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

This article is a study of illumination and graphic canons that accompany the textual message of the Qurʾān in West Africa (geographical region of Sahel (Sahil) and a part of Sahara). Wooden Qurʾānic boards are widely used across this region in the traditional Qurʾānic schools—madrasas, muthaldas, makarantar alfa; they reflect an interesting ethnographic context out of which an indigenous artistic style has developed. Understanding such context assists in the reading of the Qurʾānic ornaments and strengthens my more general claim for a dialectical development of the Islamic art which is at work in the Qurʾānic 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 provocatively board them aloud, the whereas the ornaments are distinct examples from the larger African cultural repertoire. More than any calligraphic manuscript, the Qurʾānic board is the artifice of the script and of ornamentation, but it is also an integral element in the “pagan” initiation, whereas the Qurʾānic schooling functions as an important element in one of the key traditions of a Muslim believer. Qurʾānic ornamentation (ṣūra-divisions and šurṣa-headings, ṣūrawār, margins, ornaments on binding. Qurʾānic sacs and study boards) presupposes “pagan” provenance whenever, whether in a better sense, the inter-inferio others, 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 (đinku, ṣuyuwa, etc.) and of colours — in textile, ceramic, leatherwork and the interior decorations. The Mediterranean and the Sub-Saharan Africa have long been both shapes of the Islamic caravans of the Touaregs. Decorative art of the Touaregs and the handcraft of the Berber women (the ceramics and the terracotta from the Musée du quai Branly) point to the unity in artistic repertoire among African Muslims as an ongoing cultural tradition.

The comparative analysis of the Qurʾānic 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). Qurʾānic boards from Morocco and Algeria are characterized by ordered composition and symmetry in the tradition of early illuminated Qurʾāns, whereas boards from West Africa feature a more geometric and primitive design, with some anisometric motifs and zodiacal symbols. Such iconography can be traced back to the pagan ceremonies and traditions — as in the ritual masks and initiation objects from Mali, the ancient petroglyphs and the contemporary graffiti (figs. 8 [1]). Symbolic depictions of the Qurʾānic boards can be observed in the rock images from Marghi region (South of Nigeria).

In Sub-Saharan Africa the Qurʾānic manuscripts basically fall into two types: (i) studia dura 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 and popular and sacred vs. profane distinction. 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 Qurʾānic script and the ornament: (i) the sacred, elite, superior, and divine, and (ii) the earthly, human, and ritualistic.

The African Qurʾānic 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 Islamic vehicle. In other words, the Qurʾānic board re-deems idolatry.

In this paper the Qurʾānic board is viewed as a material demonstration of how the Islamic component penetrate into the traditional pagan culture and not vice-versa as it is customary to think. I claim that the Qurʾānic board is an important artifact in the development of the material culture of the Qurʾān. I trace the route by which the Qurʾānic board made its way into West Africa through the Maghreb, the practical and the decorative aspects of this journey. Just like the Qurʾānic kāfīf script, this manuscript tradition entered West Africa fairly early, before the 10th century AD. Also later during the Middle Ages, trade routes (nominal) were instrumental in bringing the manuscripts to the remote regions of Africa like Western Sudan. Gradually by the 16th century an independent school of Qurʾān copying formed where the script was in use. However, we now have access only to some fragments of those earlier texts. The most splendid examples of West-African Qurʾāns and Qurʾānic boards are found in the late 19th/early 20th century. The art of copying is alive even today but major world collections (to which I owe the factual material in this text) are no longer engaged in acquiring any additional artefacts. Such museum policies is easy to understand: since the turn of the 20th century, the Qurʾānic tradition has remained practically unchanged, so the exemplars at hand should be sufficient for a strong classification. What is lacking is the diversity of the exhibited artefacts, that is of the Qurʾāns and the Qurʾānic boards, exemplifying particular local traditions. In this paper I will take the Qurʾānic boards and the boards in a single notion of a “school of calligraphy”.

In literature, the tradition of the Qurʾānic copying in West Africa is called the kāfīf school. This in turn hearkens back to the tradition of sanūsiyyah and / or ṣurṣah which is a variation of a much wider phenomenon of the maghribī school.

In harmony with the historic trends of Islam in West Africa, the Qurʾānic board tradition must have come from North Africa. Today in Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria Qurʾānic boards are still used in Qurʾānic schools and are very similar to the Hauz ones [2].

