Islam and Visual Culture: Sharia Implementation and Cinema as Visual Management in Nigeria

Musa Ibrahim

Abstract: Human experience is more visual and visualized than ever before. This has been obvious in Africa since the 1990s, when democratization, media liberalization, proliferation of small technology, and religious reform movements introduced new ways of meaning-making. Ibrahim's ethnographic research shows how sharia implementation and cinema as cultural production in northern Nigeria are embedded within the implicit and explicit visual regime of influencing what and how people see, think, and perform. The strategic replacement of cinemas with religious or other "neutral" objects is a visual regime that shifts people's vision or encounter from one means of cultural production to another.

Résumé: l'expérience humaine est plus visuelle et visualisée que jamais. Cela est évident en Afrique depuis les années 1990, lorsque la démocratisation, la libéralisation des médias, la prolifération de petites technologies et les mouvements de réforme religieuse ont introduit de nouvelles recherches de la signification. Les recherches ethnographiques d'Ibrahim montrent comment la mise en œuvre de la Sharia [Loi Islamique] et du cinéma en tant que production culturelle dans le nord du Nigeria sont intégrés dans le régime visuel implicite et explicite et influencent comment le peuple perçoit, pense et accomplit. Le remplacement stratégique des cinémas par des objets religieux ou « neutres » est une culture visuelle qui déplace la perception ou la rencontre du public d'une forme de production culturelle à une autre.

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Resumo: A experiência humana é hoje mais visual e visualizada do que nunca. Em África, isto é evidente desde a década de 1990, quando a democratização, a liberalização dos *media*, a proliferação da tecnologia entre consumidores e os movimentos de reforma religiosa introduziram novas formas de criação de significados. A investigação etnográfica de Ibrahim demonstra que, no norte da Nigéria, a implementação da *sharia* e o cinema enquanto produção cultural estão implicados no regime visual explícito e implícito que influencia aquilo que as pessoas veem, pensam e fazem, e o modo como isso acontece. A substituição estratégica das salas de cinema por alternativas religiosas ou "neutras" corresponde a um regime visual que transfere a visão ou o encontro das pessoas de um meio de produção cultural para outro.

Keywords: Islam; visual culture; sharia; cinema; Nigeria

Introduction

Nura Akilu was about to start premiering his film *Auta* inside one of the university's theaters when noise from outside drew the attention of people seated before the screen. They rushed outside to find out what was happening. "I saw many people shouting *Allahu Akbar!* (Allah is the Greatest!) in protest of the film I wanted to premiere," said Akilu, who is a lecturer at the Usmanu Danfodiyo University and the film's producer. "The protesters, who were mostly members of the Muslim Student Society of Nigeria (MSSN) alleged that we were breaching 'sharia' being implemented in the state."[1] Initially, Akilu ignored the protesters' demands and insisted that he had the right to show his film. Aside from being a member of the university community, Akilu said he had followed due process by obtaining approval for his film premiere. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University had watched the film and found its content suitable for exhibition on campus before permitting it to be shown. However, the protestors were so insistent that the university authorities immediately intervened and prevailed upon Akilu to cancel the premiere.

According to Akilu, there were two reasons for his choice to premiere *Auta* at one of the university's theaters. First, he considered the university "as a liberal place and its community more enlightened" to recognize his effort of tackling some societal problems through filmmaking. Second, he had no choice as there was no other cinema in the entire city of Sokoto. Akilu attributes this "terrible experience" to the desperation of some religious leaders and "zealots" who wanted to use sharia to take control of what and how people in Sokoto see, know, and perform or live their lives even on a university campus belonging to the federal government of Nigeria (Interview with Nura Akilu, Sokoto, May 29, 2015).

Sokoto is one of twelve states that have implemented sharia in northern Nigeria since 2000 (Ostien 2007). While each state has its particularities, some *ᶜulamāʾ* and Islamic activists (as sharia implementers and henceforth

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referred as ᶜulamāᵓ) in the state created institutions through which they implement religious policies that control activities of people, with the aim of ensuring a holistic image of a sharia compliant-society. The ᶜulamāᵓ implementing sharia strive to control how society is viewed from within and without by controlling information based on their views of Islamic norms. My definition of information here is expansive and comprises a broader communication pattern, including but not limited to what people see and hear as well as how they think and perform in their everyday lives. This process of sharia implementation (as visual management) regulates visual objects and public performances in ways that fit the description of a sharia-compliant society.

By theoretically situating sharia implementation within visual discourse, I analyze it as a tool of power relations between ᶜulamāᵓ seeking to reassert their dominance and ordinary people who challenge the status quo through cinema culture. This article builds on the relatively scant literature on sharia and media, including cinema and the local film industry in northern Nigeria, to provide an analysis of sharia implementation and (visual) media discourses. Data was collected through ethnographic fieldwork between 2014 and 2019, but this article covers a period of more than one and a half decades—from 2000 (when sharia was reintroduced in Sokoto) to the completion of my fieldwork in 2019. The article is organized into three sections, beginning with the theoretical framework, followed by the analysis of sharia implementation and cinema culture as a visual regime in Sokoto. The last section offers some concluding comments and suggestions for future inquiry.

Religion and visual culture

Visual culture is an emerging post-disciplinary academic endeavor that crosses the borders of traditional academic disciplines to interact with people's everyday lives. Here I adopt Nicholas Mirzoeff's definition of visual culture, namely, a fluid interpretive structure, centered on understanding the response to visual media of both individuals and groups in everyday life (1998:11). Thus, visual culture "is not just a part of [...] everyday life, it is [...] everyday life" (Mirzoeff 1998:1) and should be understood from the questions it asks and the issues it seeks to raise.

