

## **An Appraisal of Islam and its Influence on Mimetic Arts in the College of Education, Azare, Bauchi State**

**ADEYEMO, Peter Adewole**

Fine and Applied Arts Department

Aminu Saleh College of Education, Azare, Bauchi State, Nigeria

**&**

**SALIU, Ahmed Rufai, (Ph.D.)**

Professor, Department of Fine Arts

Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria

### **Abstract**

This paper appraises the influence of Islam on mimetic arts at the College of Education, Azare, as a result of the religious faith in Islam that figurative depictions, especially of living beings, are not allowed by Allah. Consequently, many sculptural works have been demolished on this stance. Relevant literature reviewed revealed that, figurative art is not repulsive to Islam except if it is aroused by idolatry. The study employed a qualitative methodology using historical and survey approaches to investigate the opinions of the sampled Muslim staffers and stance of Islamic writ on mimetic arts. Both primary and secondary sources of data were utilised. Findings showed that, figurative arts, in any form, are unacceptable because representations of human beings and animals are seen as idolatry, thus considered detestable deeds by many Muslims. The paper concludes that seminars and conferences should be regularly organised by the Department of Fine Arts to sensitise the College community on the essence of arts generally, especially in sculpture, in order to let the community know that such art works are purely for aesthetics and educational purposes and therefore, not to oppose or insult any religious belief.

**Keywords:** Religion, Islam, Quran, Hadith, Mimetic Arts, Fine Arts, Faith.

### **Introduction**

Religion is a controversial subject that is complex in nature, even in religious studies. A number of modern scholars of religion have commented on the difficulty of defining what religion really is. Over the centuries, according to Connelly (1996),

influential thinkers have offered their own definitions, with greater or lesser degrees of assurance, but virtually all of these definitions have been found wanting by the majority of other scholars. In some cases, it is observed that the definitions are too narrow, defining religion in terms of the speaker's religious beliefs or those of his or her culture and tending to exclude the religious beliefs of other cultures. In other cases, the definitions are so vague and inclusive that they do not sufficiently delimit religion from other areas of human thought such as psychology, law, economics, and physics among others.

In spite of these, Hornby (2015) avers that, religion means “the belief in the existence of a god or gods, and the activities that are connected with the worship of them.” Gadby (1995) and Butler (2003) attest to the foregoing, while Mohammad (2008) posits that, “by defining religion as a sacred engagement, with what is taken to be a spiritual reality, makes it possible to consider the importance of religion in human life, without making claims about what it really is, or ought to be.” Based on the preceding definitions therefore, religion can be described as a fundamental set of beliefs, feelings, dogmas and practices, generally agreed upon by individuals or group of people, concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, and involving devotional and constant ritual observances, which invariably determine the relations between humans and divinity. They also often contain moral codes governing the conduct of human affairs.

There are different existing religions in the world, such as Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism, Sikhism, Baha'ism and other African Traditional religions, among others. This paper, however, focuses on Islamic religion. [ReligionFacts.com](http://ReligionFacts.com) (2017) holds that, Islam (Arabic for “submission”) is a monotheistic faith based on revelations received by the Prophet Muhammad in 7<sup>th</sup> century Saudi Arabia. It is currently the second largest religion in the world, with about 1.6 billion followers. *The Merriam Webster's Dictionary* (2008) also concurs with the above. The teachings of Islam, therefore, are premised mainly on the Prophet's sayings or deeds (*Ahmadiyya Muslim Community*, 2001). Sequel to this, there is a firm belief in Islamic teachings that the production of images of God's creation is evil because such could induce worship, which is against the message of *Tawhid* [the oneness of God] (*Muslim Art*, 2008).

Hence, there are lots of excuses why mimetic arts, mainly sculptures, are either removed or totally destroyed in many societies, and most times, this act is motivated by religious and political factors. The destructions of a Horse rider's statue at Maiduguri roundabout in Borno State, Mama Tapgun's statue in the main market of Jos, in Plateau State in 2008, the statue of a Fulani milk maiden (milk hawker) at Gyadi'Gyadi in Kano, in the 80s, and the removal of Awolowo's statue from the Government House, Ibadan, in 2004, are typical examples among others.

The religious belief, which is the gist of this paper, that evil spirits (*jinn*) can possess the forms of such sculptures to unleash evil upon the host community and

also, that the makers of sculptural works, seek to rival Allah, are largely responsible for the destructions of many sculptures in many places. Nevertheless, it is learnt that, early Islamic practitioners had figurative arts (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2008). In fact, Burley (2010) affirms that, looking at Islamic art from the seventh century to the present day, in all media – ceramics, glass, painting, metalwork, and across the world, from Syria and Iraq to China, Islamic art reveals figurative representations. However, the author posits that, it is not allowed in a religious space, but it is not forbidden in secular space. So, this makes one wonder the cause of opposition and disregard for the aesthetic relevance and other functions of sculptures.