Nevertheless, a whole list of differences can be drafted between the maghribī school (in its pure form) and the West African one. Such differences can be seen both in the graphic qualities of the scripts and in the iconography of the ornaments. The most important difference is in the decoration of the Qurʾānic boards. The fundamental quality of the kāfīf school is the primacy of the Qurʾān’s “elite” (Qurʾānic — Islamic — Arabic) element, whereas further south in Africa one deals with the primacy of pagan culture which in some places is even maternally by origin (Touareg, for example).

I analysed several Qurʾānic boards from major museum collections, including the script, the ornamentation and the shapes in which the Qurʾānic boards are decorated. There are four pieces that contain either text or individual letters; they are study boards that are identifiable as a Certificate of Completion from a Qurʾānic school. Similar features one can observe on the two decorated manuscript: we have the fact that some copies that are illuminated while others are text-only and have no illuminations; some study Qurʾāns contain numerous markings on the margins, while other fine manuscripts are used for solemn purposes and are kept in a mosque. In a model the material culture of the Qurʾān must include several aspects: quality of the paper, board, ink and pigment, preservation; from this one can build a scientific procedure that can help localize other Qurʾānic manuscripts and boards. In addition, the Qurʾānic boards assist in the analysis of the manuscripts and vice-versa: manuscripts contain additional information about the script and about the artistic-historical context of the boards. But together the manuscripts and the boards present the indivisible field of Islamic and particularly Qurʾānic tradition in Sub-Saharan Africa, illustrating the connection between the pagan and the Islamic, between the popular form of culture and the “elite” one.

I will now define what I mean by the “elite” in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa. An important element is the use of Arabic (the language of the Revelation, the Qurʾān) as the language of the “official” religion. It is not a mundane language; one does not speak it, but instead teaches it, reads in it, prays in it and in a public place (a mosque). The tradition of Arabic writing requires extensive schooling which involves initiation into the patterns of knowledge and cult, into an “elite” group. Secularisation of Arabic writing is therefore a natural phenomenon. This sacralisation is connected with knowledge, power, and the traditional scholarship, and continues, with little change, with what distinguishes a person from others and puts him on a higher social level because the majority of the Sub-Saharan population is literate. Due to such social factors, the archaic and conservative tradition of sacred writing (the copying of the Qurʾān) nowadays is feasible only in the periphery, in the countries where the Arabic language is not a native language, but is a language of an empire but rather the language of culture, culture and the community. Of course, this language is more “nativiste” than French but it is still only a lingua franca rather than a colloquial language.

A similar process can be observed in the Umayyad and the “Abbildung Qurʾānic traditions in the time of the first caliphate. Arab writing in the early period of Islamic history became a symbol of unity: it promoted religious identity over the rational one. When the Arab script ceased to be the symbol of religious unity and acquired an imperial function, the role of the sacred kāfīf script degenerated and it was replaced by the new styles and the new art of calligraphy with more secular and official overtones.

With passage of time, Arabic literacy and the Islamic culture have become yet another symbol of the community life in Africa. What was unthinkable during the early period of Islamic history became a symbol of unity: it promoted religious identity over the rational one. When the Arab script ceased to be the symbol of religious unity and acquired an imperial function, the role of the sacred kāfīf script degenerated and it was replaced by the new styles and the new art of calligraphy with more secular and official overtones.

A. Grieb, In-between the “Elite” and the “Pagan”...
The Quranic Board — the Allo Practice and the Terminology

Qur’anic boards with slight variations in form are reported all over Muslim Sub-Saharan Africa. It definitely originated with the introduction of Islam and its literate culture in West Africa. The Arabs used wood as a surface for writing since the early days of Islam and even before that. Wood had been one of the materials used for recording the Qur’an [3].

Indeed the Qur’anic boards for many centuries were widely used throughout Sub-Saharan Africa by the school students who were learning how to write and recite the Holy Qur’an. Nowadays the most famous Qur’anic schools still function in West Africa and partly in North Africa. Students copy the assigned sūrā onto a flat surface of the board and wash them away with their malāms’ permission. This water is often used for ritual purposes and is treated with carefulness and piety. Following the anthropological method of Salah M. Hassana, I would like to provide a comparative analysis of the boards from Sudan, Nigeria (Borno, Kano, Kaduna), Burkina Faso, Mali, and somali with the boards from Mauritania, Ethiopia, Morocco, and Algeria. I shall draw on the Qur’anic manuscripts as the supporting material. I shall talk about two geographic traditions, the Northern tradition — of Maghrib and the tradition of Western Sudan.

