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Controversies and restrictions of visual representation of prophets in northern Nigerian popular culture

ABSTRACT

Generally, images in art forms occupy a controversial position in the Islamic world. The Sunni branch of Islam, considered more conservative and strict does not approve or condone representational art of the human form for fear that it would eventually turn into an object of worship. The Shi'ite branch of Islam, however, has a radically opposing perspective and consequently allows figurative representation in its art forms. The situation becomes more complicated when it comes to depicting prophets, who, starting from the Prophet Muhammad, are prohibited in Sunni Islam from being figuratively represented in any form. This article discusses the representation of spirituality in religious media in Nigeria, especially the reception of the representation of Biblical and Islamic prophets in dubbed Iranian films targeted at popular culture consumption. I situate my discussion within the matrix of social control and censorship in northern Nigerian Muslim cultures.

KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION

Art and religion have always formed a pair of creative confluences that seek to reinforce an interpretation of the more esoteric dimensions of the human experience. The influence of art on life – and by extension religious understanding – had been part of primitive man's consciousness, such that art was inseparable from utility and communal activities, upon which it has an immediate modifying or strengthening effect. Human physical, social, economic and intellectual development created a separation of art and its iconic representation of consciousness (perhaps with the exception of Greek, medieval and renaissance city states) to a level where art is developed and enjoyed in isolation from the rest of life. Art became valued for its own sake, for its contribution to culture, not for any further influence upon life, and this freedom has come to be part of its very meaning. The secularization of western societies therefore created an independent platform on which art is raised as a creative and independent activity. It is this creative freedom that removes barriers to creative expression in western societies – including freedom to display images of not only the deity, but also His representatives. It is also in this perspective that Islam draws a battle line in religious representations.

This article discusses the spiritual, particularly awe-inspiring, representation of spirituality in religious media, especially the reception of representations of Biblical and Islamic prophets in dubbed Iranian films targeted at popular culture consumption in northern Nigerian Islamic cultures. I situate my discussion within the matrix of social control and censorship that seeks to limit such imagery (both mental and literal) in a society not tuned to symbolic imagery in representation of imagined reality. At the same time, I explore the subterfuge around which the prohibited imageries are continually produced and consumed despite the prohibitions. The central focus is therefore on how such experimentation clashes with creative expression in an arena that brings to the fore the subtle clashes between western artistic creativity and modern African cultural realities and religious interpretations.

The data for the article was derived from the public discourse that took place in popular media in northern Nigeria between 2008 to 2010 at a particular draconian period of censorship of popular culture in the region, with additional participant interviews. The measures were sparked by the appearance in Kano markets of a popular Iranian Television series, Prophet Joseph. The Censorship Board prohibited the sales of the DVDs and this created a public debate about the desirability of portraying prophets of monotheist religions in popular media.

In my discourse on northern Nigeria, I tend to favour the term 'Islamicate' to refer to the public sphere of northern Nigeria, particularly to the twelve states (out of 36) that have re-adopted the Shari'a penal code from 1999. In my use of the term 'Islamicate' to refer to northern Nigeria, I borrow Marshal Hodgson's original conception of the word; who created it in the following argument:

'Islamicate' would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims.

(Hodgson 1977: 59)

Consequently, although the Nigerian State uses a secular constitution, those of the 36 states that have adopted the Shari'a as integral to their social fabric

operate an Islamic public space within the overall secular constitution of the country. This Islamic public space came to dominate every aspect of life such that in 2000 the Kano State government established a Hisbah Board that recruited over 9000 'Shari'a police' (the Hisbah) who are enjoined to promote what is good and prevent what is bad in Kano's social and moral spaces. The Kano State Censorship Board, established in 2001, a year after the Shari'a launch in Kano to censor popular culture in the State, works with the Hisbah to ensure that the social and entertainment spaces in Kano are 'morally clean' and prosecute any practitioner who deviates from the moral codes of the society, either in terms of their personal behaviour, or in the expression of their artistic skills.

