

# A Voice from the Purdah

## *Baba of Karo*



Anthropologists have been inclined to see themselves as the spokespeople of the people they study, especially when the latter for some reason are less able to make their own voices heard. Even if they do not fully accept “the native’s point of view” personally, they should at least be able to explain it. Yet in fact, they are usually not the unadulterated voices of those locals. They tend to write in academese to reach their scholarly peers, and if at best there is clarity and precision in this writing, it is mostly not of any remarkable literary quality. Thus, it may be a somewhat costly form of cultural brokerage.

But there has been a twist to this due to gender inequality in academia. When academic couples have been doing field research together, it could be a moment within a career pattern where, moving into a post-field phase, the man is in the driver’s seat. His wife could have a slightly less prominent career of her own, or she could become a faculty wife.

This is hardly the situation any longer, but it was in large part true in the late colonial period. And the intriguing part of this pattern was that it could give the woman in the team rather greater freedom to experiment and take liberties in writing, as she was less constrained by mainstream career planning anyway.

Late colonial anthropology in Nigeria offers two examples of this. One of the pioneer contributions to a literary anthropology was Elenore Smith Bowen’s *Return to Laughter* (1954), a slightly fictionalized account of the personal experience of research with an unnamed tribal community. But everybody knew that “Elenore Smith Bowen” was the *nom de plume* of the Oxford-trained American Laura Bohannan, who had conducted her field work with her husband Paul among the Tiv in Central Nigeria; the Bohannans published extensively under their

regular names in academic contexts. *Return to Laughter* is by now seldom mentioned in studies of Nigerian writing. A short article, “Shakespeare in the Bush,” about Tiv elders’ interpretation of, and critical response to, the Hamlet story has perhaps become yet more of a classic (Bohannon 1966).

But *Return to Laughter* revolved rather more around Laura Bohannon’s own experience. Less known is Mary Smith’s *Baba of Karo*, published in the same year (1954). Mary Smith, British, did not come to have an academic career of her own, but she was in Northern Nigeria with her husband M. G. Smith, a British-trained and British-based Jamaican of Colored elite background. M. G. Smith eventually became a professor at University College London. (“M” in M. G. Smith stands for Michael, but he has usually been referred to by his initials.) In Nigeria, he was primarily a political and historical anthropologist. For example, he wrote about political development in Kagoro, a chiefdom just next to Kafanchan, where with considerable success a progressive chief combined the power given to him under “indirect rule” with the organizational and ideological resources provided by missionary Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Above all, however, Smith wrote two large monographs about Northern emirates: Zaria and Daura (M. G. Smith 1960, 1978). (Daura, the less-known of these two, happens to be the original home of General Muhammadu Buhari, New Year’s Eve 1983 coup leader, and in 2015 and again 2019 elected president.)

These monographs were very much in the not-very-accessible style of the academic anthropology of the times. Mary Smith, on the other hand, concentrated some of her effort on assembling what amounts to an autobiography of Baba, an elderly Hausa woman. The full name “Mary Smith” actually appears nowhere inside the published book, only on the spine. On the title page, she is “M. F. Smith.” In a brief preface by Professor Daryll Forde, director of the International Africa Institute (and her husband’s superior and advisor), she is Mrs. Smith. In an extended introduction to the book, on Hausa ethnography and by her husband, she is “my wife.” This, of course, communicates more about the midcentury academic order and style than about the Hausa. The book ends with thirty-some pages of explanatory notes by M. G.

*Baba of Karo* appeared two years after Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, and with the same London publisher, Faber and Faber. And Professor Forde had had a hand in that publication as well.<sup>2</sup> The Africanist circle in London was not so large.

M. G. Smith’s introduction informs us that Mary Smith interviewed Baba on a daily basis for an average of three hours per day over a six-week period. That would come to well over a hundred hours. Apart

from that, she also collected a dozen case histories from other local women. It is made clear that only a woman could have gathered this material—a man would not have had access, as the Hausa women were secluded in purdah.<sup>3</sup> A large part of the work took place in Zaria, as the Smiths invited Baba to come along from the village to their headquarters in the larger city, where the interviewing could be carried out more efficiently. Older village women, said Baba, had not thought this was a good idea: “Don’t go to the Rest House, the Europeans will pick you up and take you home with them in an aeroplane. Don’t go!” (Mary Smith 1954: 12)

A few generations earlier, Baba’s ancestors had actually been Kanuri people, moving in from the northeastern land of Borno, but by now Baba definitely considered herself Hausa—with a dominant language and with an expansive form of Islam, the Hausa identity had great assimilative power. Ethnic boundaries seem to have been a bit blurred, and could be crossed.

