Alternative Expressions of Islam Through Islamic Film Video: Muslim Women Filmmakers Countering Social Exclusion in Kenya

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SHORT BIO

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SUBMISSION DATE
12/009/2025

ACCEPTANCE DATE
01/12/2025

DOI
https://doi.org/10.36615/q7hhaw43

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the ways in which Muslim actors in film video in Kenya make interpretations and reinterpretations of Islamic positions on gender roles, veiling, and women's education. The foundational discourse on gender roles, women's education, and veiling is contained in primary sources like the Qur'an and hadith. Muslim scholars articulate this discourse in mosque sermons and madrassa teachings. In the side lines of these official spaces are Muslim actors and filmmakers who use popular cultural forms to articulate re-interpretations of Islam and present their experiences in non-establishment environments. This article examines how Muslim women actors in Kenya use film video to challenge the double-marginal position of women in Islam and Muslims in Kenya. By performative processes of scriptwriting, acting, directing, and production, Muslim women performers in film video display various responses to contemporary issues. Using film video as a medium, they contribute to continuing discourses on gender roles, women's education, and veiling. This article argues that the dynamic response by Muslim actors reinterprets norms and traditional positions as articulated by elites and religious authority figures. Methodologically, the empirical material is based on a literature review, one-on-one interviews, and close context analysis. This is juxtaposed with a critical reading of Utata, an amateur film video produced by Muslim filmmakers in Kenya. The film's narrative describes and critiques Muslim's conventional practises and positions. Utata highlights the complex challenges facing Muslims, pointing out that responses to questions around gender roles, women's education, and veiling are, at times, multiple and varied. The stories told by interviewees indicate how Muslim women actors both support and confront male-centred discourses. The article makes use of Western theory, such as Bourdieu on cultural production and also feminist critiques on patriarchy in Islam. It is argued that Muslim women actors engage in a process of reinterpretation of Islamic positions, thereby challenging Muslim women's double marginalization. Such reinterpretation creates avenues for women actors to contribute to popular Muslim discourses.

KEYWORDS
Gender; Film video; Agency; Representation; Social inclusion; Kenya

ISSN 2707-2991

Introduction

Marginalization is often defined as a process of social exclusion in which individuals or groups are relegated to the fringes of society and being denied economic, political, and symbolic power.[1] Essentially, the marginalised lack power, participation, and integration into a group or territory.[2] The concept of symbolic marginalisation derives from the work of Pierre Bourdieu on how dominant groups exert power through norms, language, and values.[3] This leads to the marginalisation of cultures and identities that are outside of the dominant groups.[4] In this article, I argue that Muslim women in Kenya are marginalised through the imposition of dominant male-centric discourses and religious interpretations. Kenya's constitution (2010) makes a distinction between marginalised *communities* and marginalised *groups*. Women, as a whole, are identified as a marginalised *group*.[5] The categorisation of women as a marginalised group derives from the many legal, economic, political, and social impediments that stand in the way of women's attempts to improve their human condition. In Kenya, women experience marginalisation across various sectors, including legal frameworks,[6] economic participation,[7] political representation,[8] and social norms.[9] This marginalisation is further compounded by factors like poverty, existence in rural locations, and cultural beliefs. Inequalities, disparities, and marginalisation in Kenya vary across

1 Raghubir Chand, Etienne Nel and Stanko Pelc. *Societies, Social Inequalities and Marginalisation*. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017).

2 Matthias Bernt and Laura Colini. "Exclusion, Marginalisation and Peripheralisation: Conceptual concerns in the study of urban inequalities." Working Paper. (Erkner, Leibniz: Institute for Regional Development and Structural Planning, 2013).

3 Pierre Bourdieu. *Language and Symbolic Power*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

4 Pierre Bourdieu. "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education,* edited by J. Richardson. (WestPoint, CT: Greenwood, 1986).

5 Laura A. Young. *Challenges at the intersection of Gender and Ethnic identity in Kenya*. (Nairobi: Minority Rights Group International, 2013). 7

6 I.D.L.O and U.N Women. *Strengthening Gender Equality before the Law: Mapping Discriminatory Laws Against Women and Girls in Kenya*. (Nairobi: Kenya Law Reform Commission, 2014). 1-109

7 Prasad, et al. *Kenya Economic Update: Special Focus on Women's Economic Empowerment*. (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2024).

8 Eija Ranta. "Intersecting inequalities in women's political inclusion in Kenya," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 26, no. 4 (2014). 881-902

9 Young, *Challenges*, 7

the regions and successive governments have not equalised development by allocating resources fairly.[10]

Muslim women in Kenya exist disempowered under Islamic patriarchies. They are also double-disadvantaged by being part of a religious community seen as a minority in Kenya's religious mosaic.[11] Hassan Juma Ndzovu argues that Muslims in Kenya exist as a demographic, religious, and political minority.[12] Ethnic, racial, and theological divisions among Kenya's Muslims, Ndzovu contends, compound their engagement with the state, resulting in a relationship that is complex and problematic. In film work, this marginalisation is reflected in the lack of finances, poor representation, and lack of recognition. An instance of this double marginal status was seen at the third edition of the Women in Film Awards (WIFA) held at the Kenya National Theatre in 2022, where 22 award categories were listed, none of which went to a Muslim woman. Susan Gitimu, the WIFA Awards director, pointed out that this was not a result of systemic bias, but due to low entrance of works by Muslim filmmakers.[13] The Kenyan public space has been described as a male arena, with state power and political authority being male-dominated activities.[14] The voices of the poor, refugees, women, sex workers, and the queer cannot be heard under existing patriarchies. To illustrate the marginalisation of Muslim women from public spaces, Kai Kresse explores the public setting of the informal "*baraza*" where adult males gather for social interactions.[15] Kresse demonstrates the capacity for these informal meeting points to act as spaces for debate, discussion, to check up on colleagues, catch up on the day's events, and meaning-making. Being essentially male social spaces, these settings are, nevertheless, out of reach for Muslim women. This article argues that such spatial organisation justifies the consideration of Muslim women in Kenya as existing in a state of double

10 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. *Regional Disparities and Marginalisation in Kenya*. (Nairobi: Elite PrePress Ltd, 2012).