PROPHETS, SPIRITUALITY AND IMAGES

Nowhere is the interdiction of images more pronounced in Islam than in the attempts to portray the images of the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of the Islamic faith. The Sunni branch of Islam as well as other orthodox Islamic schools of jurisprudence forbids the visualization of a prophet or any of God's messengers. But while conventional Sunni Muslims across the world tend to be the strictest about religious imagery, Shi'ite Muslims, predominant in Iran, are more flexible than Sunnis in their visual interpretation of the scripture. Pictures of people in religious scenes – like pilgrims on the Hajj – are also allowed. These are more likely to be displayed in the home than at a mosque, and some conservative Muslims will refuse to pray in their presence. Muslims are more or less unanimous on the subject of Allah – He cannot be drawn under any circumstances. As Al-Faruqi argued,

The mode of representation must express the inexpressibility of the divine being if Islam is to succeed where Judaism has failed. It is to this challenge that Islam now rose. Its unique, creative and original solution was to represent the stylized plant or flower in indefinite repetition in order, as it were, to deny any and all individuation, and in consequence, to banish naturalism from consciousness once and for all.

(1973: 90)

The prohibition on depicting God extends also throughout the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The Second Commandment instructs the faithful not to make 'any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth'. Jews have for the most part avoided visual representations of the deity, although there has been a great deal of Jewish figurative art throughout history.

Christian attitudes vary widely. The Orthodox Church uses religious icons for worship: since God became embodied in Jesus, Jesus and other holy figures can therefore be represented; however, they can never be pictures of the Lord. Catholicism assigns religious imagery a more pedagogical role, interpreting the Bible to say that religious images are allowed as long as they are not objects of worship. Some Protestant traditions – like Calvinism – banned images outright, which accounts for lack of much imagery in Baptist churches. Lutherans and Anglicans tend to be more accepting of religious images, believing that a picture can be used to teach an idea as long as it is not being worshipped (Engber 2006).

Unlike the Hebrew Bible, there is no commandment against making images of living beings in the Islamic Qur'an. All the Islamic injunctions

against making religious images come from the *Hadith*, traditions recorded by various followers about what the Prophet *Muhammad* – the Prophet of Islam – said and did. Although not divine revelation like the *Qur'an*, *Hadith* is considered binding when multiple trustworthy sources agree as to its authenticity.

Thus as Farjam (2009) noted, calligraphy, revered for carrying the word of God, allowed for the production of both *Qur'an* and secular manuscripts to prosper. Subsequently, during the Abbasid Islamic dynasty, the technical and stylistic foundations of Islamic art gained firm root. This art combined traditional craftsmanship with religious beliefs, giving artists outstanding masterpieces of Islamic art including textiles, pottery, glasswork, metalwork and architectural structures, some of which were embellished with stylized quotations from the *Qur'an*. Consequently as Kuiper argues,

The typical expression of Muslim art is the arabesque, a style of decoration characterized by intertwining plants and abstract curvilinear motifs, both in its geometric and in its vegetabilic form – one leaf, one flower growing out of the other, without beginning and end and capable of almost innumerable variations – only gradually detected by the eye – that never lose their charm.

(2010: 33)

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 (essentially 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 for a direct audience with God, as related in *Sahih Bukhari* compilation of *Hadith*, Volume 5, Book 58, Number 227 (Bukhari in Bukhari and Ali 1956).

Following from the established Islamic tradition, Muslim Hausa societies express their art in the form of craft designs on objects – hats, buildings, utensils, but not as three dimensional objects that will cast shadows; the main bone of contention in Islamic art. As Judith Perani (1986: 45) noted, Hausa art is characterized by a 'rich elaboration of the surface of everyday commodities'. This elaboration is noticeable on household utilities such as calabashes (Rubin 1970; Perani 1986), spoons (Wolff 1988), clothing items such as gowns (Heathcote 1972, 1974), or buildings (Schwerdtfeger 2007). However, it would appear that to communicate certain *religious* messages, the Islamic environment can accept figurative representation – but not in the context of leisure or fame (e.g. figures of famous rulers). Early images available in northern Nigeria were stylized drawings of Adam and Eve, as well as Companions of the Prophet Muhammad such as Ali, and later, Sufi Sheikhs such as Abdul-Qadir Jailani of Baghdad (founder of the Qadiriyya Sufi brotherhood). An example of such posters is given in Figure 1 that shows the Abrahamic attempted sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22: 1–19) or Isma'il (*Qur'an*, 37: 99–113).

of Nazareth (1977), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Scorsese, 1988) and *The Passion of the Christ* (Gibson, 2004).

