

A Historical-Analytic Perspective on Islam and Cinematic Culture in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

This article reviewed the intricate relationship between film/cinematic culture and Islam in northern Nigeria and more importantly, the reception of film as a culture in Hausa Muslim societies. Various media ethnographical studies have revealed that since the introduction of cinema, the acceptance and consumption of film and other cinematic products are to a large extent influenced by the Sharia (Holy/Islamic Law), which serves as a guide for northern filmmakers and a corrective measure for the media representations of the happenings in their societies. The belief of northern Muslims is that films and cinema are harbingers of immorality and should be eschewed. Indeed, and arguably so, this is the general disposition of the northern Muslims to western ways. The overwhelming exertions of the Kano State Film and Video Censors Board (KSCB) make this claim evident. This study considered the mobility and survival of cinematic culture in the heart of Nigeria's most Islamic centre, Kano, otherwise known as Kannywood. It adopted a historical-analytic approach to the study of the development of cinema in northern Nigeria and examined the cinematic culture vis-à-vis Islam in northern Nigeria. The paper contended that globalisation and the advent of advanced technology are yet to influence film contents from the region or mass acceptance and consumption of modern films by its populace. It concluded that the Sharia and the involvement of Islamic scholars/clerics have inhibited the growth of Kannywood.

Keywords: Cinematic culture, Film, History, Kannywood, Northern Nigeria, Islamic scholars.

Introduction

Film and cinematic culture in Nigeria can be traced to the activities of Europeans in the country. Film, as understood in the sense of motion pictures, in Nigeria has been traced to as far back as 1903 when a film was screened at the Glover Hall in Lagos (Omoera, 2024). However, Ernest-Samuel and Joe (2019) claim that the first feature film titled *Palaver*, was shot in Jos (originally an area which used to be labelled as Bauchi-Plateau). Although, it was produced by a British Film Company to further the agenda of the colonisers, its recognition as the first film was because it featured native actors from Nigeria. One of the major criticisms of the film was its racist leaning and misrepresentation of Nigerians as 'backward' and worse, the barbaric portrayal of the Sura and Angas ethnicities. This is further made evident by the casting of the native actors as infamously ignorant and irresolute. This is reinforced by Sawadogo (2023, p.3) in his expression about films of the colonial period that "the colonised black subject is often stereotypically represented as a gullible buffoon and unsophisticated figure in films". While the concerns of the movie are not the focus of this paper, it is to establish that the first movie in Nigeria was created in the northern part of the country and a substantial part of it is centred on the culture and values of the people, which was largely misrepresented.

Larkin (2003, p.51) refers to movies that were shot during colonial Nigeria as "majigi performances". These were in documentary format and were primarily centred on health and farming issues. These documentaries according to Larkin followed an archetypality of 'Mr. Foolish' versus 'Mr. Wise'. While Mr. Wise seeks western medical attention when the need arises, Mr. Foolish, on the other hand, goes in search of a traditional doctor. The result is negative for Mr. Foolish whereas positive for Mr. Wise. This pattern was used to reinforce the need for natives to seek and trust the western style of treatment and to showcase the inefficacy of traditional medicine. He reiterates further that majigi was the state's dominant method of communication until television was completely adopted in the 1970s and 1980s. Majigi, due to its didactic purpose was adapted to television as a Hausa drama that has roots in colonial productions such as *Babban Larai*. These productions sought to project the values of the communities, which are dissimilar to that of other parts of the country. This created a division that enormously influence their creative engagements for media consumption in the country. This corresponds with Muhsin's (2013, p.165) remark that "filmmakers in the

country are divided largely along regional, religious, and marginally ethnic lines. Thus, there are distinct film industries – each seeking to portray the concern of the section and ethnicity it represents.”

