
Original Article

The Kano Durbar: Political aesthetics in the bowel of the elephant

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Abstract Political aesthetics deploy theatrical techniques to unite performers and audience into a cultural community, thereby distracting from conflicts. The Kano Durbar in northern Nigeria demonstrates how the aesthetics of power can promote a place-based political culture. Although power in Kano rests on a wobbly three-legged stool of traditional, constitutional and religious authority, the *status quo* celebrated by the Durbar holds back ideological challengers like Boko Haram even as it perpetuates distance from the unified nation-state. The Durbar works as a social drama that helps sustain a Kano-based collective solidarity against the threats of ethnic/religious tensions and Salafist extremism. A cultural-sociological and dramaturgical analysis of the Durbar demonstrates how weak sources of power can support one another when bound together in an aesthetically compelling ritual.

American Journal of Cultural Sociology (2013) 1, 125–151.

doi:10.1057/ajcs.2012.8

Keywords: political aesthetics; place; social drama; Kano; Nigeria; Durbar

Introduction

While political rituals are expressions of *power*, what is less often noticed is that they are expressions of *place*. Bringing this insight to bear on the analysis of these rituals can reveal how they work, what exactly they accomplish, thereby resolving some of the puzzles they present. This article examines the case of the Kano Durbar, a Nigerian ritual that presents a social drama of and for Kano residents, a drama that helps sustain a sense of

place-based collective solidarity and that supports the political *status quo* in the face of ethnic-religious tensions and Salafist extremism.

Studies of political rituals, spectacles and aesthetics run into a logical conundrum: regimes that invest most heavily in these displays of power – from the Romans and Byzantines to North Korea, Stalinist Soviet Union, and fascist Italy – are those that seem to need them the least. Dictatorships, absolute monarchies and authoritarian regimes seem fond of organizing mass games, military parades, lavish cultural performances replete with pomp-and-circumstance, uniforms and postures, while democracies do much less. This is puzzling because the common assumption is that such rituals serve a legitimating function: the leadership mounts spectacles to impress its grandeur, control and/or benevolence upon the citizens-as-audience, thereby persuading them of its right to rule. Aesthetics makes power seem natural, authority inevitable. Given the fact that such regimes monopolize power and do not hesitate to use it against their own citizens, however, legitimacy would seem to be beside the point.

This theoretical problem goes hand-in-hand with a methodological one: most studies of political aesthetics necessarily concentrate on the production of political aesthetics and not on their reception. This is either because it is difficult to get access to people and their reactions ('how do you *really* feel about Kim Jong-un?') or because the analysis focuses on some historical pageantry or display of power. In either case audience responses are unavailable and evidence of what the spectacle meant to its observers, or whether the aesthetic legitimation actually worked, is scarce. Moreover performative art often deliberately hides its politics, which creates a particular challenge for research that focuses on the productive side.

A third problem is conceptual: Analyses of political aesthetics generally assume a bi-polarity wherein one regime puts on a spectacle for one citizenry (or one unified center for one undifferentiated periphery). Such analyses typically emphasize the central authority's ideological production, as in Clifford Geertz's magisterial analysis of the Balinese 'theatre state' (Geertz, 1980). Case studies investigate the style (Berezin, 1994; Chabal and Daloz, 2006) and content (Lane, 1981; Myers, 2010) of the production, but they rely on the one source of power (the ruler, the ruling class, capitalism)/one citizenry (the ruled, the workers, the people) duality.

Regarding these theoretical, methodological and conceptual conventions as limitations to our understanding of political aesthetics, this article takes the position that one cannot assume a bi-polar model, some single power addressing some undifferentiated public. Nor should one assume that political aesthetics serve any particular function (legitimation, shaping of common sense, producing acquiescence, bread-and-circuses distraction) or convey any particular meaning; the meaning, if any, and function, if any, must be drawn from the data, not imposed on it. One thing one *can* assume, on the other hand, that political spectacles and rituals take place *somewhere*, in some specific place;

they are actual, not virtual. Thus our research has examined multiple centers of power and authority, multiple symbolic techniques, and multiple types of recipients in a specific place, that being Kano, a large city in northern Nigeria. It has followed the cultural diamond analytic model of the production and reception of cultural objects – talking to people about meaning – in a specific, emplaced social world to assess what political aesthetics in the form of a social drama can actually accomplish (Turner, 1974; Griswold, 2012).

Political Aesthetics and the Sociology of Place

In his classic analysis of political rituals, David Kertzer (1988) argues that leaders use rituals to ‘create political reality’ for the people around them. Whether they be defenders of the *status quo* or insurrectionists demanding change, leaders deploy ritual means to organize and mobilize the public. Kertzer defines ritual as ‘symbolic behavior that is socially standardized and repetitive ... Ritual action has a formal quality to it. It follows highly structured, standardized sequences and is often enacted at certain places and times that are themselves endowed with special symbolic meaning’ (p. 9). A political spectacle is such a ritual.

By political aesthetics we mean putting beauty – of imagery, of language, of music, of the body – in the service of some power arrangement. Although spectacles and representations reached their apogee under Stalinism and fascism, they have by no means disappeared. In the twenty-first century spectacles are the performative aspect of political aesthetics more generally. Note that we regard ‘political’ in the general sense of involving power; thus ‘political aesthetics’ could support a dictator, but could also celebrate a leader who does or does not hold constitutional power, a moral leader, or the national pride on display at such events as the Olympics or World Cup.

Understanding political aesthetics presupposes a theory of how culture works. Sociologists suggest that culture makes distinctions, draws lines, sets categories and establishes internal codes through which experience is interpreted.¹ Nationalism is the most familiar political expression of this: building on collective memory, it celebrates a geographic construct, draws borders, re-imagines history and creates powerful symbols separating ‘us’ from ‘them’. Successful nation building involves creating a strong identification with the ‘imagined community’ of the nation, and political aesthetics helps achieve this (Anderson, 2006). For example, Daina Eglitis (2002) demonstrates the political aesthetics of the Latvian Revolution of 1986–1991. Latvian nationalism expressed the desires return to ‘normality’, defined as the natural state of affairs before Soviet takeover. As the Soviet Union was breaking apart, Latvians nationalists held demonstrations at Riga’s Freedom

¹ The thinking draws from Durkheim’s sacred/profane binaries, from Simmel’s formalism, and/or from Levi-Straus’s structuralism. Some of the most influential articulations include Alexander *et al* (2006), Lamont and Molnár (2002), Smith (2005), Zerubavel (1997).



Monument, which had been unveiled in 1935 during Latvia's brief (and thus quite abnormal) period of independence between the wars. Today the monument remains a shrine to national independence. Latvians bring flowers to the monument, and elderly women tend the flowers and sweep the monument.

