by wearing colourful comical costumes, fake beards and sometimes rags, moving in groups from house to house to perform drama, dances and songs, all the while soliciting for gifts or money. The performance of *tashe* traditional pantomime starts from the 10th day of Ramadan and runs through to the 20th day of the month, mostly taking place in the evenings after the breaking of the fast. While children (both male and female) carry out their performances in the evenings, moving from house to house, the young men and women most times perform during the day in the market places, which fetches them a lot of money, grains and sometimes goats.

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2 Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Homecoming*, Lagos: Heinemann, 1982, p. 74.

Definition of Key Concepts:

Tashe: *Tashe* consists of some series of short performances which run through the second ten days of the month of Ramadan. The performance is normally carried out in the evenings and sometimes performed during the day in market places. According to Graham Furniss “*tashe* is the name not for one event but a whole series of mini performances performed mostly by young people moving from house to house enacting a particular scene and very often being rewarded by being given ‘alms’ by the householders so entertained.”³ Considering the fact that *tashe* is a Hausa traditional culture and specifically performed during the period of Ramadan, it can be said it is only in Hausa society and culture that one can witness the existence and practice of such a cultural tradition.

Performance: Performance according to Akporoboro is “a speech act accentuated and rendered alive by various gestures, social convention and the unique occasion in which it is performed.”⁴ Adebayo views performance as a process “in which the artist or work of art is performed to a particular audience to gradually steal their attention into his artistic work, which may go a long way to make open inner emotions and feelings he intends to pass across to the audience.”⁵ Thus, it is a process that focuses on the utilisation of conventional artistic techniques to stage actions for others for the purpose of communication. It is an important form of communication that may have a diversity of cultural manifestation in different societies.

With cognisance of the above definitions of performance, *tashe* is a performance-oriented traditional cultural practise with divergent categories of performers and audience. For the performers, it includes youth and children (both male and female), and for the category of the audience, it includes all people in the community, both the young and the old. Through the enactment of these performances, audiences are entertained as well as the actors making comments on contemporary issues of the community/society. Thus; *tashe* is a traditional oral performance which deploys artistic techniques for the purpose of communication. Another key component of *tashe* is the use of costumes and music accompaniments to enhance the aesthetics of the performance. Some of the costumes used by the performers include but are not limited to using white cotton wool as make-believe beards, the use of oversized gowns,

3 Graham Furniss, *Poetry, Prose and Popular Culture in Hausa*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996, p.122.

4 F.B.O Akporoboro, *Introduction to African Oral Literature*, Lagos: Princeton Publishing Co., 2012, p. 3.

5 Habib Adebayo, *Communication as a Channel of Communication*, Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, 2002, p. 4.

turbans, kettles, walking sticks, over-sized eye glasses, makeup, traditional animal skin praying mats and sacks of clothing or rags. All costumes used by the performers are of importance and significance. Each performer simulates and dresses as the character he/she depicts.

Culture: Culture is seen as a complex whole which includes, knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of the society. Thus, a process by which man builds society and civilisation. According to Nigerian Cultural Policy, culture is defined as “a way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organisation thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours.”⁶

Therefore, the patterns of behaviour and thinking that people living in social groups learn create and share. According to Awuawuer, a peoples’ culture includes their beliefs, rules of behaviour, rituals, language, art, technology, styles of dress, ways of producing and cooking food, religion and political and economic systems.⁷ From the above definition, *tashe* is a cultural tradition shared by the Hausa people (Muslims) which expresses some of their norms and values. The various arrays of *tashe* performances from different Hausa communities reflect such values and traditions with slight variations.

Ramadan: The month of Ramadan is a month in which Muslims devote themselves to their faith and come closer to Allah by fasting as it is one of the five Pillars of Islam, and also, it forms one of the bases of how Muslims live their lives. It is pertinent to note that during this religious rite, one is expected to rouse before dawn so that food can be taken before the fast begins each day, thus the word “*tashi*” – “to rise” – “*tashe*,” the name of the yearly performed Hausa cultural tradition

COVID-19 Pandemic

According to Ferrer, in December 2019 a series of cases of the diseases were reported, describing patients admitted to hospital with a new disease characterised by pneumonia and respiratory failure caused by a novel corona virus (SARS-COV-2), in the province of Hubei (China). On 11th March, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic at a world press conference. COVID-19

6 *Cultural Policy for Nigeria*, Federal Republic of Nigeria, Lagos: Federal Government Printer, 1988, p. 5.

