Abstract

Religious intolerance seems to have had its root in the creation of the Crusaders by Christians in reaction to the destruction of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem by a Fatimid Caliph named Al-Hakim. In its early days when Islam was growing like wild fire the Crusaders killed and maimed Muslims in Europe. History indicates that Islam in its first forty years drew more converts to it than had been attracted to Christianity in the previous four hundred years. Today, violence is being perpetrated by different groups claiming to be Muslims all over the world and the Quran says, “For you is your way and for me is mine”. This paper examines the effort of a Christian trying to resolve this issue through his paintings.

Introduction

Nigeria is today bedeviled by insecurity and this poses a bane in the growth and unity of the country. Looking through the weft of our history, national coexistence has severally been truncated by religious intolerance. The threat posed by the Maitatsine violent clashes can only be surmounted by the 1966 communal clashes and the Nigerian Civil war. Onikosi (2008) observes that more than 5000 Nigerians died in 1980 before it spread to Bulunkutu in 1982, Yola in 1984, Gombe 1985 and Funtua in 1987.

Thanks to the timely intervention of Olusegun Obasanjo, more lives would have been lost to “Sharia Dole” during his tenure as the President of this country. Today, the extremist Islamic group called “Boko Haram” is unleashing its terror in the country. They are busy abducting, killing and maiming people all over the northern states and the Federal Capital in the name of religion.

A serious disappointment is the fact that these people brandish flags and banners with Arabic inscriptions of “There is no God but ALLAH and Mohammed is HIS Messenger”. If they actually believe in this why should they kill? ALLAH’s religion is Islam and this connotes Peace. Mohammed, (PBUH) the messenger of Allah never killed anyone. He defended himself and his followers in wars except in a few that he had to declare, to avoid being attacked. Even prisoners of war were not killed in his days but kept and given the opportunity to rethink. According to Mohammed (PBUH), non-combatants are not legitimate objects of attacks, they are to be taken care of in all circumstances. History has it that the first caliph, Abu Bakr was quoted to have cautioned the Muslims not to kill little children, women and old men during war. If Rasulullah (PBUH) was the exemplary example of mankind and he lived without killing, what justification does a group have for killing and maiming individuals, abducting and destroying properties? Let’s live by the exemplary examples of Mohammed (PBUH).

It is also worthy of mentioning, the experience of the Muslims in the early days under the governance of a Christian king in Abyssinia. The king rejected the request from Mecca for the eviction of Muslims when he discovered that they were believers of Christ through the recitation of “Surah Maryam”. He gave the “Ummah” the freedom to practice their religion in his kingdom. Allah’s words in the Quran captured this sufficiently: “To you is your way, and to me is mine (109: 6); Let there be no compulsion in religion (Q2: 256); If it had been your Lord’s will, all of the people on earth would have believed in one religion (Q10: 99); If they propose peace to you, accept it and trust in Allah (Q8: 61) (SadakallahulAzeem).
A major fall out of these discrepancies between the beliefs of the extremists and Quranic injunctions is the mal-governance of Nigeria, leading to the progressive decay of institutions across all sectors. There is total disorganization of existing structures, corruption, lawlessness, unending appetite for taking human lives and large-scale property destruction. It is practically impossible to think of national development without resolving these issues.

The governments are trying in their own ways to tackle these problems to no avail. Individuals are also making efforts to appeal to the conscience of these perpetrators of violence through dialogues and writings on pages of newspapers. Musicians are not left out in this noble attempt to bring about peaceful co-existence between Nigerians. An example is Alhaji Shefiu Alao, a Muslim and Yoruba musician donning the toga of a priest and singing to Christians in the church.

The peaceful coexistence of all Nigerians is paramount in the hearts of every citizen. No wonder this young Nigerian made efforts to placate the perpetrators of violence by using Islamic calligraphy. Mr. Zinbe, a prolific painter with first and second degrees in painting from the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria is one artist to join other Nigerians in finding solution to the religious violence confronting us.

**Zinbe’s background**

A gifted child named Zinbe was born to the family of Mr. Nde and Mrs. Matwok Sabo Gushi of Ballang village in Pankshin Local Government area of Plateau State, Nigeria in 1977 and grew up to be a prolific painter. He studied Fine Arts in Federal College of Education, Pankshin between 1994 and 1997. His brilliant performance there served as a leverage that catapulted him into Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria for a degree programme in Fine Arts. While pursuing his first degree, Zinbe’s restlessness in making something out Fine Arts pushed him to set up “Deft Art Productions” to augment the stipends from his parents and also to train promising young Nigerian art lovers. He bagged his first degree in 2005 and was posted to National Gallery of Arts’ out station in Abakaliki, Eboyn State, Nigeria for his National Service.

