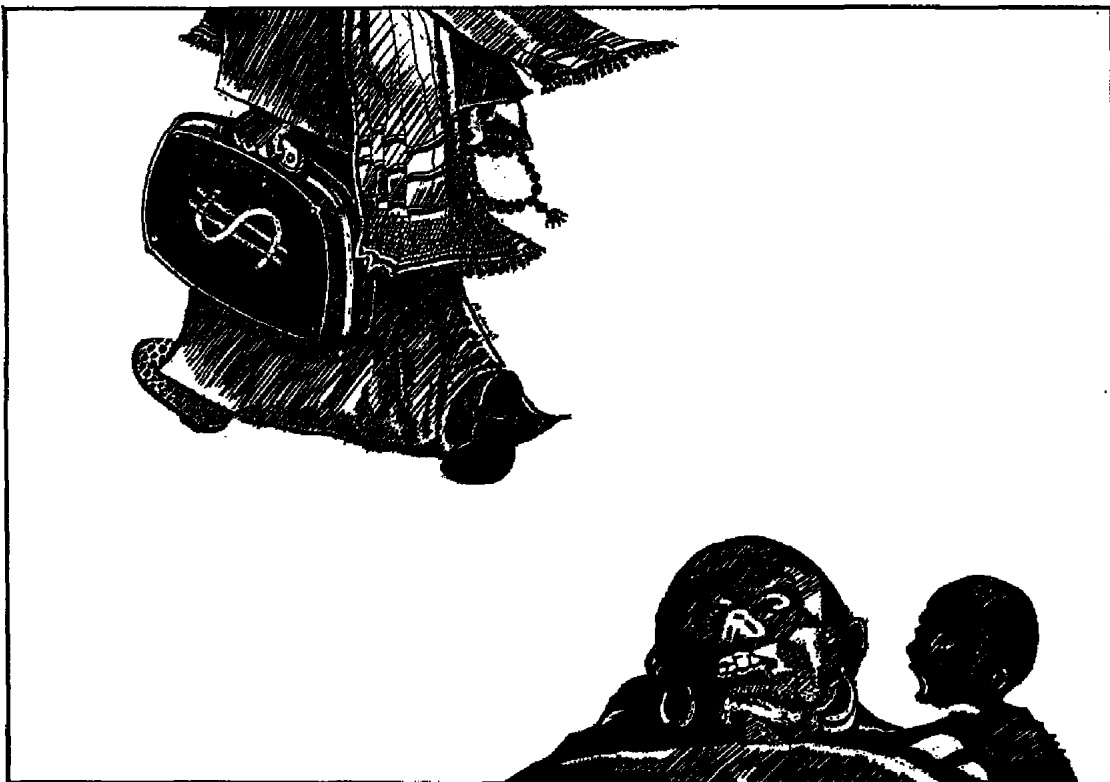


Islamist Discourse

MOHAMED ABUSABIB

The place and definition of art as a human practice have proved to be a thorny problem – in theory and in practice – for Muslim thinkers, old and new, moderates and fanatics alike. The views of both parties are well known, but two features of the problem are of special concern to this essay: the relationship between Islamic teachings and the actual human involvement with the arts as an integral cultural activity; and the practical political move taken by the Islamists to tackle this problem. Here, the Sudanese case is significant in two respects. It is the first time that the Islamist movement has seized power in a dominantly Sunni, Arab League member state, and it is also an African country that exhibits in its political, social and cultural texture all that has rightly acquired it the description of African microcosm.¹



ARTIST: MOHAMED ABUSABIB

The vampire.

Sudanese societies, under the present Islamist rule, have come to experience an extreme form of entanglement of the three major components of culture: politics, religion and the arts. In the early 1980s Dr Hassan al-Turabi, the Islamist ideologue and leader of the National Islamic Front (NIF), laid the theoretical foundation and suggested the practical guidelines for what he construed as true Islamic involvement in the artistic phenomenon.² Those guidelines were put into practice by the present government after the military coup of 1989, which brought the NIF to power.

The baseline in Al-Turabi's discourse on art is the doctrine of unicity, *tawhid*, as the main Islamic principle that determines the place and meaning of beauty and art. Citing the Qur'anic verse, 'We have decked the earth with all manner of ornaments to test mankind and to see who would acquit himself best' (18: 7), he describes beauty and art as seductive and distracting from God, and states that we either indulge in them or transcend them. He regards art as a sensuous reaction incompatible with rationality and conscious devoutness to God; like rule, economy and sex it is lustful; it is free, unruly and far from being an objective system or a social function that serves the general welfare.

But art, as he puts it, occupies a wide space in modern society and thus should not be ignored. If it is handled properly, he maintains, it can open a door for religiousness enhanced by the magnetic effect of beauty.

To solve this problem, Al-Turabi adopts a pragmatist approach. He criticizes the legacy of Islamic jurisprudence on art for being indolent, negative, and tending to repel the artist from religion. The alternative to this ju-

risprudence, as he perceives it, is what he terms the 'method of jurisprudence principles', in the sense that the jurisconsults should not build on absolute legal opinions about special cases. He exemplifies this by the following principles:

- The making of beauty is sanctioned by the Shari'a.
- The creation of beauty should be directed to the worship of God.
- Whatever distracts from the worship of God is nullity and if it contradicts worshipping it is forbidden.
- The greatest sins in Islam are polytheism, worship of idols and embodiment of glorification, such as statues of leaders and prominent personalities.
- Then Al-Turabi suggests some guidelines for how these principles can be implemented:
 - It is possible to unite and blend religious and artistic practices because both of them are symbolic practices aiming at transcending world realities to reach a higher ideal.
 - Art can be deployed as an effective ideological vehicle.
 - In the first stages of Islamic jihad and revolution all artistic resources must be deployed for the sake of God.
 - Inherited jurisprudence on art is to be re-considered.
 - The present traditional and modern artistic practices are to be re-evaluated because they carry pre-Islamic (*jahili*) values as well as ills of Western civilization.
 - There should be a creation of the religious artist who would be able to produce 'true Islamic art'.

