An Art-Historical Analysis of Selected Sacred Sufi Paintings in Kano, Nigeria

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Abstract:
‘Iconoclasm’, which may simply be defined as the destruction of artworks as a result of hatred towards them is a common phenomenon in all the three major Abrahamic desert religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Because Islam frowns at representational art, especially sculptures in the round, many Muslim artists pursue and develop their creativity in the elegant Arabic calligraphic embellishments used to adorn the walls of mosques, palaces and the covers of Islamic books. However, despite the growing nature of iconoclasm amongst mainstream Muslims, the Sufis see no harm in visually and artistically representing their saints and hermits as a way to honour them and seek their barakah (blessings). It is on this basis that this paper examines selected sacred Sufi paintings of Kano, Nigeria. Relying heavily on oral interviews and written sources this paper traces the historical development of sacred Sufi paintings in Kano, Nigeria, focusing largely on the art historical appreciation and contextualization of such paintings. The paper also found out that despite the importance of sacred Sufi paintings in the reconstruction of history, they receive little or no scholarly attention.

Keywords: Sacred, Sufi, Brotherhoods, Iconoclasm, Ain Madi, Qadiriyyah, Tijaniyyah.

INTRODUCTION

The word ‘Sufi’ is of Arabic origin referring to mystics, or hermits in the doctrines of Muslim brotherhoods like the Tijjāniyyah and Qādiriyyah.
Sufi sects, who, find solace and spiritual satisfaction through abstinence, meditation and self-denial (Iqbal, 2001: 83-85) and (Hassan, 2014: 7-8). According to Yahya (2012: 9-11), the words and visual images of the Sufis are considered sacred by their followers. Besides, Solagberu (2009: 5) defines Sufism as a unique esoteric science dealing with the state of the mind and its spiritual purity, which is today equated with piety, especially with the emergence of those who dedicated themselves to the worship of God in this way, popularly known as the Sufis.

On the other hand, Lewis (2010: 155-157), posits that sacred art has a number of principles ranging from mediation, visual representation of the divine, aesthetics not as mere objects of arts, liturgy, and prophecy revealing God’s providence as well as the affirmation of its mother culture. In this sense, the artist of the sacred may possess a strong and unwavering spiritual life, as well as acquire the necessary skills, and unique spiritual communication with both the saviour and His saints whom they are representing artistically and must know the beauty of God and convey it to others through art.

Despite the high level of Muslim iconoclasm, the Sufis believe in representing their saints artistically as against the common views of mainstream Muslims and thus, this paper provides a contextual analysis of such paintings within the Sufi understanding of art and imagery. The paper also raises a number of important questions such as: when did the Sufi figurative paintings emerge in Kano? What are the meanings of these sacred visual representations? Why are the Sufi followers in Kano adorning their houses and marketplaces with such paintings?

**METHOD**

This paper used both primary and secondary data. While the former deals with oral interviews conducted in Kano with Sufi artists, scholars and the people who patronise the Sufi paintings, the latter included written documents ranging from journal articles, and books to unpublished theses and dissertations.

During the fieldwork, which took place from February to November 2019, pictures of the sacred Sufi paintings were taken by the author. Besides, their dimensions, names of artists, year of production and the media used were also documented. The research covers a total number of
three Local Government Areas within the Kano metropolis, which includes; Kano Municipal, Dala and Nassarawa.

The population of the study, which includes artists, Sufi scholars and those commissioning the paintings were purposively sampled. The data obtained were qualitatively analysed. In the collection of the data, however, gadgets such as mobile phones, computers, measurement-tapes, cameras, as well as stationaries were used to record oral interviews, and take photographs of the paintings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Kano Metropolis

Kano State is located between latitude 10-30 N and longitude 740 E and 10-35 E with a total land mass of 20,760 sq kilometres. Kano and its environs, which include eight Local Government Areas are referred to as metropolitan Kano. The City is strategically placed at a mean height of 472-45 feet above sea level (Naniya, 2002: 18.). It is also one of the largest cities in Nigeria demographically and economically. Basically, Kano is blessed with Savanna vegetation and a hot, semi-arid climate. The level of precipitation is about 690mm (27.2in) per year, which becomes heavier from June to September. According to Nasidi (2013: 1), Kano is typically very hot throughout the year, though from December through February, the city is a bit cooler, while nighttime temperatures are cool during the months of December, January and February, which coupled with average low temperatures ranging from 11.0-14.0c.