The concern of this paper therefore, is the belief, within Islamic circles, that figurative representations are forbidden by Allah and hence, its influence in the College of Education, Azare, Bauchi State, Nigeria. The objective is to examine the influence of Islam on mimetic sculptures, investigate the attitudes of Muslims towards figurative expressions in sculpture, and ascertain the position of Islamic injunctions or writs over figurative arts. The methodology employed is qualitative, using historical and survey approaches. Both primary and secondary sources were adopted for the purpose of data collection, and the population of the study is the Muslim staff with Higher National Diploma (HND) as minimum educational qualification, using purposive sampling technique.

### **Overview on the Background of the Study**

In 1977, the College of Education, Azare (formerly known as Advanced Teachers' College, Azare) was founded by the Bauchi State Government, a little after the State was carved out of the then North Eastern State in 1976 (*College Handbook*, 2005), with the Department of Fine and Applied Arts as one of its pioneer departments. Academic activities in the Department started in 1978 with Painting, Sculpture, Graphics and Ceramics units in full operation. This included a sculpture garden that was set up in 1979 for the final year students' practical projects. Ironically, in 1992, fourteen (14) years after, the sculpture garden of the department was suddenly pulled down by some Muslim students, on the ground that the Fine Arts Department was turning the school to an abode of idols, which is considered a sin against Allah. Since then, no sculpture of any form can be found in the entire College campus, solely because of this opinion.

It is generally believed that, the Qur'an truly gives a stern warning against idol worship, as seen in chapters 14:35 and 22:30, that the faithful should abstain from it. Similarly, the *Hadith* (compiled traditions or sayings of Prophet Muhammad) also made mention of this position. Theologically, the *Hadith* is considered by the *ulama* (learned class/Islamic scholars) to be a body of knowledge second in authority to the Qur'an itself, and its influence on the faithful is undeniable. The prohibition of figurative art therefore, is a matter of orthodox theologians' attitude and not an Islamic doctrine (Kamali, 2001 and Sakili, 2006).

Typical commentaries of many writers on the arts of sub-Sahara Africa, also stressed the negative disposition of Islam with respect to traditional arts in West Africa. For instance, Bascom, Trowell and Fagg, in Adeyemo (2012) notes, many cultures that had artistic traditions in the past, no longer retain them because of the encroachments of Islam and its uncompromising iconoclastic stance, and are thus, pessimistic about the survival of traditional arts that are basically sculptures.

To buttress the above, Mbahi (1985), Oloidi and Heathcotein Gutip (1995) and Adepegba (1995) conclude that, Islam is hostile to sculpture in Nigeria. Kuhnel in Adeyemo (2012) further points out that, the extent of the prohibition, on the representation of living creatures has been exaggerated; as it does not appear in the Qur'an, but in the *Hadith*, and for this reason alone, it is not dogmatically binding on all Muslims. Meanwhile, Willett in Adeyemo (2012) observes that, since Islam discourages the representations and encourages instead, elaborate ornamental designs, yet one finds many Muslims in Africa, whose arts are not entirely non-representational. However, as Kamali (2001) also notes, figurative and pictorial representations are not repugnant to Islam. It is repugnant only when it is motivated by idolatry. Even in Christianity, the Holy Bible in Exodus 20:4-5 confirms that God is against idolatry and not art per se whose aim is decorative.

### **Appraisal of Islam and Attitudes of Muslims towards Figurative Arts**

Bearing in mind that figurative art portrays any form of art that retains strong references to the real world, especially to the human figure, then, it presupposes that the influence of Islam in the attitudes of Muslims, towards figurative arts in the College of Education, Azare, is not in doubt, hostile. This stems from the presumed religious belief that representational arts signify idolatry, and consequent upon this, majority of the Muslims are of the view that such works of art, cannot be entertained or kept within the College campus, to avoid attracting the fury of Allah, upon the host community.

The Muslim community maintains they have no problem with art works in the College, if the works conform to the Islamic teachings. In Islam, as buttressed by them, there is an unquestionable loyalty and strict obedience to God and His Prophet. It was disclosed that, such art works that are representational in nature, are only kept by infidels, who are idol worshippers. It is believed that the sculpting of Allah's creations in three dimensional forms can hinder divine visitation of supernatural beings, such as angels.