The best term to refer to the Qur’anic board in my research would be the Hausa word allo. What is the Qur’anic board in Northern Nigeria and how one can describe its place in the culture of Hausa? The allo is an essential element in Islamic education. Hassan provides the following etymology:

- The Qur’anic board’s original Arabic name al-lanah, and consequently its Hausa derivative allo, literally meaning board or slate [4].

Makarantar allo is a term for traditional Islamic primary school in Northern Nigeria, where children (boys only) are taught literacy and recitation memorizing the chapters of the Qur’an. Their learning of Arabic grammar and the basics of calligraphy involves special wooden “workbooks” (“copybooks”) which function as both the textbook and the notebook for correcting mistakes. The workbook is a specially treated piece of wood, from a certain kind of a tree, shaped in a distinctive way. (Hassana has a special chapter about learning traditions and board decorations among the Hausa people. I will therefore omit a detailed discussion of this topic).

Students write the Qur’anic passage using their memory and then erase it each time the exercise comes to the end. For my study it is significant to note that the primary function of the allo board is that it is used in the initiation rite when the boys reach puberty. In addition, the board serves as a “diploma” certifying a completion of the course. Another important element is that at the end of the course the board is inscribed with a special traditional ornament, called zayyun.

The allo has become a major symbol of literacy and an advertisement for the makantar allo itself... The allo has formed the basic physical symbol of all the malam educational and literacy establishment... Many malams have explained the origins of this name and the object itself at the same time being derived from what is known in Islam as al-lanah al-madīfī the “Preserved Tablet” or the “Guarded Tablet” as it is sometimes translated. The Qur’an is believed to have existed in heaven from eternity in a form which is called sur al-kath (the mother of the book), or al-lanah al-madīfī. The Guarded Tablet is also believed to contain all the details of the destiny of our world including individual human lives, predetermined and recorded. The idea is that the Qur’an was originally written in this heavenly masterpiece before a copy was made and revealed to Prophet Muhammad... Hence, the allo, as a medium for writing and transmitting the Qur’an, acquires the same sacred status originally associated with al-lanah al-madīfī [5].

Qur’anic Board as an Element in the Material Culture of the Qur’an (Typology, Localization and the Geographic Area of the Tradition)

Major problems:
- Identification of ornaments based on the social and cultural features;
- Genus and iconography;
- Relationship between the Qur’anic manuscript and the Qur’anic board.

The tradition of Hausa malams in 19th—20th centuries is very unique. Malams are not exclusively scholars who have an intimate knowledge of the Qur’an but also simple craftsmen, artists and copyists. They have developed a distinctive school of calligraphy and decoration. They also decorate the allo zayyuna boards which certify completion of a course of study in a traditional school makarantar allo. Plas the allumes boards (pl. of allo) which allow corrections of the text and the ornament.

Non-Qur’anic calligraphy often experience transformation into a pure ornament. When this happens not only the meaning is lost, but the calligraphy becomes abstract stylized writing, a false calligraphy or pseudo calligraphy, a pure memory of writing. It appears as an integral part of architectural decoration while in textiles and military uniforms it is used for its ritual and protective value.

A similar process can be observed in Mauritania where until today there is a strong tradition of the mouhadas — village schools, and the art of copying is kept alive. In Mauritania, there are two tendencies of Qur’anic copying: the traditional “school” and the modern one. The sūrah is widely used, but the andalah hand is more developed nowadays and it keeps developing further in non-Qur’anic forms.
As concerns the calligraphy, manuscripts from Mauritania from the 19th—20th centuries are practically indistinguishable from the Andalusi tradition. Possible explanation has to do with the fact that illuminated manuscripts from North Africa have mostly perished whereas the available manuscripts were made by Spanish artists. The latter gave models to the Qur’anic copyists in Mauritania in the 19th—20th centuries.

The Qur’anic board from the direction of Arabia and the Central Islamic Lands with the help of pilgrims who were returning back home from a hajj to Mecca. Private libraries emerged and the people of Mauritania were likewise passionate bibliophiles. In the Qur’anic schools students were copying the imported models. But also local poets, lawyers and historians were producing manuscripts. As a result, for the last 300 years people of Mauritania not only preserved their splendid manuscript tradition of Muslim Africa (which is on par with the tradition of Hausa) but also gave it to an additional impetus.

In the cities like Ouadain (Wadai), Chinguetti (Shi’qilt) and Ouallata (Walata) great libraries still exist, mostly in private hands. In Mauritania, library work (collecting the ancient manuscripts) was managed by a family “hobby”. Today, such libraries are open to public, tourists and scholars alike. The tradition of travelling schools-maḥārūdn is kept alive in Mauritania. Such a school is always founded by a travelling scholar/ teacher/ imam. Students are grouped together based on their interests rather than their age. At the end of schooling the state certificate of completion is issued. Among other subjects students learn Qur’anic calligraphy. The maḥārūd are therefore similar to mahvarvant allo schools of Hausa in Northern Nigeria. But whereas the latter see their goal in Qur’anic teaching and also producing calligraphers (more or less), in Mauritania calligraphic writing is only one teaching component among many others.