The appearance of these films at various stages of Hollywood history was not without its controversies, the greatest being created by Scorsese and Gibson's reading of the life of Jesus Christ. The controversies surrounding these films depicting Jesus focus more on the historiography of the narratives, rather than that the face of Jesus is shown. As Riley noted,

[...] the controversy surrounding Martin Scorsese's 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ* was one of the most prominent episodes in the recent history of popular culture to challenge fundamental beliefs about the sacred. The film arguably generated more conflict, controversy and public debate than any other movie in film history, igniting a wide range of deeply felt emotions about issues and values.

(2003: 1)

The film's depiction of Jesus as a human subject to human temptations and frailties created discord among believers and led to protests by Church groups. As Wernblad noted,

What so enraged the protestors was a sequence at the end where Christ is told that he can come down from the cross and live a normal human life with Mary Magdalene...the last temptation is [that] of having a home and a family.

(2011: 102)

Even the title 'temptation' suggests an inherent desire to be human and as film critic David Ehrenstein (2012) argued suggests that Jesus can 'forgo divinity and martyrdom in exchange for a normal life'. Even within a liberal Christian view, this would have been hard to accept – for it gives the impression that Jesus had a choice in being what he was; thus challenging his position. This anti-God posture suggested in the film was what caused most of the controversies and banning of the film in many countries.

Equally controversial was Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. According to Leitch,

The controversy surrounding Gibson's film raises three general questions about filmed lives of Jesus that it brings into unusually sharp focus: what is the relation between inspiration ('a religious experience') and mass entertainment? How does Scripture focus problems of fidelity more urgently than any other precursor text filmmakers could possibly choose to adapt? And what does it mean to make a film that is faithful to the Gospels?

(2007: 48)

The Passion did not focus on the teachings of Jesus, but on the suffering he underwent in his final hours. Thus according to Phillips, the controversy over *The Passion* encompassed numerous issues, including

Accusations that the film was anti-Semitic, debates about its biblical accuracy, reactions to the graphic nature of the film's violent scenes of torture and death, questions about Gibson's character and motivation in making the film, and invocations of the broader culture wars – the

struggle between social/religious conservatives and progressive liberals over the media and education.

(2008: 146)

In Islam, the issue is not on historical accuracy or ethnic slurs, but on the mere act of representing a prophet – getting a conventional actor to play the role of God’s messenger. However, Islamic viewpoints on visual depiction of the prophets differ according to either Sunni or Shi’a interpretations of Islam.

The Sunni Islamic viewpoint, as provided by the scholars of Al-Azhar University in Cairo generally hold the view that prophets should not be visually depicted – as that might lead to idolatry. The dilemma faced by the scholars is that this ruling would apply only to Sunni Muslim adherents – thus Sunni Muslim filmmakers many not make films depicting either Moses, Jesus or Muhammad, and by extension, all the other prophets as well. However, since Jesus and Moses are shared by Christianity and Judaism, censure of their depiction by the Sunni Muslims become extremely difficult – and thus best left alone. Consequently, Sunni Muslims wishing to make films on Jesus or Moses would have to face the same interdicting ruling of the Al-Azhar scholars. Abdel Moti Bayumi, a member of the Academy of Islamic Studies of Al-Azhar, said the prophets cannot be portrayed ‘because that reduces their value in the human imagination’ (Catholic News Agency 2006: par. 3). This comment was in relation to the planned move by a Christian Orthodox Egyptian filmmaker, to produce a film about Jesus. The screenwriter of the film, Fayez Ghali, said Al Azhar,

has nothing to do with my film. That the depiction of the prophets is forbidden is an issue for our Muslim brothers, not for me...I am following my Orthodox Christian teaching. No human being ought to prohibit the movie, whether it’s Al-Azhar, the church or even the state...
(Catholic News Agency 2006: par. 6)

he added.