The reason most often advanced for the rise of the visual as an analytical framework is that human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before. Studies of human culture until recently privileged the spoken word as the highest form of intellectual practice and considered visual representations as secondary illustrations of ideas best conveyed in written form. However, the emergence of visual culture as a subject has contested this hegemony (Mirzoeff 1998). Developing what W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) has called "picture theory," Mirzoeff (1998) argues that Western philosophy and science now use a pictorial, rather than textual, model of the world, marking a significant challenge to the notion of the world as a written text that dominated so much intellectual discussion in the wake of such linguistics-based

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movements as structuralism and poststructuralism. In Mitchell's view, picture theory stems from

> the realization that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that 'visual experience' or 'visual literacy' might not be fully explicable in the model of textuality. (Mitchell 1994:16)

Visualizing, as Mirzoeff (1998:7) cautions, does not replace linguistic discourse but renders it more comprehensible, quicker, and more effective.

Yet the visual is not simply the medium of information and mass culture; it also offers a sensual immediacy that cannot be rivaled by print media: in some respects, this is the very element that makes visual imagery of all kinds distinct from texts (Mirzoeff 1998:9). Mirzoeff further observes that the gap between the wealth of visual experience in contemporary culture and the ability to analyze that observation marks both the opportunity and the need for visual culture as a field of study. He contends that while those already working on or with visual media might find such observations rather patronizing, they are a measure of the extent to which even literary studies have been forced to conclude that the world-as-a-text has been challenged by the world-as-a-picture (1998:5). Despite this, such worldly pictures cannot be purely visual, but by the same token, the visual disrupts and challenges any attempt to define culture in purely linguistic terms. W. J. T. Mitchell (2005:395) underscores this intricacy by stressing the intertwined nature of various media and asserting that "all media are, from the standpoint of sensory modality, 'mixed media'."

We should recognize that visual culture is used in a far more interactive sense, concentrating on its determining role in the wider culture to which it belongs. It highlights those moments where the visual is contested, debated, and transformed as a constantly challenging place of social interaction and definition in terms of class, gender, sexual, and racialized identities (Mirzoeff 1998:6).

Moving into the subfield of religion and visual culture, David Morgan proposes that visual culture helps capture complex religious phenomena by investigating how the visual operation of image "configures a discrete relation among viewer, image, and what the image represents" (Morgan 2005:5). Each configuration carries particular assumptions about what is visible, the conditions under which the visible is visible, the rules governing visibility and the credibility of images, and what power an image may assert over those who see it. In this context, visible images mediate the visual encounter with religion. In other words, what is made visible shapes the experience and meaning of what people see and "the violent removal from sight shifts vision to other objects"; also, religious actors use (in)visibility to mediate visual encounters with religion (Morgan 2005:6).

Visual practice thus constitutes "the primary datum alongside images themselves and that the two, together, insofar as religion happens visually,

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constitute the visual medium of belief. Belief is not a proposition or a claim or an act of will prior to what people see or do as believers" (Morgan 2005:6). Analyzing visual culture from a religious perspective allows us to examine how things that are visual become crucial elements of religious experience and how the (in)visibility of certain images is deployed in power relations. We could see this in the work of Lila Abu-Lughod (1995) on Egyptian movie stars. A visual lens conveys how the decision of some female film and stage stars in Egypt to abandon their careers and adopt the *hijab* head covering is a visible marker of religious experience promoted by Egyptian Islamists.

Another striking feature of the new visual culture is the visualization of things that are not in themselves visual. In other words, visual culture does not depend on pictures but on this modern tendency to picture or visualize the existence of even the invisible (Mirzoeff 1998). It is in this context Birgit Meyer approaches the study of multi-media phenomena that mobilize the full sensorium. She argues that "forms of visual culture are a prime medium of religion, and studying them offers deep insight into [the] genesis of worlds of lived experience" (2015:333).

It is within this framework that this essay analyzes sharia and cinema in Nigeria, in their relation to all aspects of human life, from the visual culture perspective. The question that preoccupies me is how contemporary sharia implementation and cinema, as tools of cultural production in Sokoto, are embedded within the Muslim visual discourse.[2] While analyzing cinema and sharia as cultural production, I view the contemporary sharia implementation in Sokoto as a visual regime of acceptable and unacceptable (physical and mental) images, one characterized by power relations between the pro-sharia ᶜulamāᵓ and people (as sharia subjects). The *muḥtasib* (sharia police), cinema proprietors, and filmmakers configure the cultural space in which what is regarded as "Islamic" and/or its "opposite" are performed, observed, allowed, and disallowed.

One caveat is important. The analysis of sharia herein is limited to *muᶜāmalāt* (the public visibility of sharia), which is an essential aspect of sharia implementation. I examine controlling muᶜāmalāt as influencing the visibility of what is Islamic and un-Islamic in society. In this sense, I analyze the muhtasib's actions of removing certain things from sight and shifting people's vision to other objects as shaping their encounter with the religious. This becomes possible because "the rules outlining proper behavior are learned, and therefore, they change over time along with the style, prestige, appeal, and authority of images" (Morgan 2005:4). Thus, I focus on what is made visible and on who sees what in analyzing how seeing, knowing, and power are interrelated (Hooper-Greenhill 2000).

To understand "the structure and operation of vision as a religious act, to *see* seeing, as it were," Morgan (2005:6) suggested that "we must look for its visibility in a number of places." As I demonstrate, the activities of cinema proprietors, cinemagoers, and local filmmakers tend to explicitly and implicitly create a visual culture that opposes an image of Islamic society held by some ᶜulamāᵓ. The presence of cinema and its cultural effects are

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unfavorable to the vision of Islamic society sought after and promoted by Islamists. By strategically or forcefully replacing cinemas with religious or other "neutral" institutions, as well as by shifting the vision of the public to the increasing presence of religious artefacts, such as metal symbols carrying religious messages, Sokoto and other sharia states have enacted a visual regime that alters the public's visual encounter with religion. Before considering sharia as a form of visual control, I first provide a brief overview of the literature on Islam and cinema culture in northern Nigeria.