Laying flowers and wielding booms typifies the role bodies-in-motion play in political aesthetics. While power gets *embodied* in monuments and buildings, it also impresses itself on human bodies and is reproduced or defied through bodily action. Sometimes the leader's body is the vehicle for the expression of power, as in the ostentation expected and displayed by Big Men in African countries (Daloz, 2003). Parades, public ceremonies and mass games marshal and synchronize bodies to display the power of the state or other organizer of these events. Politicized bodily movements can take place in micro-interactions such as a salute or handshake.² The most familiar form of power-through-aesthetics is on a more massive scale. Political spectacle often aims to merge regime with nation, to *incorporate* the citizens' bodies into the body of the ruler or ruling elite.³ North Korea offers the most familiar contemporary example, being the one remaining producer of mass games (Myers, 2010). From the Great Leader (Kim Il-sung) to the Dear Leader (Kim Jong-il) to the Great Successor (Kim Jong-un), the regime has orchestrated visually spectacular depictions of its legitimating *Juche* (self reliance) ideology, with thousands of bodies creating a portrait of the dictator. Controlled spectacles of this sort provide the illusion of popular participation. They link the nation (imagined community) to the state (regime of rulers) through a political aesthetics that entertains, aiming thereby to raise emotional response and cognitive identification ('this is us').

Some states go in for this more than others. Laura Adams (2010) defines the 'spectacular state' as one that, more than most, conducts politics on the symbolic level. Looking at the government-produced spectacles held during Uzbekistan's

² Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi (1997) describes how Mussolini demanded that Italians greet one another with a Roman salute (stiff arm, right hand perpendicular) rather than a handshake, which fascists dismissed as bourgeois. Mabel Berezin (1997) brilliantly analyzes how Mussolini attempted to restructure the Italian self by imposing private body practices merged with public spectacles. Berezin shows that despite the sophistication of the cultural production, such aesthetic manipulations of the body politics (in both senses) may not result in general legitimation. Lisa Wedeen (1999) similarly argues that political spectacles in Syria produce only a practical and partial compliance, 'a politics of public dissimulation in which citizens act *as if* they revere their leader' (p. 6).

³ People tend to distinguish between states and nations with respect to the culture/power relationship along the following lines: States, and regimes currently holding power, have power over bodies, for example by controlling security forces. They deploy culture to legitimate themselves and their control over citizens, and they often meet resistance. Nations, on the other hand, are primordial, based on pre-existing cultures; they too deploy culture, but it meets no resistance, for people feel that they belong, are of one body, with the nation. Ever since Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community' thesis, which itself built on earlier work on 'the invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), sociologists have been aware that nations are not 'natural' but constructed. States make their claims to legitimacy on the basis of this myth of a nation, a myth elaborated in cultural symbols, and often these symbols involve human bodies.

two biggest national holidays, Adams separates form, content and production: the spectacles have national content (for example, folk costumes and dances), take modern forms (adopting the international model of the opening Olympics ceremonies), and are Soviet-style, state-directed, productions. 'Spectacle producers are oriented toward not just their actual audience but also toward an imagined audience, and broader processes of the globalization of culture can be seen in their orientation toward global international forms (Olympics) with national or regional content' (p. 77). Adams notes dryly that, in fact, few people outside Uzbekistan pay any attention.

Mass games and holiday festivals share the attributes associated with political spectacles: bodies in motion, following scripts understood by performers and spectators, with the producer (regime, local government) hoping to influence the public's political reality. As noted earlier, this general model envisions a central authority seeking to legitimate or celebrate itself but is less helpful for situations where there are multiple centers of power with none dominant. (The divided authority between federal and state or provincial governments is one reason why federations like the United States, Germany and Canada mount relatively few political spectacles.) Where authority is divided, spectacles must necessarily represent not one source of power but several.

The Kano Durbar offers a successful but vulnerable example of how this can work. It does so by drawing analytic attention to an under-recognized aspect of political spectacles: that they are not just about power but also about place. Ever since Gieryn's (2000) agenda-setting article, sociologists have understood that place is not just a background to or conceptual container of social life, but instead is inextricably bound up in social perceptions and actions.⁴ In those post-colonial regimes where power remains shaky and all authority is suspect, celebrating a specific 'place character' (Paulsen, 2004) at the national or local level can obscure conflicts, creating an emotional solidarity through aesthetic means.⁵ Emplaced political agendas get woven together in a symbolic skein, each drawing strength from the presence of the others. Political rituals of this sort are filled with contradictions and, at the same time – because they constitute a social drama that subsumes all contradictions under a celebration of place – can be surprisingly effective.

⁴ Gieryn (2000) emphasized place as a 'bundle' of location, materiality and meaning, to which I would add a fourth component, that of demographics. While he correctly rejects using places (such as census tracts) simply as containers for demographic variables, he perhaps underestimates how demographic characteristics are woven into the other three. A seaport (location), oil-producing (materiality) historically Cajun (meaning-making) town where the population is older and ethnically white is a different place from a seaport, oil-producing, historically Cajun town where the population is younger and increasingly composed of Vietnamese immigrants.

⁵ Paulsen (2004) defines place-character as 'a set of pattern of meanings and actions that are specific to a distinct locale' and that influence action (p. 245). She makes the useful distinction between a 'sense of place', which is cognitive and emotional, and 'place character', which influences political and social practices and behavior.



The Kano Durbar

The Kano Durbar presents bodies-in-motion in and about a particular place. Kano, seat of the Kano Emirate, is an ancient city in northern Nigeria that developed as an endpoint of the trans-Saharan trade. The country's second largest city, Kano is home to some three million people with Kano State claiming over nine million (although all figures are disputed). Over 90 per cent of Kano residents are Hausa-speaking Sunni Muslims, the Kanawa of Hausa and/or Fulani ethnicity, while the rest are 'settlers', Christians from the south, along with a handful of Shiites, Lebanese and expatriates. In the politically turbulent years following Nigerian independence in 1960, Kano experienced deadly inter-ethnic rioting, which led to Igbos fleeing to the south and was one of the factors that led to Biafra's secession and a disastrous civil war. Biafra lost and rejoined Nigeria, and during the 1970s oil-boom many southerners returned to Kano, but inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations (the two are largely coterminous) remain volatile.

Even by Nigerian standards, Kano is beset with problems. According to the Central Bank of Nigeria, Kano has the highest unemployment rate in the country; Nigeria's national rate of unemployment is 23.9 per cent while Kano's is 67 per cent.⁶ Local manufacturing has declined, and agriculture, the traditional economic mainstay, fell by the wayside during the oil boom and has never recovered. This combination has given rise to an ongoing rural migration to a city that lacks the capacity to provide jobs, housing or services for everyone. Masses of idle and frustrated youth have been fertile ground for religious and ethnic violence, which has plagued Kano on and off for decades, and recently for recruitment into the Islamist terrorist organization Boko Haram.⁷ Boko Haram arose in 2009 some 500 kilometers to the east in Maiduguri, and Kano had considered itself immune until 20 January 2012 when a series of attacks on police stations in Kano killed close to 200 people (Oboh, 2012). Today, on top of all Kano's economic problems, security is an utmost concern.

⁶ In a talk at the Ahmadu Bello University Alumni Association, the Central Bank Governor Sanusi Lamido Sanusi reported these figures, commenting, 'This explains why if you go to Kano now you will see a sea of unemployed people' (Bashir, 2012).

