Interdiction of Images in the Islamicate Public Sphere: Sensuality and Spirituality in Figurative Representation in northern Nigerian Popular Culture

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Introduction

Art and religion have always formed a pair of creative confluences that seek to reinforce an understanding of the more esoteric dimensions of the human experience. The influence of art on life—and by extension religious understanding—had been part of the 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 any 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 paper discusses the interdiction of images in Muslim Hausa popular culture of northern Nigeria along two separate, but related dimensions. The first was figurative, or allegorical representation of sensuality in Muslim Hausa popular visual media. The second was spiritual, particularly awe-inspiring, representation of spirituality in religious media, particularly reception of representation of prophets in films.

I situate my discourse within the matrix of social control and censorship which seeks to limit such experimentation with 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 fore the subtle clashes between Western artistic creativity and modern African cultural realities and religious interpretations.

Islam and the Sensual Video Film Star

In my discourse, I tend to favor the term 'Islamicate' to refer to the public sphere of northern Nigeria, particularly to the 12 states (out of 36) that have re-adopted the Shari'a penal code from 1999. The 12 states are shown in Figure 1.

Fig. 1. Islamic Shari'ah implementation in northern Nigeria

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:

> …if the analogy with 'Christendom' is held to, 'Islamdom' does not designate in itself a 'civilization', a specific culture, but only the society that carries that culture. There has been, however, a *culture,* centred on a lettered tradition, which has been historically distinctive of Islamdom the *society,* and which has been naturally shared in by both Muslims and non-Muslims who participate at all fully in the society of Islamdom. For this, I have used the adjective 'Islamicate'. I thus restrict the term 'Islam' to the *religion* of the Muslims, not using that term for the far more general phenomena, the society of Islamdom and its Islamicate cultural traditions…'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 1977:58-59 including emphasis).

Consequently, although the Nigerian State uses a secular constitution, States that have adopted the Shari'a as a 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 which recruited over 9,000 'Shari'a police' (the Hisbah) who are enjoined to promote what is good and prevent what is bad in Kano's social spaces. One of the earliest clashes between the Hisbah and creativity was with the Hausa video film industry, which due to its emphasis on gender-mixing and song and dances became part of Hisbah's mandate of 'stopping what is bad'.

The Hausa video film industry, known as 'Kanywood' was established in March 1990 with the release of a video film, 'Turmin Danya' (dir. Salisu Galadanci). From 1990 to 1999 the Hausa video film releases were basically extended television dramas centered around boy-meets-girl situations with parents opposing. By 2000, and under the influence of transnational flow of media through electronic media which provided alternative ways of looking at consumption patterns (Apparadurai, 1996), leading to many instances of what Sangita and Moorti (2008: 40) call 'translated modernities' the Hausa video film had become an African commodity communicating African translation of modernity. Hausa filmmakers started experimenting with various configurations of figurative representation of the female body form. One of these areas of figurative representation was in the increasing adoption of singing and dancing, patterned around Hindi films which provide a template for the Hausa film industry, especially from 2000. Such singing and dancing tended to show women in

tight fitting Western clothes. A typical screenshot from the film *Guda* (dir. A. Zango 2003) in Fig 2 provides an idea of the representations.

Fig. 2 – Western dressing in Muslim Hausa video film, 'Guɗa'

In this scene, two Muslim Hausa females were dressed in male clothing, with no head covering (hijab) and with their body shapes clearly visible. Since it is a dancing scene, naturally their body parts were also shaking. In reacting to this scene—as an example of figurative representation of the female body form in an Islamic sphere—critics in Hausa popular culture magazines draw upon various core Islamic injunctions against such trespass. The sources quoted to support the injunctions are the following Qur'anic verses and Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) from Sunan Abu Dawood collection:

> *Surat al-Ahzaab, (33:59):*
> "O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And Allah is Oft- Forgiving, Most Merciful."

Sunan Abu Dawood Hadith Collection, *Clothing (Kitab Al-Libas)*

> *Book 32, Number 4092:*
> Narrated Aisha, Ummul Mu'minin: Asma, daughter of AbuBakr, entered upon the Apostle of Allah (peace_be_upon_him) wearing thin clothes. The Apostle of Allah (peace_be_upon_him) turned his attention from her. He said: O Asma', when a woman reaches the age of menstruation, it does not suit her that she displays her parts of body except this and this, and he pointed to her face and hands.

