

Africa

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Until recently, the study of the influence and image of religion in the rich visual art of the Yoruba, the largest ethnic group of Nigeria, was limited to indigenous and Christian religious terrains. However, contacts with Islamic culture predated other non-local religions and are also manifest in the artistic panorama of this group, offering a paradoxical image of enrichment and iconoclasm. A Yoruba saying confirms the antiquated history of Islam in their culture:

*Ifa is primordial
Islam is primeval
Christianity crept in in the noon of culture*



Close-up view of a house post showing a bearded figure with turban and leather sandals, holding a spear.

PHOTO:
R.O. ROM KALILU
(1993)

To appreciate the dynamic interactions between Islam and the visual arts of the Yoruba requires a comprehension of their religious set-up. The indigenous religious outlook of the Yoruba is pluralistic. An individual may belong to one or more religions. This helps to explain the traditionally tolerant attitude towards non-local religions. The Yoruba believe in one God, the Creator and the Cherisher of the whole universe, to whom reference is made in the oral tradition, most especially in the divination corpus of Ifa. God has no shrine built for His worship; being omnipotent, he cannot be confined within space, but is rather called upon in prayer whenever the need arises. The Yoruba had also developed a pantheon of gods who are invariably anthropomorphic and are venerated and placated in various ways. In their liturgies, these deities are conceived as worshippers of God. They are considered as intermediaries between Him and the people. The tolerant reception of Islam is not unconnected with monotheistic teachings concerning God, to whom 'belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth...' (S 112: 1-3), to whom 'everything renders worship...' and to whom 'is due the primal origin of the heavens and the earth...' (S 2: 116-117).

Although the Islamic concept of the divine was not alien to the people, the Yoruba and Islamic traditions were contrasted by the cultures they radiate. The Yoruba had a non-literate religious culture and records of religions have been preserved to a large extent through oral tradition and visual art forms. This is also true of the situation today. The Yoruba have developed a non-literate way of appreciating religion and a very high sensitivity to image construction, whereas Islam discourages the use of icons and encourages writing. As a consequence, a paradoxical relation of love and hate between the Yoruba culture and Islamic teachings became extant; a relation to which people responded artistically.

Islam in the Yoruba Artistic Panorama

A remarkable example of the influence of Islam on Yoruba visual arts is to be found in the theme of a bearded figure with leather sandals. Varieties of this peculiar theme are carved on door panels and house posts. It is essentially composed, in addition to the beard and sandals, of a standing male figure, wearing a long narrow dress (*jalabiya*) with a pair of trousers. The figure also dons a turban. Carrying a big leather wallet with a long strap on his shoulder, he holds a rosary in one hand and a slate in the other hand. The figure is at times also depicted holding a spear. This representation of a male figure also reflects the fact that women did not participate, at least openly, in the teaching and spreading of Islam to Yorubaland.

Bearded figures reflect the early images of contacts with Muslims. The theme is supported by oral records. In Otura-meji, an Ifa

verse, metaphorical allusions to the early Muslims in Yorubaland are made in conjunction with the imagery of the figure with sandals:

*Ka taluku kai lai¹
Aworokonjobi²*

*The egret is the Muslim priest to the birds
Whenever he wakes up he calls out ilaafi, ilaafi
He slides his sandals unto his feet
and treks away
It was divined for Amodu³
That goes to Arabia*

Although the sculptures are not painted and are finished in the brown colour of the wood, the egret – with its immaculate white colour to which the Muslim is likened in the Ifa verse – suggests a sense of neatness and purity. The Yoruba regard the egret (*aworoko-n-jobi*) as the neatest of all birds. The *jalabiya* depicted on the figure is indeed in real life almost invariably white in colour. The depiction of the spear with the bearded figure portrays the more violent encounter with the Fulani Muslim warriors in the early 19th century. Significantly, the theme indicates that the early bearers of Islam to Yorubaland were associated with the slate: standing, perhaps walking postures and pair of slippers, most probably of leather – all of which suggest a social order, a conception of dedicated, disciplined and learned minds with some level of competence as scholars and teachers of their faith. Their association with the kola nut (*obi*) – which the bird, Aworokonjobi, is believed to be fond of eating – and long distance journey indicate that they were in some way connected with the Arabs and the Berbers, and particularly the Hausa, who traded kola nuts with the Yoruba states.