Islam, cinema, and video phenomena in Nigeria

Scholars have greatly enriched our understanding of the conflicts between religion, cinema, and video films. Brian Larkin (1999) explored how ᶜulamāᵓ rejected cinema from the onset of colonial rule, based on the context of resistance to colonialism. After the fall of the Sokoto Caliphate and Bornu empire (contemporary northern Nigeria) to British imperial forces, ᶜulamāᵓ generally opposed anything associated with the colonial occupiers. This struggle was part of their effort to culturally resist the British invasion and retained their influence as religious leaders in the region (Larkin 1999, 2002). Visual discourse between the ᶜulamāᵓ, cinema proprietors/filmmakers and Muslim public remains largely overlooked, however.

Cultural resistance by the ᶜulamāᵓ became ethnically and religiously institutionalized when the building of cinema-halls was mapped onto the moral geography of Kano City. On the one hand, the old Kano city (*birni*), surrounded by a mud wall built from 1095–1134 for defense against external aggression, was used for conserving Islamic values, such as maintaining female seclusion and forbidding prostitution and the sale of alcohol. On the other hand, the European township (Nasarawa) and New Town (Sabon Gari), the area where the young migrants from the Christian south were arriving in numbers, stand as the moral antithesis to birni. In line with this segregation, the first cinema in Kano and northern Nigeria was built in Sabon Gari, which was and is an area of ill-repute in the eyes of native Muslims (Larkin 1998). Thus,

> Cinema in Kano quickly established a reputation as an illicit, immoral arena which respectable people should avoid. Cinema-going was regarded as *iskanci* (dissoluteness) and was (and is) associated by many Hausa with the immoral cultural complex known as *bariki*: which includes beer parlours, dance halls, certain hotels, and male and female prostitution. The mixed-sex nature of cinema theatres meant that they were also socially unacceptable for most Hausa women. Those who did attend were seen as *karuwai* (prostitutes), and their presence meant that pleasure and desire were to be found both on and off the screen, the erotic pleasures of one context feeding off the other. (Larkin 1998:55)

This experience prompted the colonial government to create a so-called didactic cinema, which it used in promoting its agenda in northern Nigeria.

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This cinema was accepted by some religious leaders because of its "educative" content and exhibited on the order of the emirs (Larkin 1998). Conventional cinema as we know it today only began in Sokoto after independence. Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah (2004:55) notes that some Sokoto ᶜulamāᵓ viewed cinemas and their surroundings as hangouts for every imaginable undesirable, from drug addicts and drunks to petty crooks and criminals. To this day cinemas are referred to as *gidajen hasaba*, Hausa for "hazardous houses."

Common to Larkin (2004) and Na'Allah (2004) is the idea that cinema has become a means of cultural production, albeit in opposition to the northern Nigerian religiously established values. Accordingly, this religious opposition to cinema in Hausa society extended into the era of Hausa video film production by Hausa people (referred to as Kannywood) from the early 1990s. The emergence of Kannywood cinema as a local visual entertainment coincided with another wave of Islamic renewal, which reached its peak in 2000 when many states in northern Nigeria adopted sharia as their legal codes (Ostein 2007; Kendhammer 2013). As Abdallah U. Adamu (2010:63) puts it, Kannywood cinema became "a site of a major confrontation between global culture (emanating from both Hollywood and Bollywood) and equally 'modern' assertion of values driving from Islam and local culture." While the moral discourse and the (in)compatibility of Islam and cinema continued between ᶜulamāᵓ, cinema proprietors, and Kannywood filmmakers, the vigor with which the ᶜulamāᵓ oppose Kannywood surpassed their earlier opposition to foreign films. This is because the filmmaking phenomenon subsequently becomes a powerful and influential mode of social interpretation and construction, which the ᶜulamāᵓ vehemently rebuked (Ibrahim 2018). The Kano State government then established a censorship board to reduce what the ᶜulamāᵓ see as offensive to Hausa Islamic culture (Adamu 2010; Ibrahim 2013; McCain 2013; Ibrahim 2017). According to Adamu (2010), the ᶜulamāᵓ oppose Kannywood because of the camera's invasion and visualization of Hausa Muslim women's intimacy or privacy, which ᶜulamāᵓ seek to protect.

Against this professed fear of cultural adulteration, Carmen McCain (2013) argues that the main reasons for ᶜulamāᵓ censorship are a set of contradictory impulses in the sharia censorship of Kannywood films in Kano. McCain contends that the conflict between the Kano Censorship Board and Kannywood filmmakers articulates the difference between a "sacred" essentialist viewpoint and a negotiable "secular" process-oriented proposition of identity. Both censors and filmmakers frequently express devotion to promoting Islam and "passing a message" through films. Both sides also often express support for the ideals of sharia values. While the censorship board represented by ᶜulamāᵓ "focuses more on protecting, guarding and controlling the masses and their culture, [the] filmmakers and their allies seek to expose hypocrisy and demonstrate the consequences of excesses" (McCain 2013:234).

Tensions between media globalization and Hausa Muslim culture reveal the conflict created in the process of protecting, guarding, and controlling the masses. This study contributes to these debates by paying attention to the

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role of the visual in cultural studies. Furthermore, most of the studies previously conducted tend to focus on Kano because it is not only the biggest cosmopolitan city in northern Nigeria but also the center of religion and politics. As such, they tend to omit circumstances elsewhere undergoing similar cultural reforms under different socio-economic and political contexts. My research reveals the differences between Kano, as studied by other researchers, and Sokoto. For instance, whereas Larkin (1998, 1999, 2004), Adamu (2010), and McCain (2013) have shown that cinema and film culture in Kano have endured or survived different phases of Islamic reforms, the data herein demonstrates that the story is different in Sokoto, where cinema is effectively extinct. In the following analysis, ᶜulamāᵓ/muḥtasib and filmmakers/cinema proprietors are placed on the same analytical level to underscore how sharia and cinema, as means of cultural production, are embedded within the implicit and explicit visual regime through which some people seek to influence others. My approach highlights the similarities in approaches as well as the synergy between religious organizations in the application of sharia to cinematic and filmic culture in different cities in northern Nigeria.