11 Kai Kresse, "Muslim politics in postcolonial Kenya: negotiating knowledge on the double periphery," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S)* (2009): S76-S94

12 Hassan Juma Ndzovu. "Kenyan Muslims Minority Status: Theological Divisions, Ethno-Religious Competition and Ambiguous Relations with the State'," *Islamic Africa* 12, no. 2 (2021): 240-259

13 Personal communication. 15.07.2025

14 Grace Musila. "Phallocracies and Gynocratic Transgressions: Gender, State Power and Kenyan Public Life," *Africa Insight* 39, no. 1 (2009): 39-57

15 Kai Kresse. *Philosophising in Mombasa: Knowledge, Islam and Intellectual Practise on the Swahili Coast*. (London: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

marginalisation. Excluded by patriarchal structures from public spaces, Muslim women turn to popular cultural spaces as a countermeasure to their social exclusion and make their contribution to religious discourse. Our central question thus arises: how do Kenyan filmmakers use film video as alternative space to articulate Muslim identity and critique religious elites and dominant religious discourses. The empirical material is gathered through literature reviews, one-on-one interviews, and close textual analysis. This is juxtaposed with a close reading of *Utata*, an amateur film video produced by Muslim filmmakers in Kenya. In what follows, we explore how Muslim women in Kenya turn to film video work to challenge male-centred discourses, find spaces for self-expression, and upset social exclusion by patriarchal hierarchies that both marginalize women and stifle their self-expression.

Women filmmakers remediating meaning and confronting social exclusion through film video

Muslim women actors are part of the movement that have turned to popular cultural spaces, like film work, to offer social critiques and articulate their interpretation of Islam as a lived tradition.[16] Arguably, the creative work (thinking, imagining) of Kenyan women is silenced by Kenya's patriarchal structures, but the productive effort of Kenyan women (in writing, in filmmaking) cannot be ignored. Through an analysis of Kenya's popular literature works, Vincent Odhiambo Oduor, Jairus Omuteche, and David W. Yenjela conclude that popular culture in Kenya depicts social and financial power as being entirely in the hands of men.[17] The cultural norms of men are structurally imposed on society leading to the suppression of alternative norms and viewpoints, including the viewpoints of women. This article proposes that the entry of Kenyan women into film work can be read as an affront to male-dominated knowledge spaces. This affront is often met with patriarchal backlash, which in turn increases the oppression of women.[18]

16 Mwenda Ntarangwi. "Social media and youth popular culture in Kenya can counter political exploitation," (*LSE Research Online*, 3 Sept. 2020). https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2020

17 Vincent Odhiambo Oduor, Jairus Omuteche, and David W. Yenjela. "Popular Culture, Contemporary trends and Social identities in Kenyan Youth fiction," *Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 6, no. 2 (2002): 48-62

18 Marie E. Berry, Yolande Bouka, and Marilyn Muthoni Kamuru. "Implementing Inclusion: Gender Quotas, Inequality, and Backlash in Kenya" *Politics and Gender* 17, no. 4 (2020): 640-664

Despite of these challenges, Jane Munene, of the Kenya National Film Association, and Njeri Karago, of the Kenya Film and Television Professionals Association, have been working to raise the profile of women in Kenyan film and television work.[19] Their work is an attempt to confront exclusion to instil authentic self-representation by taking control of public discourse through film work.

While not strictly tied to giving a chronology of women's filmmaking in Kenya, we note the regard for Jane Murago-Munene as being the first woman filmmaker in Kenya, with her debut documentary coming out in 1979.[20] Murago-Munene is celebrated alongside other women filmmakers such as Dommie Yambo-Odotte and Wanjiru Kinyanjui.[21] Notably, the first woman filmmaker recognised as having directed the first feature film is Anne Mungai, whose *Saikati* came out in 1992. Her debut, however, was *Wekesa at Crossroads*, a 60-minute docudrama produced in 1986.[22] Muslim women, however, have not made their presence felt in Kenya's filmmaking industry, although their participation in radio has given them a chance to be heard by many.[23] In contemporary times and with the growth of Kenya's homegrown film video industry, Kenyan Muslim women have begun participating actively as filmmakers, confronting stereotypes by producing films with themes tied to children's rights, women's liberation, and questions of identity.[24] The deployment of such themes is an attempt to use film work to display and critique dominant male-centred views and overturn women's invisibility. According to Laura Grillo, Adriaan van L Klinken, and Hassan Ndzovu, religious meanings are not only revealed through sermons in formal spaces, but are also mediated through ritual, the arts, and multimedia performances.[25] This article, thus, contributes to the emerging body of research on the interrelations between contemporary media technology and

19 Duncan Miriri. "Women drive film industry in Kenya," (*Women's eNews*, September 21, 2004).

20 Nicodemus Okioma and John Mugubi. "Filmmaking in Kenya: The Voyage," *International Journal of Music and Performing Arts* 3, no. 1 (2015): 46-61

21 Robin Steedman. *Creative Hustling: Women Making and Distributing Film from Nairobi*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2023).

