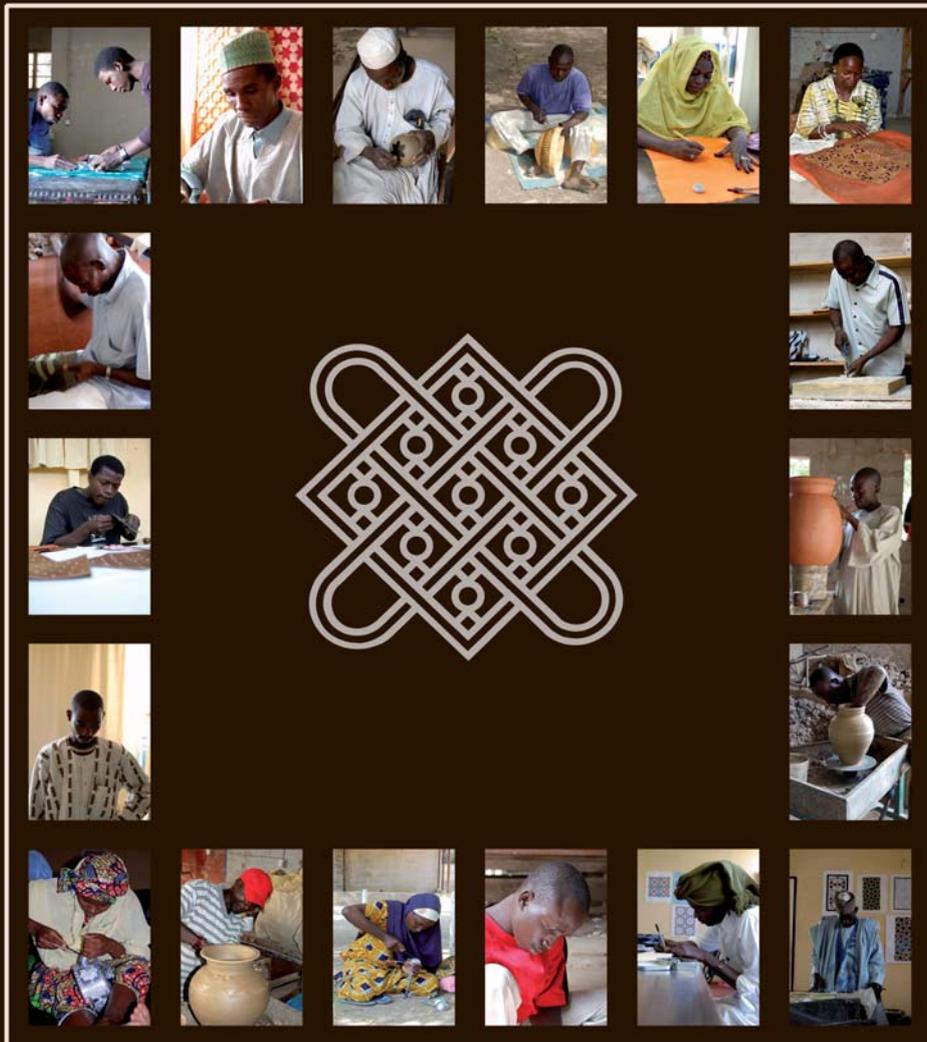


CELEBRATING THE TRADITIONAL CRAFTS OF NORTHERN NIGERIA



British High Commission
NIGERIA



THE PRINCE'S SCHOOL
OF
TRADITIONAL ARTS



THE ARTS OF THE MUSLIM HAUSA OF NORTHERN NIGERIA

Northern Nigeria has maintained an Islamic social, religious and political culture since about 1250 when Islam made inroads via trans-Saharan trade routes from North Africa. In Kano – the central focal point of contemporary Hausa popular culture in Nigeria – Islam became a state policy in 1380 when a group of Wangara (Mali) merchant-clerics arrived in the territory and converted the then non-Muslim (but not pagan) chief to Islam. Subsequently the chief declared the territory Islamic. Arrival of more Arab traders and Fulani clerics from 1450 further consolidated the city-state as an Islamic polity, well documented and versed in Islamic literature. The Shari'a subsequently became an entrenched social and political system in most parts of northern Nigeria until the coming of British colonial administration from 1903 to 1960.

Art among the Muslim Hausa of northern Nigeria is essentially non-representational expressions of creativity – and this has been an entrenched tradition long before Islam made inroads into Hausa areas in the 13th century. Muslim Hausa artistic qualities – *gwaninta* – are displayed either in building motifs, engineered products that are the outcomes of craft skills or in other motifs on clothes due to Islamic influences. As Edward H. Madden argues,

“Islamic art is the expression of a whole culture, intimately intertwined with religious, theological, and legal commitments. It is a way of expressing and celebrating the defining ideology of a community. It is always social and traditional, never idiosyncratic or wholly self-expressive (423).”