Garba (1982: 91) avers that Kano state was created on the first of April, 1967 following the 12 states creation during the Biafran war by the federal government so as to weaken the Igbo secessionists. In 1991, Jigawa state was curved out of Kano. Today, Kano has a total number of 44 Local Government Areas (LGAs) out of which 8 are referred to as metropolitan Kano. These LGAs include; Kano Municipal, Dala, Nassarawa, Tarauni, Fagge, Gwale, Kumbotso and Ungogo. The bulk of the State’s population is largely located in the metropolis.

According to Adamu (1999: 57 ) and Naniya (2002: 18) since 999 A.D, Kano been operating a centralized system of administration, which was supported by the contributions of the famous North African migrant scholar, Sheikh Abdulkarim Al-Maghili. In the 14th century, during the
period of Sarki Muhammadu Rumfa (1463-1499), Al-Maghili was said to have published his book on politics, which became the first constitution in the political history of Kano. Due to incessant external aggressions, especially from the kingdom of Maradi, the Ganiuwa (city) was built during the reign of Sarki Tsaraki.

For time immemorial, Kano is widely known for its strong economy, which not only attracts buyers from the Middle East through the famous Trans-Saharan trade. During this period, locally made goods like dyed clothes, leather, feather, pepper, to ginger, among other products, were escorted as far as North Africa and Spain. Apart from agriculture and long-distance trade, blacksmithing, dyeing, leatherworking, and weaving industries also provided goods for local consumption. According to Mubarak (2013: 1), the ancient city of Kano no doubt, has made a positive, but indomitable impression on visitors from Europe being the hub of Hausa manufacturing and commercial city. Heretofore, this view is buttressed by Heinrich (2009:10-20) who described Kano as the ‘African London, Birmingham and Manchester of Africa’.

It was during that Trans-Saharan trade that some Arab and Berber merchants introduced into Kano the sacred paintings. Those paintings were mostly non-figurative and calligraphically composed. Such calligraphies were mostly quotations of verses from the Qur’an for both spiritual security and aesthetics. With this development, the indigenous people began to make a head-way in the sacred arts.

With the establishment of the historic Sokoto Caliphate in 1804, Kano’s financial and commercial strength increased on geometric progression due to its dependence on an extensive agricultural and industrial production in both the city and its environs (Sule, 2011:1-10). The area within a radius of thirty to fifty miles around the city is densely populated, and the soil fertility made it possible, for continuous cultivation. Crops such as onion, pepper, tobacco, etc. were made important export commodities as opposed to grain production. Others are cotton, indigo, cassava and sugar cane.

The presence of a peaceful atmosphere, as well as industrial and agricultural development paved the way for foreign and domestic merchants alike to come from far and wide to invest in Kano’s economy. According to Shea in Lovejoy (1980: 66):
This combination of productive agricultural areas and a society with specialised craftsmen attracted people from other parts of West Africa towards Kano. Those newcomers were people both immigrants and transient and they all played important roles in the development of the city.

The people of Kano are predominantly Hausa and Fulani apart from other ethnic groups like the Tuaregs, Nupe, Fulani, Kanuri, and Yoruba, to mention, but a few, who, migrated from different geographical locations and settled in Kano predominantly, in search of greener pastures (Barkindo, 1983: 40-50). Their population is made of up both skilled and unskilled whose knowledge was used for industrial and economic purposes such as sword and rope making, weaving, building, etc. Some of the migrant communities adopted.

B. The Introduction of Sufi Orders in Kano

Sufism inculcated into its adherents, among many other things, remembrance of God and the attendant concomitance of asceticism and consciousness, abhorrence to worldly life and materialism, absolute love for God and divinity, deep thoughts about the unseen, to mention, but a few (Tahir, 1975). The first Sufi order to have been introduced into Kano was the Qādiriyyah. It was named after a great Islamic scholar, Sheikh Abdulqādir Jilāni. However, the brotherhood was brought to Kano by a North African scholar popularly known as Sheikh Abdulkarim Al-Maghīli in the 15th century during the reign of Sarkin Kano, Muhammadu Rumfa (1463-1499), who made Islam a state religion. Maghīli even wrote for the Sarki, the first constitution in the political history of Kano titled ‘Tāj al-Mulūk’ (The Crown of Kings). The Qādiriyyah is popular among the elites of the Hausaland.

