

## THE POLITICS OF GENDER, SEXUALITY AND ISLAM IN HAUSA MOVIES

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### **Abstract**

*Over the past few decades, the Hausa film industry, colloquially known as Kannywood, has come into tension with the pro-Islamic establishment within the Hausa Muslim society. This conflict stems from the public's perception, particularly among Muslim clerics, that Kannywood promotes moral decadence contrary to its self-proclaimed mission of cultural preservation and moral education through entertainment. The Kano State Censorship Board, established in this context, has primarily targeted the portrayal of female characters, critiquing the invasion of Hausa Muslim women's private spaces by the camera. This censorship has intensified the clash between global entertainment culture and local cultural norms rooted in Islamic and Hausa traditions. Despite these accusations, I argue that Kannywood contributes significantly to the local economy, providing employment and revenue. However, with the resurgence of Shari'a law in northern Nigeria, the industry faces heightened scrutiny. This paper delves into the socio-cultural and religious dynamics shaping the Hausa film industry's controversies. It also examines the survival strategies employed by filmmakers against these adversities and explores the experiences of female actors, offering insights into the interplay of gender, gendering, and Islam in contemporary northern Nigerian Muslim communities.*

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### **Introduction**

Over the past three decades, Hausa Muslim society has experienced both direct and indirect engagements with the creative impulses of Hausa filmmakers, collectively known as Kannywood, and the pro-Islamic establishment. The industry has faced considerable public criticism and adverse actions from the Kano State Censorship Board (McCain, 2013). A segment of the public, including some Muslims and Muslim clerics, contends that the industry contributes to societal moral decay, with filmmakers allegedly promoting immorality rather than fulfilling their professed goal of cultural preservation and moral instruction through entertainment. The censorship board's activities have primarily focused on representations of female bodies and the perceived intrusive portrayal of Hausa Muslim women's private spaces by the camera (Uba, 2007, p. 48-49). As a result, Hausa films and their creators have become the focus of significant moral policing, leading to ongoing conflicts between the global culture of entertainment and the assertion of local cultural values influenced by Hindi Bollywood traditions.

Despite generating substantial revenue for both the state and the country and creating thousands of jobs for individuals ranging from the minimally educated to the highly educated in the North, the Hausa film industry has been subjected to persistent official and unofficial oppression for many years. In this paper, I argue that, despite the public criticism and the scrutiny of censorship, Kannywood films and filmmakers play a crucial role in moral education through their interpretations of holy religious texts for public consumption. This paper provides a historical overview of the film industry in Nigeria, examining the reception of Northern Nigerian communities from cultural and religious perspectives. It also explores how gender and space are represented in Hausa video films, given the cultural importance of the domestic space as a private realm traditionally accessible only to those closely related to a woman.

Furthermore, the influence of foreign films from Europe, America, and Asia, especially Hollywood and Bollywood, has significantly contributed to the development of Kannywood and the shaping of its narrative style. The transformative impact of television drama, which later evolved into the Hausa film

industry, is also notable in the industry's progression.

The paper discusses the portrayal of Islam and women in Hausa films, with evidence indicating that the majority of these films claim to impart moral lessons rooted in Islamic teachings. In this context, the paper analyzes two Hausa films, *Wani Gari* and *Jamila*, which deeply engage with themes of Islam and women.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for analyzing the Kannywood film industry considers its resilience in the face of persistent criticism and its success in captivating a wide audience among Hausa Muslims, both within Nigeria and internationally. Despite negative perceptions, the industry has thrived due to its cultural and religious resonance with viewers, providing entertainment conducive to family viewing, free from explicit content.

In the precolonial era, Northern Nigerian society, particularly the Hausa culture, developed global features through historical interactions with Arab traders and the integration of Islam. This external influence shaped the traditional Hausa narrative, allowing popular culture to become a vehicle for moral storytelling. Storytelling sessions, often held within the compound and attended by children and adults alike, were predominantly led by elderly women. These women, skilled in oratory and adept at weaving fiction with elements of reality, assumed a position of influence and respect as informal educators who tackled subjects considered taboo, including themes of shame, sex, and sexuality.

Kannywood's foundation rests upon this moralistic approach to storytelling. The industry's scriptwriters and filmmakers view their primary function as educators in morality, frequently incorporating Islamic teachings by interpreting Qur'anic verses and Hadiths. This alignment with cultural values and religious teachings positions Kannywood not merely as an entertainment medium but as a continuation of the Hausa narrative tradition, fostering a sense of community and shared values through film.