These beliefs therefore, reflected the negative attitudes of almost all the Muslims in the College towards representational arts, hence the destruction of the sculpture garden of the College in 1992, as earlier narrated. A close observation of the reactions and opinions of the sampled Muslims about sculptures, especially on figurative aspect, shows a high degree of resentment for this form of artistic expression. Some Muslim adherents are alleged to have even vowed to ruthlessly deal

with anyone who attempts to erect any form of representational arts again, in the College.

Nonetheless, looking beyond the shores of Africa for example, the Taliban regime of Afghanistan, in the Southwest Asia, that proclaimed itself as the champions of Islam, had at one time proposed, and indeed, went ahead to destroy the historical statues and monuments of Afghanistan in 2000. In a reaction to the destruction of these aforementioned, a professor of Islamic Law and Jurisprudence observed that, the Taliban misinterpreted both Islam and the realities of Afghanistan, and that no one with a secure grasp of Islamic fundamentals can defend this fanaticism in Islam's name. Islam forbids the destruction of priceless national wealth, as long as it is not conducive to idolatry (Kamali, 2001).

From this view, it is deduced that, even if the relics in question are seen as Buddhist idols, Islam does not impose a duty on anyone to destroy them, unless there is a proof that they have been turned into an instrument of idolatry. The same logic could be inferred in the case of the College of Education, Azare, where the works are meant purely for educational purposes.

### **Stance of Islamic Writ over Mimetic Arts**

Mimesis is seen as a basic theoretical principle in the creation of art. The word is of Greek origin and it means “imitation”. Plato and Aristotle spoke of mimesis as the representation of nature. According to Plato, in *The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2017), all artistic creation is a form of imitation: that which really exists (in the “world of ideas”) is a type created by God; the concrete things man perceives in his existence are shadowy representations of this ideal type. Therefore, an artist, by skilfully selecting and presenting his material, may purposefully seek to “imitate” the action of life.

Going by the preceding, it will appear also that, the Qur'an does not explicitly prohibit visual representation of human and animal figures in artistic forms, except where such visual representation is linked with the worship of such objects. Nonetheless, the prohibition of figurative art (aniconism) is found within some *Hadith*, such as *Al-Bukhari*, Muslim and *Al-Tirmidhi*. Many Muslims quoted traditions that were narrated by Aisha in *Bukhari* Vol.9, No. 646 and *Sahih Muslim* Vol.3, No. 5268 to justify their rejection of figurative arts. These *Hadiths* attempt to show an important link between figurative arts and the dangers of associating partners or equals to the creator. In another *Hadith*, it was disclosed how the Prophet Mohammed, physically took steps in destroying a piece of fabric, which portrayed images of animals (*Bukhari* Vol.8, No. 130).

Although, the Qur'an does not contain this prohibition as mentioned earlier, based on the foregoing traditions from the *Hadith*, if critically examined and as explained within this context, do not tolerate the making and use of images. Meanwhile, during the interviews with some Muslims, they revealed that the *Hadith*

are many, and in different versions, and compiled by different scholars. It was also noted by some of them, that some of the *Hadith* were written by enemies of Islam, or those that were half-baked in the Islamic knowledge, just to suit their own purposes. Thus, the most reliable accounts, as noted, are the ones narrated by the Prophet's Companions, or those that are closer to them, and compiled by Islamic scholars.

It is perceived that, this could be the reason for the variations in the traditions of Islamic sects, as there are many different sects in Islam today than ever existed. Such sects include *Izala*, *Sunni*, *Sufi*, *Tijjaniya*, *Shite*, *Qadiriya*, *Ahmadiyyat*, *Boko Haram*, among others, with diverse philosophies and belief systems, within Islamic doctrines, based on individual sect's understanding, therefore making such belief systems debatable.

Furthermore, oral tradition has emphasised that, in Islam, there is a basic distinction between the Creator and the creation; this includes the prophets of Islam being mere creations of the Creator. So, the danger of creating images of the prophets, such as Mohammed, is that, it may divert the worshippers' attention away from the true messages of Islam. This belief, according to Eyo in Adeyemo (2012), really contradicts the general belief, on the essence of sculpture in the traditional days; before the advent of Islam. The main essence of making sculptures in traditional African society was religion. From this view therefore, it becomes obvious that, the main reason or perhaps one of the reasons behind the prohibition of figurative arts in Islam, is the fear of turning the sculptures into objects of worship. The opinion of Afghan (2009), attests to this that, the condemnation of figurative arts - representations of faces and animals, is aimed at avoiding the creation of any likenesses of God. This convention was vital in Islam's early centuries, when idol worship was rampant in Arabia. Early Muslim theologians feared that people would not distinguish between God and idols. To uphold God's supremacy, depicting figures was discouraged.