Tijjaniyyah Sufi order, on the other hand, was introduced into Kano in the 18th century by Sheikh Umar al-Futi (Rudiger, 2011; Yunusa, 2015). It first originated from Ahmad al-Tijani, born in 1737 at the oasis of Ain Madi in southern Algeria (Wright, 2020). Unlike the Qādiriyyah, the Tijjaniyyah quickly spread among the commoners and today, it is the biggest Sufi order in Kano because of the large number of its followers (Ousmane, 1997). This was possible as a result of the activities of Sheikh Ibrahim Niass from whom the Emir of Kano, Abdullahi Bayero accepted
the order in the 1930s (Quadri, 1985; Nasidi, 2021).

C. The Advancement of Sacred Sufi Paintings in Kano

Judging by the Islamic injunctions, especially from the Prophetic traditions, visual representation of humans, or animals is (three dimensional artworks) prohibited though there are serious contestations and debates among Islamic scholars about the legality of imagery (Saeed, 2011: 227). This form of iconoclasm as Jari (2007: 1) submits, is not only restricted to Islam, but to Christianity and Judaism. Despite this challenge, many among the Muslims throughout the world began to artistically represent historical narrations in the Qur’an, but mostly two-dimensional. One such Qur’anic narrations is the divine intervention Prophet Ishmael received when Angel brought a big ram on his behalf to Prophet Abraham, his father, when he was about to slaughter the former as instructed in his dream. (See fig. 1).

Figure 1: Unknown artist: Abraham’s slaughter, 1990, Oil on Glass, 236 x 184 cm

Due to the strong nature of Muslim iconoclasm, early Muslim artists focused mainly on Arabic calligraphy and symbolic representations of divinity with centres at Makka, Madinah, Kufa, Basra, Isfahan, and much later in Persia, India and North Africa. Therefore, it was through long-
standing relations between Kano and North Africa that the idea of sacred Islamic arts was introduced.

Historically, Muslim Arabs produce sacred art using calligraphic lettering (both angular and cursive scripts with its different varieties). Such calligraphic works are representations of Qur’anic verses (Muhammad, 2015: 6).

**Figure 2:** unknown artist, *The Opening of the Qur’an*, 2009, Enamel on wall

![Image](http://www.arabiccalligraphy.com)

*Source: [http://www.arabiccalligraphy.com](http://www.arabiccalligraphy.com)*

It should be noted that sacred art originated from Christendom since the middle ages and gradually made headway into Islamic art particularly that of the Sufis and the Shi’ah (Lewis, 2010: 155-157). The Christian sacred art includes the visual representations of Jesus and his disciples, the Virgin Mary, Paradise, and Hell, to mention, but a few. In conformity, the *Sufi* paintings deal with the representations of *Sufi* saints, hermits and some religious Qur’anic scenes.
The fact that the sacred Sufi paintings originated from the European/Christian art is an indication of the level of Muslim iconoclasm as a sign of their obedience to their religious injunctions (Zarcone, 2013: 43-57). Zarcone also states that the first travelogues published by westerners who visited the Ottoman Empire (the largest Muslim Empire established by the Turks in 1299 A.D.) paid attention to the Sufis who perform amazing and mysterious rituals and ascetic practices. He also claims that though during the fourteenth century such European travelogues did not include visual representations of the Sufis, it encompassed some detailed features and activities of the Sufis who were then referred to as ‘Qalanders’, which include; dance of the whirling dervishes, rituals, litanies, among other things. According to him, visual representations emerged in the sixteenth century as contained in Nicholas de Nicolay’s work titled ‘Quatre Premeirs Lives des Navigations et Peregrinations Orientale’, which was published in 1568. He added that Nicholas’s work documented the magical way of the ‘Qalanders’ wearing and bearing unusual spectacular clothes and symbolic artefacts.

Similarly, in 1646, Papas (2012: 129-135) posits that the book of the Christian missionary, Eugene Roger, deals exclusively with pictorial representations of the Sufis whose research influences Ricaud, the British ambassador in the Ottoman Empire where he gives a description of all the Sufi brotherhoods particularly, Qādiriyyah and Naqshbandiyyah. Papas adds that Ricaud’s book is also accompanied by two drawings, which show the orthodox Sufis.