The Qur’anic board from the Ceremony Mountains

The Qur’anic board from The Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York City is a unique example of visualization of cross-cultural context in West Africa. The board has been scrupulously analyzed neither by scholars, nor by the art historians nor by the ethnographers of African Islam, however it does demand close attention. This object is of unique artistry and it changes stereotypical presentation of Islamic calligraphy as iconoclastic. Instead, the Brooklyn board shows how the latter culture is engaged in a dialogical interaction, most importantly, how it conducts this dialogue on its own territory. “Pagan” (indigenous ritual) culture brings its native symbolic language into the context of an Islamic sacred object where no representation is traditionally allowed (besides the sacred text proper and the geometric ornament as the only possible decorative element). All portrait or symbolic imagery, depictions of living beings (territorial or other-worldly) are taboo in a sacred space (the mosque or the Holy Qur’ān), also in the local traditions of African Islam. On the Qur’anic boards of Mauritania, Mali, Northern Nigeria, Sudan, Ghana and Morocco depictions never violate this taboo; at the very maximum, only magical symbols and cosmograms can be present such as protective amulets, ḥuṣus or zaynun (as an imitation of a magic square), and also architectural iconography — but it can never be a depiction of an insect, an animal, or especially a human being. Anthropomorphic imagery is unimaginable in the Islamic cult; neither is it in the Qur’ān, nor in a mosque, nor on a Qur’anic board. But the Brooklyn board departs from this taboo.

Below is the catalogue description from the Brooklyn Museum of Art:

Qur’anic board. The Brooklyn Museum (Robert B. Woodward Memorial Fund, Acc. No. 22.231)
Location and dates: Ouadain city, Sudan, late 19th or early 20th century
Medium: Wood, paint, string.

Dimensions: 81.0 x 27.9 cm.
It contains 97th sûra “al-Qa’d” — the “Night of Power”.

Rectangular instructional tablet with painted designs in brown and black Arabic script. It is bound by a diamond-shaped wooden pole and has a circular-like forms. Lower half has stylized figures and scorpions. Label on this side says: “Instructional tablet for school, Omdarurn 17.” On other side script (single words) is interpreted with stylized human and animal forms as well as circular snail-like motifs. Handle has incised zigzag and circle designs. There is a cord tied around the base of the handle. [6]

Sieber provides an image of the Brooklyn board and talks about this “writing board being a devotional ob- ject” [7]. On his description, the material is “wood and ink” and the height of the board differs from the mu- sicians’s instruction — 98.7 cm, but he probably counted the height including the religious text. According to R. Braymann [8] he mentioned: “The text is decorated with geometric designs, land and sea creatures, and flags” [9]. Sieber does not give any explanation or interpretation of these designs. He only makes a provisional reference to the context:

Writing boards made of wood are used in at least two contexts. One context reflects the way that Islam, like the early Christian church, assimilated the traditional animistic and magical elements into itself. In another context, the writing board is a devotional object [10].

Brooklyn board has a pyramid-shaped handle with sharp points. The supporting legs, which are a characteris- tic feature of Hausan boards, are missing. The board is an example of an “almost garbage person” board dis- cussed by Hassan [11]. The form is vertical extended rect- angular, narrow and thin with a flat surface. The shape of

The handle (board of the head) and the vertical form of the body resemble the Hausa type. But still, the board is either from another tradition or it is a tradition of a former period. The manner of writing these boards is characterized by a fixed set of ornaments and texts: this is either the first or the second sûra from the Qur’ān. Instead the Brooklyn board is inscribed with a fragment of sûra 97, “al-Qa’d”, which may point to its educational function as a simple al- lū (instead of the al-Qa’d sûra). The positioning of the mask ornament (a modified “carpet” page) is also unusual when compared to the other boards that I have studied. Namely, the ornament seems to enframe the text whereas on the majority of the boards from West Africa (Hausa and Su- dan) the ornament is placed on a separate side of the text, covering the whole surface as a semi-self-sufficient ornamental inscription (on the script tradition, on a separate page).