22 Okioma and Mugubi, "Filmmaking in Kenya: The Voyage", 2015

23 Esha Faki Mwinyihaji. "Kenyan Muslim Women in Media and Politics: Fighting for Legitimacy," *Global Journal of Human Social Sciences* 12, no. 9 (2012): 39-42

24 Duncan Miriri, "Women drive film industry in Kenya," 2024

25 Laura S. Grillo, Adriaan van Klinken and Hassan Ndzovu. *Religions in Contemporary Africa: An Introduction*. (New York: Routledge, 2019). 221

meaning making in religious spaces. More particularly, this article opens the path to a more detailed exploration of Islamic film video and its confluence with leisure, entertainment, knowledge transmission, and religious authority in Muslim societies. To lay the ground for these arguments, this article begins by discussing popular culture and the use of film video to provide alternative meanings. The intervention of this article addresses two questions: first, how do Muslims engage with Islamic discourse through film video, and second, what alternative expressions are put forward as Muslim women actors articulate their interpretations of gender roles, women's education, and the practise of veiling in contemporary Kenyan society. The film analysed is titled *Utata*, produced in 2017 by Okoa Talent Producers. The film brings to the fore popular debates about gender, highlighting issues around Muslim women's education and the place of the hijab in contemporary urban environments.

Film video and Popular Engagement with Islamic Discourses

Popular culture consists of the non-formal and non-institutional spaces where non-elites find creative expression and artistic productivity,[26] and derives from people's lived experiences. In Muslim communities, formal and institutional practises like mosque sermonizing, public preaching, madrassa teaching, prayer leading, and Islamic propagation (*da'wah*) play an important role in the public sphere, even though these practises are exceedingly male-controlled.[27] These practises are aided by social media spaces like Twitter and YouTube. Andrew Eisenberg illustrates how popular cultural spaces contribute toward Islamic discourse through expression, communication, and interaction.[28] Eisenberg shows how Muslim youth in Mombasa appropriate Hip-hop to argue out their cultural opposition to a predominantly Christian post-colonial state that stereotypes them as "a conceptual as well as physical periphery for post-colonial Kenya".[29] As a response to symbolic marginalisation, Muslim youth in Mombasa use Hip-hop performatively to

[26] Karin Bieber. *A History of African Popular Culture*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[27] Musa Ibrahim. "Contemporary 'Non-Ulama' Hausa Women and Islamic Discourses on Television Screens," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 37, (2018): 101-119

[28] Andrew J. Eisenberg. "Hip-hop and Cultural Citizenship on Kenya's 'Swahili Coast'," *Africa* 82, no. 4 (2012): 556

[29] Eisenberg, "Hip-hop and Cultural Citizenship ", 556

express their alienation from the postcolonial Kenyan state, as well as to stake their place within a transnational Muslim identity.[30]

The focus of this article is on film video and how Muslim women instrumentalise it to articulate their understanding of Islam, thereby challenging the male-centric interpretations that exclude women's experiences. According to Uchenna Onozulike, film videos are "movies or motion pictures produced mainly in the video format while adhering to particular cinematic values or conventions".[31] Unlike conventional films that are shot on celluloid, film videos are shot straight on video and marketed on VHS, VCD, or DVD disks.[32] These products are mass produced and intended for the public, "readily available for rental by household consumers and for public screening in make-shift video-halls" in many urban centres.[33] In Kenya, the rise of the film video industry has allowed non-formally recognised filmmakers to contribute to artistic production.[34] Arguably, Muslim women actors have come forth in the film video industry to stake their claim on the public sphere and articulate their experience of Islam as a living tradition within the Islamic film videos. Without doubt, within Muslim societies, Islamic film video contests dominant elitist interpretations of male *ulama*.[35] In this way, film video facilitates the engagement of non-elite Muslims in reflecting, commenting, and responding to current local and global Islamic discourses. Thus, Islamic film video increases public engagement with Islamic discourse.

Muslim actors simultaneously use film video for self-expression and countering negative self-representation and stereotyping. The starting point for culture is in the recognition of its role in facilitating expression, communication, and interaction. Ali Mazrui proposes culture as the coordinating complex of human affairs. In this way, culture assumes a role

30 Kara Moskowitz. "'There was no Change': Kenyan Women, Temporality, and Decolonization,". *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 32, no. 3 (2023): 267-285

31 Uchenna Onozulike. "Nollywood: The influence of the Nigerian movie industry on African culture," *The Journal of Human Communication* 10, no. 2 (2007): 232

32 James Odhiambo Ogone. "Remediating Orality: The Cultural Domestication of Video Technology in Kenya," *Critical Arts* 29, no. 4 (2015): 479-495

33 Solomon Waliaula. ''Active audiences of Nollywood Video-films: An experience with a Bukusu audience community in Chwele market of Western Kenya''. *Journal of African Cinemas* 6, no. 1 (2014): 72

34 Ogone, ''Remediating Orality", 480

35 Ibrahim. "Contemporary 'Non-Ulama' Hausa Women," 2018

as the invisible architect of human interactions. Islamic film videos are cultural texts as well as cultural discourse.[36] As texts, they symbolize meaning. Indeed, an analysis of film video can lead to an appreciation of the film text's meaning. Further, film video provides an opportunity for continual reinterpretation of Muslims negotiating Islam as a living tradition. In this way, film video is part of Muslims' cultural discourse. Islamic film video allows Muslim producers to contest traditional power structures and amplify their voices. The creativity of Muslim producers and actors expands the scope of use of film video from entertainment to debates on what it means to be Muslim, weighing in to influence how Muslims express their everyday lived experience of Islam at the face of scholarly interpretations of Islam from scholars and other religious elites. In a fun and entertaining way, film video has become a site where debates over religious authority and religious interpretation occur.