Jong (1989: 7-79) asserts that a classic example of sacred Sufi painting symbolic of the religious practices of their ascetic life is Chez Antoine Bertier’s work composed in 1646. He argues that the clothes worn by the Sufis particularly that made by sewing together pieces of materials of different colours symbolize the level of their abject poverty. Therefore, in Jong’s description of the Ottoman Sufis, Bertier’s painting depicts a saint carrying a knotty stick almost similar to that of Prophet Moses, which carries some spiritual powers.

Despite the emergence of debates on the inherent synthesis between the traditional African and European artistic expressions, especially in painting, the fact remains that modern art/European painting style (especially realism) had impacted positively on the sacred
Sufi paintings in Kano. This is based on the use of media, styles and techniques. The sacred Sufi paintings of Kano originated from the Senegalese sacred figurative arts of Sheikh Amadou Bamba. This visual tradition was later borrowed and adopted by Nigerian visitors to the residence of Sheikh Ibrahim Niass in Kaolak, whom they regarded as the greatest and the most influential Sufi saint in the 20th century. More often than not, he is the most glorified person in Sufi painting, prose and poetry not only by the Nigerians, but throughout the world.

Typical example of such borrowed Senegalese sacred paintings are representations of Sheikh Amadou Bamba, a pacifist and a Sufi mystic, who, fought vehemently against the French colonial government. He is mostly represented in white garments, with either a rosary, or the holy book in his hand. In such paintings, his miracles are depicted in the highest possible order, which no doubt, entices the followers of his Sufi brotherhood apart from raising in them, the spirit of nationalism.

Therefore, the sacred Sufi paintings are mostly narrative, depicting the portraits of Tariqah (brotherhoods) saints like Ahmad al-Tijjānī, Abdulqādir Jilānī, and Sheikh Ibrahim Niass, among others. Thus, artists, especially roadside ones began their career in Kano as sacred Sufi painters in the 1940s decorating the houses, shops and vehicles of the followers of both the Tijjāniyyah and Qādiriyyah Sufi orders. They use a variety of media like enamel and oil.

D. Discussion and Analysis

The sacred Sufi Paintings though religiously inclined, play different roles ranging from social, economic, or even political. This same view was supported by Isa (2015: 243) who argues that the Sufi paintings are believed to provide both spiritual and material security to the Sufi adherents, especially those commissioning such paintings. For instance, some adherents commission artists for the Sufi paintings on the walls of their houses so as to be protected from evil due to the elevated positions of their saints before God, the Almighty. However, others preferred them in front of their shops in market places, which they believe will boost their income earnings. To others, the paintings only serve as a way of showing and celebrating their religious identity in relations to their brotherhood(s). However, others consider it as a way of reminding
people of the presence of such great pious religious figures who have flourished in the realms of history. To politicians, they commission artists for the Sufi paintings, especially the Tijāniyyah so as to wins their votes during elections.

**Figure 3:** Ado Abdu, *Sheikh Nasir Kabara*, 2000, Paint on Wall 157x182 cm

This is the portrait of Sheikh Nāsir Kabara (1925-1996), a leading scholar and a saint of the Qādiriyyah brotherhood not only in Kano but in the entire West-African sub-region. He is captured putting the glorious Qur’an on his head while holding a rosary for litanies in his left hand. In the negative area, the artist uses neutral colours; black as the background and white as a means of writing the saint’s name (Sheikh Nāsir Kabara) in *Magribi* Arabic calligraphy (Abdullahi, 2019; Yankaba, 2020; Abubakar, 2020). Using the hue of green, the artist achieves a level of value, while
the use of light brown in both the positive and the negative areas, as well as red for the Qur’an gives the composition a sense of variety, which entails unity.

It should be noted that this painting serves as a reminiscence of the historical events that took place amongst the Kano religious figures of different denominations, or sects (Matbuli, 2020). There are basically three major denominations; Tijāniyyah, Qādiriyyah and Izāla, each with a divergent view on certain religious practices including theology and matters related to belief. Therefore, after a very hot discussion on matters related to religion, Sheikh Nasir Kabara put the glorious Qur’an on his head and swore before his people that his brotherhood is the only right way to salvation. From that moment onwards, the picture taken was used as posters on vehicles and also painted on walls by Sufi painters.