The script is not of slant or type, and the ornament cannot be identified as Hausan. The textual field can be provisionally divided into eight lines. This particular combination of ornaments I haven’t been able to locate anywhere else so far. Iconography of decorative motives sets this board apart from the known tradition. Zoomorphic and anthropomorphic imagery are a challenge to the Islamic artistic (anti-visual) canon.

The S c r i p t a n d t h e I n s c r i p t i o n s

The script on the Brooklyn board defies major characteris- tics of the maghārî style: the dots in the letters fā’ and qāf are of a classic style rather than maghārî system. The shape of the letters šī’āl/dal is similar to the maghārî, but there is not enough data to draw a conclusion as to the exact script used in this text. One option is to identify the script as a variant of jība.”

Decoration above the text, nearby the tent-like im- ages, contains one more inscription. To the left of the cen- tral black line is inscribed “al-wāliyy”, whereas to the left of the left flagpole post it says “all Alim”. The inscription represents two epithets of Allāh (al-ṣamā’- al-ḥamad): No. 19 al-lātīf – “the Opener”, “the Victory”.

Or n a m e n t a l d e p i c t i o n s

Let me underscore once again that the board is unique in that, besides the geometric ornaments, it contains zoomorphic depictions and also another complex artistic motif which one can take to be a depiction of a tent camp. One may look here for parallels with the Qur’ānic text inscribed on the board (sûra 97). What follows is a discussion of individual decorative elements that have protected my eyes.

On the front side of the Brooklyn board, in the centre underneath the handle and closer to the top edge of the board we observe: the composition (the text plus the or- namental frame) crowned by an unusual depiction which is a set of five triangles resembling either a military camp (symbolized by the flagpoles) or a pastoral camp. This depiction can also be a modified version of ḥumsa, a traditional Islamic magical symbol. Popular African tex- tile design ḥumsa usually contains a local variation of ḥumsa (the hand of Fatima) called “leper hand”. So the set of five triangles can be a schematic representation of the “leper hand” which has penetrated onto the Qur’anic board from textile. Ornament borrowing from textiles is quite common in Qur’anic iconography and therefore it may apply to other similar boards.

The “mirror” quality of the board (the fact that one can flip it upside down) is another interesting feature. The Qur’anic board does not presuppose such an exchange be-

between top and bottom. The only case of flipping are the iconographies, the prayer texts, and the decoration notes in ‘ajā’iṣ which are entered (over the Arabic) either diago- nally or in a mirror-like fashion opposite the main text in Arabic. But on our board, the mirror the anthropomorphic schematic beings and the flagpoles (two men each holding a flagpole) are executed upside down, opposite the text and opposite the overhead ḥumsa-type ornament.

The most intriguing question is the reason behind the presence of the zoomorphic and anthropomorphic beings. It is also unclear how to explain the scorpion image amidst the body of the sacred text. It could be considered as a symbol of the underworld and evil.

On the front side humans are depicted as standard (flagpole) bearers. But also on the back side we have hu- mans along with the animals. These are either horse-riders (hunters) or cattlemen. Again, we have the presence of scorpions and of snakes (in a form of spiral quicks) who are moving toward the horoscope. All depictions on the back side are in the third angle view, meaning that they require that the board be turned 90 degrees. It well may be that the back side is meant to be superficially since indi-

vidual letters and words (and scribble) are repetitively written here. But to whom such all beings could refer to in the context of a Qur’amic study board?
On the board, one finds the following three scenes which are also typical for the rock graffiti from Mali:

- a woman and child following a herdsman, a giraffe or an ostrich;
- a snake;
- a man with a spear (modified into a man with a flagpole).

**Conclusions**

In the Brooklyn board we observe three types of ornamentation:

- The traditional "carpet page" which is a version of a zarzarya ornament (of Hausa origin);
- The "laper hand" magic symbol which is a modified dhooma pattern from a khome textile of local origin;
- Zoomorphic and anthropomorphic images from Malian rock graffiti whose iconography extends back to the Neolithic period.

For the Arabic text, it does not seem to fit in such decorative context. It is even difficult to adequately decipher the context because elements are placed chaotically but carry their own internal logic.

Based on any analysis of the iconography in the Brooklyn board, I propose a hypothesis that caves in Africa could function similarly to the genie in the Islamic world, i.e., that they were used to store sacred objects, including the Qur’anic boards. The Brooklyn board could come from such a cave. At any rate, it could only be decorated by someone who knew very well the tradition of rock graffiti.

The problem of reading ornamental and symbolic figurative images.