However, few Muslims are apathetic to images or pictures, as long as; they are not for worship, which are generally repulsive to Islamic faith. An example is a Muslim's remark during an interview, citing a *hadith*-cum-legal maxim of Islamic law that, "acts are to be judged by their intentions." So he stressed that, when the Prophet Muhammad destroyed the idols in *Ka'bah*, it was for a specific purpose, which he made known at the time.

Likewise, Rice in Adeyemo (2012) also argues about the origin of this ban on representation of living figures, because no verse in the Qur'an forbids it, though it is questionable, whether this hostility was formulated before the ninth century A.D. It is imperative also to note that, some Muslim scholars interviewed affirm that, all the chapters in the Qur'an that speak concretely against representation, connected it with worship and such can be found in the following chapters of the Qur'an: 2:53;190, 3:49, 5:88;92;110, 6:21;72;74;104;108;148;149, 9:1, 14:35, 15:88, 29:25, and so on. The *Hadith* from *Sahi Bukhari*, *Muslim* and *Al-Tirmidhi* however, report the

warnings and curses placed on those who make images or paint pictures of any creature by Prophet Muhammad. It was further explained that, the *Hadith* deals with exegesis of the Qur'an and thus, explains in detail all the summarised Qur'anic texts that are vague.

Nevertheless, it was pointed out that, under extreme condition, some forbidden things in Islam, become permissible, such as on medical or health, educational, legal grounds and so forth. For example, a dead animal is forbidden in Islam, but permissible during war or miasma, if that is the only available food at that particular time. It becomes permissible for such a believer to eat in order to keep or sustain his life for the period. Based on this, it appears that, some Muslims are not offended about figurative art, once it has nothing to do with worship.

The writers are persuaded by the sheer strength of these arguments, and in their own opinion, one cannot specifically be sure, when the statements on prohibition were first gathered in official legal texts, but the earlier arguments put forward by some Muslims that, they did not occur before the second half of the eight century and the view of Rice in Adeyemo (2012), appear convincing enough, within this documentation. This is because, to a greater extent, in the field of pictorial representation, according to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2008), animal and human figures were tolerated, if they were confined to private apartments and harems of palaces. So, from this, it is deduced that early Islam had figurative art. Also, this view of the respondent above, if critically scrutinised, attests to the position of Kamali (2001) that, custom ('urf) is a recognized source of law and jurisdiction in Shari'a. When the community at large accepts a practice that does not contradict any of the clear injunctions of the Shari'a, it becomes permissible. The author posits further that, some Muslim jurists have, in recent years, issued verdicts (fatwas) declaring photography permissible for this reason. This is because photography has now become a ubiquitous practice among Muslims everywhere. Nor are there objections to using images and representations, as the author concludes, for a useful purpose, such as presenting them as evidence in a judicial dispute.

This logic therefore, can also be likened to the exhibition of such images in art studios, galleries and museums. Such exhibitions have become an integral part of the common experience of some Muslims, and are thus, accepted as a general custom, in almost all Muslim communities, most especially in the entire south-west and parts of south-south of Nigeria. Such communities include Lagos, Ibadan, Benin, Auchi, just to mention but a few, and even among some individuals and institutions in certain parts of the northern states.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the assessment, analysis, discussion and findings of the study, the study has validated the repugnance of many Muslims against representational arts. The study, also, discovered that majority of Muslims in College of Education, Azare, have

internalized the feelings and opinions against mimetic or figurative arts and thus, become difficult to change. This is largely due to a fixated mindset about the teaching of Islam on the subject-matter, without regards to the realities of contemporary society. However, the discouragement in figurative art has enabled the few Muslims, who are artists, art enthusiasts, connoisseurs and patrons, to look into other means of expressing and enjoying the intricate nature of the Creator and the creation, the physical and spiritual. These categories of aforementioned Muslims have thus fulfilled, and are still fulfilling, their desires in arts via the expressions in the form of abstract art, and also through the complexity of geometric patterns.

In view of the foregoing, the study recommends that, mimetic or figurative aspect of arts should be avoided in the College, and encourages non-representational arts instead. Also, the Department of Fine Arts should organise seminars periodically or conferences annually, as the case may be, to sensitise the College about the essence of arts generally and especially, in the areas of sculpture and painting, so as to let the community know that such art works are purely for aesthetics and educational purposes and therefore, not to oppose or insult any religious beliefs.

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