**Figure 4:** Abdulkadir Jiyali, *Sheikh Abdulqādir and the Lion*, 1993, Oil on Wall, 379x233cm

*Source: Narsidi, 2018*

Here, the artist painted the portrait of Sheikh Abdulqādir Al-Jilān, the founder of the Qādiriyyah brotherhood in the 13th century A.D. He is
standing with a book in his hands, probably the holy Qur’an, while some inches in front of him, is his lion lying down. He is dressed in his traditional Arab attire typical of religious leaders. Meanwhile, he wears a white Arabian turban. Slightly above his left shoulder is the silhouette of Sheikh Ibrahim Niass, the greatest leader of the Tijāniyyah brotherhood, especially in the 20th century. Downwards is the name of Allah and Muhammad, His messenger in a typical Thuluth Arabic script.

In the composition on figure 4, a level of value is achieved through the use of chiaroscuro. Due to the absence of an eye-level, the figures on the plain seem to be flying in the sky. This if not a result of the mediocrity of a road-side artist, then it can be attributed to the miracles of the Sheikh, which he has showcased during his life time. It is a well-known fact that Al-Jilān reared a lion in his house during his life time due to his piety and miracles, which are represented here artistically (Haido, 2020). Meanwhile, the presence of Niass in the work of Qādiriyyah adherent symbolizes their yearnings for a form of unity with the followers of Tijāniyyah, particularly with the incessant religious criticisms of the Izāla against the two Sufi brotherhoods.

**Figure 5:** Abdulkadir Ijali, *Sheikh Ahmad Tijjani*, 1993, Oil on Wall, 299x134 cm

![Image of Sheikh Ahmad Tijjani](source: Narsidi, 2018)

Figure 5 depicts Sheikh Ahmad Tijjâni (1737-1815), the founder of the Tijjâniyyah brotherhood clasping his hands. Being a barber from
Algeria in North Africa, he dresses in their traditional attire, especially the one used by Muslim scholars. He also wears a white turban. Lying on his chest is a big rosary for Wird (litanies) with which he sought piety and proximity to God. Slightly in front of him is his antelope.

The use of neutral and green colours gives the work a sense of variety, the peak of which is unity. Besides, green has a special place in the midst of Sufis, which is considered to be symbolic of piety, spiritual elevation and prosperity.

It should be clear that Ahmad Tijjāni is generally considered the highest Sufi, especially among the followers of the Tijjāniyyah brotherhood. Like Abdulqādir Al-Jilān who reared a lion, he on the contrary, reared an antelope that was permanently attached to him (Faira, 2020). This could not be unconnected to his sainthood and miracles. This is because according to some oral traditions, he was once fed by an antelope as a baby when his mother left him crying.

**Figure 6:** Salisu Sa’id Alasan, *Unity*, 2004, Paint on Wall, 195x406 cm

In the composition on figure 6, the artist represented the images of four great Sufi saints. Starting from the left is Sheikh Abul-Fath of
Maiduguri, Ahmad Tijāniyyah (the founder of the order), Sheikh Ibrahim Niass of Senegal and lastly, Shekh Tijāni Uthman of Zangon Bare-Bari of Kano. Dominance is given to the work by applying orange, which is a bright colour to the founder of the brotherhood so as to show his elevated position among the rest. Besides, it also gives the work a variety as compared to blue, green and white. The projected pose of Sheikh Ibrahim Niass justifies the fact that he is truly the heir apparent of Sheikh Ahmad Tijāniyyah (Rashid, 2020).

Based on the Sufi semiotics of colour, the white symbolizes the cleanliness of both the body and the mind, while the blue in the background stands for the unity of the Sheikhs despite their ethnic and cultural diversities. It also means that for a follower’s own faith to be complete, he has to accord respect to all the Sufi saints, not just the one he prefers, or the one who comes from his cultural setting.

CONCLUSION

This paper provided a contextual analysis of some selected sacred Sufi paintings, as well as their historical evolution with particular reference to three selected Local Government Areas of Kano Metropolis. The paintings included the portraits of Sheikhs Abdulqādir Al-Jilan, Ahmadu Tijjāni, Ibrahim Niass, Abul-Fath, Nāsir Kabara and Tijjani Uthman. Apart from their aesthetical values, the paper justified the fact that the sacred Sufi paintings are commissioned by Sufi adherents for various reasons viz. Spiritual and physical protection, material prosperity, remembrance of saints and their sainthood, political mobilization, among other important things.

Despite the growing rate of iconoclastic tendencies of mainstream Muslims, this paper showed how the followers of the Sufi orders, especially the Tijaniyyah idolised, as well as immortalised their saints. The paper also made an attempt to explain the semiotic meanings of colours in the Sufi visual culture, which is quite different from what is obtainable in the secular world.

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