

Youth Culture, Islam and Democracy in West Africa

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In July, I spent an exciting three weeks in northern Nigeria with Saman Piracha and Alexander Johnson, who are master's students in UF's Documentary Film Institute. It was my first taste of life as a film producer as I was helping to create a documentary on youth culture, Islam and democracy in West Africa that will be submitted as an MA thesis by Piracha and Johnson in May 2010.

The film profiles two very different Muslim West African contexts, northern Nigeria and Senegal, to give viewers a sense of the diversity of Islam and democracy within the region. The project draws on the scholarly strengths of its three CAS faculty 'producers' (O'Brien on the politics of shari'a implementation in Nigeria; Villalón on democratization in Francophone West Africa; and African linguistics professor Fiona McLaughlin on popular culture and Islam), but was

also shaped by the research, interests, and story ideas of the young filmmakers Piracha and Johnson.

In Nigeria, the filmmakers' focused on the recent emergence of hip hop music and the continued growth of the Hausa film industry in the northern city of Kano. Young musicians and film actors face government censorship and popular ambivalence about Western and Hindi cultural influences in a society where conservative interpretations of Islam

are dominant. As part of its broader effort to 'sanitize' society in line with shari'a implementation, the Kano state government has censored song lyrics, arrested musicians and film stars, and insisted on Muslim Hausa authenticity in the arts. In the courts and in their artistic production, musicians and filmmakers have resisted these measures and in so doing they are shaping public debate about what it means to retain Islamic identity and values in a modern democracy.

Johnson and Piracha followed their time in Nigeria with a week in Senegal with UF professor Fiona McLaughlin where they interviewed and filmed several musicians and artists.

It is our hope that the final product will be a resource and tool for educators, students, and the general public in understanding the many facets of Islam in West Africa.

Susan O'Brien is an assistant professor in the Department of History and the Center for African Studies. Support for this project was provided by an Social Science Research Council (SSRC) "Academia in the Public Sphere" grant to CAS and the Documentary Institute at the University of Florida.

