

IN-BETWEEN THE “ELITE” AND THE “PAGAN”: QUR’ĀNIC BOARDS FROM WEST AFRICA

This article is a study of illumination and graphic canons that accompany the textual message of the Qur’ān in West Africa (geographical region of Sahel (Sāḥil) and a part of Sahara). Wooden Qur’ānic boards are widely used across this region in the traditional Qur’ānic schools — *madrasa*, *muhadras*, *makarantar allo*; they reflect an interesting ethnographic context out of which an indigenous artistic style has developed. Understanding such context assists in the reading of the Qur’ānic ornaments and strengthens my more general claim for a dialectal development of the Islamic art which is at work in the Qur’ānic scripts.

Calligraphy of North and West Africa continues the *maghribī* writing system as pertains to the letter shapes and the diacritics. Despite the cursive qualities of major scripts, one can provisionally call them *maghribī*, whereas the ornaments are distinct examples from the larger African cultural repertoire. More than any calligraphic manuscript, the Qur’ānic board enshrines the history of the scripts and of ornamentation, but it is also an integral element in the “pagan” initiation, whereas the Qur’ānic schooling functions as an important element in one’s initiation as a Muslim believer. Qur’ānic ornamentation (*sūra*-divisions and *sūra*-headings, *‘unwāns*, margins, ornaments on binding, Qur’ānic sacs and study boards) presupposes “pagan” provenance whereby a decorated wooden board serves as an intermediary between the human world and the world of the spirits. The board is an object of initiation; it is used in rituals (such as wedding) and healing magic. The board visualizes a dialogue between the religion of Muslim elite and the popular forms of paganism. The material culture of African peoples exhibits similarity of motives (*adinkra*, *zayyana*, etc.) and of colours — in textile, ceramics, leatherwork and the interior decorations. The Mediterranean and the Sub-Saharan Africa have long been interconnected by the caravan routes of the Touaregs. Decorative art of the Touaregs and the handicraft of the Berber women (the ceramics and the terracotta from the Musée du quai Branly) point to the unity in the artistic repertoire among African Muslims as an ongoing cultural tradition.

The comparative analysis of the Qur’ānic boards from North and West Africa draws on the collections

from the following museums: Nasser D. Khalili and Sam Fogg (London, UK), Brooklyn Museum of Art (New York City, USA) (*figs. 1–4*), Musée du quai Branly (Paris, France) (*figs. 5–7*), Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (St. Petersburg, Russia). Qur’ānic boards from Morocco and Algeria are characterized by ordered composition and symmetry in the tradition of early illuminated Qur’āns, whereas boards from West Africa feature a more geometric and primitive design, with some animistic motives and zodiac symbols. Such iconography can be traced back to the pagan ceremonies and carnivals — as in the ritual masks and initiation objects from Mali, the ancient petroglyphs and the contemporary graffiti (*fig. 8 [1]*). Symbolic depictions of the Qur’ānic boards can be observed in the rock images from Marghi region (South of Nigeria).

In Sub-Saharan Africa the Qur’ānic manuscripts basically fall into two types: (i) student drafts and (ii) well-done (decorated) copies that are used in mosques or are given by people as gifts. The two groups differ in the ornamentation as well as in the script. The latter group represents what I call the “elite” tradition, but I put “elite” and “pagan” in quotation marks in need of better terms. I also move away from the traditional anthropological *official vs. popular* and *sacred vs. profane* distinction because in West Africa, it appears to me, these play out less rigidly. By way of theory, I am inclined to use Bakhtin’s idea about the “dialogic” interplay between the “high” and the “low” elements of culture in art. There are two dialogical facets to the Qur’ānic script and the ornament: (i) the sacred, elite, superior, and divine, and (ii) the earthly, human, and ritualistic.

The African Qur’ānic board denies the popular art-historical assertion that Islamic art “preaches” iconoclasm visually. In the countries of Islamic Africa, and to a larger extent in West Africa as opposed to the Central Islamic lands, an important ideological aspect of Islamic religion is sublated, namely the continuing battle with idolatry and paganism, which includes the use of the artistic vehicle. In other words, the Qur’ānic board redeems idolatry.

In this paper the Qur’ānic board is viewed as a material demonstration of how the Islamic component pene-