

Finding Beauty in the Face of Boko Haram



A bride at a wedding in Kano, northern Nigeria, stands apart from the guests. Male guests and female guests seldom mix in the conservative Islamic northern part of Nigeria. Photo by [Glenna Gordon](#).

Before I went to northern Nigeria for the first time, I read the novel [Sin is a Puppy That Follows You Home](#). It's by [Hajiya Balaraba Yakubu](#), a respected Muslim woman who writes stories considered *littaffan soyaya* (love literature). She was married off as a child bride, jilted, and left as a divorcee at 19, but still managed to get an education and write books that started a genre.



Firdausy El-yakub reads a romance novel in her bedroom in Kano, northern Nigeria. Her university has been on strike for weeks, so she spends most of her days reading and dreams of one day becoming a novelist too. Her father allows her to go to the market and buy new books often. Photo by [Glenna Gordon](#).

Yakubu's novel tells the story of a man who takes a second wife (who ends up being a disingenuous prostitute), kicks out his first wife and her kids after an argument, and proceeds with the fallout from his actions. The first wife manages on her own, but then there is a fire and her estranged ex loses everything – all his money, his business, and his new wife – who leaves him now that he is poor. Her relatives convince her to accept his apologies and take him back.

Hajiya Balaraba would be a card-carrying feminist if they made Hausa versions, even though a western feminist might expect the heroine to stay on her own. But family is everything in northern Nigeria, and realizing the strength of this choice shows a feminism beyond narrow preconceived definitions often

attributed to it.



Rabi Tale, a popular novelist, in the courtyard of her office at the Ministry of Information. She is one of the few novelists who has a “day job” in an office. Many men allow their wives to write because they can do so without leaving the house. Photo by [Glenna Gordon](#).

Everything in northern Nigeria defied my preconceived definitions. [Boko Haram](#) jumps in and out of the headlines, but they are consistently burning villages to the ground, kidnapping boys and girls, and causing mass displacement. The involvement from the Nigerian army sometimes escalates the conflict, and certainly isn't able to make a dent.

MEETING THE WRITERS

Kano isn't at the epicenter of the conflict, but it's the biggest city in the north of Nigeria. When I got there, I sought out writers like Hajiya Balaraba. I took formal

portraits on a medium format Bronica, made friends with some of the writers, and sat around drinking juice and eating cookies. I'd shoot on my 35 fixed; and also lots of iPhone selfies and pix.



Khadija Gudaji works on her novel while laying in bed at her home in Kano, northern Nigeria.

Photo by [Glenna Gordon](#).

The romance novels are pocket sized, soft covered, cheaply made, and printed off center on thin newsprint. They often have spectacular covers drawn by local artisans, or a combination of stellar clip art that is whimsical and uncanny.

The stories are sometimes political. One writer, [Jamila Umar Tanko](#), tells the story of a young woman who was trafficked to Sudan that was incredibly popular and serialized on radio as well. She also started her own stall in the market where she sells the books wholesale and retail because she was tired of the men not paying her properly for her work.

Other stories are less political and are typical romance novel fodder – the poor girl marries the rich guy, and others are Dear Abby-style advice columns on being a good Muslim wife.

In 2007, the then-state governor of Kano publicly burned books and said they were contributing to moral indecency among the youth. (He is now Nigeria's minister of education.) [The Hisbah](#), the Islamic morality police, started requiring writers to register, and started to censor books accordingly.



A woman poses for a portrait at the Office of Enlightenment at the Hisbah, the Islamic morality police, on August 17, 2015. Photo by [Glenna Gordon](#).

THE COVER OF A ROMANCE NOVEL

I loved the size of the books and their character. I photographed many book covers and the beautiful textures I

found all around me.



Books are tied up and packaged at the local market in Kano, northern Nigeria. While northern Nigeria is best known for Boko Haram, an Islamic terrorist group whose name means “Western Education is sinful,” there’s a small but significant contingent of hijab wearing ladies writing subversive romance novels. Photo by [Glenna Gordon](#).

The novels are about love and marriage – the biggest questions of life everywhere. I wanted my photos to run parallel to the novels so I went to weddings where I photographed the kind of dowry exchanges the books describe at length.

I looked for colors and moments that echoed the aesthetics of the books. I looked for happy moments at weddings, sad moments of loss, and – whenever I could get a little closer – I also looked for whimsy, fantasy, escape, and pride.



A bride looks out the window before her wedding in Kano, northern Nigeria, on February 28, 2014. Photo by [Glenna Gordon](#).

In late April 2014, Boko Haram was in the headlines again after a few months of quiet. They burned down a village in northern Nigeria and may have burned children alive. The schoolgirls they abducted en masse never were never found and no one escaped.

This is the context of these pictures, but it is not the content of these pictures.

Sometimes I think I should be photographing those things. But what happens to our understanding of other people and other places when the only thing we know is the worst thing that ever happened there? Would we have different priorities and ideas about this world and other places if we also knew what kind of lipstick women wear, what a wedding looks like, and what they draw on the cover of their romance novels?