7 Justin Tijime Awuawuer, ‘Cultural Revitalism For National Peace and Unity: A Critique of Ziky Kofoworola’s *Fatunje: Our Love*,’ in *Book of Proceedings: International Conference on African Literature and Theatre-Cultural Construction and Re-invention for Global Peace Agenda, 1st to 4th April 2010*, E.O. Sunday and C. Bodunde (eds), Abuja: National Commission For Museums and Monuments, 2010, p. 354.

has rapidly affected every facet of human lives⁸. It lead to loss of human life, businesses, disrupted world trade, public health, employment etc. The cultural and creative sectors were also affected, venue based creative sectors were closed (live performances, cinema, festivals etc) due to distancing measures and the cultural content being modified to reflect the economic, social and political changes caused by the devastating effects of the pandemic. Even though the *tashe* tradition is not a venue-based performance, it restricted the movement of the performers.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical concept adopted for this study is the contextual theory of folklore. The theory posits that oral traditions and traditional performances are not conceived as a material but rather a rich convergence of performance, situation, setting, people and the society. The proponents of this theory (Alan Dundes and Dan Ben Amos et al) believe that the concept does not apply only to the text but to an event in time which is a cultural tradition being performed or communicated, hence the text is only part of the event. In the case of this study, *tashe* performances performed during the COVID-19 pandemic were carried out during the month of Ramadan (in its context, cultural, sociological, behavioural and linguistic environment) with the exception that all performance reflected the socio-economic and political changes caused by the devastating effects of the pandemic.

Historical Background of the Hausa People and the Emergence of *Tashe* as Performance

There are many traditions that trace the origin of the Hausa people. According to Daba, “some historians and geographers claimed that the main streams of tribal migration into present-day Nigeria,”⁹ started from the eleventh century, either from eastern or north-eastern directions. Moreover, the peoples are of hermitic and Negro origin. Daba further asserts that famous and powerful Berber empires of Western Sudan are responsible for the cultural, political and religious revolution in the present Northern States of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.¹⁰ As Borno state is noted as the route of entry to Nigeria by the Sudan Berber empiresin about 1000 A.D., there were invasions by Berber races into Hausaland, and they sometimes had to pay tribute to the powerful empires of Songhai and Borno, until the Fulani Conquest of Hausaland. The old Ghana

8 Ricard Ferrer, ‘Covid19 Pandemic: The Greatest Challenge of Critical Care,’ *Med Intensiva*, Vol. 44, No. 6, p. 323.

9 Habib A.Daba, *Danmaraya Jos in Folkloric Perspective*,Kano: Benchmark Publishers Limited, 2006, p. 1.

10 Daba, *Danmaraya Jos in...*,p. 1.

Empire is one of the oldest states in Western Sudan and a representative of Borno, the Hausa states, Ashanti Kingdoms and Dahomey. Also Madingo or Wangara are considered one of the principal tribes in Ghana. Meek further asserts that the Wangara (*Wangarawa*) played an important role in the early political set-up in Katsina, Kano and Zazzau.¹¹

Meek further asserts that, during the rule of Mansa Musa of Mali (1308–31), many Wangara traders and scholars found their way eastwards into the Hausa States. This is thus the reason why different communities in the Northern States of Nigeria trace their origin to Mali missionaries. A group of these Wangara people settled within the wall city of Kano towards the end of the fourteenth century. In about the year 1500 A.D, the then ruler of Zaria was appointed, a Wangara scholar as chief of the Maguzawa district.¹² The tenth century A.D. is the period which many historians consider the starting point of the Hausa community, comprising of various ethnic origins with a common language, Hausa. The materialisation of this community is a result of the mass tribal migration of Arab-Berber tribes from the east and north into the western Sudan. Some of them made their way into a province known as Nigeria today, specifically its northern states. As a result of this migration, the Arab-Berber tribes co-existed with pagan inhabitants who were hunters and gatherers. After a while, these immigrants established themselves as rulers of the indigenous people. With time, the Hausas organised their walled towns into city-states. Hiskett added that it was not until the sixteenth century that that the Hausa reached the level of being an homogenous people.¹³ The story of the Berber hero; Bayajidda, the Queen of Daura; Daurama and their son, Bawo, is a famous Daura tradition often cited as a source of explaining the original formation of the 14 Hausa states, known as *Hausa Bakwai* and *Banza Bakwai* (seven legitimate Hausa states and the seven illegitimate Hausa states).