Sharia implementation and cinema in Sokoto as a visual regime

Sokoto is the capital of Sokoto State in present-day Nigeria, and it symbolically remains the capital of the defunct caliphate. The occupant of the throne of the Sultanate of Sokoto is viewed widely as the most important Muslim traditional authority figure in contemporary Nigeria. Following Nigeria's transition from military dictatorship to democratic government in 1999, twelve state governors in the northern part of the country adopted sharia as their legal system (Ostien 2007; Kendhammer 2013). Ten of the twelve governors introduced sharia largely due to political pressure from ᶜulamāᵓ and Islamic activists in their states; among them was then-governor of Sokoto Attahiru Bafawara (Ostien 2007). Following this, ᶜulamāᵓ, who occupy the role of traditional religious authority, spearheaded sharia's implementation.

Sharia implementation is such a broad phenomenon that it cannot be defined and explained easily. It is so broad and fluid that it cuts across political, social, public, and private aspects of Muslims' lives at both corporeal and immaterial levels. However, one of the prevailing approaches to the political enforcement is the use of Quranic verses that enjoin Muslims to command what is right and forbid what is wrong. This instruction is mentioned on several occasions in the Holy Quran and hadith. Quran 3:104 reads:

> Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong: They are the ones to attain felicity.

Religious leaders and activists implement the above instruction as members of *ḥisba* organizations. Ḥisba is an Arabic word that simply means verification.

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In the sharia framework, the ḥisba is one of the sharia structures established to ensure observance or enforcement of principles. Although the notion of, or procedures of, deciding what is right or wrong among Muslims is contentious, societies implementing sharia create ḥisba institutions as a platform for doing just that (see Cook 2001; Mottahedeh & Stilt 2003; Baker 2008; Vidino 2013; Walker 2016). Based on my observation, while the enjoining aspect involves making sharia visible, the forbidding aspect is preventing the visibility of anything that contradicts Islamic principles in public space.

Based on this, Governor Bafarawa established the Sokoto State Ministry for Religious Affairs as a practical step toward sharia implementation. During the period of this study, Aminu Yahaya, who holds a doctoral degree in Islamic Studies, was the director of the Department of Sharia Implementation section in the Sokoto State Ministry for Religious Affairs. According to Dr. Yahaya, between 2000 (when the state government adopted sharia) and 2013, ḥisba in Sokoto ran as an independent Islamic organization with permission from his office. While the Independent Ḥisba continues, the state government created its own ḥisba organization in 2014. They ran concurrently until 2019, when the two ḥisba organizations merged into one.

Below, I discuss how desires for moral reorientation and visual restoration of "religious values," which muḥtasib (Arabic: a person carrying ḥisba duties/a Sharia Police) said are waning because of cinema culture and other visual practices, drive the sharia regime.

The Sokoto State Ḥisba Organizations and Visual Control

Malam Nuhu Muhammad Bello was popularly known as Malam Nuhu Ḥisba because he was not only a key figure in the Sokoto State sharia struggle but also the founder of Sokoto Independent Ḥisba. He mentioned that because of Governor Bafarawa's initial lukewarm attitude to implement the sharia in the state, he led a group of ᶜulamāᵓ who established the Sokoto Independent Ḥisba in 2003. Since then, he has been at the helm of sharia implementation, mainly coordinating and implementing ḥisba-related functions. In addition to pioneering the Independent Ḥisba, he led the establishment of the Ḥisba Association of Nigeria in 2012, which is an umbrella body that joins different ḥisba organizations across sharia states in Nigeria.[3]

According to Malam Nuhu, the aim of sharia implementation was "to restore the Muslim *umma* unto the right path." His detailed descriptions of both the "right path" and their activities as muḥtasib revolve around reasserting the presence of Islamic values in a public realm that is challenged by the presence of "un-Islamic" activities. The ᶜulamāᵓ in Sokoto lived with this challenge until the sharia declaration provided them with a platform with which to change the dynamic. In the sharia-age, some of the ᶜulamāᵓ (as muḥtasib) define their roles as moral police within the framework of enjoining good and forbidding wrong. To this end, one of their primary areas of focus was the perceived threats from the cinema culture. For instance,

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according to Malam Nuhu, who was speaking as the chairperson of the Sokoto Independent Ḥisba organization:

> We understand that cinemas and Hausa films and their related activities are not suitable for our living as Muslims. On several occasions, we wrote to the state government and complained about their immoral activities that influence our youths. We warned the government about the dangers of cinema if they are not stopped. (Interview, Nuhu Muhammad Bello, Sokoto, May 28, 2015)

Since the beginning of Sokoto's sharia implementation, the muḥtasib have committed to controlling what people see around them, what meaning they make of these visual artefacts, and how they perform in relation to what is available to their gaze. Part of this has involved eradicating visual practices and artefacts related to cinema. For example, before the contemporary sharia implementation, the city had two cinemas, which showed Western, Asian, and Nigerian films: the Sokoto Cinema located on Shehu Shagari Road, and the Northern Cinema located on Emir Yahaya Road. These cinemas, established in the decades following independence, had, according to the muḥtasib, transformed the cultural environs into an un-Islamic space because of their "immoral" propensities. Thus, they ensured that they were closed and replaced by religious symbols.

The establishment and extinction of Sokoto cinema is a visual discourse located between "zones of culture" and performed in practices of power and resistance (Bal 2003:19). When the wealthy Alhaji Garba Dikkon-Gande completed the building of the Sokoto Cinema between 1973 and 1975, the imams of the two biggest mosques in Sokoto—Shehu Usmanu Danfodiyo and Muhammadu Bello mosques—offered special prayers during its opening ceremony. This, according to my interlocutors, was at the instruction of the sultan at that time, Sir Abubakar III, who described the cinema building and business around them as a positive development.[4] The priority at that time was infrastructural development, which would comparatively place the state in a competitive position with other emerging Nigerian urban centers.