It is clear therefore, more experimental filmmaking among Muslim Hausa would have to negotiate these core prohibitions about the sacredness of the private, and often, conjugal sphere as reflected by the female body form. This was more so because by 2000, and under a global media snow storm, a new media hybridity in visual figurative representation of the female form had started emerging in Hausa video films. Alarm bells started ringing about the possible influence of new media technologies and behavioral modification. This is reflected in a few comments made either in public or in popular culture magazines—in essence, the Habermasian salons—in northern Nigeria. A typical example was:

> "We the fans of Hausa video films have come to realize that it is the producers and the directors that are responsible for the corruption of culture and religion in these films. You

know very well that every section of a woman is private. For instance, they are fond of allowing actresses without head covering, and straightening their hair; also making them wear skimpy Western dresses which reveal their body shapes, etc. In our awareness and education, we know these behaviors are immensely contrary to Islam. Don't such actresses ever think of the Day of Judgment? Don't forget their claims that they educating or delivering vital social message. Is this how you educate – by corrupting Islamic injunctions? Please look into this and take remediate measures immediately." Aisha D. Muhammad Gamawa, Bauchi, *Fim*, Letter Page, March 2004 p. 6.

The outcomes of these debates was the strengthening of the earlier established Censorship Board rules in the Kanywood industry by the Kano State government in 2001 and 2007 and which eventually drove many of the practitioners to other northern Nigerian States where the Shari'a law is not rigidly implemented.

Prophets, Spirituality and Images in Northern Nigeria
My second theater of discourse is a continuation of the public debate on figurative representation; although with a wider audience than erotic dancing by Muslim girls in films.

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 Islamic schools 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 from Iran are more flexible than Sunnis; for example, they display images of Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Devotional portraits of leading teachers are generally acceptable, as long as they do not fall under the Hadith ban on depicting the major prophets. 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 can't be drawn under any circumstances. As Al-Faruqi (1973: 90) 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.

The prohibition on depicting God extends throughout the Judeo-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's 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's not being worshipped.

Many Eastern religions make liberal use of imagery—pictures of the Buddha and of Hindu gods are particularly widespread. Sikhism, which merges elements of Islam and Hinduism, prohibits the depiction of God. However, Sikhs do allow images of their most important spiritual figures for inspiration.

Religious Imagery in Islam
In modern times the controversies about interdicting images in Islam were brought to the fore by what the international media referred to as "Cartoon Protests". On 30 September 2005, the Dutch daily newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* [The Jutland Post] published an article entitled "Muhammeds ansigt" ["The face of Muhammad"]. The newspaper announced that this publication was an attempt to contribute to the debate regarding criticism of Islam and self-censorship.

The article consisted of twelve cartoons. The one that drew the greatest ire depicted Muhammad with a bomb in his turban. Danish Muslim organizations, who objected to the depictions, responded by holding public protests attempting to raise awareness of Jyllands-Posten's publication. Further examples of the cartoons were soon reprinted in newspapers in more than fifty other countries, further deepening the controversy in a phenomenon commonly referred to as the *Streisand effect*. This was term coined by Michael Masnick in January 2005 at the Techdirt blog site to reflect the unintended availability of censored material as a result of its public censorship. The term itself was coined after the Hollywood actress Barbara Streisand objected to the publishing of the picture of her home. Her attempts to censor the publication of the picture led to increased curiosity in the pictures and subsequently wide availability as more sites published the pictures she does not want. Similarly, when the protests against the cartoons in the Dutch newspaper led to their wider their reproduction even in newspapers that would otherwise ignore them. This led to further protests across the Muslim world, some of which escalated into violence leading to loss of lives and property, especially in Nigeria.