Because of the differing ideologies, parts of southern Nigeria embraced the idea of films, northern Nigeria, profoundly resisted the idea of films and cinemas because of scepticism about the appropriateness of the new phenomenon (Ihidero 19). The proliferation of cinemas in major cities like Lagos and Ibadan improved the entertainment lifestyle and many native Nigerians became cinemagoers. Popular theater groups such as *Alarinjo* and *Agbegijo* among others enhanced cinematic activities in the southwest region. As films began to take on native forms and content in the southern region, it was almost extinguished in northern Nigeria with culture and religion as the prominent reasons given by numerous scholars. The unending debates on socio-cultural and ethno-religious concerns particularly among the Islamic scholars/clerics and the Sharia have inhibited the growth of Kannywood.

Film Culture in Northern Nigeria

The custodians of culture and religion in northern Nigeria are opposed to films from southern Nigeria. This is due to the view that the south has been negatively influenced by western culture. This is reflected in the treatment of the first cinema in northern Nigeria, Kano, which was restricted to Sabon Gari – strangers’ quarters or new towns whose residents are not indigenous to Hausaland and are mainly Christians. Larkin (2003, p.2) opines that the “cinema became part of what was known as barkiki culture, associated with other illicit activities such as alcohol consumption, prostitution, and pagan religious practices that are characteristic of Sabon Gari”. This negative conception of cinema has continually impressed cinema-making as a lower-class, male activity in the state.

Ernest-Samuel and Joe (2019) expound that from the time of the opening of the first cinema to the later part of the 1960s, the promotion and distribution of films in this region were done solely by a Lebanese cabal and their clientele base was Christian colonisers who lived in the region. The cinema houses in core Hausa cities like Kano were labelled unlawful and received the same condemnation as the beer parlours, dance halls, and prostitution. Citing an instance, Ibrahim (2000, p.12) asserts that in Sokoto, a cinema businessman, Alhaji Dikkon-Gande’s was frustrated out of business. While it initially enjoyed some form of acceptance and

popularity among the people, it was later attacked by preachers for its “immoral” proclivities that negate the Islamic faith. Ibrahim recounts that a group of ‘Ulama’ (a body of Muslim scholars who are recognised as specialists of Islamic sacred law and theology) led by Shaykh Jibril ordered the closure of Dikkon-Gande’s cinema business and directed that the building be used to promote Sharia, otherwise he risked being punished with hellfire.

The persistent divide in the representation of Islamic beliefs by the south and the north has significantly informed the alignment of the north with Hindi films. Remarkably, the Muslim Hausa community that was apathetic to popular western content and local content in the south and the outskirts of the north suddenly became interested in these Hindi movies. Adamu (2009, p.173) submits that between 1960 and 1990, Hindi cinema gained exposure through patronage by Muslim Hausa youth. This earned film the staple entertainment status among urban Hausa youth, and equally made these films popular in the cinemas. He notes a significant leap in the reception and approval of film and cinema as popular culture in the north in this phraseology:

The biggest boom for Indian films in northern Nigeria was in the 1970s when state television houses were opened and became the outlet for readily available Hindi films on video tapes targeted at-home viewers. At the time that Hindi films began to appear on Hausa television, children aged four to six and their youngish mothers (who were in their twenties) became avid watchers of these films. By 2000 the children had grown up. Many became filmmakers, and they used their Hindi cinema impressionistic conditioning as the defining template for artistic visual media.

The Hindi films had features that were similar to the Hausa culture and religion. Adamu (2019) establishes that notable instances of these similarities include the men’s mode of dressing in both cultures. The Hindi movies showcased Indian men who wore long kaftans and long waistcoats. These clothing items are similar to the Hausa *dogonriga* and *palmaran* respectively. There were also long saris and scarves worn by Indian women to veil their heads in these movies, similar to the cultural attire and appearance of women. On drawing parallels in these cultures, Larkin (1997, p.143) submits that “The iconography of Indian ‘tradition’, such as marriage celebrations, food, and the village life, although different

