

# Conflict and Violence at the Crossroad of Religion and ‘New’ Media: Periscoping Faith-based Crisis through the Eyes of Camera in the Sharia-age of Northern Nigeria

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## Abstract

Recent engagement in local cinema production by northern Nigerian Muslims (Kannywood) elicited numerous religious disapprovals from Islamists and a section of ‘*ulamā*’<sup>2</sup> leading to contestations, and even persecutions, especially after the Sharia reintroduction in the year 2000. This article discusses the role of religious and media actors in a structural violence context. It elucidates on how the stance of Islamists on Kannywood, which is pervasive among youths, reproduces factors and actors in the region’s history of intolerance, physical conflicts and ‘structural’ violence. This new media forms of religious conflict and violence accentuates the role played by the intersection of religion and ‘new’ media in conflicts and violence. It analyses how youth engagement in the movie industry and the interference of Islamists provoke new and reignite old modes of religious tensions. The data used was collected during a 12-month period of ethnographic research in northern Nigeria between 2014 and 2016 which was part of a Doctoral programme.

**KEY WORDS:** Religion, Movies, Sharia, Censorship, Conflict, Violence

## Introduction

Contemporary scholars of religion (e.g. Geertz 1993; Twiss & Conser 1992; Tayob 1999; and Shields 2008) have begun to move beyond focusing on the idea of religion as an object of study investigating a factual variety of religious phenomena in the world. This

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<sup>2</sup> Islamist in this paper refers to people struggling for full implementation of Sharia in northern Nigeria. They include mainstream Muslim scholars (*‘ulamā*) and activists. I use the two words interchangeably.

trend prompts new points of departure in understanding the role of religion in societies, particularly regarding its relation to other social institutions. My recent observation on the intersection of religion and ‘new’ media among northern Nigerian Muslims reveals new nuances of religion, media, and violence influenced by Islamists through contemporary northern Nigerian Muslim cinema, referred to as Kannywood in this article.

It has been established that media is an intrinsic part of every religion (De Witte 2003; Ibrahim 2013). Thus, at the centre of every religion is a certain kind of mediation between: (i) the physical and the spiritual world; and (ii) the individual person and the religious community (De Witte 2003:174). Richard Fox (2009) argues that it is quite difficult to discuss religion at all—during any historical period, without reference to media. Religious actors require a certain kind medium to experience any kind of religion. Therefore, media are the site of religious experience and meaning making (Martin-Barbero 1997).

Recent scholarship about the ‘media’, especially the ‘new’ technologies that offer communication capabilities to a much larger audience such as radio, television, and the internet, are affecting and redefining modes of operations of all social institutions including the religious (Appadurai 1996; Horsfield 2008). The media have been playing a major role in defining the religious history of northern Nigeria and elsewhere. Different religious actors and groups at different times use it to promote different brands of Islam they subscribe to within the region and beyond. The differences that emerge in communicating beliefs and practices, particularly between the Sufi, the Salafi, and the Shia led to competitions, contestations, and which often sparked violence among their followers (Umar 1994; Larkin 2009).

While northern Nigerian Islamists use new media such as radio, video and recorded cassettes in their ‘religious’ engagements (Larkin 2009), Muslim youths in the region tend to use it differently. Between early 1990s to the present, a local Muslim home video industry (Kannywood) emerged. Within a short period Kannywood became popular in the region and beyond. Sooner than later, Islamists started challenging the filmmakers, who are mostly young entrepreneurs, on cultural and Sharia grounds (Adamu 2003; Mc Cain 2013; Krings 2015). They accused the filmmakers of promoting socio-cultural and political changes which, according to the Islamists’ perspective, contradict Islamic values which they laboured to establish over years in the region. Individual Islamists and groups that criticise Kannywood filmmakers use religion as their main justification. For example, at the onset of Kannywood, several prominent ‘*ulamā*’ in northern Nigeria expressed their disapproval through their various media of communicating with people, such as Friday sermons, daily congregations, religious classes and various homily sessions.

On the other hand, the filmmakers did not only repeatedly deny such accusations but also, claimed to be doing the same work as their accusers. They consider their accusers as those who have not only failed to come to terms with reality in their socio-religious and cultural engagement but, using the monopoly of religious authority to deny and oppress others. In what, I see as an element of a generational gap at the crossroad of this popular video culture and northern Nigerian Islam, filmmakers often point to the failure of the Islamists to appreciate the new ways of communication and how the former impart changes among people.