The Streisand effect seemed to metamorphose into larger figurative representation frenzy when in April 2010, after US TV show Comedy Central cut a portion of a South Park episode following the suggestions of a possible death threat from a radical Muslim group based in New York, Seattle cartoonist Molly Norris wanted to counter the fear. She declared May 20th "Everybody Draw Mohammed Day." Norris asked other artists to submit drawings of any religious figure to be posted as part of Citizens Against Citizens Against Humor (CACAH) on May 20th. On her website (which was rapidly altered following protests) Norris explained she was motivated by desire not to disrespect any religion, but rather to protect people's right to express themselves. The idea became viral and became a Facebook community project when two graduate students in Europe started a Facebook page supporting "Everybody Draw Mohammed Day" which, drew more than 65,000 people who liked it within few days of its creation. According to Janet Tu (2010), writing for *Seattle Times*,

> A few days later, though, realizing her cartoon was fueling anti-Muslim sentiments, Norris posted on her website that she never meant to launch a real "Everybody Draw Mohammad

Day" and that "the vitriol this 'day' has brought out is ... offensive to the Muslims who did nothing to endanger our right to expression in the first place. ... I apologize to people of the Muslim faith and ask that this 'day' be called off."

This did not stop the Facebook community, and subsequently created a backlash against Facebook, such as the Pakistani and Bangladesh governments banned the site in their countries in May 2010, and the ban was lifted after Facebook agreed to block the page for users in India and Pakistan. This therefore serves to illustrate the intensity of emotions created in the Muslim public sphere with figurative representations of Prophets, no matter how intentioned. Unlike the Hebrew Bible, there is no commandment against making images of living beings in the Islamic Qur'an. But the Qur'an 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 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 to its authenticity. The 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).

Thus as Goody (1997: 40) analyzed,

> …by and large Islam continues to reject figurative representations, especially in mosques. With few exceptions they were particularly excluded from the sacred space, which confined itself to abstract designs, including the dancing rhythms of arabesques and of calligraphy.

Further, Gocer (1999: 683) attributes this rejection of figurative representation to a myriad of theories, of which were radically opposing and attributed to the influence of Judaism and Islamic resentment of the Byzantine icons.

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 luster-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 for a direct audience with God).

However, non-representational art, especially expressed in form of calligraphy of the Qur'an is totally accepted, with graduating Qur'anic school pupils in northern Nigeria having their graduation wooden slates elaborately and colorfully decorated with border artwork. Other form of Hausa arts are totally divorced from any religious iconography. For instance,

> …in the markets of the northern states [of Nigeria], it is fairly common to find itinerant Hausa men who carve relief patterns into the surface of calabashes. Presumably they work in areas where there is a demand for decorated calabashes and no local talent to satisfy this need (Rubin 1970: 20).

Thus Hausa societies express their art in form of designs on objects—hats, buildings, utensils, but not as three dimensional objects. 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). An example of commonly available art – as in craft-as-art—is shown in Fig. 3.

Fig. 3. Calabash decoration in northern Nigeria

Other forms of artistic expression, particularly dealing with the visual, has had to contend with the strict implementation of Islamic principles in social governance and intercourse, as indicated earlier. However, by the time the censorship regimes started curtailing the production of local films in northern Nigeria, a viewing culture had been cultivated in youth such that other transnational forms of entertainment, particularly those with religious inclinations, started to become more acceptable.

Antecedents and Folk Art
It would appear that to communicate certain *religious* messages, the Islamicate 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 Prophets such as Ali, and later, Sufi Sheiks such as Abdul-Qadir Jailani of Baghdad (founder of Qadiriyya Sufi brotherhood). An example of such posters is given in Fig. 4 which shows the Abrahamic attempted sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:1- 19) or Isma'il (Qur'an, 37:99–113).

Fig. 4 – Depictions of Abrahamic sacrifice.

In this poster two prophets – Abraham and his son are both depicted, and for many years, such posters which serve to illustrate religious incidents in the Qur'an were commonly available in northern Nigeria, with no specific injunctions from any Islamic scholar against them or their circulation.