While Madden sees the wider usage of the term “Islamic art” to include crafts and architectural designs – deviating thus from Western conceptions of art – nevertheless most African traditional Muslim communities have not been able to domesticate the Western conception of art. Within this limitation, therefore, Islamic Art is essentially reduced to figurative representations on poster artworks.

Unlike the Hebrew Bible, there is no commandment against making images of living beings in the Qur'an. But it does make clear that nothing should be honored alongside God:

“God does not forgive the joining of partners [Arabic: *shirk*] with him: anything less than that he forgives to whoever he will, but anyone who joins partners with God is lying and committing a tremendous sin” (The Qur'an, 4:48).

All the Islamic injunctions against making religious images come from the Hadith, traditions recorded by various followers about what the Prophet said and did. Although not divine revelation like the Qur'an, Hadith is considered binding when multiple trustworthy sources agree. Following are some examples of Hadith on images:

“Ibn 'Umar reported Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) having said: Those who paint pictures would be punished on the Day of Resurrection and it would be said to them: Breathe soul into what you have created.” (Sahih Muslim vol.3, no.5268).

“This Hadith has been reported on the authority of Abu Mu'awiya though another chain of transmitters (and the words are): Verily the most grievously tormented people

amongst the denizens [inhabitants] of Hell on the Day of Resurrection would be the painters of pictures...." (Sahih Muslim vol.3, no.5271).

"Narrated [Muhammad's wife] 'Aisha: Allah's Apostle said, 'The painter of these pictures will be punished on the Day of Resurrection, and it will be said to them, Make alive what you have created.'" (Bukhari vol.9, book 93 no.646).

"Narrated 'Aisha: The Prophet entered upon me while there was a curtain having pictures (of animals) in the house. His face got red with anger, and then he got hold of the curtain and tore it into pieces. The Prophet said, 'Such people as paint these pictures will receive the severest punishment on the Day of Resurrection.'" (Bukhari vol.8, book 73, no.130).

"Umar said, 'We do not enter your churches because of the statues and pictures.' Ibn 'Abbas used to pray in the church provided there were no statues in it." (Bukhari vol.1, chapter 54).

"Aisha played with dolls while her husband Muhammad was with her. (Sahih Muslim vol.4, book 29 ch.1005, no.5981).

"Muhammad went to Fatimah's house, but turned back when he saw a figured curtain." (Sunan Abu Dawud vol.3, book 21, no.3746).

The art of the Fatimids (a Shi'ite dynasty that ruled 909–1171 AD) focused mainly on calligraphy and decorative vines, and also frequently depicted animals and humans. The celebrated lustre-painted Fatimid ceramics from Egypt are especially distinguished by the representation of the human figure. Some of these ceramics have been decorated with simplified copies of illustrations of the princely themes, but others have depictions of scenes of Egyptian daily life. It is this tradition that eventually found its way from about 1930 to Muslim northern Nigeria where posters depicting various prophets (Adam, Abraham) and religious icons (e.g. the baraka – a mystical half-woman, half-horse that carried the Prophet Muhammad on a spiritual night journey to meet God). However, non-representational art, especially expressed in form of calligraphy of the Qur'an is totally accepted, with graduating Qur'anic school pupils having their graduation wooden slates elaborately decorated with border artwork.

Thus Hausa art forms are essentially geometric patterns and lattices reproduced on a variety of media – from calabashes and gourds, textiles, metal, pottery, buildings, to writing forms.

It is in the spirit of sustaining the wonder and creativity of the Hausa art forms that the British Council and the British High Commission, in collaborative partnership with The Prince's School of Traditional Arts, instituted a project that explores the possibilities of transferring geometric designs to the crafts of Northern Nigeria. While the artists – essentially craftsmen and women – are fixed in their ways in both methodological approaches and media, the project sought to enhance their individual skills, and at the same time encourage what we call "horizontal transfer" of ideas and designs from one media and concept to another. Thus the motifs usually seen on traditional buildings are transferred on textile especially caps (huluna) and gowns (dogwayen riguna); while textile designs from caps, for instance, were transferred to wood carvings on calabashes and door frames.

The focus of the project was on young traditional craftsmen and women and the perfection of their art to bring such art to the center stage where it is seen as a credible form of art.

There was a studious attempt to move away from the "tourist/airport" art approach of creating designs for sale to tourists. The focus was on Hausa art as a functional aspect of their daily lives. This has always existed for centuries. The project is giving it a new direction.

The project has achieved tremendous success, thanks to the sheer enthusiasm of the participants, the generous funding from the British High Commission, the British Council, and Standard Chartered Bank, as well as the dedication of the programme tutors, Fosuwa Andoh and David Barnes of the Princes School of Traditional Arts, London.

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