In this article, I aim to discuss the role of religion (as embodied by the Islamists) not only as an instrument of controlling society and maintaining the *status quo* through resisting changes from ‘others’ (as manifested through local movies) but its role in political, socio-cultural and economic forms of violence. I also explore ways in which the intersection of religious beliefs, practices, and institutions on the one hand and Kannywood movies production on the other hand, have been instrumental in reproducing causes of conflict and violence in northern Nigeria. In other words, I intend to discuss forms of perceived and real violence within the context of mediating and mediating religious ideas, experiences, and other social issues through Kannywood. The purpose is to show how the stance of Islamists on Kannywood physically and structurally exacerbate intolerance of both secular and religious views of others. In this context, I will analyse how youth engagement in the popular culture and the interference of Islamists, through criticisms and sanctions, provokes new and reignites old modes of religious tension in the region and in some instances, results in physical violence. This, however, extends to both inter and intra-religious tensions among the religiously diverse people of northern Nigeria. I used qualitative data — interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation generated during an intensive nine months of ethnographic research in northern Nigeria. I conducted the field research in three phases, between April 2014 and March 2017. In the next section, I present theoretical considerations of understanding religion and violence.

### **Theoretical Consideration: Religion, Media and Violence**

The field of religious violence studies is a vibrant one in Africa and Nigeria. A survey of the literature shows that one of the major causes of these faith-based acts violence and conflict in these countries and elsewhere is largely due to the activities of some religious groups seeking to change society according to their (mis)interpretation of religious texts or based on their own ideologies and/or interests. Nevertheless, the role of those religious actors through media trajectories and the role of the media as instruments in perpetrating religious violence is still under-researched in the region.

Media, as conduit pipes through which the message of those struggles is embedded (McLuhan and Fiore 1967; Hoover 1997a; 1997b; Horsfield 2008) is central to understanding how the actors achieve their aims. For instance, the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the role of print and electronic media had at that time, has had a high global profile on many Muslim communities in Africa in all areas of human endeavours, leading to struggles for a more orthodox interpretation of Islam (Miles 2003; McCormac 2005; Adamu 2007). Taking this as a point of departure, scholarly discussions on the elastic concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘media’ toward socio-political struggles which in many cases adopts ‘violent’ means capture the play between northern Nigerian Islamists and some Muslim youths operating through Kannywood in the northern Nigerian Sharia context. In this literature survey, which also formed my theoretical framework, I look at how the struggle between various actors using religion and media as tools generate ‘physical’ and ‘structural’ violence in the communities they live. In what follows, I briefly discuss each of these trio concepts and then link them to see how they provide us with a framework for understanding religious violence and conflict at the intersection of northern Nigerian Islam and popular video films.

## **Religion**

Until recently, some scholars, particularly in the West, portrayed religion as an ideology that belonged to a past phase of human development. However, recent studies show that religion has continued in the face of the advancement of science and technology to play a great role in the existence of human societies. It has retained its major role in influencing human thinking since the beginning of human civilisation. Moreover, the increasing presence of religion in public life has provoked an ambivalent response from contemporary scholars trying to understand its nature, and what its “efflorescence means for our understanding of the nature of politics and society” (Hirschkind and Larkin 2008). The authors pointed that:

...when religion does appear outside the personal and private, it often gets read as a sign for something else: an idiom through which marginal groups express political demands; a salve in times of crisis; a vehicle of social mobilization and solidarity; an instrument by which cynical leaders manipulate their supporters. A chief fear in this regard is that religious movements and the forms of violence that sometimes accompany them further what are “really” barely disguised political projects lurking under the name of religion (Hirschkind and Larkin 2008:1).

In other words, the interaction between religion and the general society within which it functions made it a potent force for socio-political control and manipulation thereby playing a significant role in the entire societal process, especially in societies whose people are religious in their thinking and actions (Alhaji-Shehu 2012) typical of northern Nigeria.

## **Media**

We should have in our mind that the concept of media is a general and overbearing one. It denotes a great range of items and phenomena. Thus, media denotes things and phenomena that connect ideas, situations, environments, and people. It is anything that has the potential of conveying messages to the senses through viewing, listening and or experiencing. Thus, both *mimbar* (Mosque pulpit), recorded sermons and movies are important media through which Muslim actors communicate, as well as compete for influence and hegemony.