**Some Historical Considerations**

In Muslim Africa the Qur’anic tradition is an heir to an earlier tradition. In early Qur’anic times, various forms of ornamentation or additional elements were prohibited besides sacred text. In the beginning prohibition extended not only to the sūra headings but also to vocalization and diacritics. At a later stage, empty spaces between sūras were filled with headings; ornaments were added to the headings as were the tawwābi at the beginning of each chapter; tawwābi were often of a textile type or constituted separate "carpet pages". Reformulation of the prohibition has thus occurred, the result being the new pictorial statute. The Brooklyn board is the next stage in this process leading to the departure from the taboo.

Early kāf Qur’āns contain ornaments with unclear provenance. Among these are architectural elements or the so-called "reduced Temple image". Based on my analysis of the kāf Qur’āns from Marseilles’ collection [12], I concluded that the ornament can function as a colophon and therefore as a symbolic image of location of a particular manuscript. A sūra-division shaped after a particular type of a column can, for instance, point in the direction of the Ibn Tūlūn mosque in Cairo where the manuscript was stored. In the Brooklyn board we encounter a similar phenomeon: decorative motifs point to the place of origin or the place where the board was kept. In the Brooklyn board the library stamp (an ex-libris) which marks the artefact. This explains the transposition of the pictorial images from the cave rocks of Mali or Maghreb region to the Qur’anic board. In addition, line drawings and other forms of ornamentation are no longer reduced images of a temple in a narrow sense of the word but rather the symbol of a sacred place as such. In other words, the cave represented the temple for the local Muslim community, and the use of other ritual objects used in the initiation rites, is yet another factor signalling the break of the taboo. The Qur’anic board is depicted symbolically as a temple, and although the shape is represented accurately thereby underscoring the ritual function of this object; geometric lines dividing the surface of the board into proportional sections may be a representation of a magical ornament. The elemental element which would identify the board as a sacred Islamic object for a Muslim, namely the Arabic script, is missing from the visual repertoire of the cave graffiti in Mali. It follows that the “elite” quality of the board (the Arabic script in which the Divine Qur’ānic Word is written) is the only factor that helps maintain the taboo: the taboo in the caves extends only to the Word itself. But we have enough data to speak about the Islamic element crossing over into the pagan territory, into its “holy of holies”, even if it is only through a symbol. On the other hand, ritual indigenous symbols are used on the board with no specific canon in mind. A similar pattern one could observe on a cache of finds from an archaeological site in Mali. The Qur’anic board is pictured here as part of a reduced Zodiac circle. This latter example and the cave graffiti point to the ritual usage of the board as its essential function in the local culture.

At any rate, one can agree with Le Quellec that "the meaning of these figures can never be recovered from the image alone. The meaning of rock images can never be directly accessible without the help of either those who made them or knowledgeable people who belong to the culture in which the art has function and meaning." [18].

One can well apply his statement to a larger problem: how to interpret the decorative elements which appear to depart from the traditional Qur’anic iconography as we know it? This is the exact problem which I face in my research of the Qur’anic boards. To this end, I provide a more detailed description and localization of the Brooklyn board. I would need to examine the chemical formula of the ink, the colours and the wood and compare them with those from the cave graffiti.

**Notes**

1. The village of Songolo is located between three hills. Image belongs to a group of graffiti called “Ceremony Mountains”. As reported by Karl-Johan Dahl in 1931.
2. The initiation ceremony occurs here every three years. Tourists are shown the set of images which are located on the bottom part of the cave wall. Among them are the symbols of the five clans of the Songolo village. A local told me that a horned and saura-like character bears the name guél, with an evident Arabic origin, and is a local variant of the devil-guél, although it is not evil, according to the local legend. Guél is more of a spirit of an unlivable place (like a wood demon, lekélé in Yoruba mythology). He is a reoccurring character in the legends describing the origin of various settlements.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 149.
6. Ibid., p. 149.
7. Ibid., p. 149.
10. Ibid.
12. The Department of Manuscripts, National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg, Russia. A chapter in my dissertation is a detailed study of this collection (The Qur’ānic manuscripts No. Marseille-13).
15. Le Quellec, op. cit. Qur’ānic board appears as a stylized almost abstract, schematic symbol on ritual Negro carvings. “All these cloths are genuine Negro textiles hand-woven by women on the upright single heddle loom and collected in Nigeria.”
Moreover some textile panels represent an old (dates as early — mid. 20th century) marriage cloth from the north eastern Yoruba town of Eria, whose people belong to the ancient kingdom of Igbonina. the design, which represents a range of animals, Koran boards and other motifs framed by a zigzag is called "akas" which means "something wonderful". This was the most prestigious and rarest of a series of five marriage cloths which a woman might weave for her daughter, and was used only in the most wealthy and important families.