from Hausa culture, provides a similar cultural background that is frequently in opposition to the spread of 'westernisation'." Meanwhile, it is worth stating that although Kannywood has been greatly influenced by Hindi movies, both were also directly or indirectly influenced by Hollywood, which Adamu (2014, p.6) believes positioned itself as the "first early role model for other film industries to copy". The Hindi, like the Hausa, regarded Hollywood as an intrusion into the pristine nature of their culture and one that was set to polluting the sanctity of their tradition. Meanwhile, the Indian movie scene itself had been influenced by first, the Soviet film industry and later by Hollywood, and it would seem right to admit that Hollywood has a more lasting influence on Indian film, Adamu (2014, p.6) asserts.

Adamu (2019) further argues that the common basis that the Hausa audience found in the Hindi culture and theirs brought about the fondness for these films and quite intentionally, sets them in complete opposition against western movies and culture at large. Hence, it is safe to say that northern Nigeria aligned with the East, as against southern Nigeria's alignment with the West. He maintains that the Hausa youth who have developed a likeness for Hindi movies also created a strong bond with the culture through fandom. This fandom transcended mere talks and admiration for the Indian actors in the movies; it reflected in their dressing, the songs they sang, and in their choice of language. He expresses that:

The Hausa Hindi fandom was made by religious singers, performing the Islamic qasida in the mid-1970s. Ushaqu Indiya (lovers of India) being the most prominent among them. With the increasing popularity of Hindi film song soundtrack and the mimicking of these songs by young Hausa, Ushaqu Indiya changed their set lists to focus on adapting Hindi film music and substituting the Hindi lyrics with Hausa lyrics, praising the Prophet Muhammad. (Adamu, 2019, pp.115 -116)

It is, therefore, expected that Hausa filmmaking, which became more prominent some years after, started by imitating the Hindi films that were a delight for many movie consumers in the north for viewership and audience retention. Besides the few indigenous filmmakers who took up the responsibility, there was also an influx of young filmmakers from other parts of the country. In effect, Adamu (2019, p. 116) confirms that a

higher percentage of filmmakers in the north at some point have been recorded to be of Yoruba, Igbo, and Kanuri extractions, which was common during the early independence years in Nigeria.

The Creation of Indigenous Hausa Visual Content

The influx of non-ethnic Hausa filmmakers in the north brought about a new era in the region's history of filmmaking. These new film makers were acculturated into the Hausa customs. They introduced new technological equipment that brought about a revolution in the region's film industry. It is noteworthy that these non-Hausa who ventured into film had differing ideologies from the indigenous filmmakers; they were adventurous and enthusiastic to experiment with cultural issues the indigenous Hausa could not explore – adapting the *soyaya* (love stories) of the Kano literature. These contents sharply contrast with the culture highlighted by Kirk-Greene (1974), which borders on moral excellence that portrays the archetypality of Hausa Muslims. Adamu (2009, p. 172) refers to these issues as attributes include inter alia:

Amana (strictly friendliness, but used to refer to trust), karamci (open-handed generosity), hakuri (patience), hankali (good sense), mutunci (self-esteem), hikima (wisdom), adalci (fairness), gaskiya (truthfulness), kunya (modesty, self-deprecation, humility, acknowledging others' opinion over one's own), and ladabi (respecting self and respecting others; also a consideration for others, both older and younger).

In the highlight above, Adamu echoes Alhasan et al. (1982) to bring forth more attributes that are found in the typical Hausa culture. Some of these include zumuta (communal spirit), rikonaddini (adhering to religious tenets and being guided by them with attributes such as truth), dattako (gentlemanliness), and so forth. These features became the guide for the new generation of indigenous Hausa filmmakers. They understood the culture and religion of their audience and were intentional about making movies that promoted these teachings. To reach both ends of the divided audience in the north (the purely Hausa audience and the predominant southern immigrants), the new players in the industry also adopted the Hindi motif that had gained popularity among both sides of the audience. Invariably, Hindi films became the templates upon which new films were made. It has been noted in some instances that the only difference between an original Hindi film and its Hausa adaptation is

simply the actors and perhaps the setting. This proves that the storylines of such films were lifted with little to no alteration in many instances. The fusion of Indian and Hausa cultures became the popular culture of film. This was a careful measure for the acculturated filmmakers on two accounts; to appeal to the audience on both sides of the divide, and to guide against offending the sensibilities in the re/presentations of the people's religion and culture.