Similarly, Shi’a Islam, just like the Egyptian Orthodox Christian filmmaker, has a more oppositional perspective on the depiction of prophets in films as well as pictures. In fact according to Grabar,

The earliest representation of the Prophet Muhammad known to us today appears in a mid-thirteenth century illustrated manuscript in Persian entitled ‘The Poem of Warqa and Gulsha.’ Several Arabic texts dated as early as the tenth century mention the existence of painted portraits of Muhammad, as well as of Jesus and several figures from the Old Testament.

(2003: 19)

Indeed, Thomas Walker Arnold’s pioneering ethnographic research in this areas shows that the antecedents of the modern portraits of saints and depictions of their shrines go back to the religious paintings of Iran. Thus ‘as early as the fifteenth century, biographies of the prophet and other literary works such as hagiographies were illustrated with miniatures showing Muhammad with human features, members of the holy family, and saints’ (Arnold 1928: 111).

Thus, based on cinematic freedom from Sunni Islamic restrictions concerning the visual depiction of prophets in drama, the list of Iranian-backed films

on Islamic prophets include: *Mohammed* (Majidi; in production), *The Kingdom of Solomon* (Bahrani, 2010, with Amin Zendegani as Solomon); *Jesus, the Spirit of God*, also *The Messiah* (Talebzadeh, 2007, with Ahmad Soleimani Nia as Jesus), and *Ibrahim, the Friend of God* (Varzi, 2006, with Mohammad Sadeghi as Abraham). The one that caused most controversy in Nigeria was *Joseph, the Prophet* (Salahshoor, 2009; with Hossein Jafri as Young Yousuf, Mostufa Zamani as older Yousuf).

FATWAS AND PROPHETIC VISUALS IN KANO

Consequently, in the Shi'ite interpretation of Islam, figurative representations of the prophets are accepted. This in fact led to the appearance in 2009 of the TV Series, *Yousuf-e-Payambar* or *Joseph, the Prophet* at the 2009 Cannes Film festival. The 45-episode series was produced by Sima Film Productions, an affiliate of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). Although the dialogue was in Persian, soon enough the Lebanese Al Manar TV station, owned by the Shi'a Hezbollah, started re-broadcasting the series with Arab dub-over voices of the Farsi dialogue, and became available through the Middle East satellite TV networks.

In the summer of 2009 a young Muslim Hausa student studying at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo somehow downloaded the entire *Yousuf-e-Payambar* series with Arabic voice-over dubbing in his laptop, and brought it to CD marketers in Kano, the biggest commercial centre in northern Nigeria. This download was freely available from www.shiashource.com, but would have been difficult for the marketers in Kano to obtain due to low Internet bandwidth available in the city's commercial Internet cafes. The marketers subsequently copied the series into eight volume DVDs and released them to traffic light markets common in most urban centres in Africa.

The story of Joseph (Hau. *qissar Annabi Yusuf*) is one of the most inspiring and captivating narratives of the Qur'anic Tafsir (exegesis) in Kano, in part due to the myriad lessons drawn from the narrative, including fortitude and total obedience to God. Further, the biggest appeal of the narrative was its close reproduction of the sociocultural realities of Hausa domestic conflicts and psychology. In Hausa societies, children sharing the same father, but from different mothers often enter into conflict situations with each other – a rivalry referred to as '*yan ubanci*' (lit. hating father's sons, i.e. brothers from a different mother). In this social situation, it is not considered surprising when a strong sense of resentment is built among siblings sharing the same father, but with different mothers.