### **Literature Review & Prior Studies**

The Kannywood film industry has surpassed three decades of existence, yet scholarly attention to its remarkable contributions to popular culture and the economic landscape of

Northern Nigeria and the nation at large remains sparse. The academics who have extensively engaged in scholarly discourse concerning the industry are relatively few in comparison to its counterpart, Nollywood. However, their seminal contributions have significantly influenced subsequent generations of scholars to further explore and enrich the existing body of knowledge. Notable among these scholars are Brian Larkin, Abdallah Uba Adamu, Rudolf Pell Gaudio, Carmen McCain, and Muhsin Ibrahim.

Brian Larkin's scholarly inquiries delve into the postcolonial dynamics of media, popular culture, and globalization in Africa, with a particular focus on Nigeria. His recent publication, "Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria," examines the evolution of film and the movie industry from the colonial to the postcolonial era. Abdallah Uba Adamu, a native professor of Hausa Language and Culture from Kaduna State, Nigeria, centers his research on language, culture, media, film, and Islam in Northern Nigeria. His scholarly articles have been featured in esteemed journals of African studies in both the United States and the United Kingdom.

Rudolf P. Gaudio's research encompasses gender, sexuality, Islam, and film in Northern Nigeria. His significant work, *Allah Made Us: Sexual Outlaws in an Islamic African City*, offers a provocative exploration of the politics surrounding Islam, gender, and sexuality in a region marked by stark poverty and low literacy levels, particularly when contrasted with the Southern part of the country. Carmen McCain's extensive writings include numerous articles and book chapters that shed light on Kannywood and popular culture in Northern Nigeria. Her analyses include a critical examination of the newly established censorship board's role in regulating and screening Hausa films before their release to the public.

Muhsin Ibrahim, an indigenous scholar in Hausa language and culture, has also contributed to the academic dialogue through his book and multiple articles on Kannywood, adding depth and perspective to the understanding of this significant cinematic tradition.

### **Space and Gender in Hausa land**

The architectural layout of a conventional Hausa residence, or gida, embodies the cultural and religious ethos of an Islamic society

grounded in fundamental principles. As articulated by Uba (2007), the typical structure accommodates an extended family and consists of several units. These are generally inhabited by the patriarch of the family, his multiple wives—often ranging from two to four—and his married sons along with their own spouses and children.

Within these densely inhabited dwellings, the spatial arrangement is distinctly gendered, segregating female spaces from those of the male counterparts. The traditional Hausa home's design features a central courtyard surrounded by living quarters, a kitchen, bathrooms, and occasionally an additional room intended for hosting guests rather than for residential use. The specific allocation of this room varies according to the economic and social standing of the family's head.

Approaching the main entrance, one encounters a vestibule known as the *zaure*, which obstructs a direct line of sight into the inner quarters. Male visitors are customarily not permitted beyond this antechamber without the household head's consent. Exceptions occur only when male guests have a close relationship with the household or its female members; such visitors must announce their presence and await permission to enter (p. 44).

The reception room, situated near the entrance, generally serves as a less private area for accommodating guests, whether for brief or extended stays. The central courtyard, or *tsakargida*, however, remains a private domain, typically off-limits to non-family members. Entry into this secluded space requires explicit permission or the accompaniment of an adult male family member. Moreover, cultural and religious practices necessitate neighbors to notify each other when conducting activities that might afford them a view into another's compound, such as harvesting dates or repairing roofs and walls, to respect privacy when courtyards are exposed or unroofed.

Mirroring its counterpart in Southern Nigeria, the Hausa film industry crafts narratives that reflect the indigenous culture of its primary audience. Consequently, an understanding of the Hausa environment is essential to the discourse in the subsequent chapters of this work.

#### **Foreign Influence in Hausa Cinema**

The advent of cinema in Nigeria dates back to the colonial era when films served as a conduit for disseminating colonial educational, health, and socio-political campaigns across major

cities. These films, often showcasing colonial infrastructure projects, were government-financed initiatives aimed at educating citizens on health and promoting political agendas (Larkin, 2008). Larkin draws parallels to Foucault's assertion that modern liberal states engage citizens through welfare, offering improved housing, healthcare, and education. Such thematic elements influenced the Nigerian commercial film industry in the early 1990s, inclining it toward positive portrayals of Nigerian institutions.

Kannywood, the film industry of Northern Nigeria, emerged around 1990, slightly before Nollywood. The film *Turmin Danya* (Hog Plum) is frequently cited as Kannywood's inaugural production. Larkin, and Uba (2008, & 2007), observed that unlike its southern counterpart, the Hausa film style was significantly influenced by the popularity of Hindi films in Northern Nigerian cities like Kano, Kaduna, and Jos. The term Kannywood derived from Kano, reflects this influence, integrating Bollywood's narrative style with traditional Hausa folktales that address themes of morality and decency. Such fusion has resonated with audiences, leading to widespread viewership across Nigeria and Africa.