The way and life in northern Nigeria is largely guided by the dictates of Islam and more specifically, by Sharia. While it is true that Sharia does not apply to all places in the north, it has a huge effect on many places in the region. Adamu (2004, p.2) sustains this view when he affirms that unlike the south which 'enjoys' some form of religious freedom, the north is more bound by the regulative nature of Islam. He notes that Islam is averse to the idea of representation as Judaism and Christianity. Thus, artistic and creative works produced under Islamic jurisprudence in northern Nigeria are subjected to strict surveillance. Consequently, this prompted a regulation on the visual content of the region, particularly, on Kannywood and its products.

Kannywood: The Making of a Regulated Movie Industry

The Hausa-Language film industry owes its existence to the success of Salisu Galadanci's *Turmin Daya* (The Draw), 1990, which has been cited as the first commercially successful film in the region. Its release came shortly before the release of Ken Nnebue's *Living in Bondage* (1992), which also has been credited to be the first most successful Nigerian video film by the mainstream film industry, Nollywood. From the antecedents and the production of home videos at about the same time suggests that the culture of filmmaking was never at dearth at any point in the north. Consequently, the label, Kannywood was created in 1999 by Sunusi Shehu of Tauraruwa Magazine. The name is a combination of Kano, which was the film and entertainment hub in the north at the time, and Hollywood, which is the name of the American film industry. Interestingly, the name, Nollywood became recognised in 2002 when it was referenced by the New York Times journalist, Norimitsu Onishi. This was three years after Kannywood was used to describe the film industry of the north. Considering the available information on how long Kannywood has vibrantly existed in Nigeria, one begins to wonder and question why it is not as famed as Nollywood. The several reasons attributed to this reality are addressed.

In the year 2000, when film productions have been in full course, the Sharia Law was instituted in Kano state as in some other predominantly Muslim states. The institution of the Sharia meant that the state could adopt stricter means in its handling of ethical issues. Sharia, from the study of Adamu, was not indigenous to the northern society. Rather, it was a borrowed style, just as the religion was. Adamu (2004, p.4) establishes that there had been an extreme form of Islamic sect that operated in Saudi Arabia. The Wahabists, as he calls them, became the media police in the country and this led to the establishment of the al-ri'asa al-'amma li-hay'at al-amrbial-ma'ruf wa-al-nahy 'an al-munkar or the General Presidency for Committees of Ordering the Good and Forbidding the Evil – a form of censorship body. One of such moral police, as presented by Ibrahim (2021, p.87) is a certain Dr. Magaji. In his words, “Dr. Magaji opposed practices in Kannywood films such as the song and dance routines, and the mode of dressing of female actors that don't cover their body as per culture and religion”. He praised old films for the better presentation of Hausawa. He also cited other people like Ashiru Hassan, alias Malam Dalibu and an Islamic scholar and university lecturer of Hausa language and culture, Dr. Muhammad Sulaiman Abdullahi who have opposed the practices in Kannywood. (Ibrahim 2012, p.88)

Barau (2008) in the book, *Mission and Vision of the Kano State Censorship Board* that he documents, compiled and edited, informs that censorship is grounded in colonial culture from as far back as 1933. Independent Nigeria and its semi-independent regions, and later states simply adopted the practice of upholding the moral ground of the people and their communities. The first host of censorship was the Kano literature books, replete with the theme of love. This was based on the submission that the works of literature being read by the young population were or had the potential to corrupt their minds and mislead them. Remarkably, Adamu (2004, p. 10) reveals that when filmmaking started exploring various globalised configurations of behaviour that have direct diluting influences on these core Muslim Hausa mind-sets, alarm bells started ringing about the corrupting influence of new media technologies and behavioural modification. The road to this corrupting influence started with Hindi films.