His performance as a youth corps member won him the heart of his superiors who submitted his name for appointment at the Headquarters of National Gallery of Arts at Abuja for the job of a curator. Zinbe seized an opportunity to pick up a second degree from the same university while in Abuja. He is now a proud holder of Master of Fine Arts degree in Painting (MFA).

Zinbe is a dedicated and hardworking painter who has exhibited far and wide. His works are found in the collections of both national and international collectors and galleries. He is more of a social commentator that uses his pallet as a vehicle for putting his message across to his audience. This is what he said of himself ‘I use art to address problems associated with daily existence which include politics, religion, socials, environment, economy, culture, current affairs etc’.

It was indeed an exciting experience being called to write one or two lines on his oncoming exhibition targeting the security and unity of our dear country. Is it the curiosity of an Ngas man exploring Arabi calligraphy that amazed me or the untutored Christian youth in Islamic ways consumed by Islamic spirit and dwelling into Islamic religious realms to the level of expressing his captivation in Arabic?

Arabic calligraphy, though preceded Islam, it was Islam that developed it to the modern times aesthetically appealing level. This is probably why people see it as Islamic calligraphy. According to Russell (1976), since Islam forbids images, Moslems created elaborate nonrepresentational designs to decorate their religious and secular buildings many of which were based on Arabic lettering of sayings from the Quran.

**Arabic calligraphy**

Numerous expressions in defining Arabic calligraphy by scholars exist but apparently gearing towards the same meaning. Sakal (1993) defines Arabic calligraphy as a group of Semitic
alphabetical scripts in which mainly the consonants are represented in writing, while the markings of vowels are optional. These are alphabets put together to form words that are written from right to left. The alphabets are usually formed with broad and tiny lines. Examples of the typefaces of the calligraphy include Kufic, Thuluth, Maghrebi, Naskhi, Riqa and Diwani.

Artistically, Arabic calligraphy is a beautiful writing because of its stylistic use of lines. Some writings are made in colours while black ink and white surface is commonly used to create contrast for brilliant attraction that makes it visually artistic. Waterman (2009) perceives Arabic calligraphy artistically by defining it as: “the art of beautiful or elegant hand writing exhibited by the correct formation of characters, the ordering of various parts, and harmony of proportions”. The Arabic calligraphy may sometimes appear in form of shapes (e.g., rectangular, square, triangle, circle, among others) and are as well used to create shapes or figures of animals and plants to show its beauty.

Pearls (2007) explains that “the origin of calligraphy in third millennium goes back to cave paintings, with the earliest written words being a pictorial representation of the most significant event in a caveman’s life”. In the Islamic world Arabic calligraphy is mostly used as a medium of expression and this tradition existed from onset.

Waterman (2009) revealed that:

Arabic calligraphy as seen in writing existed before Mohammed received Allah’s words; it was the spread of Islam that served as the catalyst for Arabic calligraphy. During the Othman caliphate, these words were compiled into the Qur’an, or holy book of Islam. Followers wanted to demonstrate their devotion to Allah, and one way to do so is to exalt the verses and Surahs of the Qur’an. The written words become very important in Islam, and so beautifying it and making it into an art form served as a way to honour Allah. Thus, calligraphic began to boom during the caliphate, and even the fourth caliph Ali was himself a calligrapher. Islam began to grow in popularity and quickly spread throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain, and with it, the increase need to read and write Arabic.

Paintings or sculptures are commonly produced to exalt religious figures in many religions. But because Islam forbids production of images, Muslims focus on the words of the religion, and this further boost the rise of Arabic calligraphy among Muslims. The Arabic calligraphy has been in existence for a very long time in the East, and in some part of Africa where they are used as a means of communication especially in the propagation of Islam. Even where Arabic was not their national language, it was the language of religion wherever Islam was established. Since the Qur’an is written in Arabic, the profession of faith is said in Arabic, and five times daily the practicing Muslim must say his prayers in Arabic.