⁷ When Western media notice Kano at all, it is usually for sectarian violence, terrorism, Shari'ah or polio. In 2003 Kano State refused to participate in the World Health Organization's polio vaccination campaign that was intended to eradicate the disease by 2005. 'Datti Ahmed, the President of the Kano-based Sharia (Islamic Law) Supreme council, has told the BBC that the vaccine is part of a United States-led conspiracy to de-populate the developing world'. Consequently Kano had the world's highest number of new polio cases, and the disease spread to neighboring states and countries. Subsequently, the State has turned around, even to the point of threatening to prosecute families who did not vaccinate their children, but many people are still suspicious. Nigeria is one of three countries where polio remains endemic, and the only one where all three types of the disease are still circulating. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3313419.stm>, 12 December 2003. Retrieved 29 April 2012. <http://www.thelancetstudent.com/blog/polio-eradication-taking-stock-2012-isaac-ghinai-and-bruce-aylward>. Retrieved 29 April 2012.

Kano has two parallel leadership structures: traditional and constitutional. The traditional leadership is headed by the Emir of Kano (an Emir is a Muslim ruler), also called *sarki*, king, and considered royal. The current Emir is Sarkin Kano Alhaji Ado Bayero, who has ruled since 1963. He presides over a hierarchy of aristocratic district heads (*hakimai*), territorial or village leaders (*manyandagatai*), and ward leaders (*masuunguwa*). The Emir of Kano lives in the Gidan Rumfa, a palace built in the late sixteenth century, along with about a thousand courtiers, princes, wives, concubines, slaves, guards and children (Nast, 2005).⁸

Kano's constitutional leadership includes an executive branch headed by the State Governor, assisted by a deputy and various commissioners and permanent secretaries. There is an elected legislative branch, the House of Assembly and a judicial branch with judges of both common and Shari'ah (Islamic) law. Kano has 44 Local Government Areas (LGAs), each run by a local government council with a chairman, deputies and elected councilors. As elsewhere in Nigeria, the constitutional 'modern' leadership tries to avoid coming into conflict with the traditional leadership, for it recognizes that the latter generally has the greater legitimacy with the public at large.

In addition to these two sources of political authority, Kano has a third one, that of Islam. The Ummah or global Muslim community transcends individual nation-states, coexisting with them but theoretically not subservient to them. As a practical matter states with large Muslim populations try to reconcile the two sources of identification, that of citizen and that of believer. Kano instituted Shari'ah in 2000, and eight other states have done so as well, but it remains controversial. Non-Muslims in northern Nigeria see a threat to their freedoms, and cases like that of Amina Lawal, sentenced to stoning for adultery, provoke international outcry. Kano has hundreds of mallams (mallam is the Hausa form of the Arabic word for Islamic scholars, elsewhere called ulama or mullahs), these being mosque leaders, teachers and itinerant clerics. Mallams vary sharply in their education and prestige, some have great influence, and there is no overall hierarchy or central control along the lines of the Roman Catholic church, though there may be hierarchy within a particular sect. The Emir of Kano is 'leader of the faithful' symbolically and morally, but not administratively.

These three bases of power, each partial and qualified, underpin the extravagant twice-a-year spectacle known as *Hawan Sarki* (the Kano Durbar). Over four days thousands of elaborately costumed horses and riders, footmen, acrobats, musicians, courtiers, titleholders, and the Emir himself parade through the city. The dramatic highpoint is a series of break-neck cavalry charges saluting

⁸ Heidi Nast (2005) provides a penetrating look at the economic activities of the palace over the past five centuries, paying particular attention to gender and the productive role of concubines. She demonstrates extraordinary and scrupulous methodological creativity, especially insofar as much of her evidence comes from changes in palace architecture. For a description of the palace architecture as it currently stands, see the ArchNet Digital Library: http://archnet.org/library/sites/one-site.jsp?site_id=7730.

the Emir (Figure 1). Durbars take place at the two main Muslim holidays: *Eid al-Fitr* at the end of Ramadan (the Islamic month of fasting and spiritual renewal) and *Eid el-Adha* at the end of the Haj. (Occasionally additional Durbars celebrate the visits of foreign dignitaries.) The Kano Durbar is wildly popular locally. It is also something of a tourist attraction; southern Nigerians and a few European, American and Asian visitors come to Kano to see the Durbar.

Despite its popularity, the Durbar presents two paradoxes. First, it honors a traditional leader who is respected and revered but who holds no constitutional or formal power, either in terms of the Nigerian federal or state government or in terms of an official Islamic religious hierarchy. Second, though promoted as the symbol of northern Nigeria tradition, the Durbar is widely recognized as being in large part a colonial leftover, a contrived spectacle that the British imported from India in the early twentieth-century to enact and represent indirect rule (Apter, 2005).

Given these two impediments to meaningfulness, the wonder is that it works so well. Clearly, in sociological terms, what Jeffrey Alexander calls a fusion of performance and spectators takes place that makes the Durbar culturally powerful (Alexander, 2004; see also Schudson, 1989). So our general research question asks, how does the Durbar work as a political spectacle? Given the enormous resources of money, time and energy that go into producing the Kano Durbar, who gains in terms of economic profit, political capital or enhanced authority? Why is the Durbar so popular? What meanings do participants draw from it? How does it impact the relationship between government officials (state and federal) on the one hand and the traditional rulers (the Emir of Kano and local aristocrats) on the



Figure 1: Horsemen charging to salute the Emir, with Kano's Central Mosque in the background (Associated Press Photo/Saurabh Das Reproduced with permission).

other? How does it impact the relationship between secular and religious authorities? These are the questions our study sought to explore.

Colonial, Pre-colonial, Post-colonial Durbars

Post-colonial cultures typically combine reworked pre-colonial traditions with colonial impositions to produce symbolic bundles that serve contemporary agendas.⁹ Thus the Kano Durbar combines pre-colonial equestrian skill, royalty and aristocratic hierarchies with colonial forms imported from India to celebrate a post-colonial city and its shared power arrangement. While today's Durbar is an adaptation of an old ritual to twenty-first century circumstances, exactly the same can be said of colonial durbars, by which the British incorporated local Hausa elements – horsemanship, pastoralism, Islam – into an imported display of colonial homage.

Andrew Apter (2005), who makes it clear that the Durbar was never somehow pure and uncontaminated, shows its transformation from pre-colonial equestrian parades to a colonial spectacle of imperial power. In the post-colonial era, the organizers of FESTAC '77, a month-long Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture held in Lagos and Kaduna in 1977, promoted the Grand Durbar as a national spectacle aiming at an international audience. As Apter sums up the complex history,

The durbar is an invented tradition par excellence. It was devised by the British with specific political objectives in mind, first in Victorian India and then in West Africa. In the latter it initially signaled the Royal Niger Company's transition to Imperial Protectorate – a portentous event held on January 1, 1900, quite literally at the dawn of the new century – whereafter it naturalized the policy of indirect rule in choreographed public spectacles honoring emirs, governors, district officers, and even such distinguished guests as the Prince of Wales (1925) and Queen Elizabeth II (1956). By 1977 however, the durbar's colonial content was mysteriously phased out. Staged in FESTAC to recuperate indigenous culture, the state memorialized a 'precolonial' durbar – explicitly associated with Islamic Sallah celebrations – with which the new Nigeria, enriched by oil, could celebrate its national development... Thus the genealogy of the durbar