At the same time, visual discourses around cinema's physical spaces and film content had already instantiated an "evil" reputation among some conservative ᶜulamāᵓ in Kano, the biggest city in northern Nigeria, where the cinema had arrived much earlier. Larkin (1998) reports that a fire at the El-Duniya cinema in Kano in 1951, which killed 331 of 600 attendees, precipitated an attempt to assert the incompatibility of Islam and cinema through visual discourse. Some falsely ascribed the disaster to the alleged content of an American movie shown at the time, which they said contained the image of prophet Muhammad. Rumors circulated to the effect that, in addition to the casualties inside the cinema, government workers who assisted during the incident had fallen into madness. Moreover, after the ᶜulamāᵓ refused to perform funerals for the deceased because of their sin, prisoners from Kano prison, who were asked to bury the victims, could not eat

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food for days afterwards. The manners in which these stories spread necessitated the prevailing colonial government to officially counter it with sponsored counter-messages broadcasted on the local radio in four different languages.

Returning to Sokoto, the Sokoto Cinema, which was endorsed by the Islamic establishment, became not only a symbol of development and an entertainment hub but also a major cultural influence that stimulated other activities in the 1970s. Very much in line with Larkin's (2008) description of how cinema culture generates effects far beyond the immediate purpose for which it was created, commercial activities that pro-sharia described as illicit businesses developed quickly around the Sokoto Cinema building. Beer parlors, brothels, and other activities proliferated. Consequently, discourses around the cinema changed, giving rise to the phrase *gidajen hasaba* (Na-Allah 2004).

This cultural role and dynamic formed the basis for visual discourse around cinema in Sokoto just as sharia implementation began. Some staff of the Sokoto Cinema recalled that they had been running their business for decades without major challenges until the sharia struggles started.[5] They recalled an event that led to the final closing of the cinema. Sometime in the late 1990s, some pro-sharia ᶜulamāᵓ organized a preaching session in front of the cinema while a film screening was about to begin. The preachers started at around six in the evening, when the cinema attendees were arriving for a Friday night show, the most heavily patronized screening time. According to the schedules, Indian and Chinese movies were shown every Friday—a combination of movies the locals used to call "double." The show normally started at seven o'clock and ended between eleven and midnight, depending on film length.

The preachers, led by Shaykh Abubakar Jibril, the imam of Farfaru Jumu'ah Mosque and one of the foremost advocates of sharia implementation in Sokoto, directed their proselytization not specifically at the content of the movies shown on that day, but rather at general issues related to cinema culture and its incompatibility with Islam. The preaching highlighted what Mirzoeff (1998:6) describes as "those moments where the visual is contested, debated and transformed as a constantly challenging place of social interaction." Discursively, the criticism came from cinema's perceived challenges and cultural impact, including the physical and social transformations it caused. This echoes W. J. T. Mitchell's (2005:395) notion of "mixed media," insofar as he argues that "all media are, from the standpoint of sensory modality, 'mixed media'." The cinema constituted a visual antithesis of the Islamic society to which the preachers aspired, and cinema and its attendant cultural practices would have to cease for them to achieve their goal of actualizing sharia.

Furthermore, looking at the preaching as visual performance, its timing and space, it is easy to understand how ordinary Muslims, those who constituted the cinema-goers, workers, and business owners, were the targeted audience. These same people would later become the subject of sharia implementation through its visual regime. However, since implementation

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was still in a formative stage, the ᶜulamāᵓ did not violently interfere with the film screening. Unlike the aforementioned case of Akilu, the preachers did not prevent the cinemagoers from entering the hall, nor did they interrupt the film screening. Rather, they took the sharia versus cinema (visual) discourse, which has already gathered momentum among the pro-sharia ᶜulamāᵓ, to the very doorstep of sharia's perceived adversaries.

As the preaching was ongoing, some Sokoto Cinema employees alerted the owner, Alhaji Dikkon-Gande. He then exited the projection room to interact with the preachers and invited them inside the cinema hall to persuade them, from his perspective as a non- ᶜulamāᵓ, that his cinema business did not breach sharia—an effort that predictably failed. Instead, the ᶜulamāᵓ dissuaded Dikkon-Gande using the hisba discourse of enjoining right (where it is missing) and forbidding wrong (where it manifests). Shaykh Jibril and his colleagues did not merely ask Alhaji Dikkon-Gande to stop his cinema business because it contradicts sharia but enjoined him to use the building in a way that promotes the visuality of sharia. They convinced him that unless he stopped what he was doing, he would be punished with hellfire.

Alhaji Dikkon-Gande agreed to quit his cinema business. As an act of repentance, he told them that he would again perform *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) that same year. Two conflicting narratives exist about this dialogue. One contends that Dikkon-Gande promised that when he returned from Mecca, he would donate the cinema building to Shaykh Jibril to convert it into a Quranic school (madrasa). The other holds that Dikkon-Gande only informed the Shaykh in the presence of some of cinema workers that when he returned, he would personally convert it to something else, precisely what was never clarified. Based on this, people speculated that by "something else" he meant a purpose related to Islam such as a madrasa or a mosque.

However, as circumstance would have it, Alhaji Dikkon-Gande died in Medina, Saudi Arabia, while performing the pilgrimage. When Shaykh Jibril paid a condolence visit to his family, he informed them that Dikkon-Gande promised him (before he died) that he would convert the cinema to a madrasa. The confusion here was whether Dikkon-Gande intended to transfer the ownership of the cinema building to Shaykh Jibril for that purpose (the interpretation of the Shaykh) or he wanted to do it himself (the interpretation of some workers and family members). Whatever his intention, the heirs of Dikkon-Gande refused the claim of Jibril because, apart from the fact that there was no written agreement, the cinema was now the property of Dikkon-Gande's heirs, who continued the business. According to my interlocutors, what transpired between Shaykh Abubakar, the late Dikkon-Gande, and his family did not affect the Sokoto Cinema and other social life around it until the Sokoto State government declared sharia the state law in 2001.

At the beginning of the official proclamation of Sokoto as a sharia state, Jibril revisited the issue of converting Sokoto Cinema into a madrasa. Due to the mixture of excitement, and tension resulting from the sharia and cinema visual discourse, Dikkon-Gande's family decided to sell the cinema.

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Figure 1. The former Sokoto Cinema, remodeled and converted to Isa Mai Kwari Mosque during sharia reimplementation in Sokoto State. Photo by author, 2017.