Four decades prior to Kannywood's rise, Hausa films, akin to other Nigerian films, primarily consisted of television and radio dramas. These were sponsored by household product manufacturers in the 1960s, echoing the advertising-driven programming in Britain and America. Lever Brothers, Peterson & Zochonis, and Greiner Bio-One are a few companies that targeted primarily female audiences, often housewives, through jingles and advertisements embedded in these shows. The soap operas, rooted in Hausa folktales, were carefully crafted to avoid cultural or religious backlash, adhering to specific gender and spatial norms as described by Abdalla Uba Adamu. Filming techniques of the time dictated outdoor domestic scenes to avoid bedroom shots, thus maintaining cultural decorum (Uba, 2007).

The Hausa video film industry, marked by "Turmin Danya" in 1990, explored themes of love and parental opposition, mirroring societal norms where parents often chose partners for their daughters. Following the success of "Turmin Danya," a surge of Hausa movies began to capture the socio-economic realities of Northern Nigeria. These early films cautiously navigated cultural and religious sensitivities,

especially concerning the portrayal of private spaces.

However, as Kannywood evolved, it ventured into areas previously delineated by culture and religion as private. Adopting Hindi film styles, the new films began to challenge traditional depictions, particularly concerning the portrayal of women's private spaces. This shift provoked divided opinions, with liberals supporting the industry's benefits, such as job creation and cultural preservation, while fundamentalists viewed it as a vehicle for cultural subversion and moral decay.

By its first decade, as Bollywood transitioned towards a more globalized style, Kannywood continued to produce films with Bollywood-inspired triangular love stories that questioned parental interference in romantic relationships. Films like *Soyayya Kunar Zuci* (The Pains of Love 1995) and *Alhaki Kwikwiyo* (Sin is a Puppy, 1998) began to depict scenes considered taboo in traditional Hausa society. The early 2000s saw further defiance against traditional norms, coinciding with the reintroduction of Shari'a in Northern Nigeria. Kannywood films of this era increasingly portrayed themes of sexuality and gender through erotic dance and dialogue, challenging the stricter moral codes enforced by Shari'a (Jibril et al., 2004; Larkin, 2008; Gaudio, 2011).

The inspiration from Hindi cinema was evident, with Kannywood echoing Bollywood's focus on the female body and sexuality. Notably, the portrayal of sexual desire became more overt in Hindi cinema, with mainstream films addressing diverse expressions of sexuality. Consequently, Kannywood followed suit, mirroring these cinematic trends within the context of Hausa cultural and religious norms.

#### **Portrayal of Islam and Gender Disparity in Hausa Films**

This chapter will examine the films "Wani Gari" and "Jamila," selected for their thematic focus on Islamic and societal norms as they pertain to gender and inheritance. "Wani Gari" explores the intricacies of Islamic inheritance laws, while "Jamila" portrays the societal constraints placed upon the rights of women, particularly Hausa Muslim women in Northern Nigeria, encompassing freedoms of speech, choice, and movement. Released in 2013 and 2015, respectively, both films achieved commercial success and critical acclaim, garnering awards for best director and cinematography. However, their representations of Islamic laws in "Wani Gari" and gender issues in "Jamila" sparked

significant debate within contemporary Northern Nigerian society. This chapter will investigate contentious questions raised by the films, such as the impartiality of Islamic inheritance laws between genders and Islamic perspectives on women's autonomy in choosing marital partners.

#### **Wani Gari**

In the film "Wani Gari," the narrative centers on Alhaji Mudi, a prosperous but illiterate merchant who conducts business across villages and towns. Mudi, a polygamist, marries in various locales, siring children whom he keeps secret from his other wives. Despite his wealth, Mudi is frugal, preferring to save rather than spend. His first two wives, in collusion with their eldest sons, murder him. His death precipitates a dispute over inheritance, a complex issue given his multiple wives and children and the application of Shari'a law. This analysis examines the film's treatment of Shari'a inheritance laws and the implications of gender within these legal structures concerning the legitimate heirs. The inheritance issue invokes specific Qur'anic chapters and Hadiths of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The analysis begins with a citation from the fourth chapter of the Holy Qur'an:

*"Allah commands you regarding (the inheritance for) your children: To the male, a portion equal to that of two females: If only daughters, two or more, their share is two third of the inheritance; If only one, her share is a half. For parents, a sixth share of the inheritance to each, if the deceased left children; if no children, and the parents are the (only) heirs, the mother has a third; If the deceased left a brothers (or sisters), the mother has a sixth. (The distribution in all cases is) after the payment of legacies or debts. You know not, which of them, whether your parents or your children are nearest to you in benefit. These are portion settled by Allah; And Allah is ever knowing, All wise." (Qur'an Ch.4, v.11)*

The cinematic narrative *Wani Gari* explores the complexities of Islamic inheritance law as depicted through the story of Alhaji Mudi, a wealthy merchant notorious for marrying in various locales and fathering children, whose frugality contrasts with his affluence. Upon his

murder by his first two wives and their sons, the issue of inheritance arises under Shari'a law due to his extensive progeny and multiple spouses. This chapter investigates the film's portrayal of Shari'a inheritance laws and its treatment of gender relations concerning the deceased's legitimate heirs, drawing upon Qur'anic verses and Hadiths.