⁹ Karin Barber's (2000) research on popular Yoruba theater offers a good example. While orality and didactic stories were common to traditional Yoruba culture, plays performed on stage were unknown before the colonial era. Contemporary traveling Yoruba companies stage dramas that both entertain and instruct in moral lessons; both the producers and much of their audience are from a non-elite, urban 'aspiring' class. Neither fully modern nor completely traditional, this theater 'occupied a cultural space defined by what it was not'. Similarly Griswold (2000) shows how the Nigerian novel, which took form in the late colonial period, adapted the English novel genre to Nigerian concerns and narrative structures.

reveals how the cultural foundations of colonial authority were transformed into the cultural effect of a postcolonial state. (pp. 168–169)

Thus 17 years after independence and at the peak of Nigeria's oil boom, FESTAC's Grand Durbar in Kaduna (people were bussed up from Lagos) was at once 'a cultural concession to ... northern hegemony' and in effect a lavish bid to make the durbar represent the whole of Nigeria, and indeed to represent all of Africa and all of 'World Black' people in general. Apter's genealogy shows how 'a composite tradition stemming from two sources: one indigenous, with its own complex layers of sacred kingship and equestrian culture ... assimilated to the Islamic religious calendar, and the other exogenous, as an imperial ceremony imported from Victorian India' was developed, during the heady years of the 1970s oil boom, into the post-colonial durbar of FESTAC '77, thereby revealing 'the process whereby the colonial durbar in northern Nigeria became regionalized, nationalized, and Africanized as its imperial pedigree was erased ... the durbar was universalized as Nigerian national culture and globalized as black and African culture' (pp. 197–198).

It is impossible to know if this bid for a pan-Nigerian and even a pan-African durbar might have succeeded, for it never got the chance. According to some economic accounting, 1977, the year of the FESTAC celebrations, was actually the peak of Nigeria's oil boom (Pinto, 1987; Adedipe, 2004). By the late 1970s the boom was over, and following the worldwide drop in oil prices of 1982, Nigeria entered two decades of economic and political malaise. There has never been a third FESTAC, and by the 1990s, the Festac Town housing estate in Lagos, built to accommodate visitors and then become a prestigious middle-class neighborhood, had become dilapidated and crime-ridden. Ambitious plans were shelved, Nigeria held no more national cultural extravaganzas, and the durbar remained a northern festival performed in a handful of cities, with the Kano Durbar preeminent.¹⁰ The irony is that the failure of the mid-1970s ambitions has meant that the Kano Durbar has fallen back on being more local than ever, more closely associated with, and representative of, a specific place within Nigeria that offers an alternative to identification with Nigeria as a whole.

The Contemporary Kano Durbar as Ritual Political Spectacle

Thus in studying a post-colonial cultural form like the Kano Durbar, one should concentrate not on what is 'authentic' or not but on how the cultural form works today. To do so means looking at both the cultural object itself and the responses to it. Our data come from participant observation, Nigerian media

¹⁰ Today the two main durbars are those of Kano and of Katsina, with Kano's being larger and more elaborate.

(Kano-based newspapers and websites), and interviews with 32 spectators. Two researchers conducted the interviews in Hausa or in English. They selected the subjects from among the crowds observing the events, aiming for a balance between men and women and between Hausa and non-Hausa. The final interviews came from 17 men and 15 women. The subjects had an average age of 32, ranging from 20 to 59. They included traders, students, businessmen/women, civil servants, a hair-dresser, a driver, a nurse, a food seller and an engineer. Twenty-six lived in Kano, one in Ibadan, and five lived outside Nigeria. Twenty-one of the interviewees were Muslim, seven were Christian and four were other. The analysis comes from two disciplines, that of sociology and that of theatre-performance studies.¹¹

To understand the Durbar as a ritual political spectacle and, more important, as a social drama, one must first examine its structure. The contemporary Durbar (*Hawan Sarki*, the Riding of the King) unfolds over four days that follow a fixed sequence.¹² The first day is *Hawan Sallah*, the Festival Riding (Kanawa refer to the whole holiday period as *Sallah*). In the early morning the Emir and his retinue of *hakimai* and courtiers leave the palace (Gidan Rumfa) and ride to the Eid prayer ground outside the city, where he is met by the Kano State Governor or his representative. The Chief Imam of Kano leads the prayers. Afterwards the procession rides through different quarters of the city, where the Kanawa come into the streets to offer the Emir their greetings and prayers. Next the Emir and his entourage move to Gidan Shatima, the government house, where he greets the State Governor and various executive, legislative and judicial leaders. Returning to the palace, he delivers the Sallah Message, which typically counsels Kano's officials and citizens regarding proper behavior; for example in the 2011 message at *Eid al-Fitr*, the Emir advised people to shun rumor mongering, respect the environment and stay united (Aliyu, 2011).

Day Two of the Durbar is *Hawan Daushe*, when the Emir and his retinue ride out of Kofar Kwaru and, after being greeted in several quarters of the city, come to the Babban Daki, the Palace of the Queen Mother. (Historically some of the emirs' mothers have held great influence.) The procession goes through a series of quarters that are home to historically important families and then returns to the palace at the Kofar Kudu (main) gate for the *Jahi*, the salute by the

¹¹ One of the authors is an American cultural sociologist who has worked in Nigeria for many years and who witnessed the Durbar for the first time in the course of this research; the other is a Nigerian professor of theatre and drama who lives in Kano and has seen the Durbar his whole life.

¹² A detailed account of each day can be found at Ibrahim Ado-Kurawa's website kanodurbar.com. He introduces the site by saying 'I decided to create this site because there is no available Website on this important subject, which is one of Kano's contributions to African culture and preservation of its heritage not to mention that there have been enquiries on it. Kano Durbar arguable being the largest procession of colorful horses in the world certainly needs to be documented'. Ado-Kurawa is also working on a book with the working title *Kano Durbar: The Largest Procession of Colorful Horses in the World*. Ado-Kurawa has written a number of books including ones on Kano economic development, Shari'ah and the representation of Islam in the United Kingdom.



horsemen. Bands of titleholders enter and circle the grounds, then take their positions. The State Governor and his officials come not on horseback but in luxury cars; the Governor greets the Emir and then takes his seat. Viewing stands for VIPs surround the grounds in front of Kofar Kudu, though most of the thousands of ordinary spectators stand. The Emir is situated in front of the gate, facing outward. Waves of riders charge toward him, only to pull aside directly in front of him in a cavalry salute. *The Daily Trust* describes this as ‘the most impressive, most wonderful and most intriguing part of the Durbar celebration’, and certainly the Jahi is the focus of media attention and what most people come to see (Bello and Ibrahim, 2011).¹³ Spectators and riders thus display their loyalty and their valor before the seated king in a carefully choreographed dramaturgy uniting man and beast, aristocrats and commoners – a classical performance of delicately balanced power politics (some of the riders paying homage to the Emir, who holds no political office, are themselves political heavyweights).

Hawan Nassarawa, Day Three, begins with the Emir and his retinue riding through several quarters of the city to the Nassarawa Palace, where he prays at the tombs of his ancestors. He then proceeds to the Government House, for the ‘purpose of the *Hawan Nassarawa* is to pay homage to the State Authority’ (Ado-Kurawa, 2011, p. 10). Greeted by the Chairman of the Local Government Council, he is ushered into Africa House, the main assembly room. There the State Governor, along with the Deputy Governor, Speaker of the State House of Assembly, Chief Judge of the State High Court, Grand Kadi of the State Shari’ah Court of Appeal, members of the state executive office, and other government officials and guests, receive him. The Emir and Governor sit side by side and the *hakimai* pay homage.