According to some members of Dikkon-Gande's family, the ᶜulamāᵓ influenced the Sokoto State governor, Attahiru Bafarawa, to show his commitment to sharia implementation by purchasing the Cinema and converting its building for a religious purpose. In 2002, the governor approved the sum of thirty million naira (~USD250,000) for the purchase, after which it was to be converted to a mosque. The government remodeled the building, adding a minaret section to the existing structure, removing the seats inside the hall, and creating more entrances for the worshippers (see Figure 1). The state named the house of worship Isa Mai Kwari Mosque in memory of the last son born to Usman Dan Fodio, founder of the Sokoto Caliphate. The mosque enjoys equal status with other three big mosques in the metropolitan area, which are all under state government control.

Muhammadu Danmajema, who spent thirty years working for the cinema, became the new mosque's caretaker and was placed on the government payroll. The government's role in purchasing and converting the cinema into a mosque highlights the intricacy of how religion, infrastructure, and politics are interwoven by visuality. The cinema-turned-mosque function as a religious sublime (Mishra 2014) tied to seeing by politics. The sight of the mosque not only creates a feeling of representation of Islam but also visualizes what the government was doing in implementing the sharia. The latter comes with a political benefit, especially to populists in the eyes of some ᶜulamāᵓ and their followers.

The surroundings of the cinema-turned-mosque have also been significantly transformed. Describing what has changed eighteen years later, Danmajema, a former employee of Sokoto Cinema and current mosque caretaker, noted:

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Figure 2. Location of the demolished Northern Cinema, Sokoto. Photo by author, 2017.

> When this building was a cinema, it was surrounded by brothels and beer parlors in all directions. Now they are replaced by grocery stores, shops occupied by retailers of different commodities, Islamic bookshops and eateries. (Interview, Muhammadu Danmajema, Sokoto, April 19, 2019)

Similarly, within the same implementation period, the Northern Cinema, which was built between the mid- and late-1960s by a Lebanese man named Abdallah, ceased operations as a result of a similar visual discourse. Between 2007 and 2008, the Sokoto State government under Governor Aliyu Wammako purchased the Northern Cinema from Yusuf Kwara (the son of its founder). The building was initially converted into office spaces for the ruling political party (PDP), before being later demolished. The government began erecting, and then abandoned, a new structure on the land, the purpose of which was unclear to many of my interlocutors. As of April 2019, the location of the former Northern Cinema was fenced by corrugated iron (see Figure 2).

The closure of Sokoto Cinema and Northern Cinema ended the era of conventional cinema culture in Sokoto, signifying the success of a sharia regime, one in which ᶜulamāʾ control and influence what and how people see, think, and perform. These events informed Nura Akilu's decision to premiere his film inside a university theater, an attempt that ultimately failed due to the overt display of sharia enforcement.

In addition to repurposing cinemas into religious and secular buildings, a new visual regime ensued in Sokoto. Muḥtasib in both government and independent ḥisba organizations erected small signposts with Arabic inscriptions and sometimes with transliteration carrying expressions such as "lā ilāha illā llāh" (there is no deity but Allah), "Allahu Akbar" (Allah is the greatest),

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Figure 3. One of the visual displays with inscription *lā ilāha illā llāh* on the street of Sokoto. Photo by author, 2017.

and "hasbuna Allāhu wa ni^{c}amal wakīlu" (Sufficient for us is Allah, and [He is] the best Disposer of affairs). At the time of conducting this research, many three-to-four-feet-high religious signposts of this nature were visible throughout the city of Sokoto (see Figures 3 and 4).[6]

Following Mitchell's (2005) conceptualization, such religious images, from the standpoint of sensory modality, are also mixed media. The Arabic calligraphy and the strategic public locations do not merely characterize them as "purely visual" media that showcase Sokoto as a sharia state. They also demand the cultivation of certain forms of religious subjectivities. The texts generate a mixed media experience of seeing, reading, and performing. The act of seeing these symbols is followed by reciting the texts written on them as daily *azkar* (pl. of *zikr*, Arabic: remembrance of Allah) and *du ā* (prayer or

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Figure 4. A signpost with inscription hasbuna Allāhu wa ni^{c}amal wakīlu. Translated: Sufficient for us is Allah, and [He is] the best Disposer of affairs. Photo by author.

supplication). Such devotional acts and performances have a significant spiritual impact on the life of the Muslims at the center of the discourse.

This visual transformation from profane to sacred images and practices affects cultural experiences throughout Sokoto. People born at the turn of the millennium (at the onset of sharia implementation in 1999), those who are twenty years old or under at the time of writing, have never known, let alone experienced, conventional cinema. Indeed, the only thing that has resisted these transformations is the very name of the neighborhood, which has retained the name "Sokoto Cinema" eighteen years after the cinema's termination. However, since history is told in the language of the victor, the disappearance of Sokoto's cinemas is now narrated as a success story by the muḥtasib. The cultural experience of young people in the state is controlled and characterized by visuality of more "sacred" than "profane"

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images. This dynamic plays to the advantage of the ᶜulamāᵓ as cultural producers, because the dominance of sacred images symbolizes the power and authority of Islamic authorities, as they embodied and demanded the cultivation of certain forms of subjectivities towards those images. In this respect, sharia is a tool through which the ᶜulamāᵓ reassert their authority by means of visual control.

Politicians who invest public funds in this visual regime are significant beneficiaries of the visual discourse. For instance, one may well wonder what that impact would be if the money spent on religious metal signage were instead channelled into social reforms, such as *Almajirci/almajiranci* (Hausa: socio-cultural practices associated with the traditional Quranic education system, which is now intertwined with the street begging menace), which the Nigerian government has been struggling to transform for decades.[7] In this context, Almjiranci, like other religious features, visually functions as a religious sublime. While it is an eyesore and embarrassment to a small western-educated ᶜulamāᵓ elite, most ᶜulamāᵓ, especially those trained in the traditional system, are still supportive of it. Its persistence is an embodiment of their authority and resonates with the resistance to westernization of many ᶜulamāᵓ since colonialism. Thus, the presence of almajirai on the streets parallels mosques and religious signage, insofar as they both function as visual markers that reinforce a particular configuration of religious practice within a given cultural and historical setting. In other words, seeing almajirai, along with other religious symbols, represents "Islamicness" and portrays the antithesis of un-Islamic communities.