These corrupting influences observed by the stakeholders was consequent to the institution of Sharia and necessitated the abolition of filmmaking in the state, as the concern of these films were adjudged to conflict with the dictates of Islam in its truest form. To salvage a profession

that had become a means of livelihood for many people within the state and the entire northern region, the local censoring committee created by Kannywood producers and marketers was converted to the state censorship board in 2001 by Governor Rabi'u Kwankwaso. This led to the establishment of the Kano State Censorship Board (KSCB) that would check the activities of film workers. Adamu (2004, p.10) notes that censorship was founded basically on the observation of Hausa culturalists that the media was beginning to deviate from the typical Hausa mind-set. This, therefore, suggests, as Adamu admits that censorship was not instituted in the interest of the public, the supposed guardians of culture but as a reaction to the new and alien. The typical mind-set of the Hausa, therefore, is what has been itemised above by Kirk-Greene (1974). It confirms that these attributes are no longer reflected in the content that permeated visual outputs at the time. The war and campaign against Kannywood became tougher with the rise of 'Izala', a religious society that propagates the Sunnah (the traditions and practices of the Islamic Prophet) and removal of Bid'ah (innovation), and the instating of Ibrahim Shekarau, the radical Muslim Governor in 2003. Scores of movies considered profane were banned from being shown and some of the filmmakers were either imprisoned or suspended while some others suffered both, which impeded the growth of the industry.

Despite the agitation for the supremacy of Sharia in the north, it is safe to say that things went smoothly between the lawmakers and filmmakers until sometime in 2007 when the sex tape of a famous Kannywood actress, Maryam Hiyana got leaked to the public. This scandal simply brought to the fore, the culturalists' agitation about the ability of films to corrupt the pristine Hausa culture. This scandal received criticism from the government and the Islamic scholars, and led to major changes in the structure of the censors' board. McCain (2012, p.4) reports that in response to the sex scandal, the newly appointed executive secretary of the KSCB, Abubakar Rabo Abdulkarim, formerly deputy commandant of the hisbah, shari'a police, took a harsh interpretation of the censorship law that earlier censorship regimes had only mildly enforced. From 2007-2011, thousands of people employed by the film and entertainment industry were arrested and fined or served prison sentences, including directors, actors, singers, editors, marketers, video viewing centre owners, and video gaming centre employees.

This created a disruption in the entertainment industry in Kano and led to the mass exodus of filmmakers and musicians to other northern

states with thriving industries such as Kaduna, Jos, and Abuja. This crisis however gave Kannywood films great exposure as filmmakers who relocated were compelled to introduce their movies to other parts of the region. The re-election of Rabi'u Kwankwaso as governor in 2011 created a favourable business atmosphere for entertainers. He removed the restrictions on the industry with the reappointment of the first executive director of the board Malam Yahaya Faruk Chedi. Thereafter, Kannywood has continued to grow and also plays host to sponsors who have the wherewithal to fund movies. It is essential to state here that Kannywood faces palpable challenges similar to other Islamic countries around the world. Huda (2012, p.4) relates the case of Indonesia, which shares a similar experience to what is found within the northern Nigerian context. Indonesia was colonised by the Dutch and just like the Britons in northern Nigeria, they were the first to introduce film into the country in the early 1900s. She stresses that by 1950 when the first national film was produced in the country, "the acceptability of cinematic practices in Islamic law was a hot issue among the majority Muslims of Indonesian society" (Huda, 2012, pp. 4-5). Consequently, shortly after Indonesia gained its independence, the Islamic community started making films with the tenets of Islam as the central theme such as "Islamic reformation, patriotism, nationalism based on Islam, and sometimes of the women's emancipation movement" (Huda, 2012, p. 8).