Therefore, film video engages Muslims in their everyday settings, and it is these "normal" settings that both embody and express how Muslim actors make meaning of their realities. Throughout Africa, television is part of the media through which Muslim women redefine their religious life, participate in public interpretation of Islam, and engage '*ulama* on discourses about Islam. Muslim women actors use the screen environment to find avenues for authentic self-expression and participate in reconstructing what it means to be a Muslim woman. In this sense, Musa Ibrahim shows Nigerian Hausa Muslim women outside of the '*ulama* class utilising television screens to "express alternative viewpoints that seek to redefine their religious life, but also engage with specialist '*ulama* on some practises established through male-dominated discourses about Islam and everyday life".[37] Consequently, religious learning, knowledge transmission, and cultural critique are embedded in non-institutional forms of expression, such as poetry, popular music, social media, and film video.[38]

[36] Ali Mazrui. *A World Federation of Cultures: An African Perspective*. (New York: The Free Press, 1976).

[37] Ibrahim, "Contemporary 'Non-Ulama' Hausa Women", 101

[38] Grillo, Klinken, and Ndzovu, *Religions in Contemporary Africa*, 221

In Kenya, improvements in infrastructures of communication and the passing of the 2010 constitution expanded spaces for free expression.[39] There were, after 2010, stronger opportunities for Kenyans to express themselves, access information, participate in public discourse, and hold power to account. The Constitution of Kenya (2010) strengthened protections for journalists, media houses, and the public.[40] It guaranteed access to information (chapter 35), a major step since access to information laws did not previously exist as constitutional provisions.[41] It also offered protection of media from prior restraint.[42] Before the enactment of the Constitution of Kenya (2010), the use of draconian laws such as the Chief's Authority Act, the Official Secrets Act, the Public Security Act, and a host of sedition laws allowed the arrest of journalists, seizure of newspapers, and censorship in the name of public order.[43] It is in this regard that the Constitution of Kenya (2010) is seen to have transformed Kenya by explicitly guaranteeing freedom of expression, independent media, and access to information, rights that had been severely restricted by government control, censorship laws, and an institutionalised harassment of journalists.[44] The remaining section of this work presents an analysis of *Utata* (2017), part of the productions that are a result of these expanded media freedoms, and show Muslim women actors creating alternative interpretations of veiling, gender roles, and Muslim women's education.

39 Rachael Diang'a. "Themes in Kenyan Cinema: Seasons and Reasons," *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 4, (2017): 1-11, also see George Ogola. "Popular Culture, Politics, and the Kenyan News Media," in *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa,* edited by Herman Wasserman, 123-136 (London: Routledge, 2011).

40 Kim Caesar. "Balancing the Right to Privacy and Media Freedom in Light of Public Interest." *SSRN Electronic Journal,* (2024). DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.5266981

41 Edwin O. Abuya. "Promoting Transparency: Courts and Operationalization of the Right of Access to Information in Kenya," *Common Law World Review* 46, no. 2 (2017): 112-139

42 Moses Sichach. "History of Media in Kenya: Legal and Ethical Implications," SSRN Electronic Journal (January 30, 2024). DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.4710087

43 Philip Onguny. "The Politics of Impunity and the Shifting of the Media Landscape in Kenya," *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications* 7, no. 1 (2021): 61-78

44 Samuel Muthami Wanjiru and Daniel Muthee Wambui. "An Assessment of Critical Issues in Access to Information: A Systematic Literature Review with Special Reference to Kenya," *International Journal of Research and Scholarly Communication* 5, no. 1 (2022): 23-46

Utata Film Video: Gender Roles, and Muslim Women's Education

Ogone posits that Africans have domesticated video production, allowing more people to participate in shaping contemporary discourses.[45] The production of cheap and easy-to-use film videos and their circulation in informal spaces allow marginal artists to participate in the pursuit of creative freedoms. *Utata* was produced in Kenya in 2017 and is the work of largely unknown, marginal artists from the coastal region. The scriptwriting is by budding filmmakers Salim Hassan Mwagoyo and Dickson Dio and was produced and edited by Samir Alfan Kelly of Okoa Talent Producers. A Swahili word, *Utata* references complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions. As a title for the film, *Utata* hints at a myriad of complex challenges facing Muslims, including complexities arising from multiple interpretations of the foundational textual sources in Islam.

The issue of parity between genders is mentioned in several chapters of the Qur'an. For example, the idea that men and women exist complementary to each other is mentioned in Surah *Al-Imran* (The House of Imran) and Surah *An-Nisa'* (The Women). Surah *Al-Imran* (Q.3:195) mentions "I never fail to reward any worker among you for any work you do, be you male or female-you are equal to one another".[46] This verse can be read together with Surah *An-Nisa'* (Q.4:124) that states "As for those who lead a righteous life, male or female, while believing, they enter paradise without the slightest injustice".[47] Juxtaposed, these two verses bestow equal status to men and women regarding spiritual worth, human dignity, and accountability before God.[48] The social roles of men and women, however, are complementary to establish harmony.[49] The ambiguities and ironies inherent in popular interpretations of scripture are dramatized in *Utata*, to which we shall now turn.