## **Violence**

The term “violence” which is similarly pliant comprises a range of meanings, including “to force or forcible”, “to injure”, “to dishonour”, and “to violate or violently”. The Princeton Cognitive Science Laboratory defines violence as “an act of aggression (as one against another who resists); a turbulent state resulting in injuries and destructions; ferocity: the property of being wild or turbulent”.<sup>3</sup> Although violence clearly encompasses injury to persons or property, it also includes “the forcible interference with personal freedom, violent or passionate conduct or language (and) finally passion or fury” (Tanner 2007). A comprehensive definition of violence is found in Galtung (1990) who defines it beyond physical and psychological dimension to cover an “avoidable

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/journals/article/index.xml?journalid=32&articleid=60&>. Date accessed May 10, 2016.

insult to basic human needs”. He emphasises the hidden or in his own term, “structural” dimension of violence caused by political or economic structures of exploitation and inequality. However, while violence may be physical or non-physical its immediate target may be either humans or material structures, and its goal is to destroy the existence or degrade the dignity of persons or group of persons. This definition is more comprehensive and relevant to this work.

For violence to occur there must be motive. In this context, religion is often used to motivate violence. The fact that religion is value-based rendered people to be emotionally attached to it and usually less tolerant of any criticism of it (Alhaji-Shehu 2012). In a more general sense, Eller (2015) argues that world religions created dualism of believers and nonbelievers or us-versus-them. This renders violence possible if not, inevitable because always the group(s) that feel themselves in possession “of the one true religion” have little sympathy or tolerance for other groups. In a similar but more tailored manner, Appleby (2011) discusses that “strong religions” through their interpretive approach, possess the capacity to enjoin or legitimate violence, as well as breed movements, groups, networks, and organisations driven primarily by religious goals and dynamics. This assertion is evident in Nigeria with the northern part of the country as the most susceptible, as there is no single state among the nineteen states in the region that has not experienced violence in the name of one religion (Alhaji-Shehu 2012).

Based on the above, we could describe religious conflicts and violence to imply disputes or disagreement based on differences in faiths and interests. These may manifest in a form of physical, cultural, or structural aspects.

### **Religion, Media, and Violence Converged**

Towards understanding religions and their interactions with media technologies in a pluralistic society, media theorists postulate that all social institutions respond to the forces of new media. Scholars on media and religion (e.g. Hoover 1997; 2006; De Vries 2001; Meyer 2006; Horsfield 2008; Morgan 2008; Hjavard 2008; and Hirschkind and Engelke 2011) argue that media have the capacity to change social institutions and modes of interactions in culture and society. It is not only a neutral tool through which actors communicate religious messages but influence the ‘meaning’ conveyed (mediatisation) (Ibrahim 2013). This could be justified through the resurgence of faith-based media and their main roles as propaganda tools among various violent groups like al-Qaida, ISIS, and Boko Haram as well as non-violent Sunni and Shia organisations. Therefore, it is about media setting the agenda. Media actors use media institutions to manipulate society.

In this context, I prefer to emphasise the role of religious and media actors rather than the abstract concepts of religion and media. Actors, through mediation and mediatisation, invoke religious sensibilities of people to create (sacred) experiences and use threat, intimidation, coercion, etc. in justifying their various engagements in the name of beliefs and practices, which the actors conveyed through media. This approach resonates Appleby’s suggestion of approaching religious violence through the actions of people that embodied it. Since both religion and media are in themselves abstracts, they become objects or material of violence only when the actors that personified them decide to invoke or manipulate the sensibilities of their fellows in justifying their interests

by means of violence. This happens both within the same religion and between different religions and unfolds through media infrastructure (Larkin 2008).

Meyer (2009; 2015) uses this framework of the materiality of religion and media to map the nexus between the two. She points to how people share or transmit their religious imaginaries and images *via* various means: verbal language, pictures, arts and other visual means. In other words, religious actors are active agents in mediating and mediatising religious ideas and interests through media. They do so through various religious media forms. In an edited volume, Meyer (2008: xi) points to how religious organisations skilfully use the new availability of media such as movies, television, radio and print to their need thereby raising the questions of, “what happens when religions adopt new media? How does this affect the message, the way in which believers are reached and addressed, and the role of religion in the public realm?” Similarly, in her monograph about the role of Ghanaian video films in mediating spirituality, particularly Christianity and African Traditional Religions, Meyer (2015) establishes the connection between religion, visual culture, and communication. She provides useful insight into how religious actors use video film technologies to recreate and retransmit religious ideas and vision. In so doing, she analyses video films as, “relay points that feed and are fed by what and how people imagined” (Meyer 2015:13).

Taking my inspiration from Meyer, in this article, I analyse Kannywood movies as relay points through which Islamists, in the wake of popular video culture, influence the society by reproducing and transmitting their worldview and ideologies through movies that were hitherto meant to serve a different purpose by their producers.

