Islam and Artistic Response among the Yoruba of Nigeria

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 iconography. However, the arrival of Islam with Islamic culture predated other non-local religious groups and is 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:

Xa is primordial Islam is primeval Christianity crept in the noon of culture

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 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. Islam 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 placed 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 ‘be–longs all that is in the heavens and on earth...’ (S1 11:3, 10) to whom ‘everythings renders worship...’ and to whom ‘is due the profession of the primal origin of the heavens and the earth’ (S2 11:16). 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 religion have been preserved in 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 with 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 Bearded Figure with Leather Sandals. Varieties of this peculiar theme are carved in doors and panels and house posts. It is essentially composed, in addition to the bearded and sandals, of a standing male figure, wearing a long narrow dress (jalabiy) with a pair of trousers. The figure also dons a turban. Carrying a sharp soldier sword with a long strap on his shoulder, he holds a rosary and a spear. This representation of a male figure with turban and sandals appears to have been inspired by 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 earlier bearers of Islam to Yorubaland were associated with the state of Turan and 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 bearded male figure—be–strode of eating and journey long distance indi–cate that they were in some way connected with 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 had no artistic impact on the Yoruba sculptural traditions. Themes associated with Islam are invariably rendered in Yoruba styles. Nonetheless, it has been adopted and integrated into the culture. As a consequence, the few geometric motifs found in Yoruba art appear to be inspired by decora–tions on saddles and other horse riding equipment as well as ornamented swords, reflecting Sudanese influence. Also, the use of Arabic in the Yoruba languages is closely associated with Arabic influence. 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 spread southwards 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 becomes 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 destruc–tion of art. Some Yoruba settlements were despoiled of their valuable artistic treasures. For example, between 1833–1835, on more than one occasion the Fulani ruler of Ilorin sent war parties to Yorubaland. The Arab of Oyo–lie to remove, amongst other things, numerous brass posts and all the masque–rader, costumes. These art objects were de–stroyed, the metal being melted to make cannon balls needed for warfare. It was not unusual, until the last decade of this centu–ry, to find Muslim preachers publicly burn– ing to Muslims. Stylistically, the Arabic inscriptions on saddles and other horse riding equipment are those of other sheikhs of local significance. Photographs, stickers and painted portraits of men of Islam, particularly those of Sheikh Ibrahim Niysa of Kaala (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 through Islam with a much-valued aspect of their culture—visual arts. Its uses indicate that the Yoruba see their art not only as part of an ethnic tradition, but also as a means of identification with foreign influences.