Visuality is always tied to the hidden transcripts of what we cannot see (Scott 1990). In this regard, despite the ᶜulamāᵓ class reasserting their influence through the visual regime, people continue to relate with cinema in diverse ways, especially in the wake of the proliferation of "small video technology" (Sreberny-Muhammadi & Muhammadi 1994) and the arrival of digital devices. Just as some have resorted to watching foreign films in the privacy of their own home, some local drama groups that previously performed in closed spaces have adopted new technologies to reach a broader audience within the framework of the emerging commercial Hausa video film industry called Kannywood (Adamu 2002; Adamu 2010; McCain 2013) which has its root in Kano. It is an industry that involves millions of people through its chain values (Ibrahim 2018). In Sokoto, the commercial Hausa video film industry is pioneered by people such as Buhari Alhaji Daga, popularly known as "Master Alko." Daga, his colleagues, and his students now record and distribute their performances on VCD and market them for home viewing.

The process of making video films creates scenarios similar to cinema culture and entails visual practices that contravene some sharia rules. For example, the physical movie-making space brings men and women into close proximity, which risks the wrath of the muḥtasib, who see such spaces as sites of promiscuity and sexual immorality that challenge sharia as visual management. In response to this, Sokoto's independent Ḥisba Organization began

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regulating the local video filmmaking business. In the absence of any formal government policy to support their actions, however, Malam Nuhu Hisba explained that muḥtasib surveil the activities of the local Sokoto film producers, especially the neighborhood called Rijiyar Dorawa, with their own resources (Interview, Sokoto, May 28, 2015).

In the 2010s, the independent Ḥisba collaborated with sympathetic individuals within government institutions to influence policies to control local film production. For example, Dr. Yahaya noted that Sokoto's state government established a Censorship Committee in the early 2010s to consider public complaints about the visual effects of local filmmaking on the Islamic culture. The Sokoto State Censorship Committee (SSCC), composed of representatives of different government institutions, has the commissioner of the Ministry of Social Welfare as its chairperson, the Director of Culture as a secretary, and representatives from the Ministry for Religious Affairs, State Security Service, Ministry of Justice, and Nigerian Police as members. This composition and practice emulate the sharia censorship practices of Kano. The legal framework authorizing the Kano State Censorship Board (KSCB) mandates that all Hausa-language films produced in the northern states be censored first by the KSCB before sale or distribution in Kano markets. Thus, in theory, films produced in Sokoto and other northern states are supposed to navigate two different censorship bodies—the national and Kano State censorship boards. Notwithstanding this regime, the decisions of some filmmakers, such as Sokoto-based Nura Akilu, to boycott both the KSCB and Kano markets because of their negative experiences, pose a significant challenge to the censors. These kinds of films produced outside Kano and uncensored by KSCB are brought into Kano by individual buyers. The same uncensored Hausa films are also covertly distributed by marketers in Kano as if they were illicit narcotics (see Ibrahim 2017, 2018).

In response to this challenge, and to consolidate its influence, the KSCB reached out to sharia organizations in other sharia states, encouraging the establishment of similar censorship structures. As a result, films produced in Sokoto may be censored by three different bodies, depending on where the producers want to sell their films. Jibril A.H.I is a film vendor of mainly locally-produced Hausa films at Sokoto Central Market. He mentioned that sometime between 2009 and 2010, he and his colleagues at the market were invited to a meeting at Giginya Hotel Sokoto. The organizers, whom he identified as Members of KSCB and officials of the Sokoto State Ministry for Religious Affairs, informed Sokoto-based filmmakers and marketers about the SSCC and its new regulations in the state. It is empowered to view and approve every film sold in Sokoto State.

Dr. Yahaya, representing the Department of Sharia Implementation in the SSCC, mentioned that he does not watch the films himself. He only relies on complaints brought to him by muḥtasib. While not providing any film titles, he generally described them as those reported to risk "spreading immorality, using obscene language, wearing or displaying un-Islamic dressing, exposing nudity, intermingling between opposite sex, teaching

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disobedience to elders and constituted authorities" (Interviews, Aminu Yahaya, Sokoto, May 28, 2015). All such films were in the form of video films viewed in homes. In this regard, Jibril A.H.I mentioned that the SSCC arrested some of his colleagues for selling films that violate their guidelines. Because of this, he always double-checks by requesting a copy of the censorship certificate for every film before accepting it from the local producers, to avoid being arrested himself.

The Sokoto Independent Ḥisba remained the main sharia enforcer until 2014, when Governor Wammako created a government ḥisba, the Sokoto State Ḥisba Commission (SSHC). This decision, according to Dr. Yahaya, was intended to create an all-inclusive state ḥisba organization with equal representations by various religious groups and entities. Dr. Yahaya explained that there were complaints that one particular religious group (which he did not mention by name, but based on my interaction with the Independent Ḥisba, I understood it to be Salafis) has dominated the Sokoto Independent Ḥisba.[8] This is likely because Salafis have dominated contemporary Islamic reform struggles in northern Nigeria since sharia implementation (see Loimeier 2003; Ben Amara 2011). One example of this rivalry could be seen in Kano state, where different governors could not avoid accusations of bias by one of the three dominant groups (*Izala/Salafiya*, *Tijaniya*, and *Qadiriya*) despite the governors' efforts to divide the leadership of the different sharia institutions among those groups. The history of competition and contestations between Salafi and Sufi groups over the supervision of sharia implementation provoked this innovation. The decision of the Sokoto government not to adopt the Independent Ḥisba was made primarily to avoid protests by rival religious groups. An all-inclusive state-sponsored ḥisba included representation from the following groups: the Sokoto Independent Ḥisba; *Jama'atu Nasrul Islam*; *Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'a wa Iqamatis Sunna*; *Fityanul Muslimun*; and *Munazzamatul Fityan*. While the Independent Ḥisba continues, the government has absorbed some of its members and recruited additional personnel to form a government ḥisba. By 2015, the SSHC comprised 250 muḥtasib (ḥisba personnel), who were paid monthly by the state (Interview, Aminu Yahaya, Sokoto, May 28, 2015).