### **Faith-based Conflict and Violence through the Eyes of Camera in Northern Nigerian Sharia Context**

As I pointed out in the introduction, home video culture started in Nigeria in the 1990s. At its inception in the predominantly Muslim north, Islamists rejected it. One of the major reasons is that the filmmakers promoted contrary worldviews to that of the Islamists. Eventually, the Islamists intolerance culminated in specific censorship, and reached its height with Sharia reimplementation in the year 2000 during which the Kannywood filmmakers felt deprived and “oppressed through religion”. In addition to subduing the role of the Kannywood movies in challenging their hegemony, the Islamists use the phenomenon to reignite the age-old interfaith rivalry between the Sufis and Salafists. The movies also become a medium through which inter and intra-religious intolerance are mediated. I discuss below various nuances of faith-based crises and violence that stem out of the popular video film culture and Sharia reimplementation in northern Nigerian.

#### **1. Threats and Counter Threats Between Kannywood Filmmakers and Religious Establishments**

When Kannywood started in the early 1990s in the northern city of Kano, the Islamists labelled it un-Islamic and incongruous to the region’s Islamic culture. The indigenous filmmakers rejected the claim and consequently tensions ensued. One of the basic features of the phenomenon that made the atmosphere ripe for religious violence was the use of threat and counter-threat between the Islamists and the film practitioners. For example, when the filmmakers realised that their interest was at stake, they started

attacking Islamists through some polemical kinds of films. For example, they produced two films *Saliba* and *Mallam Karkata* in which they attacked the credibility of the Islamists by depicting them as less holy as they claimed to be. They presented 'ulamā' and film practitioners at the same level—as both professionals—and showed that there are bad eggs in every profession—even among the 'ulamā'. This led to a group of religious leaders in Kaduna making an edict (*fatwa*) that sentenced the producer of *Saliba* film to death. There was serious panic among the filmmakers, as they believed if those threatening them had their way, they could execute them. Some of them cited an example of Gideon Akaluka, a Christian who denigrated Quranic papers and was killed by some fanatics in accordance with a *fatwa* passed against him.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, an unknown religious group distributed pamphlets in mosques across Kano state inciting people against Kannywood filmmakers. According to Ado Gidan-Dabino, who is one of the pioneers of Kannywood, the pamphlets described them as anti-Islam and the Sharia formations of the region. It then enjoined people to ostracise filmmakers. The following week, some filmmakers, however, responded by distributing a rejoinder to the same mosques' attendants rebuking the content of the previous pamphlets; this situation led to the arrest of many of the filmmakers by state security operatives.

Gidan-Dabino, who stood up against attempts to stop them from producing films, also recounted that a phantom group called "Islamic Values Protectors" sent him two different letters threatening his life and that of his colleagues. According to him, he reported the two cases to the Nigerian police and secret security service respectively, but to his knowledge, they arrested no one in connection to that and they continue to live in fear.

Another case involved Ismaila Afakallah, former head of Arewa Filmmakers Association, who felt the need to respond to the heightened "hate-sermons" against filmmakers by Islamists. He featured on a popular Freedom FM radio morning show *Barka da Hantsi* where he likened the activities of filmmakers to that of Friday prayer imams, pointing out that they both address congregations either in mosques or cinemas and convey "good messages" to them.<sup>5</sup> This statement elicited harsh responses from some Islamists and their supporters. Some of them gave him an ultimatum to come back to the same programme to first withdraw his statement and then repent to Allah or face an undisclosed punishment. Afakallah told me that he refused to give into their threat because he was "legally prepared" to defend himself.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, there was also a time Ali Baba appeared on a Freedom FM radio programme and discussed the activities of the filmmakers *vis-à-vis* their rejection by the Islamists. During the programme, he supported the filmmakers and repeated what Afakallah previously mentioned that film practitioners do the same work as 'ulamā' and imams.<sup>7</sup> Like Afakallah, some Islamists scolded and threatened to deal with him.

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<sup>4</sup> See the Associated Press (AP). 3 January 1995. "Tension High After Muslims Accused of Beheading Christian." (NEXIS); *The Herald* [Glasgow]. 4 January 1995. "Kano Quelled After Beheading." (NEXIS)

<sup>5</sup> I obtained the recorded program from the radio station and discussed it with the anchor, Salisu Baffayo.

<sup>6</sup> Afakallah, Ismaila. Interview with the author

<sup>7</sup> I obtained the recorded programme from Freedom FM radio.

