

A BRIEF EXPLORATION OF THE ISLAMIZABLE YORUBA ART AND CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Art and culture it is believed cannot be simply defined. This is based on the complexity of the notions and connotations they both imbibe. A similar difficulty it is faced when determining what is religious, particularly Islamic, in art and culture and what is not. Bearing in mind the complexity of both the definition and the conception, this paper attempts a general definition than can be considered by all sundry and attempts to draw closer some conceptual usages that would not be alleged as taking one beyond the boundary of religion. Islam is both an inclusive and exclusive way of life, and as such is expected to be tolerant in most cases. Art and culture derived from natural instincts would not in any way and form go against Islamic injunctions, if properly dissected and appropriately elucidated. There are many aspects of Yoruba art and culture that are still maintained both during and post advent of Islam among the Yoruba community. Moreover, Islam has been silent on some others, not giving consent not disproving, due to lack of a direct prohibition from the Shariah law and the Muslim scholars. Art and culture cannot be strictly placed under the category of haram (prohibited acts), and it is the position of this paper that whether we like it or we like it not art and culture are both part of us and so shall we manage them with our ways of life (religion). The paper likes to conclude that the misplacement of the artistic and cultural concepts stem from the misappropriation and misrepresentation of what art and culture are and what they are not. Art and culture are just what they are, and are not what they are not, a water-concept of life that is seldom felt but hard to jettison.

Keywords: Art, Culture, Exploration, Islamizable, Yoruba art, Yoruba culture.

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INTRODUCTION

A very simple fact in defining art is that there is no simple yet comprehensive definition of art. *Ars*, the Greek and Latin equivalents, can generally include things customarily grouped under the label of fine arts as well as servile and liberal arts (see Art philosophy). Many thinkers believe that art cannot really be defined because the moment a concise definition is reached art is reduced to a particular thing, and as such they shy away from definitions in the usual scientific and operational sense. There are others, however, who do not feel comfortable about art having no clear, accurate definition (Zekrgoo, n.d). Even when narrowed to Art, the word retains ambiguity in at least two important respects.

First, whatever community of meaning the various fine arts share, distinctive differences among them prevent the name's remaining exactly the same in meaning. Poetry and painting, for example, are not art in all identical sense. Current usage tends to limit the meaning of art to painting and sculpturing.

Second, within the context of fine art, art may signify the product of art, the creative process itself is the experience of appreciating the work of art, sometimes referred to as the aesthetic experience (see Art philosophy). An exact definition convinces the scholar that all is known; all elements have been observed and understood hence, definitions are attempted and Art is duly analyzed. The encyclopedia Britannica says *"in any attempt to arrive at a clear and comprehensive definition of the meaning of Art, it is necessary to disregard all philological and etymological derivations which, in the past have led to much confusion of thought and to an expansion of human activities embraced by this term, which oversees the limitation imposed upon it by the modern conception of its meaning"* (Zekrgoo, n.d). Hence, the complexity of the meaning of the word "art".

Finally, perhaps a more concise opinion is that credited to Ad Reinhardt, quoted as saying: *"the one thing to say about Art is that it is one thing. Art*

is art- as- art and everything else is everything else. Art as art is nothing but art. Art is not what is not art" (Kosuth, 1991). In other words, everything is Art, and nothing absolutely is out of Art.

Thus, if properly investigated, an artistic and cultural aspect of life derived from the nature and human vicinity itself cannot antagonize any religious tenet that has come to address human nature. The conceptual problem thought to be generated from this might be unrelated to the sectional interpretational differences there are among the religious sages.