16. ibid., p. 76.
17. ibid., p. 74.
18. ibid., p. 65.

Illustrations

Fig. 1. Qur‘anic board (“Qur‘anic Board from the Ceremonies Mountains”) with handle. Front side. Sūra 97. The text area is adorned with a modified ṭhuya-type decoration; the set of five tents (a modified ḏhūṣa-type ornament) and the inscriptions in two epistles of Allah on top of the board. Also there some anthropomorphic images (flagpoles), scorpions, a snake figure (the word “Allah”) and flags are present. Omdurman city, Sudan, late 19th — early 20th century. Wood, paint, string, 81.0 × 27.9 cm. The Brooklyn Museum, Robert H. Wood Memorial Fund, Acc. No. 22.231. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

Fig. 2. The same board. Back side. Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images: scorpions, animals and hunters; also separate words and letters.

Fig. 3. The same board. Front side. Fragment. Text area with a modified ṭhuya-type decoration.

Fig. 4. The same board. Back side. Fragment. Spirals, scorpions and hunting scenes: animals and hunters.


Fig. 7. Qur‘anic board. Fragment. Stylized ornaments: floral motifs, palm image, crescents, and the name of Allah. Mali, Timbuktu, 20th century. Wood, clay, ink, 17.2 × 46.8 × 2.8 cm. Musée du qui Brany, donation of Maurice-Paul Huillery, Acc. No. 74.1962.0.1049. Photo by the author. Courtesy of Musée du qui Brany.

Fig. 8. Graffiti of Dogon. Mali, village of Songho. Photo by K. Proskorov.

L. Pavlinskaya


During the postwar years MAE RAS received some photo-illustrative collections from Moscow Museum of Ethnology. From multiple items of this rather rich collection two pictures of a raw-hide tent with a big copper mask-guise attached on its external side has recently attracted particular attention (fig. 1). The pictures were taken by a well-known anthropologist Mikhail Grigor'evich Levin in 1927 in North-Baikal region, where he worked with the Evenki. According to the comments the pictures show a raw-hide tent of the Tungus shaman clan with the guise as a shaman mask. However, the size of the mask is much bigger than a man's face, which means that the shaman didn't wear it during snowwalking. The size and location of the mask allow us to conclude that it represents an image of the shaman's ancestor spirit and the clan guardian-spirit. Moreover, it also is a guardian-spirit of the territory occupied by the tribe and used for hunting, pasturing deer, etc. In its turn the raw-hide tent is not the shaman's house, but a tribal public structure symbolizing a sacred centre of the inhabited area.

The studies of religious monuments in Transbaikalia, Mongolia, Tuva and Tibet give all reasons to believe that M. G. Levin found the Evenki model of the so-called oboo widely spread in this region (Buryat: oboo, Tuvanian: ooю, Mongolians: ɷөү) [1]. The Buryats, the Mongols, the Tuvins and the Tibetans built it in the form of a rock fill that symbolized a sacred presence of the host-spirit in a certain place or territory.

The majority of scientists believe that oboo traces back to the cult of ancestors and territorial-guardsmen. It is also related to the most ancient conceptions of the Universe embodied in the image of a Universal Mountain. Rooted in a wide-spread cult of mountains, these conceptions took shape in traditional culture of Central Asia, Southern and South-Eastern Siberia. Later on the above mentioned cult took an important place in the religious system of Northern Buddhists.

Oboo were built both on hilltops in steppes and mountain valleys and in the most dangerous places of mountain passes, as well as by the roads, at the riverheads or springs. Depending on the place these religious constructions have significant differences in their structure. Along the mountain passes, paths and sources one could find single fills that symbolized the presence of the mountain host-spirit in this particular place occasionally visited by people. Oboo devoted to the "hosts" of large territories permanently inhabited by people represent rather complex structures. The steppes of Buryatia these structures usually consist of twelve low conic rock fills arranged in the form of a circle. In the centre of the circle lies a higher rock fill holding a wooden pole crowned with a figure of a bird. These fills symbolize the highest mountains of the region and their host-spirits, the guardians of the whole Buryatia. The highest fill in the centre stands for a mythic mountain Sumber [2].

Rock fill shaped oboo characteristic of Transbaikalia, Mongolia, Tuva and Tibet landscapes appear in photo-illustrative collections of many museums and the researches know them very well. The situation is completely different with illustrating and describing these religious structures in other cultures of the region. The picture of the Evenki sacred raw-hide tent with a mask-guise is truly unique, since scientific works contain only brief information about the oboo in the shape of a raw-hide tent and completely avoid mentioning its most important element — the image of ancestor-spirit and host-spirit of the territory (fig. 2). What gives us the ground to assert that the mask on the Evenki raw-hide tent is the guardian-spirit of a particular geographical area?