The story of Joseph was reported in Torah, Chapter 39. It narrates the ordeals of Joseph, and how sold into slavery by his brothers, he rises to prominence in the home of an Egyptian official, Potiphar, whose wife attempts to seduce him and, upon failing, accuses Joseph of attacking her. In the Qur'anic version, basically an extension of the Torah version, Joseph's temptress tries to defend herself from the rumours going around the city that she has tried to seduce him. Indeed the struggle between Zuleikha, in a seductively revealing dress, Joseph and his master was captured in an Egyptian folk-art poster available for years in northern Nigeria – without any 'fatwa' by any Muslim cleric on its depiction of a prophet – and shown in Figure 2.

This narrative is easily the most popular *qissa* (historical account) in the Qur'an for many Tafsir attendees during the monthly Ramadan Tafsirs in Kano. Thus at the basic 'ordinary' street level, the DVDs containing full



Figure 2: Joseph fighting temptation in 1930s Egyptian folk-art poster.

dramatic re-enactment of this narrative were welcomed by ordinary viewers. This is more so because of the lull in the Hausa video film production caused by a more strict censorship regime. *Joseph the Prophet* as a visual re-enactment of a spiritual and personally identifiable drama thus provides a ready, and religiously more acceptable alternative to the singing and dancing spectacles of the Hausa video films that attracted the ire of the Islamicate establishment. Released to a consumer market that is already in tune with Shari'a and looking for more Islamic offering in its popular culture, the DVDs sold massively. The marketers soon obtained another DVD, *Ibrahim, the Friend of God* (Varzi, 2006) a two hour film about the life of Abraham (Ibrahim).

However, no sooner had the DVDs entered the market, than two prominent Muslim clerics in Kano appeared on public radio and condemned the films. These were Sheikh Amin Daurawa and Sheikh Ibrahim Khalil, the latter who was Chairman of the powerful Kano State Council of Ulama (Council of Scholars). In their 'fatwa' – Islamic ruling – echoing the Al-Azhar proscription of visually representing a Prophet of God, they argued it is prohibited to visually depict any prophet of God in any form. The basic problem was that while the Prophet TV series were produced by Shi'a filmmakers, the consumers in Kano were Sunni, and do not make the sublime distinction about the interdiction of prophetic images between Sunni and Shi'ite interpretations of Islam, particularly as there is no direct and specific prohibition against the practice in the Qur'an.

The outcome of the fatwa was the banning of the sales of *Joseph the Prophet* DVDs in Kano by the Kano State Censorship Board, and the arrest and prosecution of marketers and vendors who sell the DVDs. However, while the series were banned in Kano, they became easily available in neighbouring States, especially Kaduna and Bauchi where the Shari'a law was implemented along more flexible lines.

INVISIBLE BORDERS, PIRACY AND SUBVERSION

While the debate was going on in public (e.g. at meetings organized by the Societal Re-orientation Agency, A Daidaita Sahu) in Kano in 2010, another DVD appeared of the same *Joseph the Prophet* – but with Hausa language



Figure 3: Joseph the Prophet DVDs in Kano markets – Pirated original and dubbed pirated..

voice-over dubbed translations of the Arabic voice-over dubbing of the original Persian dialogue, as seen the picture of the DVD jackets in Figure 3.

The banning order in fact seemed to have generated more interest in religious films, because other pirated religious-themed films also resurfaced, in particular, *The Ten Commandments* (Demille, 1956). Other pirated media products with religious themes included a Hausa-language dubbed version of *The Message* (Akkad, 1977), easily one of the most popular films about Islam – and which pointedly did not show the Prophet Muhammad’s image, even though it centred on his life and struggles.

As Brian Larkin pointed out, media piracy in Kano is part of the ‘organizational architecture’ of globalization (2004: 289), providing the infrastructure that allows media goods to circulate literally freely. Interestingly, the public authorities were not so much concerned with the piracy and infringement of international copyright conventions, but on the availability of media products they selectively identified as being detrimental to the Islamic public sphere. The availability of the first four volumes of *Prophet Joseph* in Hausa language voice-over dubs is significant in the way such process subverts the original Fatwa of one of the most respected Islamic scholars in Kano by bringing the film much closer to its Hausa audiences, instead of the second language Arabic translations on which the Fatwa was issued.