From a slightly different perspective, Smets (2012) approaches the study of cinema on Muslims and Muslim societies. His study is not based on African Muslims living in Africa, as is the case in some of the literature referenced previously; rather, he considered the way Moroccan Muslims in the diaspora, precisely Belgium viewed the restrictions of Islam on their decision to view a movie. His conclusion primarily shows that despite being of the same faith, Moroccans who reside in Belgium have slight differences in understanding the pronouncement of religion on its adherents' intention and engagement with a film. It is perhaps safe to say that his inference from one of the participants in his survey summarises the attitude of many of these diaspora Muslims toward visual art. He recounts that later on in the conversation, it became clear that he was not necessarily referring to films in general, but to 'vulgar, dirty and extreme' films. In that sense his view reflects the general response to my question about film-watching and religion: from a moral point of view, a Muslim cannot watch films with explicit content, described variously as sex, nudity, eroticism, or 'bad things' (Smets, 2012, p. 80).

Smets', Huda's and Adamu's accounts of their experiences and observations about Islam and the media reveal the incompatibility of the two phenomena and the resulting conflicts and arguments in defining moralities in the age of modernity. The better attention that Kannywood enjoys has seen to it that the industry, which had just a few production companies to its credit, now boasts of hundreds of production companies that produce numerous films that appeal to the tastes of their mixed audiences beyond the continent. For instance, the Hausa film industry, like their Yoruba and Igbo counterparts, has a dedicated station on the popular cable provider, MultiChoice. These 'branches' of Africa Magic were established in 2010 to provide valuable television content as a result of the growing demand for their movies beyond Nigeria. Given that Hausa is ranked the sixth most spoken language in Africa with speakers in over 10 counties, Krings (2005), signalled the presence of potential consumers for Hausa culture and Islamic religion and gives a wider spectrum for the possibility of eventual consumers. Leveraging on the intentionality of Kannywood filmmakers to portray the Hausa culture and Islam religion, and the strict censorship of these films by the government and other censorship bodies to ensure "truthful" portrayals, MultiChoice enjoyed wider subscriptions on the continent, which became poignant for the local filmmakers who started recording low sales on DVDs. Arguably, this created an avenue for *YouTube's* broader access and success in 2018.

Kannywood and the New Media: A Shift in Terrain and Orientation

Excitingly, the realities and peculiarities of the present times are also giving more importance to the industry. Adam Zango and Ali Gumzak were two of the earliest northern filmmakers whose zeal for large viewership and exploration impelled them to adopt *YouTube* for the streaming of their movies. Both films hit the streaming platform in February 2012 with two weeks apart but they have experienced a significant difference in viewership. While Adam Zango's *Adon Gari* (Pride of the city) has 428,000 views, Ali Gumzak's *Muradi* (My heart desires) has only 15,040 views as of December 23, 2022. There has been no known study to examine the cause of this gap in viewership but it could be attributed to the popularity, preference, and fan base of the filmmakers and their star actors. The Covid-19 pandemic that led to a global lockdown opened the world up to new possibilities. This has also affected how the world relates to films and visual content in general. This has a telling effect on Kannywood. Major parts of the world has long accepted

platforms such as Netflix and Prime Video, the southern part of Nigeria embraced online streaming platforms such as Iroko TV and Ibaka TV, while the north also boasts of a platform like Northflix. A report by Aljazeera in 2020 presents the resulting information:

The lockdown, which saw cinemas, hotels, bars, and other recreational outlets shut down, was a boon for Northflix as Nigerians turned to streaming their favourite movies. That opportunity also came as producers were desperately seeking an alternative market for their films with cinemas and DVD shops shuttered. Northflix was the answer.