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45 James Odhiambo Ogone, ''Remediating Orality: The Cultural Domestication of Video Technology in Kenya'', 2015

46 Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall. *The Holy Qur'aan (Arabic text, English translation, Roman transliteration)*. (Lahore: Qudrat Ullah Co., 2011).

47 Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Holy Qur'aan (Arabic text, English translation, Roman transliteration),* 2011

48 Abdullah Ibn Abbas. *Tafsir ibn Abbas* (trans). Mokrane Guezzou. (ed). Yousef Meri. (Amman: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007). p. 81

49 Abdullah Ibn Abbas, *Tafsir ibn Abbas,* 2007, 104

The plot of *Utata* involves Maalim Shariff, a single parent, raising three daughters (Halima, Mariam, and Aziza). A conservative and respected religious figure and elder in his community, Maalim Shariff endeavours to raise his daughters into modest young Muslim women. It is debatable whether he does this to protect his daughters' honour and chastity from the seemingly wayward young men of the cosmopolitan urban environment to protect his own integrity and standing in the community. The daughters receive both secular and religious education, in preparation for their role as mothers and productive citizens. Their various actions and decisions throughout the film demonstrate how complex society is and give voice to the myriad responses individual Muslims are likely to deploy in the attempt to make relevant their daily experiences. The daughters' actions and decisions at times support traditional patriarchal structures of their society yet at other times, their choices challenge these structures, showing the daughters' attempt at authentic self-expression. Mariam is the first-born daughter while Aziza is the third-born. Mariam responds to Sajjad, a suitor who has expressed interest in courting Aziza with the words "*si unajua utaratibu wetu*" (Surely, you know the customary procedure?) (*Utata* 00:19:48). By referencing "customary procedure", Mariam demonstrates the weight of tradition. Her actions as a young Muslim woman are proscribed by long-established norms. While she cannot make decisions regarding her sister's courtship and marriage but refers the suitor to her father, Mariam advises the suitor to visit Maalim Shariff rather than waylay Aziza on the streets. To guard her sister against what are seen as corrupting influences, she further asks the suitor "*Sasa wataka kumuoa au wataka mwende vichochoroni*?" (Are you intent on marriage or do you just want to play her around?) (*Utata* 00:20:05). Mariam's reference to customary procedures and her insistence on the suitor's engagement with the father demonstrates a set of actions and decisions that support the patriarchy and the structures of tradition. In addition to demonstrating and critiquing patriarchy, *Utata* also hints at Muslim producers contesting dominant societal norms and challenging Muslim women's ascribed marginality, and it is to an exploration of these entanglements that we now turn.

Following Cecilia L. Ridgeway and Shelley J. Correll, we approach gender as,

> an institutionalised system of social practises for constituting people as two significantly different categories, men and women, and

> organising social relations of inequality on the basis of that difference.[50]

Gender includes a cultural dimension, one that is linked to relations of power.[51] On the question of gender, *Utata* presents the idea that Muslim societies in Kenya are culturally complex and that contemporary Muslim families deploy alternative responses to confront what they perceive as unfair cultural norms that subdue and suppress women. In responding to the challenges of parenting in an urban environment, *Utata* shows Muslim families contesting the prevailing norms on the role of women, positioning Muslim women as both central and important. This article observes that, like Muslim women elsewhere, Kenyan Muslim women aspire to raise themselves to higher levels of self-understanding to achieve their potential and humanness outside of the confines of dominant patriarchies. By contesting dominant norms, Muslim women actors are challenging their marginal status within Islam as well as the broader marginal status as Muslims in a Christian majority state. Ultimately, *Utata* presents gender relations in Kenyan Muslim societies as dynamic, reflecting a community grappling with modernity, tradition, and the continuing quest for authentic self-expression.

In *Utata*, Mama Sajjad challenges local Muslims cultural patterns that disapprove of her meeting Maalim Shariff to initiate marriage negotiations for Sajjad and Aziza. Mama Sajjad visits Mzee Shariff to initiate marriage negotiations. In the film video, Mama Sajjad is accompanied by a single male relation in visiting Maalim Shariff to initiate negotiations towards Sajjad's marriage to Aziza. This visit stretches the Muslim discourse on marriage and the need for complementarity of roles in socio-cultural engagements. Traditionally, witnesses to a Muslim marriage are part of the stipulations that lend legitimacy to the marriage contract. Islamic jurisprudence demands that witnesses must be Muslim, male, free, mature, sane, competent, and morally upright.[52] Mama Sajjad does not get excluded from the marriage

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50 Cecilia L. Ridgeway and Shelley J. Correll. "Unpacking the Gender System: A Theoretical Perspective on Gender Beliefs and Social Relations," *Gender and Society* 18, no. 4 (2004): 511

51 Jo Rowlands. *Questioning Empowerment*. (Oxford: Oxfam, 1997).

52 Mohamed Suleiman Mraja. *Islamic Impacts on Marriage and Divorce among the Digo of Southern Kenya*. (Wurzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2007).

negotiations, nor does Maalim Shariff protest her presence. While Mama Sajjad's role in *Utata* is not as a witness to marriage, and hence her presence on the scene is not to be construed as her being the sole witness to the actual marriage but rather only to start the negotiations, it is plausible that the film video's depiction of that scene is a critique of religious norms that, at times, limit the involvement of women in socio-religious contexts out of the segregation of gender and attendant gender-based spatial organisation in Islam. The actual marriage ceremony, if it were to take place, would likely occur in private spaces such as the bridal home or, at most, a mosque. Muslim actors use film work to articulate local adaptations of Islam that, while not syncretic, nonetheless give audiences an alternate view of lived Islam, highlighting multiple ways local cultural traditions meet with scriptural Islam. In the case of Mama Sajjad contesting the different spaces for men and women in marriage negotiations, it is arguable that Mama Sajjad is more influenced by Digo customary patterns than Islam's specific and legal prescriptions when she visits Maalim Shariff. In this way, we see film video challenging symbolic marginalization of Muslim women and expanding their self-expression.