The exact date of the first emergence of Islam in Hausaland is subject to speculation, according to Daba.¹⁴ But it is apparent that Muslims came to Hausaland from the west relatively more so than from the north, before the middle of fourteenth century. The coming of Islam to the Hausaland has always been associated with Wangara scholars from Mali who penetrated the lands, particularly Kano and Katsina. History has it that the Wangara (*Wangarawa*) came to Kano during the reign of Sarki Yaji, son of Tsamiya (1349–1385), who was said to be a Muslim by the second half of the fourteenth century.

11 Charles K. Meek, *The Northern Tribes of Nigeria*, London: London Frank Cass and Co, 1971 [1925], p. 64.

12 Meek, *The Northern...*, p. 64.

13 Mervyn Hiskett, *The Sword of the Truth: The Life and Times of Shehu Usman Danfodio*, London: Oxford Press, 1973, p. 4.

14 Daba, *Danmaraya Jos in...*, p. 2.

Sarkin Kano, MMuhammadu Runfa was said to have invited a renowned Muslim cleric, Muhammad Bin Abd al-Karim Al-Maghili, who lived in the late fifteenth century. Crowder posits that Al-Maghili came to Kano with a group of North African Muslims and wrote numerous books on Islamic law for Kano people.¹⁵ Hiskett notes that the coming of Islam affected all Hausa culture and traditions.¹⁶ Therefore, this made it possible for the introduction of *tashe* performance during the holy month of Ramadan by the Hausa people in order to relax and gain pleasure after hours of abstinence from eating and drinking.

According to Umar, *tashe* began as a result of waking people up to eat the pre-dawn food before the commencement of fasting.¹⁷ Because of individual differences as regards slumber, some in the community were assigned to wake others up so as not to miss their pre-dawn food. With time, the *almajirai* amongst them began to solicit for food in loud tones to avoid the pangs of hunger during the day. Subsequently, drummers and singers who are of age (eighteen and above) got involved by singing in order to wake the community up and a token was given to them. But for the young ones, especially the girls, it was not ideal for them to partake in such a tradition because of the time frame. Thus, the young boys and girls began imitating the elder ones after the breaking of fast; consequently, they named the performance *tashe*. Umar further adds that, with time even the older *tashe* performers began performing in the evening, moving from house to house to entertain and educate the community.¹⁸

Karaye adds that, *tashe* started during the reign of Sarkin Kano Bello (1882–1893).¹⁹ The performance began by soliciting money and material wealth by secular singers, moving from house to house of the wealthy in the Hausa community. Another scholar, Alhamdu postulates that *tashe* is a tradition practiced by the Muslim Hausa community and also a tradition that has a relationship with the religion of Islam.²⁰ Besides, the performance of *tashe* differs from one community to the other.

15 J. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder (eds), *History of West Africa*, London: Longman Group, 1976, pp. 191–192.

16 Mervyn Hiskett, *A History of Islamic Verse*, London: University of London Press, 1975, p. 1.

17 M. Umar, *Wassannin Tashe*, Zaria: N.N.P.C, 1981, p. 4.

18 Umar, *Wassannin...*, p. 5.

19 M. Karaye, *Tashe By Male People*, Report on Summer Project, Kano: ABC, A.B.U, 1970, p. 2.

20 Ibrahim D. Alhamdu, *Tashe Mussamman Na Kassar Kano*, Report on Summer Project, Kano: ABC, A.B.U.

Tashen Corona

All cultural, traditional and oral performances are functional in nature, thus some of the functional nature of *tashe* is its socio-economic, political and cultural benefits. First and foremost *tashe* performances entertain their audiences. Young children and young adults are dressed in caricatural costumes, drumming, singing and dancing for the pleasure of their audiences. Furthermore, the practice makes it possible for the performers to earn savings from the proceeds of their performances in preparations for Eid-al-Adha Sallah celebrations. It also makes political and social commentary on societal problems. For instance, most of the performances cited in this study address issues reflecting the socio-political and economic realities of its society. Another major function of the *tashe* is it distracts the community from political and social problems, for instance after the Nigerian civil war, a new performance called *Ngozi Uwar Ojukwu* (Ngozi Mother of Ojukwu) was introduced to make people forget the difficulties they faced during the civil war. Examples of *tashe* which evolved as a commentary on contemporary societal issues include, *Yan Mata a Daina Bilicin* (“Girls Stop Bleaching”) to create awareness to women on the hazardous effect of bleaching the skin, or *Tashen Student Ta Rasa Aikin Yi* (“The Unemployed Student”), to comment on the many jobless youths in society after graduating from school. Other examples of *tashe* include *Jatau Mai Magani* (“Jatau with Medicines”), *Kayi Rawa Malam* (“But you danced, *malam*”), *Dan Dukununu* (“The Unkempt Fellow”), *Mai Kiriniya* (“The Naughty Boy”), *Zan Buge* (“Allow me to Knock/Hit”), *Tashen Zuciyar Maitumma* (“The Fellow with a Heart Made of Rags”), *Tashen Ga Mairama Ga Dauda* (“This is Mairama and Dauda”), *Tsoho da Gemu* (“The Old Man with a Beard”).

