

FILM REVIEW

Abubakar S. Shehu, dir. *Risala* (“Message”). 2018. 126 minutes. Hausa, with English subtitles. 3SP International Limited. No price reported.

The film *Risala* (an Arabic word meaning “message”) represents an attempt by director Abubakar S. Shehu to return to the roots of Kannywood’s Hausa-Muslim tradition and glorify the “good old days.” He has tried to avoid the usual clichés (forced marriage, love triangle, intrusive music and dance routines), focusing on the main objective of the film’s storytelling, which is to present Islam in a positive light.

Risala tells the story, set in the past, of Zakariyya (acted by Sadiq Sani Sadiq), who embarks on a tumultuous journey to seek forgiveness from the owner of a farm from whom he and his two hunting friends have “stolen” fruits. It is an adventurous journey, filled with intrigues and mishaps. Zakariyya is mistaken for a thief in one town, and as an accomplice of an infamous, brutal robber in another. He is arrested, tortured, and then released, saved both times by his honesty. A wealthy, itinerant trader, Abdulmunafi (Abubakar S. Shehu) whom he meets en route gives him a bag of gold during the last moment of his life—in extremis—after armed robbers have waylaid the duo, resulting in Abdulmunafi’s fatal injury.

“Malam” Zakariyya, as he is later called due to his much-admired uprightness and piety, typifies an ideal Hausa-Muslim in the perception of a large percentage of Kannywood’s audience. The usual criticism of Kannywood films is that they misrepresent the Hausa culture and Islam. To further cleanse this “pure” character, the farm’s owner, whom he ultimately meets at a fictitious town called Baihan, tests him by outright refusing to forgive him and, subsequently, by asking him to marry his ugliest, disabled daughter, to which Zakariyya agrees. The wife, however, turns out to be the most beautiful lady alive. This part of the story resembles the history of Abu Hanifa, a renowned eighth-century Sunni Muslim theologian and jurist.

In keeping with the Hausa folkloric pattern of departure-adventure-return, Zakariyya returns home with his stunning bride. On their first night together, however, he has a nightmare in which the late itinerant trader appears. Zakariyya interprets this to mean that the deceased’s family needs their inheritance! He promises to embark on yet another mission to find them, leaving the audience in suspense and setting up the expectation of a possible sequel.

Risala is not a masterpiece. There is a lack of continuity right from the opening scenes. The three hunters are shown walking with their hunting dogs, but the dogs suddenly disappear in the next shots without any explanation. Also, Gambo, the lethal robber who saved Zakariyya and seized his wealth at the same time, appears too ruthless to be credible. Likewise, the special effects—of blood and fireball—are too artificial. Even though the industry is small and often makes films on a shoestring budget, the postproduction could have been smoother and more polished.

Generally, the Jos branch of Kannywood, where 3SP Production Limited is located, makes films differently from the mainstream industry headquartered in Kano. Often, they are accused of gratuitous depictions of violence and murders, cartoonish gun battles, hooliganism, and cultism, among other grotesque portrayals. Many of these films promote and propagate Islam and its values excessively. The Jos film *Ana Muslim* (I am Muslim) is one such example. It is patterned after the film *My Name is Khan* (directed by Karan Johar, 2010), starring Shah Rukh Khan, which was intended to counter the portrayal of Muslims as terrorists.

Both the titles of *Risala* and *Ana Muslim* are Arabic and Islamic. The former implies a direct connection with the prominent 1977 biopic of the Prophet Muhammad, *The Message* (directed by Moustapha Akkad). Although the depiction of Zakariyya is in no way like that of a prophet, his demeanour and virtue are that of an ideal Muslim. One may argue that Zakariyya's uprightness is too angelic, making the action somehow overblown. However, as a historical film laced with didacticism, the message of the film is clear: remain steadfast and truthful even in the face of intimidation and threats. From all angles, *Risala* succeeds as a propagandist movie that sets out to portray an ideal Muslim-Hausa protagonist with no Western or Christian influence.

Muhammad Muhsin Ibrahim
 University of Cologne
 Cologne, Germany
 mibrahi3@uni-koeln.de

doi:10.1017/asr.2019.50