Each of those incidences added to the existing tension in society and increased the likelihood of physical violence as both antagonising actors and their supporters remained resolute to their interests. This, however, happens alongside other socio-political and cultural factors that had bred thousands of miscreants out there waiting for any form of religious or political validation of violence from religious and political leaders to start attacking others and looting properties either in the name of religion or politics or both which often pair well in the region.

## **2. Sharia Reintroduction, Intolerance and Renewal of Ideological Antagonism through Kannywood**

Sharia reintroduction in northern Nigeria in the year 2000 opened a new page in the intra-faith crisis between Islamists and filmmakers. The initial attempt by the Islamists was geared toward stopping the films completely in its hub — Kano state. That proved impossible for reasons connected to the globalisation and technological sophistication of the world, as well as legal pluralism and diversity of religious beliefs and ideologies in the country. Thus, the first Sharia administration in Kano adopted a specific religious censorship by establishing Kano State Censorship Board (KSCB) and Kano State Hisba Board (KSHB) to control the activities of the local filmmakers in line with Sharia law. The law that established them stated that they should be headed by prominent religious scholars (*'ulamā'*) appointed by the governor. This development empowered the Islamists with political wherewithal to strengthen their resistance against the Kannywood video industry.

When Kannywood started, criticism came from all Islamists irrespective of their ideological and theological differences. Their reaction was unanimous because, as mentioned earlier, they have a common aim of resisting the socio-cultural changes promoted through the Kannywood films. Despite this common aim, the voices of Islamists with a Salafi background represented by Shaykh Jafar Adam, Muhammad bin Uthman, Aminudden Abubakar, and Abdallah Gadon-Kaya are louder through sermons. As such, the Salafists views are more articulated than that of their Sufi counterparts and thus the former formed dominant religious views about the activities of the Kannywood filmmakers. Moreover, the Salafists dominate the new censorship agencies established in the state and set the new Sharia rules controlling Kannywood based on their religious worldviews. This twist of events agitated the Sufis, and they became apprehensive that the common religious struggle was turning against them. Their fear became prominent when a Salafi head of KSCB, Ustaz Abubakar Rabo, entirely banned songs and dances among other things in the Kannywood movies. The Sufis viewed it as not only an attempt to control the filmmakers whom they both opposed, but by extension targeting their Sufi values as songs and dances, which are part of their rituals. On realising this, the Sufi *'ulamā'* repositioned themselves and started to reject Salafist dominance through Sharia censorship boards.

As Larkin (2009) noted, Salafism, also known as *Yan-Izala*, developed in northern Nigeria on the altar of the modern media technologies, particularly, radio, television and recorded cassettes. It spread across the region in the early 1960s *via* radio broadcast and recorded cassette, at the time Sufi *'ulamā'* rejected those new technologies for religious usage. At that time, several cases of violent attacks against the opposing religious groups including the media houses that supported them were reported (Umar 1993; Kane 1994; Larkin 2009; Ben Amara 2013). Therefore, after having firmly established themselves through popular (electronic) media, the Salafists knew the danger the local films may



portray if allowed unchecked in changing people's views as initiated by the Kannywood filmmakers. Thus, they became very active in sanctioning it in accordance with their creed.

With this fear in mind and by observing the way things unfold in the Sharia reimplementation, the Sufis suddenly started to take an unusual opposite stance. They started campaigning that film is originally Islamic as opposed to the initial collective view about Kannywood films that later became a dominant Salafi view. Some of them started preaching that filmmaking is even more Islamic than western *cum* modern culture and must be accepted by the northern Nigeria Sharia implementers. Sufi '*ulamā*' like Shaykh Dr. Yusuf Ali and Bazallah Nasiru Kabara espouse this view. They wanted to avoid the mistake they made in the 1960s and 1970s during which they rejected the new media as well as the need to tackle their rivals. This informed their newfound re-interpretation of the activities of the Kannywood filmmakers. They also viewed Kannywood as a lesser threat to their Sufi ideology than the growing Salafism and its dominance *via* media. This development led to a sharp division among the two in defining the new movie industry in accordance with their interests within the Sharia context, leading to a tense situation. Since KSCB and KSHB became instrumental in effecting whatever views the Islamists held in the context of their religious interests on Kannywood, different groups compete for their leadership. For example, when a Sufi Shaykh Bazallah, replaced Rabo as the head of KSCB, he undermined the Salafi beliefs instituted by his predecessor and replaced them with his own. Thus, the religious conflicts which were hitherto limited to filmmakers and Islamists, developed among the latter. They competed regarding whose view should be used to control the activities of the filmmakers. A development which led to the emergence of alternation of censorship implementation was based on the two polarised ideologies of Sufi-Salafi Sunni groups, tensions between the '*ulamā*' and their followers across the two divides.