When media technologies became more readily available, images of local, African, sheikhs became predominant, particularly of the main motivator of the Tijjaniya Sufi brotherhood, Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse (from Koulack, Senegal) who became popular in northern Nigeria in the 1950s. A typical example of his poster is shown in Fig. 5.
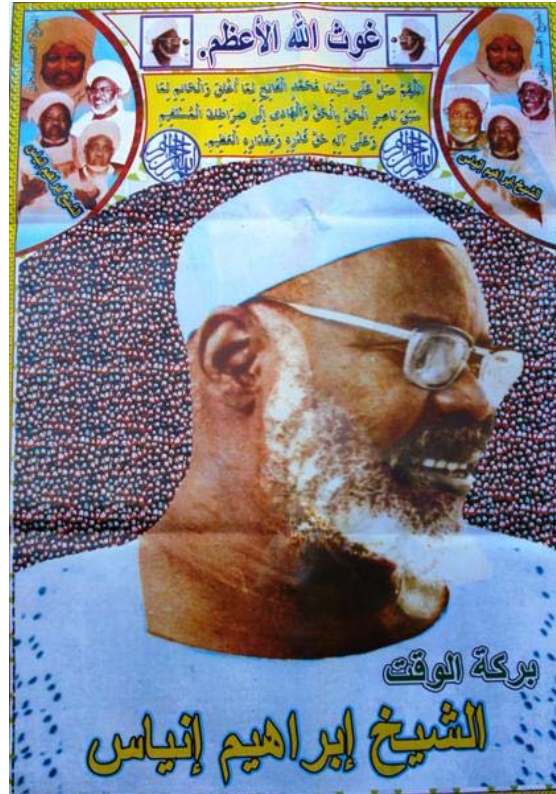

Fig. 5. Sufi brotherhood posters (Tijjaniya) in Kano

Subsequently, and with the Sheikh's open advocacy for embracing media technologies (Larkin 2008), his posters became widely available on shop walls, as stickers on bikes and public transport systems, and on doorways of houses – often as being considered talismamic: his mere image is expected to bring blessings to the object, and in cases of moving objects (e.g. cars), to prevent accidents. However, these were all subsequently seen as innovations (*bid'a*) in Islam in northern Nigeria.

The development of these devotional poster-portraits of Sheiks, which itself paved ways for figurative representation of the next level – prophets – found a ready acceptance in Pakistan where Frembgen (1998:185) noted that "mass-produced portraits of saints become the focus of authentic "lived" experiences.", because "even if modern devotional posters were identified as kitsch, they still would represent a legitimate form of popular culture aesthetics."

However, earlier writings of Muhammad Ibn Hanbal (780-855), the famous Muslim theologian who declared war against the so-called intrusion of foreign influences in Islam inspired later generations of Muslim thinkers, who became known as Neo-Hanbalis, and condemned especially the Sufi orders, popular Islam and the cult of

saints. Notable among the latter Muslim thinkers are Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziya (1292-1350), and Muhammad Ibn 'Abd Al-Wahhab (1703-787). In Nigeria, one of the most prominent disciplines of this critique of Sufism which later became known as Wahhabism was Sheikh Abubakar Gumi (1922-1992) a strong pro-Saudi cleric who used his position as a leading national and international Islamic scholar and cleric and prominence to promote the credo and generally condemn Sufism and its practices—including visual veneration of Sheikhs. This led to the establishment of counter-reform movement, the Izala in northern Nigeria which actively fights against all innovations in Islamic practices (Kane 2003), including pictorial representations and music making.

Moving Violations – Prophets in Movies
Films about the Prophets of the three main Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – have tended to generate controversies – not because of the subject matter of the main messages of the Prophets, but because of the general aversion of the followers to the portrayal of their Prophets in visual forms.

Early versions of the life of Christ indicated uncertainties about how to portray Jesus Christ using the new media technology. The first life of Christ on film was *The Passion Play of Oberammergau* (1898, dir. Henry C. Vincent), 19 minutes long and shot on a roof in New York. In some such films the face of Jesus was not shown, and in fact up to the 1930's the British Film Censor insisted that it be not shown. Other Jesus films such as the first *King of Kings* (1927, dir. Cecil B. DeMille) delighted in the potential for spectacle provided by the Jesus story, but reverence was still a high priority. Nicholas Ray remade *King of Kings* in 1961, but one of the best known and most often seen of the Hollywood versions was *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965, dir. George Stevens). Others included *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1972, dir. Jose 'Pepe' Wenceslao), TV mini-series *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977, dir. Franco Zeffirelli), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988, dir. Martin Scorsese), and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004, dir. Mel Gibson). Their appearances at various stages of Hollywood history was not without its controversies, the greatest being created by Mel Gibson's reading of the life of Jesus Christ.