The series has not escaped controversy within the Islamic world. Religious authorities in Tunisia, citing their interpretations of Sunni Islamic law, requested that the series on Joseph be banned from Tunisian TV for violating prohibitions against biblically depicting prophets of Muslim scripture. Habib Toumi reports as follows on the controversy over depicting Muslim prophets.

This is a dangerous violation of the status of prophets and an attack on a pillar of faith...Shiites allow the depiction of prophets, but Sunnis totally reject their visualization of prophets.

(Toumi, 2010)

The Christian community in Kano was also caught in the cross-fire when the Censorship Board arrested Christian marketers selling pirated DVDs of Jesus films, often on a megapack DVD collection containing as many as 15 full-length feature films and sold for less than a dollar. These were sold and purchased predominantly by the Christian community. The Censorship Board anchored its arguments on the fact the Jesus is a prophet of God – and therefore recognized in Islam, and therefore the Islamic ruling on the prohibition of visual imageries of prophets apply to him. However, when Christian marketers' lawyers argued that Christianity does not have the same prohibition about visual depiction of Jesus as Islam, the Censorship Board backed away and allowed the sales of Christian films.

Generally, audiences of the prophet films devised three ways to subvert their prohibition and acquire them. The first was a direct purchase of the official DVDs of the TV series via an online gateway located in Tehran and payable via debit cards commonly available from Nigerian banks. With a strong Shi'ite community in Nigeria, obtaining the DVDs therefore became extremely easy – and since the Censorship Board is itself vague on possession and viewership of the DVDs – focusing attention on market sales and distribution – it became easy to subvert the ruling, at least on a legal basis.

The second subversion was via direct Satellite viewing of the series from Sahar TV station. When the Kano State government banned the sale of the locally produced DVDs, viewers of free-to-air ArabSat networks, commonly available in Nigeria for less than \$150 installation fees only, suddenly realized that the series was in fact being broadcast directly from Sahar, an international Iranian TV channel available on ArabSat network – and since the Kano State Government cannot block satellite transmissions, it therefore became possible for viewers not only to watch the series, but also record it and distribute it, thus subverting the Censorship.

The third, and perhaps most effective strategy of subversion was the Internet. The Iranian producers of *Joseph the Prophet*, perhaps aware of the controversies the series would generate in some Muslim communities across the world, enabled it to be uploaded on the Internet video sharing websites. These included YouTube, and later, ShiaSource. The latter source also contains other TV series on Islamic Prophets – all free to download and with complete English subtitles, which took the subversive stand to a higher level – thus offering a controversial product to a larger, international audience.

The film on YouTube also generated its own online controversies. An unedited comment from a poster states:

This series is made by the Shia ... there for I advice my brothers in Islam to not watch this ...first its not allowed to show any prophets face ... and not one of the one that was most beautiful because none of these

earthly 'ugly' human can replace his beauty ...my beloved Yusuf (aleyh salam) was alike the beauty of a moon...if you agree with this they will also make a series about our noble and master Muhammad (salAllahu alyhi wasalam) and which of the human is better than him ?

(Suleiman, 2010)

As in all controversies, there are multiple, often contrasting, perspectives. In this case, the *Joseph the Prophet* film did attract many supports on YouTube, and not necessarily from Shi'ites. A typical comment, for instance is from MegaDina2009

Mashallah. I watched this movie on dvd, and I loved it and it really made me cry and also made me realize that Allah's Prophet had to go thru so muchh, imagine wat His servants wud have to go through? I think every Muslim should watch this movie, it will really open their eyes, Inshallah. May Allah (swt) Guide us all to the right path. Ameen.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgU__EZgX0I&feature=related,

22 September 2010)

Seeing the acceptance of *Joseph the Prophet* series, the filmmakers promised to make more forays into prophetic depictions in dramatic form in future plans, thus ensuring that the debate on the interdiction of prophetic images continues.

CONCLUSION

Experimentation plays a vital role in transformation, because it 'contributes to and thus advances a body of knowledge that, when applied, allows us to develop new capabilities' (Alberts and Hayes 2005: 2). This is more so since experimentation is a process, rather than a collection of individual experiments, and combines a structure of results that become part of a larger corpus, as well as providing indications of future experimentation activities.