On the other hand, *tashe* performances by girls include: *Samodara* (“The Foolish Girl”), *Mai Ciki* (“The Pregnant Woman”), *Matar Malam* (“Mallam’s Wife”), *Iya Duba Duba* (“Iya Look at Me”), *Dalibar Makarantar Boko Tayi Ciki* (“The School Girl is Pregnant”), *Iya Talgen ki Zai Zabai* (“Iya Your Pudding is about to Spill”) and scores of others.

The year of corona pandemic witnessed the emergence of new *tashe* performances to reflect the socio-economic and political situation in Nigeria. For instance, *Kudin Corona* (“Grant for Corona”). During the pandemic, the Nigerian government disbursed a sum of N10 billion naira to Lagos State in order to combat the novel corona virus after other State governors had accused the Federal Government of Nigeria of “abandoning” other States of the federation. One of the State governors proceed to solicit for funding to combat COVID 19 from the Federal government and the federal government tactfully refused the grant but responded with clinical equipment. The governor in

question is accused of misappropriation of funds. The *Kudin Corona* emerged to satirise the governor for entertainment purposes as well as an indictment of corrupt administrators. The central character of “Grant for Corona” is adorned with a *babban riga* (traditional Hausa dress worn by men), cap, a fake beard and lies down on a mat. Other performers flash lights on his face and sing: *Ganduje tashi gari yawaye* (“Ganduje, wake up, its morning”) and he responds *Bana tashi sai an bani kudin/dollar corona* (“I am not waking up until am given my corona grant”). The performers continue singing until a token is given to them.

From another perspective, this performance is an indictment on corrupt government officials in Nigeria, as the character satirised in the performance above is accused of bribery and corruption. The Nigerian image reflected in this performance is that of social decadence and continuing degeneration, which is evident in the political terrain of the nation. Within this performance one foresees the advocacy for immediate revolutionary change in Nigeria in order to stop the vicious circle in which national resources are recklessly appropriated by government officials, who then tax the poor for amenities that are always promised and never provided.



Ganduje tashi gari ya waye
 (“Ganduje, wake up, it’s morning”)

The global pandemic impacted all areas of life, including religion. All religious centres were closed so as to encourage social distancing to reduce the spread of the corona virus. For instance, Muslim congregational prayers were banned and all conventional and religious schools were shut down. For this reason, another performance emerged to reflect this policy, namely *Liman ina zaka ne?* (“Imam, where are you going?”). The central character is adorned with *babban riga*, a turban, eye glasses, fake white beard, sack of clothing and a walking stick. The drummers together with other performers ask the Imam, thus:

‘Yan amshi – Liman ina zaka ne?

Liman – Gari zan bari su Buhari sunci zanbe sun hana sallar Juma’ a.

English translation:

Chorus – Imam, where are you going?

Imam – I am leaving town, because Buhari has won the election and has banned Jummu’at congregational prayers.

The performers keep singing and dancing until they are given a gift or money. Even though *Liman ina zaka ne?* is short and precise, it is laden with a number of connotations.

One of such connotation is satirising and lampooning the character implied in the performance. The character in question ascended to the presidential seat of Nigeria in 2015 after three failed attempts. Even though the corona pandemic necessitated social distancing and the ban on Muslims from attending congregational prayers, many were aggrieved. They believed that banning the five daily congregational prayers was valid, excluding that of Jummuat



congregational prayers observed once a week. Additionally, it is considered as the most religious day of the week. Hence the statement, *Su Buhari sunci zabe sun hana sallar Jumma’ a*. Therefore, the Imam who leads Jummuat prayers wants to leave town because the Friday congregational prayers have been banned.

Liman ina zaka ne?

(“Imam, where are you going?”)