**Zinbe’s paintings**

The artist’s skill in rendering objects as they appear is commendable. He hopes to exhibit twenty works reflecting different characteristics of Allah. These works are more of visual commentary infusing ALLAH’s (SWT) attributes into the backgrounds that say it all. The sizes of the works range between sixty centimeters (60cm) by ninety centimeters (90cm) and ninety centimeters (90cm) by one hundred centimeters (100cm). A brilliant attempt at capturing moments in his works with vibrant colors and unequal rendition of effects in different lines and shapes are visible in the artist’s compositions. A complete change of pallet is noticed after every two compositions produced revealing his meticulous concern for accuracy when it comes to colour.

Although his paintings appear to capture moments like the actionshots of candid photography, Zinbe was deeply concerned with composition. For example, Figure 1, “An-Nuur” reflects Allah’s attribute of “light” suggesting a well composed quiet landscape in a fleeting moment. This reveals
his determination to record nature’s atmosphere to suggest “harmony” at sunrise while “Al-Gaffaar”, one of the paintings to be exhibited shows the sunset. He painted clouds, waves and mist as billowing shadowy forms, lit with dramatic light. It is indeed a display of poetic quality of light. Both have about the same colour combinations of shades of red and blue. The use of colours and compositions to intensify emotion is displayed here.

In ‘An- Nuur’, the sunlight emerges from the clouds, lighting up hazy and fuggy atmosphere revealing the effects of light on rivers. The reverse is the case with ‘Al- Gaffaar’ that the light is being swallowed up by the clouds. What a serene atmosphere, situating it a pole apart from the wavy turbulence exhibited by “Al-Wadud” through its floating floral patterns.

Fig. 1 “An- Nuur”

Another is Figure 2, “As- Salam”, meaning peace. Allah indeed is a peace-loving God. This reveals a different stylistic approach from afore described compositions. The artist used cool vibrant hues of blue colours in different sizes, shapes and directions revealing a web of diagonal and horizontal lines fusing into the calligraphy from the background to portray this characteristic image of Allah. This style is reflected in a few other compositions like ‘Ar-Raheem’ to show that he is equally adept at decorative painting and the use of delicate colours and subtle lines.

Fig. 2 “As- Salam”

Fig. 3 “Al- Awal”

Fig. 4 “A-Haq”
“Al-Awal” and “Al-Haq” are symbolic of the attributes of Allah (SWT) to remain the same for ever; that is to say as He was in the beginning, so shall He be in the end. Allah is upright and unwavy, so are the lines and colours that make up these compositions. The colours are cool and impressive shades of yellow and red blending into green and blue.

The artist’s capacity to manipulate colours is further displayed in his graphic approach to a few of the compositions like “Al-Malik” and “Al-Aleem”. The use of shapes and colours of different hues, partitioned into sizes in diagonal, horizontal and vertical directions to form the backgrounds for the compositions is marvelou.

Figure 7, “Al-Hameed” and Figure 8, “Al-Qahhaar” reveal the ability of the painter to record objects realistically. The musical instruments in “Al-Hameed” attest to this with the blending of the calligraphy and the objects. His love for serene atmosphere is further displayed in “Al-Qahhaar” with very calm and quiet landscape compositions. “Al-Hayu” (the everlasting) and Al-Mateen (the invisible) are two of the paintings to be exhibited.
They are complete departure from the other paintings in terms of technique and colour. The paintings resemble Gothic windows with their stained glass-like compositions. The colours are rich combinations of yellow and red hues emerging from dark background.

**Conclusion**

Zinbe’s collaborative efforts in ensuring the path of peace in Nigeria is worthy of emulation by our youths in using what they have to bring about peace to Nigeria. Treading the path of Islam by a Christian to be able to reach those concerned is highly commendable.

He has proved to be a piece-loving individual through his works. Despite his experience during the turbulent times in Jos, he has not given up his hope of peaceful nation. He had watched families who sought refuge from the menace of shelter-raiders and arson, others being killed and maimed in the name of religion and ethnicity. What preoccupies his mind now is peaceful resolutions to insurgencies in the country.

By embracing the attributes of Allah as the giver of live, the everlasting and the mighty, his paintings may serve as memorials to those who had perished. His agonized and silent methodical protest against senseless destructions of human lives and the need for peaceful coexistence is demonstrated with serene landscape paintings of the environment with rising and setting suns. Above all, a combination of cool colours and musical instruments to soothe the soul of every Nigerian.

**Reference**