Experimenting with figural representation in the realm of Hausa visual culture and receptivity thus provides opportunities for observing how such efforts are received within the larger framework of Islamic prohibition of imagery.

Discussing Islamic discourse in the Arab context, Nazih Ayubi (2004) has argued that public space or the public sphere is not conventionally equivalent to the political civic realm of public debate, conscious collective action, and citizenship as understood in western democratic theory. Rather, Islamic authorities have historically interpreted the public not in contrast to a 'free' privatized realm of conscience and religion, but instead as the space for 'symbolic display, of interaction rituals and personal ties, of physical proximity coexisting with social distance' (Ayubi 2004: 440) in contrast to a private sphere that is in effect defined as a residual – what is left over after the public is defined. Ayubi calls this space 'civic' since 'it is the realm of public debate and conscious collective action or, in a word, of citizenship' (2004: 440). Thus the public sphere is above all a space for the 'collective enforcement of public morals' (Ayubi 2004: 27) rather than necessarily political.

Similarly, Jon W. Anderson (2003) has argued that for well over a generation, the public sphere of Islam has been an arena of contest in which activists and militants brought forth challenges to traditional interpretative practices and authority to speak for Islam, especially to articulate its social interests and

political agendas. Further, as Gaffney (1994) also noted in analysing Islamic preaching in Egypt, opening the social field to new spokespeople – in our case, Hausa filmmakers – and new discursive practices not only challenges authority long since thought settled to interpret what religion requires, but also blurs boundaries between public and private discourse and fosters new habits of production.

Media figure in this process in several crucial respects. First, they devolve access to consumption by more people on more occasions. Passage into media conveys previously 'private' or highly situated discourses from interactive contexts to public display, where they are reattached to a public world and return as information conveyed through new media technologies with different habits of reception. Detached from traditional modes of production, they become messages in a world of messages (Anderson 2003).

Islamic jurisprudence fully enforces the sanctity of the private domain: there is ample admonition against prying into the affairs of others; preventive measures can be found that guarantee the privacy of personal information and positively support individual rights to property and promote freedom in determining one's course of life. Thus there can be no doubt that Islamic law can fully accommodate the notion of the private domain, of which the female figure is a clear example. The challenge lies at delimiting the private domain from what is regarded as public in Islamicate environments in visual entertainment media in Muslim societies.

It is clear therefore that visual culture faces a significant challenge in contemporary Muslim societies. This is more so as the traditional societies are based on retaining an epistemological status quo that invests knowledge within a restrict class of clerics – and this comes in direct confrontation with contemporary trans global flow of visual media. Striking a balance between what is allowed, what is desired, and what is accepted is an essential task that must be faced by Muslim African communities in the throes of transnational transformations.

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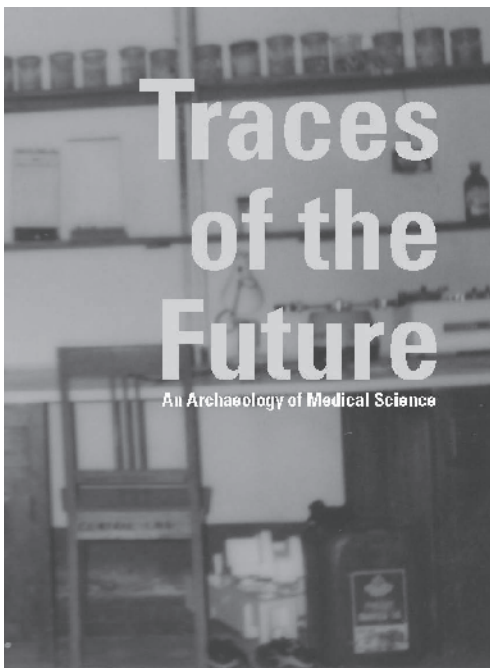
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An Archaeology of Medical Science
in the Twenty-First Century Africa

Edited by Paul Wenzel Geissler, Guillaume Lachenal,
John Manton and Noémi Tousignant



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