© L. Pavlinskaya, 2009
CONTENTS

TEXTS AND MANUSCRIPTS: DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH .............................................. 3
A. Fedeli, Relevance of the Oldest Qur’anic Manuscripts for the Readings Mentioned by Commentaries. 3
A. Ambartsumian, On the Manuscripts of Pahlavi Work “Ayiškaš i Zaręšín”. .......................... 11
A. Grilib, In-Between the “Elite” and the “Pagan”: Qur’anic Boards from West Africa ....... 22

PRESENTING THE COLLECTION ................................................................. 35
L. Pavlinskaja, On the History of Photo-Illustrative Collections of the Department of Siberia of MAE RAS. I: The Concept of the Clan Ancestor Spirit and the Territory Host-Spirit Among the Peoples of South-Eastern Siberia in the Context of Ethno- and Culture-Genesis Processes .............................. 35

PRESENTING THE MANUSCRIPT ............................................................... 41
A. Kudelin, Muhammad ‘Abdi’s Letter to Leo Tolstol (History of Russian-Arabic Cultural Dialogue in the Beginning of the 20th Century) .................................................. 41
M. Dehqan, Malá Muhammad Sharíf Qud’s Account on the History of Kurdistan: a Unique Manuscript from the Central Library of Tehran University .............................................. 50

ORIENTAL PANTHEON ................................................................. 53
I. Afimov, “Tai-ping guang ji”: Motives Related to the Dead Souls ........................................ 53

BOOK REVIEWS ................................................................. 66

IN MEMORIAM ........................................................................ 71
Karen Nikitch Yuzbashian (1927—2009) ........................................................................ 71

Front cover:
Plate 1. Sacrifice at a home altar of ancestors before a wedding ceremony. Watercolour on pith, 33 x 21 cm, China, 19th century. MAE RAS, No. 311-1-1-12 (76). Photo by S. Shapiro. Courtesy of the Museum.

Back cover:
years of exile in the ice and dirty states of New England, the intellectual frigidity and provincialism, the horrible weather and donnal light, the exilic personal isolation gradually tore apart what was left of my life, yearly trips to St. Petersburg became my only link to authentic culture and human warmth. I stayed often at Karen's apartment on Orbelli Street, and as he claimed on his chaise lounge we had long and intricate conversations about Russian and Armenian literature and politics. Roundabout midnight Karen would rouse me from my reading: *James Jan, K'ntress?* "Dear James, will you have supper?" and we'd sit down in the tiny kitchen for a snack and a glass of vodka. Karen was then as a rail. I write these lines in a bed in Jerusalem, Israel, where I am recovering very slowly from a terrible motorcycle crash. Gradually I am restoring the muscles of my shattered leg, but when the poor thing was first released from its casts and bandages and stared in horror at its matchstick proportions it reminded me of Karen's skeletal limbs. He used to look up from his meals and tell me he had the *zapasoul appetit blokhakna*, "the reserve appetite of a Leningrad blockade survivor".

Karen was not just a warm friend, not just a captivating scholar, not just a fascinating Russian Armenian intellectual. He was also the center of a large circle of friends that began in Petersburg and radiated outward across the planet. His goodness warmed more people than he knew. That warm heart has ceased to beat here on earth, and this is a colder place for it. Karen believed always in the essential affinities of Jews and Armenians. After all, he grew up in the Soviet Union, not the Middle East. He was entirely free of the anti-Semitic, hyper-nationalist virus that has disfigured Armenian life and scholarship in recent years; and despite his venerable stature and imposing credentials, the yellow press in Erivan attacked him. His friendship with foreigners was a mark against him. "James", he used to tell me, "Our enemies have everything on their side... except the truth". Karen visited Israel and liked this country. In the last couple of years he was far too weak to travel; so my hope of his visiting the home here I hope to have will be one more item for the days of the coming of the Messiah, I guess.

Dear Karen, may the earth, as Russians say, rest as lightly as a feather over your earthly remains. And for all of us left behind, *ahl da'vur*—"slain by grief"—God grant us strength to live out our lives in the light of his bright memory and he granted the consolation of being reunited with his enfranchised soul in the regions of the truth beyond space and time.

*Barukh Dayan ha'Amet.* Blessed is the one true Judge.

*James Russell*