Another *tashe* performance is *Iya ina zaki da kaya?* (“Iya, where are you going with all your belongings?”). The central character in this case is a small girl dressed in over-flowing gown, with her is her bundle of cloths, mat and a kettle which signifies she is going for an impromptu journey. The performance goes:

Yan amshi – Iya ina zaki da kaya?
Iya – Ganduje ne ya ishe mu!

English translation

Chorus: Iya, where are you going with all your belongings?
Iya: I am leaving because Ganduje is harassing us.

In most Northern States in Nigeria, there is the practice of *almajiri*, an Islamic system of education which is being bastardised. The system entails a child taken to an Islamic scholar to be taught using religious books until he graduates and goes back home to his parents. But with the increase in the poverty level, parents take their wards to *almajiranci* without providing them with all they need. The norm is for the children to roam about (begging) after studies and fending for themselves. Thus, during the corona pandemic, The Kano State government and some few other state governments announced the ban on street begging to curtail the spread of corona virus. Furthermore, the decision was taken to discourage and address the lingering problems of street begging and also an effort to fully consolidate free and compulsory primary and secondary school education in the States. The policy puts in place measures for rounding up any *almajiri* on the street and repatriating them back to his/her State, parents and guardians or face the law. As oral traditions serve the purpose of social commentary, this performed *tashe* satirises the above policy because the *almajiri* system is seen as sacred because it deals with religion.

From another perspective, the performance of *Iya ina zaki da kaya* reflects the policy of selling public properties and land by the State in question, justifying this by saying it is trying to rejuvenate the state’s economy and infrastructural deficit. To the general public, and opposition parties, this is selling public properties to private entities. The State in question is also accused of destabilising small-scale businesses, which use public spaces to operate, and this action meant a lot of street side vendors lost their means of earning a livelihood in the quest to ensure social distancing and decongestion in public spaces to contain the corona virus. Therefore, *Iya* (“Iya”) is tired and is packed into a place where she can be accommodated.



Iya ina zaki da kaya

(“Iya, where are you going with all your belongings?”)

This study will not be complete without discussing modern technology and its influence on *tashe* during the corona pandemic. Generally, modern technology has had a tremendous effect on all traditional oral performances. Modern technology through the print media is able to transform all oral and traditional performances into text, thus being

documentable. Accordingly, there are numerous scholarly works on *tashe* performances in text, hence serving as reference material. Modern technology also provided a means of learning and retaining oral traditions, therefore, one comes across works on *tashe* performance recordings. Examples are the documentaries on *tashe* as aired by Arewa 24 during the month of Ramadan for the pleasure of people who live in Government Reserved Areas where one rarely witnesses live performances of *tashe*.²¹ This also gives the performance a wide audience, rather than confining it to the community. As a result giving it a global popular cultural focus and gaining international fame. All live performances are ephemeral in nature, but with modern technology i.e. videos and recordings, one can watch the performance whenever one wishes, for instance performances during the pandemic were recorded, as a result many were able to witness it in the confines of their homes. Lastly, technology affords new audiences within the globalised world to witness oral traditions of different peoples.

Conclusions

As discussed earlier on, the tradition of *tashe* performance moves from house to house in order to amuse and entertain audiences. The question is: how then was it possible for young children and adults to perform for their audience during the corona pandemic? Most of these children performed in the comfort zone of their homes surrounded by families. Performances were recorded via

21 Satellite Television Station, Kano, Nigeria.

phones and forwarded to the general public for consumption. The tradition of giving out the token was carried out by families and friends. An example of a *tashe* performance which went viral in Kano is the one performed to former Emir of Kano, Khalifa Sanusi Lamido Sanusi by his son. Without technology, *tashe* performances would not have been possible and witnessed by the general public during the corona pandemic, only a few would have witnessed the pantomime in the confines of their homes as performed by their children.

In conclusion, *tashe* performances showcase the talents and potentialities of the key actors performing in this particular Hausa oral performance and at the same time made commentaries on contemporary issues. In 2020, the global pandemic impacted all areas of life with the old age Hausa traditional performance of *tashe* no exception. All performances mirrored issues raised by the pandemic as depicted by *tashe* performers in this study, thus, they were able to recreate and reinvent their art to reflect the scenario. In fact, the pandemic spurred innovation and creativity for the performers. As for the presentation of the performances, all were conducted within the context of its setting, situation and time. Furthermore, all performances were witnessed by many audiences with the aid of technology, as though one had witnessed them live.