On January 5, 2017, SSHC personnel raided a public performance described as "un-Islamic" and seized and publicly destroyed all musical instruments, together with other devices confiscated from other similar events across the state. It was later reported in a *DailyTrust* newspaper that the event was a "pre-wedding party" for the serving Governor Tambuwal's daughter (Auwal 2017). The public destruction of confiscated "un-Islamic" items is yet another form of visual discourse deployed by muḥtasib as a means of broadcasting their power and influence (see Adamu 2010; Krings 2015; Ibrahim 2018). Following this incident, the Commissioner for Religious Affairs at that time, Alhaji Mani Katami, announced the dissolution of the SSHC (the government ḥisba) by the state governor. He cited a leadership conflict among "three different ḥisba factions" as the motive for this action (Auwal 2017).

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For his part, the head of the SSHC Dr. Bello Kasarawa denied the existence of any competing factions. He attributed the dissolution to the embarrassment their operation caused Governor Tambuwal (Auwal 2017). The leadership of the SSHC challenged Tambuwal's decision to disband them in court. In January 2018, the court ruled in favor of the SSHC, as they had been established through a legislative act. Consequently, Tambuwal fired Dr. Kasarawa and replaced him with Malam Nuhu, the head of Sokoto Independent Ḥisba, in June 2019. Nuhu's decision to accept the position ended the era of the Independent Ḥisba in Sokoto, which he had led for nearly two decades. The contestations between politicians, muḥtasib, cinema owners, and filmmakers highlight how that which is visually (dis)allowed is influenced by power relations between different social actors.

Conclusion

Human experience is more visual and visualized than ever before. Beyond the popular association of sharia with capital punishment, this article directs attention to the visual connections between sharia and cinema as means of cultural productions used by Muslims who are motivated or influenced by both their shared and divergent interests in these two phenomena. The documenting of muḥtasib activities and the actions of cinema proprietors and filmmakers in Sokoto as a visual discourse reveal how cultural participation and power dynamics between these actors construct and influence how people see, think, and perform in Sokoto State. While the activities of cinema proprietors and filmmakers implicitly and explicitly influence the society, the ᶜulamāᵓ, as arbiters of Islamic culture, opposed the former in many subtle ways until the sharia implementation in the early 2000s provided them with the opportunity to reassert their dominance through visual control.

Sokoto's ᶜulamāᵓ use the concept of "enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong" as a tool of visual control that favors religious elites. The cases described here show that the enjoining aspect makes Islamic values visible where they previously were not, and the forbidding aspect prevents the visibility of anything that muḥtasib perceive as contravening sharia in the public spaces. In this regard, the presence of entertainment centers, such as cinemas and the local Muslim filmmaking industry (Kannywood), tends to reduce the visibility of Islam in public spaces.

Between the year 2000 and the present, cinemas and the imagined (in) visible "vices" they attracted were strategically and forcefully replaced with either mosques or neutral objects by the muḥtasib, which sought to control cinematic content, particularly the work of the local filmmakers that brings men and women into close physical proximity on domestic television screens. The muḥtasib also erected metal symbols with religious messages that function as a mixed media, demanding the cultivation of certain forms of religious subjectivities. The increased visibility of Islam and the eradication of images and practices that diminish it in public spaces is a visual regime of acceptability and unacceptability (both physical and mental). Over a period of

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almost two decades, this regime has changed people's visual encounters with religion, thereby shifting their vision from the profane to the sacred. Visuality is, however, also tied to what people cannot see, the hidden transcripts that are subterranean, especially in the era of small video technology. In this regard, despite the ᶜulamāᵓ class reasserting their influence through the visual regime, people continue to relate to cinema differently, especially through short films circulated through YouTube and social media. Controlling the visual within the sharia framework is not an easy task for the muḥtasib.

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Notes

1. Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (MSSN) is an association of Nigerian students at higher institutions of learning with Islamic political views. See Loimeier (2003) and Gbadamosi (1967).
2. Cinema is a compound term that has many meanings and can be taken to mean very different things at different times: a physical space ("I am going to the cinema."), a medium of entertainment ("Casablanca is a cinema masterpiece!"), or even an entire industry with all the connections and entanglements that entails ("I am studying Bollywood cinema."). Further, the third usage, as an industry, may *or may not* include the prior two usages Gordon Gray (2010:x).
3. During this research, Bello was the chairman of both the Sokoto State Independent *Ḥisba* and Nigerian *Ḥisba* Associations.
4. Muhammadu Danmajema (Interviews, Sokoto, April 19, 2019).
5. Among them include Faruk Kurma Dikkon Gande, who was a former manager, and Muhammadu Danmajema, who worked as a messenger or errand man for the cinema.
6. There are similar metal and wooden religious signs in Kano, which are also sponsored by government. The difference is that, in Kano, these signs still exist

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alongside cinemas and other visual objects considered by *muḥtasib* as incongruous with a sharia-governed city.

7. The *Almajiri* system in its original form is not a problem. The problem is how it has been transformed from an educational system to an institutionalized way of abusing children.
8. I used the tern Salafism (*Salafiyya*) as a trend, not a movement; it is essentially the antithesis of Sufism. While some Salafis who joined a Salafi-based reform movement known as *Jama'atul Izalatil Bidi'ah Wa'Ikamatus Sunnah* (JIBWIS) are called *'Yan Izala*, my usage of Salafis goes beyond this limitation to refer to those who associate with a trend of opposing Sufism as a way of discovering "authentic" Islam. See Umar (1993); Larkin (2009); Ben Amara (2011); Brigaglia (2015).

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