*Baba of Karo* is a first-person narrative.<sup>4</sup> One could imagine Mary Smith as Baba’s ghostwriter—appearing nowhere in the book herself, in her own voice, with an authorial or editorial “I.” That also means that whatever there may have been of Baba’s personal response to the young white woman in front of her is not noticeable in the text. Nor is there much in the way of reflective, inward-looking commentary, either by Baba or by Mary Smith, as “Elenore Smith Bowen” could have in *Return to Laughter*.

The account of everyday activities, however, is often lively enough. As a young girl (presumably in her early teens), Baba would go with other girls to outlying village markets to buy garden produce cheaply, then take it home to cook so it could be taken next morning to be sold as ready-made food in the more central market. There was a nice modest profit (in cowrie shells) to be made from this. But then, as some or even all of that profit could go into donations to young male drummers and praise singers accompanying them, the girls might still have to ask for new investment capital from their mothers before their next excursions to those villages.

Baba’s mother was from a family of drummers and blacksmiths, but she died when Baba was about ten years old. At the beginning of the rainy season, there is a period of intense thunder and lightning, and Baba’s mother and her two younger children were in her hut when lightning struck. Baba’s father cried, although he was surprised to find that Baba and her brother had survived: they had been away from the hut at the time. Then a beautiful, young female slave came to live with them so that Baba’s father would not have to be like a bachelor.

She became pregnant soon enough, but as she went away to visit her maternal kinsfolk some distance away, she died too.

So a father's sister became like a mother for Baba, but then this aunt was somehow abducted to distant Abuja.<sup>5</sup> When Baba was around fourteen, it was time for her to get married. A suitable husband was found, a farmer and second cousin. Evidently Baba agreed, but without real enthusiasm, and hinted to another suitor of a blacksmith family that it would be his turn next. She reminisced about the intricate and extended wedding arrangements, after which she went off to live in her husband's village. But then the aunt was retrieved from Abuja, and, as circumstances of life changed, Baba could decide that she did not enjoy life in the village—she preferred the nearby town where that young man of a blacksmith family lived, still available. (Actually, he was by now a *malam*, a Koranic teacher.) The divorce from the first husband, after a few years of marriage, was amicable. The second marriage lasted longer, some fifteen years. In both those marriages, Baba was a junior wife, however, and the senior wives already had children, while Baba remained childless. That had at least one advantage: when her husband traveled for teaching and preaching, she could go along. Yet when the *malam* acquired a third wife, who soon enough had children, Baba's position became untenable. The aunt who had become like a mother did not care for the *malam* either. So Baba divorced once more, although remaining on friendly terms with this set of in-laws.

Then, by way of a set of kinship links, she became acquainted with another man in another village: a farmer and prison guard. He already had four wives, the maximum number allowed, but as he desired Baba, he divorced one of these. Indeed, after some time, Baba had him to herself. On the other hand, later on, when a village chief died and his wife, Baba's good friend, was pregnant, Baba arranged for her husband to marry this friend. Then, however, the husband had a sister who was widely seen as troubled and quarrelsome, so this was something that Baba had to deal with for an extended period.

This third husband died, and Baba became a widow. Apparently it was not a good idea for an elderly woman to be alone, so she married a fourth time, to a farmer. But they did not live together. This new husband already had a wife, who had gone away to see kinspeople, and Baba worried that if she turned up again, they would not get along. So Baba stayed in the compound of a younger brother. The husband came around one morning, after he had heard that Baba was working with a European woman—that is, Mary Smith—to point out that this was an infringement on his domestic authority. Baba gave him sixpence to go

the market and get some kola nuts and meat and things for stew, and so he walked away again very pleased.

There are parts of Baba's story offering intricate descriptions of domesticity, bond friendships, and related ritual rules and cases of infringement that a reader without any specific deep interest in Hausa culture may find rather hard going. Nevertheless, some topics may draw special curiosity. Slavery is one of them: it is described as involving sets of close, quasi-domestic, often largely benign relationships. When a male slave wants to marry someone else's female slave, his owner becomes engaged in the marriage negotiations and pays the bride price for the desired woman to her owner—even as she remains the latter's slave. On the other hand, when an owner frees a slave, he may proceed to adopt him as a son.