Judaism had also attracted earlier Hollywood interests, but mainly the life of Moses. *The Ten Commandments* (1956, dir. Cecil B. DeMille) was the first early Hollywood attempt at portraying Jewish Moses on the big screen, and became hugely successful throughout the world, regardless of the faith of the viewers, particularly due to its spectacular special effects, crude as they might seem now in the age of CGI and 3D animations. Coming as it did at the time it was released, it evoked less controversies principally because the idea of a prophetic representation had not sunk in. Subsequent filmmakers generally avoided making films about Moses, such as it was only in 1998 that the *Prince of Egypt* (dir. Brenda Chapman and Steve Hickner), an animated feature on Moses, was released. Responding to this challenge, *The Ten Commandments* was remade also as an animated feature in 2007 (dir. Bill Boyce and John Stronach).

Islamic viewpoint on visual depiction of the Prophets differ according to either Sunni or Shi'a interpretations of Islam. Shi'ites believe that shortly before his death the Prophet Muhammad publicly nominated his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, to be his successor. However, according to Shi'ites, contrary to the expressed wishes of the

Prophet, the community came under the leadership of three of his companions: Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman ibn Affan. It was only as a consequence of the assassination of 'Uthman in 656 that Ali himself was chosen as caliph. Shi'a Islam is the principal religion of Iran, although there are many influences around the world, including northern Nigeria.

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 adolatory. 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.

Shi'a Islam, on the other hand, has a more opposing perspective on the depiction of Prophets in films as well as pictures. In fact, according to Graber (2003:19),

> 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.

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 painting 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).

Consequently, in the Shi'ite interpretation of Islam, figurative representations of the prophets are accepted. This in fact lead to the appearance in 2009 of a TV Series, *The Story of Joseph* (AS)(2009, dir. Farajollah Salahshur) 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.

Fatwas and Prophetic Visuals in Kano
In the summer of 2009 a young Muslim Hausa student studying at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo somehow downloaded the entire *Story of Joseph* TV series on his laptop, and brought it to CD marketers in Kano, the biggest commercial center in northern Nigeria. This download was freely available from www.shiashource.com, and 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 re-recorded the series into eight volume DVDs and released them to traffic light markets common in most urban centers 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 to the narrative was its close reproduction of the socio-cultural realities of Hausa domestic conflicts and psychology. Hausa, like Muslims all over the world, are allowed (but not compelled) to marry more than one wife, up to a maximum of four, although there are conditions that must be fulfilled. As stated in the Qur'an,

> If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, Marry women of your choice, Two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice (Qur'an, Al-Nisa, 4:3).

In cases of two or more wives sharing a common domestic space (although in some other marital configurations the wives can be kept in separate houses, with the husband shuttling between the two dwellings, which could be in the same city or in different cities) tensions may often arise amongst members of the household. 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 rumors going around the city that she tries to seduce him. According to the Qur'anic narrative of her reaction

> When she heard of their malicious talk, she sent for them and prepared a banquet for them: she gave each of them a knife: and she said (to Joseph), "Come out before them." When they saw him, they did extol him, and (in their amazement) cut their hands: they said, "(Allah) preserve us! no mortal is this! this is none other than a noble angel!" (Qur'an 12: 31).

In the Qur'anic telling, the master's wife actually confesses that she lied:

> She said: "There before you is the man about whom ye did blame me! I did seek to seduce him from his (true) self but he did firmly save himself guiltless!.and now, if he doth not my bidding, he shall certainly be cast into prison, and (what is more) be of the company of the vilest!" (Qur'an 12: 32).

Later, Muslim commentators identified the wife as Zuleikha, and she intrigues readers for generations. In the mystical tradition of Islam, Zuleikha becomes a model of chaste passion, a stand-in for the human soul that longs to be united with God. Indeed the struggle between Zuleikha, Joseph and his master was captured in an Egyptian folk-art poster available for years in northern Nigeria, and shown in Fig. 6.

Fig. 6 – Joseph fighting temptation in 1930s Egyptian folk-art poster

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 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 stricter censorship regime. The Story of Joseph 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, the Story of Abraham and also released it to the market.