Henceforth, the two-major opposing Sunni groups influence Kannywood movies and its Sharia law. For example, between 2009 and 2011 when Ustaz Rabo, a Salafi cleric, was heading KSCB, some people reproduced or rather translated a foreign film about Prophet Yusuf from its original Arabic to the Hausa language. The film became very popular among locals. Ustaz Rabo banned the film based on his theological view that it is wrong to represent any of Allah's prophets in a film. He ordered the confiscation of all its copies in circulation and arrested any person who continued to sell or patronise it. His reasons were rejected by Sufi '*ulamā*' not because of the economic violence against the filmmakers but because of ideological differences as articulated by Shaykh Qaribullah Nasiru Kabara:

To tell you the truth, the Censorship Board used religion as a pretext to ban that film. They use the excuse of representing Prophet Yusuf to deceive ignorant people. The truth of the matter is that, from where was that movie from? It was from Iran, and people in Kano Censorship Board have their ideology from Saudi Arabia; and Saudi Arabia is determined to execute a jihad, no, we should not call it jihad; Saudi Arabia is waging *yaki* [unholy war] against Iran and anything related to Iran in the whole world. That was their motivation to ban the film. It comes from Iran and people accepted it here because of its high quality, and compliance with the sharia. You will find it [the film] at that time in every household. I assured you, had it [the film] come from Saudi Arabia, nobody would utter a word against it. Therefore, there is a problem. KSCB need to enhance their

vision and open their chest [mind] to see beyond their short vision. If they could not, we hope one day we will have people there who will do the right thing.<sup>8</sup>

The above highlights the growing intolerance among the diverse religious interest groups in the media context. The Salafi head of KSCB uses the board to articulate his intolerance to others' religious views. Thereafter, the Sufis strived and took over the leadership of KSCB with the change of government in 2011 in the state. This renewed a historic clash of interests in the long-standing rivalry between the Nigerian Sufi, Salafi, and Shia Muslims.

Another example is the case of a Kannywood movie, *Ashabul-kahfi*, produced by Aminu Saira. He based his movie on a Qur'anic anecdote about some people and their dog that fled a polytheist and wicked king and sought refuge in a cave. Thus, Saira produced his movie based on his personal imagination of space and people that occupied it, and of course the imagination of some 'ulamā' that influences his Islamic beliefs and thinking. He symbolised pious people in his movie with a beard. He censored his movie with Kano KSCB during the tenure of Ustaz Rabo who is a Salafi. Shaykh Bazallah, a Sufi Shaykh and the successor of Ustaz Rabo, revisited the status of the *Ashabul-kahfi* movie alleging that it promotes Salafism and denigrates Sufism. He attempted to ban it the same way his predecessor banned Prophet Yusuf's film. He based his allegation on the view that there is no version of the *Ashabul-kahfi* parables that described them as wearing a beard. He accused the producers and those that censor it of promoting Salafism which he described as an "alien religion imposed upon northern Nigerian Sufi Muslim" and which they must resist.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, this placed the filmmakers at an *impasse*. They are caught at a crossroads of local movie production, which initially challenges some instituted religious values and the divergent interests and power struggle between the Islamists. With this, the latter compromises the filmmakers by imposing their respective ideologies on them. They tend to become followers of either of the dominant ideologies not because they are convinced about them but, to save their own interests of making films. Yet they continue to pay the price of the clash between the Islamists from Sufi and Salafi camps, depending on the ideology of the gatekeeper. In other words, while the initial Islamists resistance against the filmmakers continues to run in the background, the latter also become victims of the ideological differences of the former as they fight each other through the leadership of the Censorship Board. The Islamists force the filmmakers to cross-carpet between religious views, depending on who controls the Censorship Board, the latter also stands the risk of having their already produced and officially licensed films revoked because of change of leadership at the Censorship Board, which also means a change of rules and policies. Thus, the filmmakers suffer multiple layers of structural violence because informed by stakes of some religious actors in society and the opportunity provided by religion (Sharia reimplementation) to achieve that.