After all the titleholders have paid homage, the Emir delivers his speech, which is usually made up of calls to the State Government to alleviate one form of affliction or the other. The Governor then responds. His speech sometimes contains policy statements and his Government’s intention to carry out some projects or to complete others. The Emir then leaves Africa House and a procession is made that passes by the Governor who receives greetings from all the riders in the conventional Durbar procession. (Ado-Kurawa, 2011, pp. 10–11)

The Emir’s procession moves through Kano neighborhoods, notably including the *Sabon Gari* (strangers’ quarters, or literally ‘new town’, the quarters of Northern Nigerian cities where people who are not indigenous Hausa live, these being usually Christians from Southern Nigeria or their descendants though

¹³ The same newspaper article reported that 5000 horsemen took part; this figure seems high, but while no number can be confirmed, our observations suggest that at least 3000 horsemen were riding in the *Jahi*.

there are also a sizable number of Muslims and mosques in this quarter). The procession returns to the palace, ending with a *Jabi* by the Kofar Fatalwa at the northern side of the palace.

The final day's riding, *Hawan Dorayi*, brings the Emir and horsemen to the western side of the city. Dorayi Palace, constructed by the current Emir's father who was Sarki Kano from 1926 to 1953, is outside the city and something of a rural retreat. Residents of the western quarters pay their homage to the Emir as the procession rides to Dorayi Palace, where they remain until after the mid-afternoon Asr prayer. The riders then process back to Gidan Rumfa, accepting greetings along the way. At Kofar Kwaru the titleholders salute the Emir one more time, he enters the palace and the Durbar is over.

The Kano Durbar fully satisfies the sociological definitions of being a ritual political spectacle. A ritual is a set pattern of symbolic actions (Kertzer, 1988). Rituals must occur repeatedly, either on regular occasions (independence day celebration) or when events warrant (a state funeral); a single dramatic event may be compelling, a spectacle and political, but it is not a ritual. Rituals must have a structure, a sequence of acts that participants know and follow. When a ritual is said to be political, it involves power. Private life can be political, as in the feminist contention that 'the personal is political', but typically the adjective refers to power relative to governments at any level or to institutions that have a public presence and rights – for example, religious bodies, private firms, NGOs – and that routinely exercise power, and that is how we use it here. Finally, by spectacle we mean something that occurs in public, something that is both visible and oriented toward the eye. Spectacles are big, theatrical, stunning, visually overwhelming. Private conversations between leaders, radio addresses, state dinners or summit meetings may be political events that are highly ritualized, but they are not spectacles. The Durbar is ritualized, represents power and is spectacular.¹⁴

Traditional non-political celebrations are often hijacked by regimes to fuse nation and state (Adams, 2010). In the case of the Kano Durbar, however, multiple groups and elites have ridden on its popularity. The Kano Durbar relates to other social institutions, especially religion and government, in what anthropologist Victor Turner (1974, 1977) called a *social drama*, whereby during a ritual process, the liminal period of suspension from normal, routine life clarifies and reinforces the very social structures that have temporarily been set aside. Successful social dramas engage participants and spectators with powerful symbols that operate at both cognitive and emotional levels. As Geertz

¹⁴ The two most common types of ritual political spectacles are those marking transitions and celebrations. Transitions allow for the orderly transfer of or ascension to power; common examples include presidential inaugurations, coronations, turbanings (inauguration of traditional rulers in northern Nigeria), ordinations and the opening of Parliament. Celebrations often celebrate significant moments in the life of the political unit, Independence Day festivities being a common example.



put it, they ‘express a view of the ultimate nature of reality and, at the same time ... shape the existing conditions of life to be in consonance with that reality; that is, theatre to present an ontology and, by presenting it, to make it happen – make it actual’ (Geertz, 1980, p. 104). But unlike the theatre state of Bali that Geertz studied in which ‘the kings and princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience’ (p. 13), neither Kano’s Emir nor its State Governor nor the *hakimai* nor the mallams nor the spectators exactly produce the Durbar. Instead they are stars and audience, in some cases both, to a production put on by Kano’s disparate elites along with their followers, dependents and fans.

These elites are geographically very specific. Other northern cities hold smaller Durbars, Katsina being the main one although a few other cities are mounting them as tourist attractions, but the participants are always local notables. (FESTAC ’77 was an exception, but it didn’t last, and in any case the Southerners never bought into this play for cultural hegemony.) Durbars are massive, but they are local, not national.¹⁵ They are *celebrations of place*, first and foremost, and that place is Kano. The twenty-first century Kano Durbar is a potent symbol not of Nigeria or Nigerian-ness, let alone of African-ness, but of Kano-ness.

The Contemporary Kano Durbar as Theatre

If the Durbar is a ritual political spectacle, it is also theatre: a participatory drama that unites the riders led by the Emir, the central dramatic personage, with the audience, led by the State Governor, in an ensemble performance. The entire city becomes a stage, and the drama being performed is Kano itself.

The Kano Durbar contains the traditional theatrical elements of characters, costumes, props and a plot. The characters, well known by everyone, include the Emir, his courtiers and princes, the titleholders, the horsemen riding with titleholders, the footmen, and assorted musicians and acrobats. A second set of characters comes from Kano state government, including the Governor, past governors, state officials and their entourages. Political party leaders and their energetic supporters (including ones whose enthusiasm has been hired) are also prominent. Muslim clerics lead the prayers. Supporting roles include media representatives, tourists and the local population, who become performers in the spectacle, especially as the cameras pan the crowd. Familiar characters might be said to include those naysayers who conspicuously do *not* attend the Durbar as well.

¹⁵ As mentioned previously, scholarly analysis of such spectacles has emphasized their production of solidarity at a national level, a much discussed historical example being Queen Elizabeth I’s elaborately staged progresses as ‘an insistent and potent symbol of Englishness’ (Archer and Knight, 2007, p. 23). In contrast, the Durbar is sub-national.



Figure 2: Durbar riders (Associated Press Photo/Saurabh Das Reproduced with permission).

Riders and other participants, including the horses and an occasional camel, wear colorful and costly costumes adorned with silver fittings (Figure 2). Kano supports a substantial industry of designers and tailors who work all year to clothe men and horses in suitable magnificence. Spectators attend to their costumes as well, in that everyone in Kano tries to wear new clothes for Sallah.

Props include the riders' ornamental silver spears, recalling the warrior-on-horseback heritage. In a parallel symbolic statement, footmen carry herdsman's sticks, for the Hausa were nomadic pastoralists. Sunglasses serve as both prop and costume. The Emir wears his so that he can see without being seen, the horsemen usually do not, and the spectators remove their sunglasses as a token of their respect when the Emir rides by. Another prop is the large umbrella that his courtiers hold over the Emir (Figure 3). Only the Emir can ride under an umbrella, which both protects him from the sun and shows the crowd exactly where he is. Thus the umbrella functions as a spotlight in the unfolding dramatic spectacle, the symbol of authority and seat of power in motion.