In *Wani Gari*, the character embodying the sheikh articulates Islamic views and Shari'a rulings, predominantly quoting sacred texts. He addresses the contentious wealth distribution, emphasizing Islamic fairness, and juxtaposes it against other religious traditions where females or non-oldest male children may receive no inheritance. This filmic representation sparks discourse on gender equality and women's rights, challenging perceptions of Islamic laws as oppressive.

The film also tackles the contentious issue of inheritance for other wives and illegitimate children. A sheikh, doubling as a judge, elucidates Shari'a mandates for bequeathing a deceased's estate, complicating the narrative when two women claim to be additional wives of Alhaji Mudi. The sheikh's verdict, grounded in Islamic law, excludes these women and their children from inheritance, adhering to the Qur'anic stipulation for a maximum of four wives.

Nasir (2002) discusses Islamic law's nuanced approach to inheritance, highlighting protections for children susceptible to social injustices. In Islamic jurisprudence, even unborn children are eligible heirs, while the inheritance rights of illegitimate children are limited to their mother's lineage. This legal perspective is pertinent to a dispute in *Wani Gari*, where the eldest son challenges the equity of sharing the inheritance equally with his minor siblings.

Islamic inheritance laws are not arbitrary; they embody principles reflecting Islamic views on property, family, and justice. The system prescribes fixed shares, yet allows for flexibility through wills and estate planning, ensuring a broad distribution among relatives. This framework prevents disinheritance of legitimate heirs and ensures equitable wealth succession, as discussed by Siraj (2006), and reiterated by Nasir (2002).

### **Jamila**

The film *Jamila* is named after its lead female character and portrays a stark contrast between wealth and poverty through its protagonists. Adam Abdullahi Zango plays a wealthy,

pampered only child, whereas Jamila is a poor orphan assisting her mother with domestic work for Zango's family. Despite being in love with Sadiq Sani Sadiq, a poor house guard, Jamila is coerced by her mother to marry Zango for financial security, despite his vices of smoking, drug abuse, and alcoholism. Yielding to her mother's wishes, Jamila marries Zango, who fails to keep his promise to renounce his addictions. The narrative culminates in tragedy as Zango, in an inebriated state, assaults his mother-in-law, leading to her death, and perishes in a car crash.

The film *Jamila* aligns with Kannywood's traditional Bollywood-inspired love triangle narratives (Uba, 2007, p. 32), yet delivers a potent and timely message. It contrasts male dominance, represented by the character Adamu, against female subordination, as evidenced by the female characters Jamila, her mother, and Zango's mother, in a society where patriarchal values often override female opinions.

The theme of female marginalization resonates in Northern Nigeria's social discourse, with the Hausa film industry reflecting this reality. Prominent Nigerian writers like Zainab Alkali and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, both advocates for women's rights, have influenced this narrative through their literary works, which are often adapted for film. Similarly, *Jamila* was scripted by Hausa novelist Yakubu M. Kumo, whose writings frequently expose domestic violence and marital issues typically shunned from public discussion. In the film, Jamila is subjected to domestic violence, and her mother dies following a violent assault by Zango.

African feminists like Obioma Naemeka (1995) emphasize the prevalence of domestic violence, urging a focus on the basic needs of lower-class women living in poverty, distinguishing African feminism from Western feminism's pursuit of gender equality. Naemeka argues for a cooperative approach involving both men and women to address these challenges, a perspective mirrored in Kannywood through writers like Kumo who engage with female-centric issues.

The Hausa film industry impacts society in multiple ways, with filmmakers aiming to profit while conveying messages through entertainment. While some view films merely as a diversion from socio-economic pressures, others, particularly clerics, may criticize them as frivolous or negative. Religious figure Nasiru

Kabara's support for Kannywood highlights a divide among clerics regarding the acceptance of new media. Despite the industry's efforts to blend religious and cultural narratives, Hausa filmmakers often face contentious debates, in stark contrast to Nollywood, which has navigated such issues with less friction due to different religious dynamics.

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