### **3. Socio-economic and Political Violence: Un-employment, Destruction of Properties, Imprisonment and Persecution**

Kannywood started as an entirely informal sector providing direct and indirect employment opportunities for over a million Muslim youth in northern Nigeria<sup>10</sup> (also

<sup>8</sup> Shaykh Qasiwini, Interview with Author, Kano, Nov. 24, 2014

<sup>9</sup> Shaykh Bazallah, Interview with Author, Kano, Dec. 3, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Abdul-Aziz Ezet, Interview with Author, February 19, 2017, Kano, Nigeria.

see Fagge 2004; Jibril 2004; Ahmad 2004; Sheme 2010). According to Fagge (2004), it is the largest employment provider in northern Nigeria after *Achaba* (Motorcycle Taxi), which was also banned by the Sharia state, for religious and security reasons (see Adamu 2008). Many of the Kannywood employees I interviewed mentioned ‘employment’ as the primary reason for joining the industry before they later discovered some secondary and tertiary reasons. Thus, Kannywood became a leading direct and indirect employment provider for those youths whom the formal economic sector could not cater for.

When the Islamists resistance against Kannywood started, the latter contextually focused on protecting their religious views over the livelihood of those involved. Although most of the Islamists are aware that their actions would affect the livelihood of many youths, the former viewed that religious values must not be sacrificed for employment reasons.<sup>11</sup> Thus, filmmakers primarily struggled to save their means of livelihood and the investment they made in the thriving local entertainment industry.<sup>12</sup> However, due to the dominant and historic role of religion in northern Nigeria, the Islamists have more advantages over other socio-cultural groups including filmmakers. The religious capital (Bourdieu 2011) they possess, together with the ‘mediatic power of pulpit’ through which they influence the public, helped them to have a full grip on the political system of the region, which enables them to strengthen their resistance against Kannywood industry.



*Street vendors in Kano selling Kannywood Movies. Photos taken by author*

Even though it is a normative responsibility of any state to provide jobs to its citizens, many Kannywood filmmakers lost their jobs because of the activities of KSCB and KSHB, who confiscated and destroyed some of the films they produced. This cost the filmmakers and marketers huge amounts of money and jobs lost. For example, KSCB seized and destroyed whole copies of *Bakar Ashana* produced by Aminu Mai-lalle.

<sup>11</sup> Daurawa, Aminu; Kabara, Bazallah Nasiru, Abu Abdurrahman, Abubakar Interviews November, December 2014 and June 2015, Kano and Katsina, Nigeria. See also Adamu (2008) on Gender, *bisba*, and enforcement of morality in Northern Nigeria.

<sup>12</sup> Mai-lalle, Aminu; 3SP, Abubakar; Iyan-Tama, Hamisu interviews November 2014, September 2015, Kano and Jos, Nigeria.

Similarly, Hamisu Iyan-tama's film, *Tsintsija*, was not only banned after production but the producer was jailed for two years.<sup>13</sup>

Other cases of imprisonment of Kannywood filmmakers on a religious basis are that of Rabilu Musa Ibro, and Adamu Zongo. Many of the filmmakers who have suffered both socio-economic and physical violence viewed this as a deliberate attempt by the Islamists to silence their voices regarding social changes. One could understand this when Mai-lalle mentioned, "...I invest my life-saving income in producing my movie but they [Islamists] frustrated my efforts. It is a deliberate attempt to silence us but, I want to assure them that whether they like it or not we must keep producing films ... we will fight for our rights and freedom by all means"<sup>14</sup>. Some of them became so frustrated and were now possible recruits for any interest group capable of liberating them or even setting up their own liberation movements.

Amidst their sufferings, some of the filmmakers resorted to using religious songs to express their feelings. An example of this is when Aminu Ladan Ala led seven other singers to compose a song titled *basbunallahu wani imimal wakilu*—a phrase that means "Allah is sufficient for us; He is the best disposer of affairs [for us]". This prayer is usually invoked when one is in hardship and helpless. Ala and his colleagues called the song *al-qunut* (meaning a special prayer). They invoke Allah to send all sorts of calamities to their persecutors in the name of religion. The song landed them in prison. Police, under the instruction of Ustaz Rabo, arrested Ala in the late evening inside a bakery. He was tried and jailed at a special tribunal in the same night.<sup>15</sup>