The plot of the Durbar, played out over four days, involves a series of processions from the palace to the prayer grounds, to the Governor's residence, to the Emir's rural resort at Dorayi, to the *Sabon Gari*, and through all the city quarters. Along the way spectators mass to pay homage and to enjoy the sights and sounds. The climax comes with the *Jabi*, as horsemen charge toward the Emir, wheeling their mounts at the last second in a dramatic salute. One thing the plot does not contain is overt competition. Even though spectacular events often entail games and medals, and horsemanship in particular suggests races or equestrian contests, the Durbar is officially and formally non-competitive. This characteristic supports the



Figure 3: The Emir in front of Kofar Kudu, the main gate of the palace (Associated Press Photo/Saurabh Das Reproduced with permission).

collective Kano-ness theme, for winners-and-losers would detract from the unity of the disparate social and political elements that is being enacted.¹⁶

¹⁶ In some respects competition is simmering all the time. The costume of the Emir is often kept secret, for example, so he can outshine everyone else. Moreover, the procession is an intricate employment of diverse groups competing with each other at the level of costume, choreography and horses.

Although recognizing its theatrical characteristics, most spectators stressed that the Durbar was a tradition that was more ‘real’ than a dramatic performance. As one 42-year-old Hausa trader who had seen at least 30 previous Durbars put it, ‘This is not a drama; it is a reality’.¹⁷ Kano-born Hausa seemed to agree with one civil servant’s assertion that ‘It’s not a drama. It’s a great tradition of great people’. Several Hausa emphasized that the Durbar was not a drama because it aimed to show respect for the Emir, and the Emir could not be considered an ‘actor’. As one man put it, ‘If you say it’s a drama, a person such as the Emir cannot participate in the drama. It’s just a tradition’. Non-Hausa respondents were more willing to accept the idea of the Durbar being like drama. One Christian businesswoman born in Kaduna and living in Kano acknowledged, ‘It really looks like a drama’, while another from Delta State in the South agreed with the interviewer: ‘It is not really different, because when you say drama, most times, you *catch fun* from watching a drama. So we *catch fun*, too, watching the Durbar’.¹⁸

The Contemporary Kano Durbar as Social Drama

Fun, indeed: For a social drama to be effective, it must first and foremost be compelling, entertaining, dramatic, and the Kano Durbar is certainly all that. At the same time it is social, and explicitly political, as it choreographs the powers-that-be in a celebration of the place where their power is situated. Kano rests on a wobbly three-legged stool of traditional, constitutional and religious

Members of the audience informally rate and score the groups, although no formal medals or trophies are awarded.

¹⁷ When the interviewer asked, ‘Some people think the Durbar is like a drama; what do you think?’ most of the spectators disagreed. They distinguished between drama, which takes place on a stage and is artificial or fictional, and the Durbar, which is ‘a culture that came from our ancestors’. Similarly, a 24-year-old Hausa woman said, ‘No, I think Durbar is very natural. It is not a drama. In the theatre, maybe the director gives directives to people. Here [in the Durbar], everything is natural, people coming and moving’. A Hausa woman from Kano now living in London responded, ‘No it’s really tradition ... You can actually see it physically, the culture. You can see it by the colors of the clothes, the horses, how everybody is gathering just to see’. One man contended that it ‘predated drama’, and several emphasized the distinction between drama and tradition; as a 28-year-old student put it, ‘It’s a tradition that is admired by the entire world’.

¹⁸ A visitor from India agreed that, ‘It’s a theatrical performance because all the public are there to watch the display of all the horses. It’s a bit theatrical, yes’. A Muslim student of Kanuri ethnicity, born and living in Kano, said, ‘It is a drama. It is organized. No one is allowed to move about. Every spectator obeys the rules...’ At the same time the distinction most Hausa insisted upon between the Durbar and drama did necessarily mean the former was more serious. One female Hausa student, Muslim like virtually all Hausa, said, ‘I don’t think it is a drama. It is something that entertains; it is to while away the time. It’s just fun’. When probed, she elaborated, ‘Drama is acted on stage ... This [the Durbar] anyone can come and watch it. It is a free environment but drama has specific people that act’. And one visitor, an artist from London, cheerfully pointed out, ‘Ah ... it is part drama, but all culture is drama, that is how you’re going to get it to the wider population. It’s part of the history, but it’s also drama. [What makes it drama?] The costumes, it is like a procession that flows’.



authority.¹⁹ All three legs have partial, qualified legitimacy in the eyes of the locals, and none of the three dominates the others. The Durbar is a spectacular social drama that works to hold this arrangement together. It does so by systematically delineating and celebrating *places* (the quarters of Kano and its outskirts) and *place* (Kano itself as having a unique place character).

Given the Emir's systematic movement through the different quarters of the city, Kano residents would find it hard to avoid the Durbar, and few try. On the contrary, rapturous crowds greet the procession, and the people we interviewed, most of whom having come to see the *Jahi on Hauwan Daushe*, said over and over that they would never miss it. 'I always derive pleasure from it... I can't miss it' and 'I must suspend all my daily routine on the altar of the Durbar. I can't just miss it!', said a couple of Hausa men, while a non-Hausa Christian woman expressed the same sentiment, saying she would never miss it because 'The Durbar is more important than any of my business'. Even the first-timers saw it as an essential experience. When an Indian Hindu visitor was asked how he would have felt if he hadn't been able to see the Durbar, he perceptively replied, 'Yah, actually I may have returned without knowing *nothing* about Kano, [thinking it] just may be like other cities'. The Durbar is what makes it *not* like other cities, and the throngs of spectators amplify the spectacle.

Being someone who 'can't miss' the Durbar does not imply any great knowledge about its history, however. When we asked the questions, 'Do you know anything about the history of the Durbar? Where does it come from?' repeatedly Durbar aficionados admitted, 'Really, I don't know, I don't know anything about its origin', 'I don't have any idea', and 'I only see and admire it'. Only one referred to an ancient past: 'I've heard my elders saying ... I can't tell you the history of Durbar, but I can say that it started since Kano came into being, before Kano became a state'. Several mentioned its colonial roots. One female Hausa student from Kano who would never miss the Durbar said, 'My Dad once said it originated as a result of the Europeans that came to Nigeria. It was organized to welcome them'. A middle-aged Hausa businessman, also from Kano and who was riding in the Durbar ('it's part of me from birth'), said that, 'Since the advent of colonialists it has been in existence. It's like seasonal compliments extended to residents during the colonial days ... that is about 104 years now, the tradition of the Durbar has continued'. Neither ignorance about the Durbar's history nor recognition of its colonial past dampens anyone's enthusiasm.

As for the VIP performers, in addition to the Emir himself along with his courtiers, princes and officers, most of the several thousand riders are either

¹⁹ In many African cultures the stool is ceremonial and a symbol of power. It is used metonymically in exactly the same way as the throne is used in British and European cultures. For example the *Daily Champion* newspaper reported a dispute over chieftaincy as: 'Abia State government has declared the Sarikin Hausa stool vacant to avert violence in the Hausa community of the state' (Oko, 2009).

horsemen representing a specific area such as a village, neighborhood or LGA, or horsemen who are aristocrats and titleholders. Both types have their entourages, and each member of the group wears an identical costume, man and horse. Each group identifies itself by having one or more walkers or riders preceding it with signs mounted on poles. Two types of politicians, as we have seen, also participate in the Durbar: the traditional leaders, who may or may not be mounted, and the constitutional leaders, most notably the Governor of Kano State, along with members of the executive, judiciary and legislature. The Governor and other elected officials are not mounted on horseback; they receive the Emir's visit at the state mansion and come to the Emir's palace in Mercedes and Bentleys. Thus the two political hierarchies and the geographic territories of Kano are given visible representation, the Durbar offering both a vertical and horizontal mapping of elite power.