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 in a human 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 Story of Joseph 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 neighboring States, especially Kaduna and Bauchi where the Shari'a law is implemented along radically different 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, another DVD appeared of the

same Story of Joseph – but with Hausa over-dubbed translations of the over-dubbed Arabic translation of the original Persian dialogue, as seen the picture of the DVD jackets in Fig. 7.
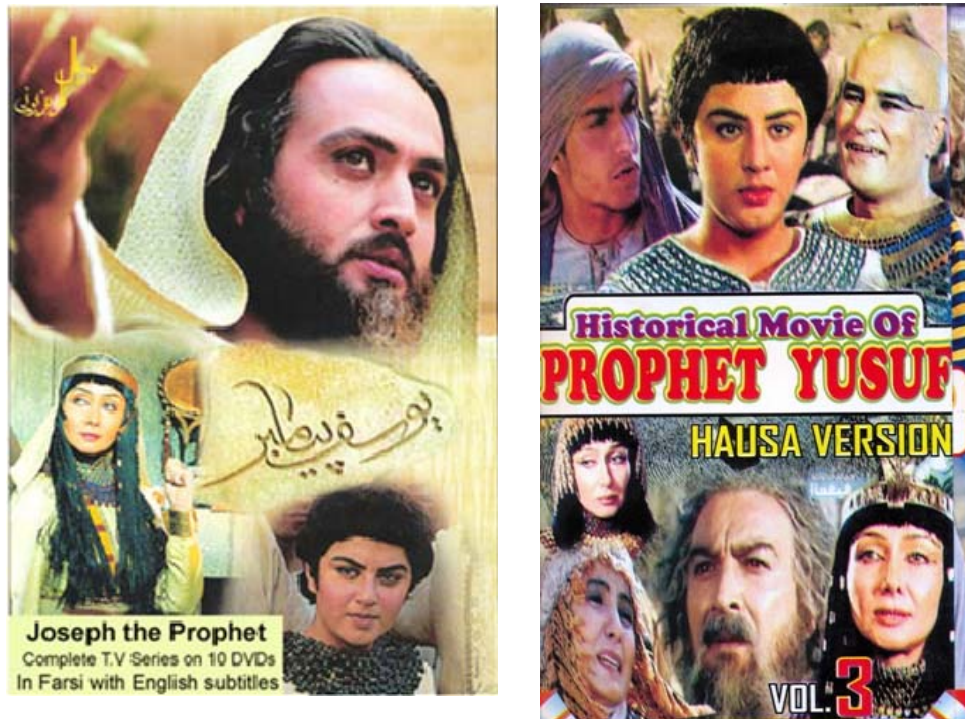

Fig. 7 – Story of Joseph DVDs in Kano markets – Pirated original and dubbed pirated

The banning order in fact seemed to have generated more interest in religious films, because other pirated 'prophet' films also resurfaced; in particular The Story of Abraham and Ten Commandments. 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 for less than a dollar. Other pirated media products with religious themes included a Hausa-language dubbed version of *The Message* (1977, dir. Moustapha Akkad), easily one of the most popular films about Islam—and which pointedly did not show the Prophet Muhammad's image, even though it centered on his life and struggles.

As Brian Larkin pointed out, media piracy in Kano is part of the "organizational architecture" of globalization (Larkin 2004: 289), providing the infrastructure that allows media goods to circulate 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 in Hausa language over-dub is significant in the way such process subverts the original Fatwa of one of the most respected Islamic scholars in Kano.

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 (2010) 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,"

In northern Nigeria, three ways existed to subvert the banning order. The first was a direct purchase of the official DVDs of the TV series via an online gateway located in Tehran and payable via visacard which is 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 legal basis.

The second subversion was via direct Satelite 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 the 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 Prophet Joseph, aware of the controversies the series would generate, enabled it to be uploaded on the Internet video sharing websites. In this way, about 40 ten-minute clips of the series were uploaded on YouTube. And as if aware that viewers could prefer more than just 10 minutes, the uploader, labeled as ProphetYusufMovies, offers full length films the download server Megaupload (offering the film split into five parts, each being about 97MB Windows Media Video (wmv) file with English subtitles; and Megavideo—the latter which enabled watching a full length film from the site. Making the film with an English sub-title took the subvertive 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 non 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 sides. In this case, the prophet Joseph films 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, September 22, 2010.

Seeing the acceptance of the Story of Joseph 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 structure of results that become part of a larger corpus, as well as provide indications of the future experimentation activities.

Experimenting with figural representation in the realm of Hausa visual culture and receptivity thus provides opportunities for observing how such efforts is received within the larger framework of Islamic prohibition of imagery.
Discussing Islamic discourse in the Arab context, Nazih Ayubi (2001) 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 2001:440) 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." (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 analyzing 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 transglobal 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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