The public, on the other hand, split into two. While some people are convinced through sermons that the holy war against Kannywood by the Islamists is for their own good, and even started to dislike the filmmakers, others, especially keen audiences of the movies, do not quite share the indignation. This is evident in the way some of the filmmakers were declared anti-Islam by the Islamist such as Rabilu Musa Dan Ibro, Adamu Zango, and Hamisu Iyan-tama became unexpected champions among young people. They display on their vehicles, particularly commercial buses, taxis, and motorcycles, as well as personal shops and kiosks, stickers bearing pictures of their preferred Kannywood stars. Moreover, according to many film marketers, banned Kannywood movies became bestsellers. The audiences prefer them because they want to show their solidarity to the 'persecuted' filmmakers. This dragged the film marketers into the circle as KSCB arrested and imprisoned many of them such as Naziru Mallam-kato, Sukairaju, and Madobi on the account that they were selling local movies not approved by the Sharia boards.<sup>16</sup>

#### **4. Conversion Films and Reproduction of Intolerance Through Manipulated Movies**

As McLuhan and Fiore (1967) coined that media is the message, cinema does not just communicate the message but influences the reception of the message (Hoover 1997a; 1997b; Hjavard 2008; Mazzarella 2004; 2009; Gordon 2015). The stance of Islamists on the Kannywood movies through the Sharia institutions led to its partial Islamisation as some filmmakers succumb to the pressure and interests of the Islamists. They produce

<sup>13</sup> Iyan-Tama, interview with Author, November 18, 2014, Kano, Nigeria

<sup>14</sup> Mai-lalle, Aminu interview with Author, November 25, 2014, Kano, Nigeria.

<sup>15</sup> Ala, Aminu interview with Author, November 3, 2014, Kano, Nigeria.

<sup>16</sup> Mallam-kato, Naziru interview with Author, May 9, 2015 Kano, Nigeria.

films to satisfy the interests of their censors. This reignites and inculcates intolerance through (mis)interpretation of texts to suit multiple and conflicting individuals and group interests. Krings (2005:1) noted that since the Sharia reintroduction in 2000 and sequel to the activities of some Islamists in the KSCB, Kannywood producers, took up the challenge and responded by inserting religious issues into their narratives, and by adding a new feature genre focusing on conversion to Islam. This genre is characterised by violent Muslim-pagan encounters, usually set in a mythical past, culminating in the conversion of the pagans”. He subsequently observed that several Kannywood movies depict such stories about conversion to Islam, “to give a religious flair to their products, a flair that resonates with the permeation of public culture with fundamentalist Islam” (2008:1).

In addition to this, intra-faith disputes between the Islamists reared its head by contesting how such movies should visually depict conversion to Islam. There is disagreement on whose ideology should the interpretation of such conversion films promote as observed earlier in *Ashabul-kahfi* (directed by Aminu Saira). Even though it was about conversion, Shaykh Bazallah accused the producer of promoting a Salafi agenda by depicting the Muslim warriors and heroes as Salafists with a beard.

While this happens, all the Islamists and Kannywood producers interviewed have agreed on the efficacy of Kannywood films (irrespective of whether it is religious or secular) in changing people’s behaviour, and thus the need to control it. In this regard, imposing certain religious beliefs in the films and aiding its propagation among millions of audiences in the region and beyond reproduce people with such perspectives premised on extremism and intolerance, which are the major causes of religious violence.

### Conclusion

After establishing a nexus between religion, media and violence, the paper discussed roles played by various actors through Kannywood movies in mediating and mediatizing religious ideas, experiences, and other socio-cultural issues. It analysed the Kannywood movie phenomenon within the context of a “structural” dimension of violence (Galtung 1990). It showed how people were using indigenous movies to contest Islamists’ hegemony and how the former subdued the latter through religious censorship that attracted consequences as fines, jail terms, and other forms of violence (real and symbolic). Similarly, it showed how the same Kannywood phenomenon was used to reignite an age-old interfaith rivalry between Sufi and Salafi Muslims. Members of those groups, who are the censors, use censorship for their respective interests. More importantly, the paper showed how the Islamists, through the trend, compromised the filmmakers to make ‘acceptable’ religiously inspired movies to appease one of the rival groups in charge of gatekeeping and how that generates more tensions that are religious in nature. Hence, we see various interest groups and actors jostling to bring down one’s opponents through manipulation of power and opportunity provided by a state structure based on religion. Popular video culture (Kannywood) is analysed as an avenue for promoting and imposing ideological views and perspectives to suit individual and groups’ religious interests, a situation that caused disrespect, maltreatment, and denigration of fellows, as well as creating an environment ripe for violent reactions from the perceived oppressed. This was illustrated in the case of Sufi against Salafi, the Islamists among themselves, and between Islamists and filmmakers. We also see another aspect of

violence as an act of aggression (as one against another that resists)—a turbulent state resulting in injuries and the destruction of property belonging to the filmmakers.

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