There are more such practices creating a multifaceted web of varying close linkages.

Then, of course, the Europeans came, in the early years of the twentieth century. Baba would have been around twenty-five at the time, and in her second marriage. Talking to Mary Smith, she was inclined to refer to the newcomers not as "conquerors" or "British" or "Europeans" or "whites," but often as "Christians," seemingly the most significant categorization. The arrival of a Pax Britannica was apparently not entirely unwelcome either, even if some places like Kano had to be taken by force. There had been a period of violent conflicts in the area just before, so it was okay to get some peace.

The Europeans, perhaps with an understanding of slavery based less on local knowledge and more on what had been its recent cruel forms in Plantation America, quickly banned what they found of it in their new Hausaland territories. But even as it may have been formally abolished, it would not seem that—as an informal, personal, and collective clientage type of relationships—slavery disappeared quite so quickly. (By the time I came to Kafanchan in the 1970s, the neighborhoods of the descendants of the people once enslaved by the emir of Jemaa could still be identified.)

Again and again, Baba would also come back to the topic of the Bori cult. This possession cult shared some traits with cult life among the Maguzawa, those "heathen" Hausa who had not adopted Islam. It offered a certain refuge for women who somehow, temporarily or more durably, did not fit into conventional married life. They supported themselves at least in part through prostitution. Some males who might have been of homosexual inclination would hang out with the cult as well. But it was under female leadership, and the *malams*, Koran

experts, seemed anxious to be on good terms with that leadership. One might sense some coexistence of religious traditions here.

Bori dancing was also a popular public spectacle. Baba reminisced about a time when there had been a Bori cult compound in the vicinity, and about an occasion when one woman, possessed by the Boxer spirit, performed her song and dance; when the spectators gave her money, she had in turn given it to Baba. She remembered well, too, how one of her co-wives with the third husband, the prison guard, was a Bori follower. After this woman got into a quarrel with other cultists, their husband told her off, and so she picked up and left. A half century after *Baba of Karo*, a more elaborated gender studies perspective would find the Bori cult intriguing material.<sup>6</sup>

There is, in Baba's midcentury account and commentary, little sense of some sort of modernity as an alternative mode of living. The bright lights of the city do not seem to be on the horizon—even as those women in her village neighborhood are evidently aware of the international airport in Kano (which had recently been in quite intense use in World War II). Instead, in Baba's view, life has simply been as it has: no need to be defensive about it, or compare it to anything else.

The book has a brief postscript. Mallam Abdu, local Arabic teacher, has written to Mary Smith in London to inform her that Baba died on 3 June 1951, aged 74. He had given one pound two shillings so a shroud could be bought for her.

By then, further south in Hausaland, a boy named Ibrahim Tahir was just moving into his early teens.

## Notes

1. I have had the pleasure of extensive conversations with both the Smiths, in London, and the chief of Kagoro, Gwamna Awan, in his mansion.
2. I refer to this in chapter 1, note 1. There was another edition of *Baba of Karo* published by Yale University Press in 1981 (while M. G. Smith was a professor at Yale University); this edition is still available.
3. There are later anthropological studies of Hausa womanhood in a volume edited by Coles and Mack (1991).
4. There is a certain broad parallel to *Baba of Karo* in the book *Akiga's Story: The Tiv Tribe as Seen by One of Its Members* (East 1939). But the story of the latter is more complicated. Akiga Sai (1898–1959) was a mission school product, consequently literate, and wrote his text himself, a rather diverse account of history, ethnography, autobiography, and more, intended primarily for younger Tiv readers. But the better-known published version was edited by Rupert East, who as a member of the Northern Nigerian

colonial government took a wide-ranging interest in literacy, writing, and publishing. Another edition of *Akiga's Story* was published in 1965, presumably as part of the postcolonial reawakened interest in locally produced texts. On this see Fardon 2015.

5. This was old Abuja, not the present national capital. Old Abuja is now Suleija, nearby.
6. There are updates on the Bori cult in a Festschrift for Daryll Forde (Onwuejeogwu 1969), in Masquelier's (1993, 2001) study of the Bori in a town in the Niger Republic, and in a chapter in the book referred to in note 3. Matthias Krings (2015), German anthropologist with field experience from Kano from the 1990s onwards, offers varied comments on the Bori and related cults and movements in the context of Northern Nigerian and African popular culture. In Kafanchan in the mid-1970s, a compound in the Hausa neighborhood was known to be the local site of Bori activities.

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