The participation of Islamic leaders is both indirect and powerful. In the first place honoring the Emir, the traditional leader of the Muslim faithful, is the *raison d'être* for the Durbar. Moreover, Durbar is tied to the Islamic calendar, coming at the end of the two Eid holidays. And the Durbar starts on *Hawan Sallah* with the Chief Imam leading the prayers for those assembled, including the Emir and Governor, at the Eid prayer ground. Overall, and despite the Durbar's lack of any official Qur'anic basis, most local mallams and clerics take a tolerant attitude toward it.

Most but not all. More conservative Muslim thinkers are ambivalent, and Salafists (literalist, puritanical; Wahhabism is a form of Salafism) oppose anything that does not follow from the sacred texts. The neo-Salafist Izala brotherhood, for example, follows this strict interpretation of Islam and opposes innovations. They are critical of the Emir and the traditions surrounding the Kano royalty as being un-Islamic; the homage and adoration of the Emir seems to them to violate the 'no god but God' principle. Since 2009 Boko Haram, a jihadi Salafist sect that is organizing lethal attacks on Nigerian police, government, Christian churches, newspapers, has carried the theme of jihad and rejection of innovation to a violent extreme. Such religious fanaticism, while attractive to some disaffected youths, is at odds with the more absorptive Islam characteristic of Kano. For most people the Emir is extremely popular; indeed one reason Kano people have tended to resist the puritanical interpretations of Islam is that they are so attached to the palace and royal paraphernalia.

Moreover there is local pride. Kano people have a strong regard for Kano itself and its traditions, expressed in sayings like *kano tumbin giwa. Da kome ka zo an fi ka*, Kano is 'the bowel of the elephant' (meaning very strong, source of power) and 'when you come to Kano, whatever you have (money, culture, learning), someone there has more than you'. So this geographical self-regard, this sense of Kano-ness, supports the Emir and mitigates against fundamentalist criticism. Such local pride is vulnerable, however. Rural migrants to the city may not absorb this aspect of the local culture (and in fact they may have



experienced discrimination in the competition for jobs and resources) and the continuing frustrations of unemployment may chip away at it.

A second, less pressing source of criticism comes from some university lecturers, generally considered oddballs, who are modernist, secular and/or Marxist in inspiration. These academics express their views individually, often in the press, but are not organized. Seeing both the Durbar and traditional culture as obfuscating social inequalities, they are critical both of practices surrounding royalty and of religious fundamentalism. Beyond the university campus, however, few Kanawa pay them much attention.

In face of such criticism, and in light of the previously mentioned paradoxes – the Emir does not hold formal power and the tradition is something of a colonial leftover – one must reconsider the question of the Durbar's popularity in more pointed terms: does it do any good? Does it resolve or exacerbate political conflict?

Most observers that we interviewed saw the Kano Durbar to be demonstrating respect to the Emir, honoring traditional leaders in general, and entertaining everyone. At the same time our respondents almost universally denied that the Durbar was political. To them politics denotes parties and elections; as one businessman put it, 'The majority of our people see politics as running for a certain position of power. It involves campaigning to elect a president, governor or a local area councilor'. The Durbar, despite the presence of some candidates and electioneering, is something different. As a Kano Muslim of Kanuri ethnicity summed it up, 'It is a thing of pleasure and pride for the government ... It generates revenue for the state government. For the traditional rulers, it increases their power. For the Islamic rulers ... it is a celebration of Sallah. If there is no Sallah, Durbar will not take place'. Something for everyone, in other words.

Exactly so. Our analysis suggests that the Durbar is useful for Kano's leaders – traditional, constitutional and religious – as a way of supporting one another while fending off both Islamist and modernist critiques. Political power in Kano, as in Nigeria more generally, is fragile. Military coups, weak or partisan civilian leadership, widespread corruption, sifting off oil revenues to give to political cronies, religious conflicts and a civil war have been the rule during the half-century since independence. Even under civilian government (Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999 after 16 years of a military regime), elections are rigged, losers cry foul and violence invariably follows. In an all-too-typical example of the political cynicism, some southerners suspect that former military President Ibrahim Babangida, who ran in but then withdrew from the 2011 presidential election won by Goodluck Jonathan, is supporting Boko Haram; when a disaffected jihadist made the accusation in February 2012, Babangida not only denied it but also accused Jonathan of planting the story. The northerner who did run and lost to Jonathan, Muhammadu Buhari, had headed a military regime during the 1980s and was deposed by Babangida, then the Army Chief of Staff, in a bloodless military coup during the 1980s. In such a poisonous

political atmosphere, Nigerians hope for the best but assume their leaders are probably corrupt and in any case will favor their own ethnic and regional groups, which is why the presidency alternates between northerners and southerners.

Traditional leaders have much more respect and affection, even though their adherents recognize that many of them are colonial or post-colonial creations rather than the notables rooted deep in the sands of time. This is partly a matter of patronage, partly one of kinship-based identity, and partly one of the comforts of stability, for traditional rulers don't get deposed or voted out of office as a rule. The Emir of Kano has ruled since 1963; during the same half century, Nigeria has had 14 heads of state.²⁰ Traditional leaders, elected leaders and religious leaders may sometimes vie for the upper hand, but usually they find it advantageous to support one another in a web of mutual dependency.

The Kano Durbar gives explicit representation to this mutual support along four dimensions:

- Dependence of traditional leaders on elected authority. With no constitutional power, the Emir of Kano, his court and local titleholders depend on the state to support, or at least not openly defy, their honorific positions. State authorities provide practical support (for example, security for public events) and symbolic support (for example, turning to traditional leaders to weigh in on public issues). The Emir's ride to the Governor's residence during the Durbar is a dramatic homage to this support.
- Dependence of elected authority on traditional leaders. Democracy in Nigeria is fragile, corruption is rife and elected leaders at the federal and local levels often lack popular legitimacy. Moreover they turn over quickly, especially compared with the Emir. Given the respect that the Kanawa afford the Emir, state officials turn to him on carefully selected occasions to resolve conflicts and lend legitimacy to state activities. The Emir preserves his position in this regard by avoiding politics, or rather by playing an intricate diplomacy-laden politics with the deftness of a poker player without showing his hands, and by not aligning himself with any parties. The Governor's ride to the palace pays homage, again in public and as part of the spectacle, to the Emir and his support.
- Dependence of Muslim leaders on political leaders, both elected and traditional. The implementation of Shari'ah law, support of Muslim schools and a general level of security underlying mosque/state relations all rest on the

²⁰ Eight of the 14 were military rulers, six were civilian; one man, Olusegun Obasanjo, was both, being Head of the Military Government from 1976 to 1979 and then the elected President from 1999 to 2007. Of the total, five were deposed, one was assassinated and one was deposed and killed. Since 1999 Nigeria has had elected civilian presidents, and although the return to democracy has not curtailed the corruption and cronyism, things are considerably better than the plunder carried out by the last military ruler, the despotic Sani Abacha.



state's legal and judicial apparatus. The Emir's reception of the Governor and the local mallams' participation in, or at least toleration of, the Durbar festivities displays Islam acknowledging state authority.