The streaming platforms have created a new epoch in the history of world cinema; a shift in film and media prospects. It has gone beyond being a floating mechanism for film producers during the difficult period of the pandemic. Most subscribers have stuck to the streaming platforms despite the easing of the lockdown, mainly because it offers a convenience that is similar to the emergence of the VCD era; access to a variety of media/content, access to the latest programs, controlled viewing, and most importantly, the quest to escape the stifling of the Kano State Censorship Board (KSCB). In an online article that appears in Premium Times Newspaper in 2020, the Executive Secretary of the board, Isma'il Nabba decries the level of immorality in Hausa movies on the streaming platforms. He inveighs the necessity "to sanitise the space, as many movie makers have found an escape route to showcase their immorality...We made it clear to them that everyone must henceforth bring his/her film to the board for censoring before uploading on the channels." (premiumtimesng.com, 2020)

In spite of the warning from the board, the numbers continue to grow in favor of Kannywood from the traffic of online streaming. Kannywood actors have also begun to receive more attention from their counterparts and award organising bodies both in the south of Nigeria and in the other parts of the world. Recently, Kannywood entered into a working relationship with Hollywood, called Kannywood-meets-Hollywood. It was mainly to help Kannywood, especially the youngsters in the industry improve their production skills and output. According to a report by Kano Chronicle on the Kannywood-meets-Hollywood initiative, the Director of Motion Picture Productions, Mohammed Sani remains optimistic the project would enhance the industry's output and upgrade its production to vie for global status: "We have made

collaboration, value-addition, and industry enhancement the target metrics of our growth within Kannywood and we are firmly committed to supporting any opportunities (sic) that will build bilateral bridges and sustain the future of the industry.” The optimism expressed in his comment about the workshop, particularly bothers on the commitment of filmmakers to ensuring the growth and continuity of the industry.

According to the report, the Director stated further that the program will further enhance both the business and the creative aspects of the industry. As earlier noted, this attention has positioned the industry in the spotlight, which has been beneficial to some of its actors beyond the shores of the north. One of such signal of attention is the establishment of a cinema house in Kano in 2015 by The Film house Cinema Limited with Ali Nuhu as its brand ambassador. This branch of Film house Cinema stands nowhere near the success rate that has been recorded in many other locations in the south of the country but its presence in the north is a positive pointer. This would have suggested a possibility that can be nurtured but on the contrary, Islamic scholars who are major stakeholders in the state staged an opposition to the proposed film village by the administration of Muhammadu Buhari in 2016. The administration rescinded on its plans to construct a 20-hectare-Muhammadu Buhari Film Village at Kofa Local Government area of the state to facilitate wealth and job creation, promote cultural activities and tourism. Reports have it that the Presidency allocated three billion naira for the project, which would house state of the arts facilities (similar to that of China and India) for film production, and had ‘cash backed’ one billion naira for the commencement of the project. However some Muslim clerics, led by Sheik Abdallah Usman Gadan Kanya challenged the decision. The clerics reportedly declaimed “they don’t want the project in Kofa and in Kano because such a project would promote immorality” (sararareporters.com, 2016). These few Clerics who are against cultural imperialism, have been proven to be the major stakeholders who serve as gatekeepers, protecting their religious identity and control access to their consumption culture in the state. This has posed a major challenge to Kannywood competing favourably with other cinema cultures and structures in Nigeria.

Themes in Kannywood Films

It has been established that the concern of the films made by filmmakers in the north in the 1900s was an imitation of the Hindi films the people had come to accept. These Hindi films had the themes of love, and betrayal

and of course featured music and dance prominently. The acceptance of these films explains why northern filmmakers also adopted this approach. As the years passed by, however, northern filmmakers have been portraying vital elements of Hausa culture in their film production for identity and originality. Adamu (2004, p. 13) highlights some of the major characteristics of Hausa films. He notes forced marriage as the first motif. The second motif he notes is love triangle (which might be within the confines of forced marriage or not), and the third is song and dance routines. The third motif is embellished alongside either of the other motifs in every Hausa film. In stating its importance to the success of every film, Adamu (2004, p.14) concludes that “A Hausa video film without song and dance routines is considered a commercial suicide, or artistic bravado undertaken by few artistes with enough capital to experiment and not bother too much with excessive profit.”