Paradoxical influences

The impact of Islam in the art is paradoxical. It has enriched the visual arts of the Yoruba but has also served as the basis for the destruction of some indigenous art objects. Islam has not had any stylistic impact on the Yoruba sculptural traditions. Themes



Carved gourd decorated with arabic inscription.

PHOTO: R.O. ROM KALILU (1994)

associated with Islam are invariably rendered in Yoruba styles. Nonetheless, it has enriched their arts in terms of motif and form. For example, the typical flat Qur'anic school slate is used as a motif in Yoruba wooden sculpture. Also the Qur'an, represented as an open book, and the rosary are used as motifs in both wooden sculpture and gourd carving. Islamic names of God and short phrases in Arabic letters are also used as motifs on carved door panels. The inscriptions are also commonly written, engraved, or made in bas-relief on walls of mosques, houses and on motor vehicles, particularly the commuter vehicles belonging to Muslims. Stylistically, the Arabic inscriptions do not reflect the rich free-flowing rhythm and the elegance characteristic of Islamic calligraphy. This is partly due to the limitations of the medium, usually wood, on which they are made. It is also because the texts are written by artists, usually unlettered or not knowledgeable of Arabic, who merely copy whatever is written for them. Also till today, Islamic education in Yorubaland concentrates on Qur'anic studies; it has not taken any interest in calligraphy as an art. Gourd carving – the gourd being a medium that lends itself easily to such carving techniques – has only recently adopted Arabic texts as motifs (see photo).

A few geometric motifs found in Yoruba art appear to have been inspired by decorations on saddles and other horse riding equipment as well as ornamented swords, reflecting Sudanese and Bornu influences. Interlaced motifs are now commonly found in Yoruba leatherwork, gourd carving and woodcarving. Such motifs have a pre-Islamic origin but are associated with Islamic cultures in West Africa. Their southward spread to Yorubaland has been attributed to trade contacts through the Hausa. The same appears to be true of cloth embroidery, which in West Africa is associated with the dress of Muslim scholars and teachers.

Islam does not encourage direct representation of living forms, it therefore became associated with a certain level of iconoclasm in Yorubaland. The arts of the Yoruba were dominated by sculptures. And in spite of a growing Muslim population, people remained fond of ornamenting their doors and house posts with carvings. The Fulani jihad, however, was accompanied by destruction of art. Some Yoruba settlements were despoiled of their valuable artistic treasures. For example, between 1833-35, on more than one occasion the Fulani ruler of Ilorin sent warriors to ransack the town of Oyo-Ile to remove, amongst other things, numerous brass posts and all the masquerade costumes. These art objects were destroyed, the metal being melted to make cannon balls needed for warfare. It was not unusual, until the last decade of this century, to find Muslim preachers publicly destroying indigenous art objects belonging to new converts or their families. And for the same iconoclastic reasons, some artists in

the indigenous arts such as the brass casters of Ilorin, who professed Islam, stopped the production of figurative forms.

Notwithstanding the iconoclastic incidences, few Yoruba Muslims have any serious iconoclastic tendency. Yoruba traditional thought still exerts some influence on them. Many continue to use sculptures for architectural and other decorative purposes. Such sculptures also identify them with Islam. Other Yoruba Muslims have integrated their cultural aesthetic sensitivity into their faith and are thus not averse to the display of pictures and figurative objects that have religious significance. Photographs, stickers and painted portraits of men of God, particularly those of Sheikh Ibrahim Niyas of Kaola (Senegal), the spiritual head and reformer of the Tijaniyya tariqa, as well as those of other sheikhs of local significance are displayed or painted on vehicles or on houses.

The Yoruba's use of visual art continues to be one of the ways in which their conception of Islam is recorded. At the same time, it is a means of identifying with Islam through a much-valued aspect of their culture – the visual arts. Its uses indicate that the Yoruba see their art not only as part of an ethnic identity, but also as a means of identification with foreign influences. ◆

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For more details and references, see the author's work on the 'Bearded Figure with Leather Sandals: Islam, Historical Cognition and the Visual Arts of the Yoruba'. Africa: Revista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 1977.

Notes

1. Cognomen of priest
2. Cognomen of the priest and name of a bird
3. Ahmad