Muslim educational practises derive from foundational sources of Islam (the Qur'an and Sunna) and are mediated through mosques, madrassas, and Qur'anic schools.[53] This has mostly been the case for religious education. However, in secular education, Muslims in Kenya appear marginal. Explaining this marginality is the historical reliance of colonial administrations on Christian missionaries to provide education on Africans, leading to Muslim apathy toward secular education, which they considered a prelude to Christianisation.[54] While Islam considers education, in general, as a fundamental right for both genders, with its acquisition incumbent on each individual Muslim, there exist huge disparities between the freedoms of women to access education as envisaged in the Qur'an and the actual obstacles that societies place on women in their quest for attaining education.[55] These restrictions to Muslim women accessing education are not only confined to Muslim communities, but are also evident in other

[53] Ali Adnan Ali, "Historical Development of Muslim Education in East Africa," *Journal of Education in Muslim Societies* 4, no. 1 (2022): 128

[54] Ali Adnan Ali, "Historical Development of Muslim Education in East Africa", 2022

[55] Afreen Jawed and Gaurav Sikka. "Educational Rights and Status of Muslim Women as Provided for in Islam," *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* 6, no. 4 (2024): 1-10

communities in Kenya and attributed to cultural factors such as patriarchy, poverty, and parental illiteracy.[56]

Forms of patriarchy are identified as an obstacle to women's access to education in Kenya. Among Muslims, patriarchy presents a clear structure of marginalisation that impedes women's development, thereby curtailing economic opportunities open to them. Firly Annisa contends that "in a patriarchal system women are automatically assigned a specific role and identity that are not to their advantage".[57] In the context of Kenya, Annisa's contention would be that Muslim women are assigned the roles of both childbirth and domestic duties. Clearly, in patriarchal societies the role of women does not evolve beyond mere reproduction and housework.

In *Utata*, all three of Maalim Shariff's daughters attain both religious and secular education, breaking societal cultural patterns that limit the educational progress of girls. Maalim Shariff's effort to offer both Islamic and secular education to his daughters is a dynamic response to parenting in an urban environment. He takes pride in educating his daughters, reminding them "*Mumesoma vizuri, mna elimu ya dunia na ya dini*" (You are well educated, in secular and religious education) (*Utata*: 00:05:10). Exposing his daughters to education enables them to overcome socio-cultural impediments and acquire sufficient knowledge to fulfil their religious obligations as Muslims. The film video shows Halima, Mariam, and Aziza creating new representations of the Muslim woman as educated, enlightened, and progressive and, as such, challenging cultural exclusion and subordination. By casting the three young Muslim women as educated, the film video displays their experience as evolving beyond reproduction and housework, thereby challenging stereotypical representations and inscribing a form of authentic self-expression

[56] Pauline Wangari Mukuria, "Factors Contributing to High Rate of Illiteracy among the Borana Muslim Women in Marginalized Areas: A Case Study of Marsabit County," *Impact: Journal of Transformation* 1, no. 2 (2018): 1-23

[57] Firly Annisa. "Representation of Fashion as Muslima Identity in Paris Magazine," in *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption: Politics, Culture and Identity between the Local and the Global*, edited by Johanna Pink (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009). 274

Contesting Representations on Muslim women and the hijab

The foundational discourse on practises of veiling is traced to Surah *Nur* (The Light) (Qur'an 24:30-31). Verse number thirty reads "Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their chastity. That is purer for them. Surely, Allah is All-Aware of what they do".[58] This verse stipulates modesty upon believing men. It is required of believing men to lower their gaze and not feast their eyes on women that are prohibited for them. Verse 31 reads,

> And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornments…And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers, that you might succeed.[59]

The second verse stipulates modesty upon women. It outlines the requirements of a Muslim woman's performance in public. The two verses place equal responsibility for men and women to lower their gaze and to protect their modesty. The emphasis is on avoiding the forbidden, protecting the privacy, and maintaining modesty for both.[60] That men and women are spiritually equal is confirmed by the directive for all to turn in repentance to God. While the instructions in the Qur'an appear self-evident, Muslim's interpretation on the practise of veiling is varied.

Katherine Bullock notes that multiple conceptions of the practise of veiling exist in Muslim societies, and consequently, different discourses and practises on veiling arise.[61] Drawing on fieldwork in Canada, Bullock points out that Western stereotypes that consider Islam inherently violent and oppressive to women similarly expose Muslim women to discrimination. In the liberation struggle in Algeria, and in response to the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962), wearing the veil was a symbolic resistance to French efforts to depict unveiled Muslim women as modern and liberated.[62]

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58 Pickthall, *The Holy Qur'aan,* 2011
59 Pickthall, *The Holy Qur'aan,* 2011
60 Abbas, *Tafsir ibn Abbas,* 2007, 391
61 Katherine Bullock. *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes*. (London: International Institute for Islamic Thought, 2002).
62 Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*,88