Practical measures

The Islamist strategy is to have the entire artistic enterprise monopolized, manipulated and transformed into a religious practice. In part one, article 12, under 'Sciences, Art and Culture' and article 18 under 'Religiousness', the constitution of 1998 affirms the commitment of the state to encourage all forms of art and strenuously seek to elevate

society to values of religiousness to be directed towards the grace of God in the hereafter.³

This constitutional formulation is, in fact, a codification of administrative measures that were already put into effect by the regime in its first years. The appointment of loyalists to leading positions in art institutions, universities and the mass media, the banning of literary and art unions such as The Sudanese Writers Association, and the formation of an alternative organization expected to play a central role in promoting religious art, are some examples of these measures. The outcome includes a sharp decline in the quantity and quality of artistic production in the country, and the voluntary or forced immigration of artists to other countries. According to estimations of the Musicians Union, more than 200 singers and professional musicians left the Sudan in the first years of the regime. The majority of qualified teaching staff in art institutions either were dismissed or forced into early retirement, or chose to resign instead of tolerating unacceptable educational policies of the so-called Islamization of the arts. In general, the culture of parasitism with its sophisticated politics, which is now deeply rooted in Sudanese political life, has already tainted the artistic field, and mediocre artists of every kind are now dominating the artistic scene.

The ideological dimension

The ideological aspect of this Islamist programme is significant in many respects. Firstly, the place of Al-Turabi in the Islamist movement is likely to turn his vision on art into a 'classical' reference for political Islam not only in the Sudan, but in other Muslim societies as well, particularly in Africa given the relations and contacts the Sudanese movement has already established with them. Secondly, it is the first time that a fundamentalist jurisprudential opinion is unequivocally incorporated by the Islamist movement into a comprehensive political agenda. Hence it enables the state to try to use the artistic medium in its strategy to impose a pan-Islamic identity on the multicultural and multi-religious Sudanese society. Thirdly, the Khatmiyya and the Ansar sects, which form part of the Sudanese religious institution and still play a major role in Sudanese politics, never attempted this kind of theorization on art. They are Sufi orders that turned into political sectarianism and adopted conservative visions and rightist policies without having any elaborate political or cultural programme, something that has made it possible for a more intellectual Islamist movement to try to fill in the gap in religious discourse on art. And, the very nature and history of the Sudanese Sufi institution do not allow for such jurisprudential interference in such delicate cultural matters.

Another ideological aspect is that the initial tying of artistic creation to the Islamic principle of unicity is designed to curb its capacity as an effective critical tool. Also, if art is to be based on this principle then any opposition to measures associated with this conception must eventually lead to its antithesis – that is, heresy.

But one serious ideological consequence is the phenomenon of vandalism. Destruction of sculptural works and statues of historical

personalities is now quite frequent. Another version of vandalism is that some brainwashed singers declared their 'repentance for singing' and sought to recover and destroy their previous records. Even more serious is the type of official vandalism practised by the Islamist authorities. The director of the cultural section of Sudan television has stated that '[t]he banning of some songs is in accordance with the general policy of the state to establish genuine creative works of art and culture and purge them of all blemish'.⁴

Finally, terrifying rumours were widespread in the mid-1980s that the Islamist establishment, in collaboration with the Minister of Culture and Information in the Cabinet of Sadiq al-Mahdi of the Ansar sect, was considering the elimination of the Sudanese archaeological heritage assembled in the National Museum. He backed down only after local and international bodies started to move.

The aesthetic dimension

The Islamist discourse on art reflects a kind of epistemological arrogance. The vast knowledge accumulated by the humanities and social sciences in this area is simply ignored. The Islamists so easily abstract culture into religion and then accommodate art to it after having it 'purged of non-religious stuff'; hence taking a major risk as they hinge the whole project on a bid to transform art into a religious pursuit. And while as predicted they failed to create the 'religious artist', they did not anticipate the consequences of their policies.

It follows that the role of art as a multi-purpose component of culture deeply rooted in the social realities of the people is irrelevant to the Islamist paradigm. In the African context, the question of art simply transcends a wearisome jurisprudential wrangling over Qur'anic texts and Prophetic Tradition on art. As manifested in the practices of Muslim and non-Muslim Sudanese, art is an integral part of a cosmological outlook. It is instrumental in the preservation, promotion and enrichment of the life of the community, as well as in resolving delicate socio-cultural and psychological situations, thus helping both the group and individuals maintain a healthy and balanced way of life.

Notes

1. Sudan is home to more than 500 ethnic groups, speaking about 132 languages. The country comprises a mixture of Muslims, Christians and followers of African religions.
2. Al-Turabi, Hasan (1983), 'Hiwar al-Din wa al-Fan' (Dialogue of Religion and Art), *Majallat al-Fikr al-Islami*, No. 1, Khartoum: The Islamic Culture Group, pp. 41-64.
3. Draft constitution of the Republic of the Sudan, the authenticated English translation of the Arabic version (1998), p. 2.
4. From an interview with the director of the cultural section, *Al-Fajr Newspaper*, No. 1, 14 May 1997, London.

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