- Dependence of both kinds of leaders on Islamic leaders. While the Durbar has no basis in the Qur'an, it is tied to the Islamic calendar, specifically the *Eid al-Fitr* and the *Eid al-Adha*. Putting the Kano Durbar in this context of Islamic holidays offers religious legitimation to constitutional and traditional leaders. For the population, emerging from the Ramadan or haj periods, the merging of sacred and secular authorities is virtually seamless.

The Kano Durbar shores up these dependencies, gives them vivid, entertaining, memorable and repeated enactment, thereby strengthening the sense of a natural association, mutual respect, between the state and religion, the traditional and constitutional authorities. It does so by regularly performing and celebrating the unique place character of the bowl of the elephant.

We witnessed these dependencies in a micro-social drama the day after the Durbar ended. While visiting the Emir's palace we heard a commotion in the courtyard outside the entrance. All of a sudden, heralded by gunshots, the Emir and a retinue of about 20 courtiers rode out through the palace gates and over to a tree in the courtyard where multiple television cameras were at the ready. The Emir dismounted while hidden from public view by the outstretched robes of his men. When they lowered their arms so that both the public and the cameras could see him, the Emir was seated at a small table writing something. In fact the Emir of Kano was registering to vote in the upcoming state elections. This mini-spectacle (a mini durbar or a slice of a mini durbar) duly recorded and broadcast by the local media, lent the Emir's traditional authority to the government's latest attempt to routinize democratic practices: if the Emir is going to vote, the message was, it must be okay for all people of Kano to follow his example.

Political spectacles, when they work, entrance and delight. They also obscure social contradictions, be they starvation in North Korea, dictatorship in Uzbekistan or religious/secular conflicts in Nigeria. As Christal Lane (1981) pointed out 30 years ago, 'Ritual expresses and defines social relations. Ritual activity occurs in a social context where there is ambiguity or conflict about social relations, and it is performed to resolve or disguise them' (p. 11). Performed, yes, but it is accepted ('fused' in Alexander's term, powerful in Schudson's) when it is dramatic, entertaining, a feast for the eye, such that it sweeps the spectator up in a satisfying burst of emotional energy (Collins, 2004). In Brechtian terms it leads to empathy with little or no room for the audience to think through the political import of such a spectacle.

The political aesthetics of the Durbar has bolstered the traditional-constitutional-religious stool of power through the spectacle's repeated capacity to shape political reality at the local level. Spectacles of massed human bodies enacting well-known plots create a ritual process that presents social relations in

a dramatic, visually compelling form. Social dramas like the Kano Durbar, when they work, promote solidarity by obscuring contradictions and by incorporating spectators into a culturally tended whole, that of Kano-ness, that is stronger than the sum of its parts.

Thus so far, despite enormous pressures, the Durbar has persuaded most Kanawa and non-indigenous Kano residents that local loyalty, to Kano and to Kano-ness, to living in the bowel of the elephant, should trump religious-secular tensions, skepticism toward authority, economic hardship, and the paradoxical history of the Durbar itself. Such loyalty has allowed the people of Kano to define the Boko Haram terrorist attacks as foreign to their city, not from or about this place. When Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan paid a condolence visit following the devastating attacks of January 2012, the Emir wept while delivering his prepared message (Muhammed and Ojeme, 2012). The media broadcast the Emir's weeping (although palace guards tried to shield him from view when he broke down, as he did repeatedly). Although southerners talked about crocodile tears, online comments suggested that Kano wept with him.

What of the future? The stool of power in Kano may grow even more wobbly in the near future. The present Emir was born in 1930. Since becoming Emir in 1963, he has seen 17 Kano State Governors come and go.²¹ Most Kanawa have never known another Emir. Such stability and longevity contribute to his popularity, but the Emir is in his eighties and will not reign forever. During the 2011 Eid-al-Fitr Durbar, the state government had reported, apparently erroneously, that the Emir's health would preclude his participation (Bello and Ibrahim, 2011); he did in fact show up, but in a horse carriage rather than mounted. The Eid-al-Fitr Durbar was cancelled in 2012, officially because of the Emir's health (most people thought the security situation was also a factor). It is a question how readily the affection that people feel for the present Emir can be transferred to a new one.

Moreover, until recently Kano had been untouched by the Boko Haram terrorist attacks, which centered on Maiduguri and northeastern Nigeria. Local complacency ended in January 2012 when coordinated bomb blasts targeting police stations killed 178 people in the city. Then in April an attack on Christians leaving worship on the Bayero University Kano campus killed 16; security officers uncovered more bombs at the university during the following weeks. Following the January violence the Emir led prayers asking Allah's help in ending the violence; notably the call for prayers was issued by both the Kano state government and the Emirate council on local radio stations (*BBC News*, 23 January 2012). The demands of Boko Haram resonate with some jobless and disaffected youth looking for someone to blame; western education, Christianity and state security forces all offer tempting scapegoats as well as targets.

²¹ For the names and titles of the 17, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Governors_of_Kano_State.

Whether the Durbar's ritual performance of political mutuality and place-based solidarity will enable Kano to withstand these pressures in the coming months is an open question. The Emir and other traditional leaders are managing the delicate business of condemning the violence while not positioning themselves as creatures of the state.²² New Durbars will be coming up, and the remarkable capacity of this ritualized performance of Kano-ness to hold the city together will be tested as never before.

To date, the impact of the Kano Durbar has been impressive, possibly unique. Most political spectacles are, in some strict sense, not necessary. They are not needed for internal control (dictatorships don't need popular legitimacy) and they are not effective externally (the bemused outside world laughs, shudders, or simply ignores them). The Kano Durbar is unusual in that it has been and is needed, absolutely needed, to hold together the fissiparous geographic entity that is Kano. Kano's tri-partite power structure may be wobbly but it is still standing, and the Durbar brings the parts together in a compelling extravaganza of place. The raw political capacity of aesthetics to assert and reproduce place character, repeatedly and insistently and – so far – effectively, has never been clearer.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the superb research assistance provided by Bayero University Kano students KB Abdullahi and Kabiru Musa Jamaje. Professor Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah, formerly Chair of African American Studies at Western Illinois University and currently Vice Chancellor at Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria, provided helpful comments in the early stages of this research. We would also like to thank our colleagues at Bayero University Kano and at Northwestern University, particularly those in the Program of African Studies, for their advice and suggestions.

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²² For example at a meeting of emirs (including the Emir of Kano) and traditional Islamic leaders, the Sultan of Sokoto charged that the recent bloodshed was 'tearing apart the fabric of our religious, social and economic life'. However he spoke of violence and insecurity in general without mentioning Boko Haram by name, and he made no reference to the recent call by Nigeria's Minister of Defense for traditional rulers to aid the government in stopping the violence (Sa'idu and Ahmadu-Suka, 2012).

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