In the Iranian revolution of 1979, the veil assumed meaning in the discourse against the imperial state of Iran and what was perceived as a puppet government of the Shah Reza Pahlavi. Women put on the veil in a deliberate attempt to identify with the revolutionary zeal of the Mujahidin of the Islamic republic of Ruhollah Khomeini and to offer symbolic resistance to the commodification of women.[63]

In East Africa, Muslim women wear the hijab to represent their religious affiliation to Islam as well as to express specific cultural identities.[64] The hijab in East Africa has different forms, ranging from simple head coverings (headscarves) to the colourful Swahili *kanga* (also termed *lesso*), and the full body *buibui* or *abaya*. Habibat Oladosu-Uthman and Mutiat Titilope Oladejo demonstrate that diversity in forms of veiling attests to local adaptations of Islam, where cultural norms become the lens through which to filter religious injunctions.[65] In their observation, "Muslim women veil differently across continents and cultures".[66] This localization of globally binding stipulations reflects a people's appropriation of aspects of their faith and the effort to give religion local interpretations to make it meaningful.

In Kenya, the coastal communities of the Swahili in the North coast and the Digo in the South coast share similar socio-cultural patterns and traditionally use vibrantly coloured pieces of cotton fabric termed *lesso* (or *Kanga*) for covering. *Lesso*, about one by one and a half metre and usually carrying printed Swahili proverbs along one side, are a symbol of modesty for Muslim women in these communities and are considered appropriate dressing for Muslim women.[67] Swahili and Digo women add variety to dressing norms. In formal settings, such as weddings and funeral ceremonies, these women discard the *lesso* and adorn a long black outer covering locally termed *buibui* that has become part of their cultural identity. Among the Somali of Northern

63 Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil,*88

64 Mwenda Mukuthuria. "Islam and the Development of Kiswahili," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 2, no. 8 (2009): 36-45

65 Habibat Oladosu-Uthman and Mutiat Titilope Oladejo. "Veiling and Muslim Women in African History since the Ottoman Empire," *Islam and Civilizational Renewal* 12, no. 2 (2021): 314-330

66 Oladosu-Uthman and Oladejo, "Veiling and Muslim Women in African History since the Ottoman Empire", 315

67 Laura Fair. "Dressing Up: Clothing, Class and Gender in Post-Abolition Zanzibar," *The Journal of African History* 39, no. 1 (1998): 76

Kenya, the *niqab* that covers the face is more common, usually combined with a full body robe locally termed the *abaya*. Borana women add variety to local formulations of *hijab*. The Borana, residing in the dry semi-desert environments of Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia, use a long cotton shawl thrown over the shoulder and tied at the waist, called *guntina*. Older women in this community use a headscarf, locally known as *agogo*.[68] While contentious how far the Borana covering fulfils the Islamic scriptural dictates for veiling, it has local utility in allowing the free flow of air and is accepted as modest by the locals.

The young Muslim women in *Utata* use their screen presence to voice the multiple responses that individual women deploy in their everyday lived Islam. The complex choices of the daughters Halima, Mariam, and Aziza over the *hijab* demonstrate the effort of Muslims to dismantle stereotype around the *hijab*. Indeed, the film video shows Halima exercising agency in her choice of dress and sense of fashion. As a teenage girl living in a cosmopolitan environment, her dressing is a negotiation between the religious sensibilities of her Muslim environment and the global fashion trends that seep into her cosmopolitan social urban setting. Among the Digo community of the South Coast from whom the video is set, Islamic dictates on dress are upheld, albeit with local adaptations in fashion for practicability. Halima is expected to uphold these etiquettes of dress but, at times, she does not, to the consternation of her friends. When confronted by her friends about the apparent conflict between her liberal fashion choices and the strict religious upbringing from her family, she dismissively refers to her father as "*yule mshamba"* (that old fashioned one) (*Utata* 00:13:07). This dismissive remark displays Halima's increasing agency in her choice of dress. She is not confined to the religious sensibilities of her Muslim environment. Halima signals a break with the older generation when she refers to her father as an "old fashioned one", implying that the dress choices popular among her generation are different from the choices of the older generation.

In contrast, the father, Maalim Shariff, represents the forces of conservative Islamic parenting that reflects ingrained notions about women's bodies as

[68] Kalthum D. Guyo. "Hijab: Cultural Dominance over Muslim women or a moral act?" (Daily Nation, Jan. 22, 2023). Available at: https://nation.africa/kenya/blogs-opinion/opinion/hijab-cultural-dominance-over-muslim-women-or-a-moral-act-4095146

sources of *fitna*.[69] Such conservative parenting, with its attendant view of female sexuality as disruptive, is characteristic of the traditional Muslim male.[70] When he learns from neighbours that Halima disregards the *buibui* whenever she is out of the home, Maalim Shariff convenes a family counselling session where he admonishes his daughters:

> *Nina hisia kwamba kuna baadhi yenu mna tabia ambazo si za kistaarabu…mkitoka nyumbani hapa mnavaa vizuri, mnajistiri vizuri tu…inasemekana kwamba mkitoka huko nje mabuibui huvuliwa…mkavaa vile ambavyo mnataka. Kisha mkirudi hapa nyumbani unarudisha buibui lako…unarudi nyumbani* (I suspect some of you are misbehaving…you leave home well dressed, well covered…but it is said that when you are out there the *buibui* [full body covering] are taken off…you dress however you want. Then when it is time to come back you again put on the *buibui* [full body covering]… and come back) (*Utata* 00:04:10).