Another prevalent motif in Hausa films is love (*soyaya*), a legacy from the days of adapting Hausa literature to screen. Yet, while it is true that culture and religion hamper the exploration of the theme of romance/sex in Kannywood films, this has not stopped them from dwelling on the theme of love. Love is explored from different perspectives in the films; sometimes, between two people from the same social class, and at other times, between two people from different social classes. The films also sometimes centre on the challenges and difficulties that come with love and passion. An example can be found in Ali Nuhu’s 2021 movie, *Tsakaninmu (Between Us)*, which focuses on a love triangle between a privileged young man, his choice of a wife, and his father’s choice of an equally privileged wife for him. The young man agrees to his father’s bid but the love is short-lived. He fulfils his desire when he goes back to his choice. This is the typical instance of many other love-related stories in Kannywood films. Apart from the theme of love, there are other themes that the industry explores. Some of the recent movies have explored the theme of parenthood, just as they have also explored the most challenging issue in the north at present – terrorism, banditry and displacement. Desmond Ovbiagele’s 2020 movie, *The Milkmaid (Yar Nono)*, explores the state of religious extremism in the region. The narrative centres on how women and children are the most affected in cases such as this. The film has many awards and recognition to its name:

- i. it was nominated at the 93rd Academy Awards (Oscars) for Best International Feature Film in 2021;

- ii. at the 16th African Movie Awards for Best Film, it won Best Actress in a Supporting Role, Achievement in Makeup, Best Film in an African Language, and Best Nigerian Film in 2020;
- iii. it won the Pan African Film Festival award in Los Angeles for Narrative Feature Award in 2021 and;
- iv. It has been nominated fourteen times at the Best of Nollywood Awards.

In a similar vein, Robert Peters' 2020 film, *Voiceless (Mara Murya)* narrates an unfortunate scenario of how two female characters are kidnapped by a terrorist group, and how in violent situations, they found love. This movie is listed on the popular streaming platform, Netflix and is said to have grossed an approximation of \$2,000,000 at the box office. This simply shows that the story resonates with a significant number of people. This is also the case with quite some other recent Kannywood movies produced by non-Hausa. A few other filmmakers have transitioned from the banal and untactful methods to the globally neoteric approaches.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a historical perspective to cinema and films in northern Nigeria. One predominant issue that has been teased out in the different phases of film in northern Nigeria is the influence of culture, and religion in particular, on the production of movies in this region. The paper revealed that even though the very first movie that featured Nigerian actions in the country was shot in some part of the north and tells in part the story of this region of the north, the northern region has not advanced as one would have thought in its production of films. Indeed, the assertion that northern Nigeria has not advanced much in movie production is further made prominent by the developments being witnessed in southern Nigeria in the same industry. The structure of Nigeria, as encouraged by the colonialists who handed over power to natives, was such that northern Nigeria is almost as much as half of the south of the same country. Many have argued that the white colonialists did this with the intent to favor the northern region and to ensure that through the power of the majority that goes to the north, they—the colonialists—can continue to determine the state of events in the country. Again, this is a postulation by a certain school of thought, which is backed up with facts and can pass for the truth if well argued. However, what is

clear is that the north has an advantage over the south – mostly due to population and landmass. Hence, one would expect that an industry like entertainment should thrive more in a region with a high population. This, rather fortunately or otherwise, is not the case. Northern Nigeria still suffers some backwardness in its entertainment industry because of an ingrained cultural belief that is conservative and is actively encouraged by a religion that has little to no tolerance for the liberalism that comes with the western world.

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