As a responsible parent, Maalim Shariff instils religious training to his daughters to approximate his ideals of a proper Muslim woman who is educated and decent as a counter to the encroaching secularism of the touristic Diani, their suburban home. By removing the *Buibui* (the Swahili community's equivalent to the Muslim full body covering for women) on her rendezvous into town to meet her lover, Irshad, Halima seeks to assert her liberties regarding dress code and courtship. This action can be read as a flagrant disregard of the local Muslims cultural norms. It is also antithetical to the Islamic education and moral upbringing her father has endeavoured to provide to his three daughters.

Conversely, her sisters Mariam and Aziza, always appear in the film cast in modest clothing that fulfils the local Muslims' notions of the ideal Muslim woman. While the two uphold conventional norms of dressing, thereby considered appropriately dressed, Halima provides a contrastive to what have been seen as restrictive discourses on women's bodies.[71] Kelly M.

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69 Fatema Mernissi. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

70 Henry Munson, Jr. "Review by Henry Munson, Jr.," *American Anthropologist, New Series* 85, no. 1 (1983): 213-234

71 Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*,50-70

Askew traces these restrictive discourses on women's bodies to "Islamic principles and practises of sex-based segregation".[72] Halima challenges these restrictive discourses by removing her veil when she ventures away from home and overturns conventional norms of dressing. Her actions conflict with both her father's authority and Digo society's notions of the ideal Muslim woman. Halima gives potency and power to the idea developed by Fatima Mernissi that patriarchies consider women's bodies a threat to the moral order.[73] It is in this regard that Maalim Shariff cautions his daughters,

> *Kama hamjiheshimu hamtaheshimiwa…nyumba hii inajulikana kama nyumba ya adabu…lakini kama nyinyi mtakuwa mnaibwaga nyumba yenu ni nyinyi wenyewe.*[74] (If you do not respect yourself, you will be disrespected…ours is a respectable home…but if you draw shame to this house that will be your own doing) (*Utata* 00:06:00).

It is unfathomable to Maalim Shariff that a Muslim woman can venture outside of the home except in a state of veiling. Appearing in public spaces without a decent Islamic covering is equal to drawing shame on the self, the religion, and the society at large. Maalim Shariff regards himself a custodian of the moral order. He embodies Mernissi's critique of the patriarchal view of women's bodies as sources of *fitna* (chaos, strife).[75] In the social context of the Digo Muslims of Kenya's South coast, the threat of the collapse of the moral order is compounded by international tourism. This threat leads traditional authority figures (represented in the film by Maalim Shariff) to fear the collapse of society. The contradiction that arises in contemporary Muslim societies is amplified by Maalim Shariff's choices. By ensuring his daughters receive secular education, he prepares them for formal employment and subsequent participation in the economy. Educating his daughters is a liberatory act. It reflects his attempt at achieving gender equity and at positioning his daughters to participate as co-equals in the knowledge economy and in society. Maalim Shariff, as the head of his family, embodies the traditional norms, represents patriarchal dictates, and preserves tradition. The challenge appears to be upon the young generation of Muslim

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72 Kelly M. Askew. "Female Circles and Male Lines: Gender Dynamics along the Swahili Coast," *Africa Today* 46, no. 3 (1999): 69

73 Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil,*15-40

74 *Utata* 00:06:00

75 Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, 39

women who must leverage western education to gain mobility in public spaces while, at the same time, preserving modesty and family reputation. The veil, then, is a site of contestation, presenting secular education and employment outside the home as a latent challenge to Digo and Swahili notions of decency.

Makers of Islamic film videos in Kenya contribute to the discourse on veiling by giving visual display to the complex and multifaceted responses of Muslim women to the practice. While rooted in scripture, the practise of veiling is given local inflections by Muslims from the Somali, the Borana, the Swahili, and the Digo, among many other Kenyan communities. These local inflections reflect the geographical, cultural, and religious contexts in which veiling have been adapted to local contexts. The film video demonstrates the complex ways veiling creates identities, showing the struggles of Muslim women towards empowerment. Ultimately, the depiction of the practise of veiling by Kenyan Muslim actors offers contradictory narratives. These narratives demonstrate the encounter of global fashion trends with local Islamic conceptions of modesty, ultimately reflecting Muslim's local interpretations of Islam.

Conclusion

Utata exposes alternative responses to veiling, gender roles, and Muslim women's education. Veiling is considered a way to preserve the chastity of Muslim women. Young Muslim creatives, including producers and actors, use film video to challenge that view. The actors reinterpret veiling, casting it as a ploy by male authority figures to control women and curtail their visibility. While Maalim Shariff's three daughters receive formal and religious education, in contradiction they are expected to uphold traditional norms, such as the separation of sexes, and surrender their decision-making to traditional authority figures. Such expectations suggest that education has not been liberating to Muslim women and has not fully allowed them to participate as independent agents in the project of modernity. By exposing the contradictions of Muslim's responses to veiling, gender roles, and women's education, Muslim actors use forms of popular culture to engage with and challenge the discourse of religious scholars and elites.

Utata highlights the various alternative positions Muslims adopt in response to contemporary challenges. This film video gives voice to the myriads of

ways Muslim families respond to veiling, gender roles, and Muslim women's education. In a situation of perceived Muslim women's curtailment from the public sphere, film video allows Muslim women to approximate a measure of authentic self-expression. Film video allows Muslim women to express their identity as Muslims and contribute to Islamic discourses. This article demonstrates how the positions and pronouncements by religious authority figures are contested and reinterpreted in film video, allowing marginal voices of Muslim women actors to counter social exclusion and enable actors to participate in shaping national discourses.

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