THE YORUBA RACE

The Yoruba people live on the west coast of Africa in Nigeria and can also be found in the eastern Republic of Benin and Togo. Because the majority of the slaves brought to the Americas were from West Africa, Yorubas can also be found in Brazil, Cuba, the Caribbean, and the United States. There are also many Yoruba currently living in Europe, particularly Britain, since Nigeria was once a British colony. The Yoruba is one large cultural group in Africa. There are about 50 million Yoruba world-wide, with notable populations in Nigeria (36,147,000), Benin Republic (1,500,000), Ghana (546,000), Togo (351,000), United States (196,000), Ivory Coast (124,000), United Kingdom (102,000), Burkina Faso (74,000), Niger (74,000), Equatorial Guinea (64,000), Italy (57,000), Liberia (24,000), Canada (16,210), Gambia (12,000), Ireland (10,100), Sierra Leone (6,400), Greece (5,300), and Australia (2,000) (Nolte *et al.*, 2016; Lloyd, 1963; Oyelaran, 2018; Francesco *et al.*, 2015; Falola, 2016; Jacob, 2011; Leroy *et al.*, 2002; Jeremy, 1994; Akinrinade and Sola, 2011; Maureen, 1997; Adetugbo, 1982; Adetugbo, 1973; Ojuade, 1992; Adeyemi, 2016; Robin, 2006; Alice *et al.*, 2013; Falola and Genova, 2012; Ajayi, 2001; Blier, 2015; Kevin, 2004; Laitin, 1986; Munoz, 2003; MacDonald *et al.*, 2000; Da Silva and Misevich, 2018; Thornton, 1998; Philip, 1996; Alpern 1998; Alonge, 1994; Earl, 1969; Jacob, 2011; Niara, 1973; Adelusi-Adeluyi and Bigon, 2014; Salawu, A., 2004; Sowunmi, 1985; ABC-Clio, 1985; and Bolaji and Ibigbami, 1993). The

Yoruba have been living in advanced urban kingdoms for more than 1,500 years, creating a strong economy through farming, trading, and art production. Their outstanding and unique artistic traditions include woodcarving, sculpture, metal work, textiles, and beadwork.

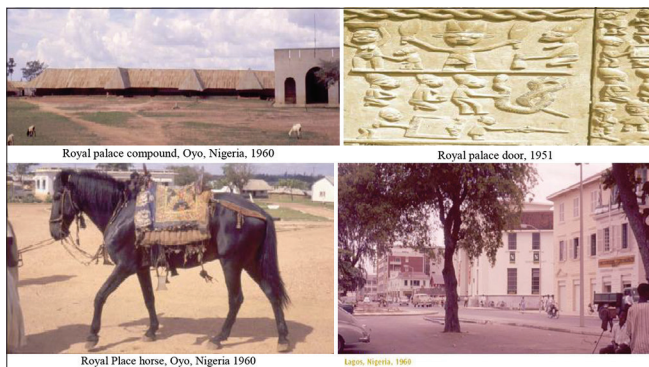
YORUBA ART

Yoruba art is so ambiguous that it is not peculiar to any religion, and it is its ambiguity that makes it important; it is, just like water with no identity. Yoruba art is so flexible that its existence cannot be limited to a race; it has always been there even when the people did not realize it. Yoruba art is that that deals with and manifests the beauty, language, culture of Yoruba, its people, its place, as well as its ideologies. It depends solely on how individuals handle a thing; the value of actions is determined by the nature of the intentions, just as depicted in the following artistic/poetic verse:

- In the east of Eden, In the timeless zone,
- At the time of creation, When the trumpet was born,
- From Emerald waters, A garden was grown,
- As a gift of mercy, From Divine throne. (Zekrgoo, 2009).

As explained above, no art is purely religious. Even if, today, Yoruba Islamic Scholars are strong and influential they cannot be stronger than the Yoruba culture and art; cultures and arts are stronger than scholars. Yoruba art, inextricably linked with its religion and philosophy, is universally recognized as one of the world's greatest heritages. Traditional art included wood carving (including mask making), leather-working, bead-embroidery, weaving, and painting. In an environment where the resources for artwork was the vegetation, fires which accompanied every dry season was periodically responsible for destroying years of art in a few hours. Yoruba philosophized that any beauty destroyed makes room for new and better works of art (i.e., *Ile Qba t'oyo, ewa l'obu kun-un*).

West Africans, where the Yorubas are densely populated, have lived in urban societies and have produced extraordinary artwork since the 5th century BC (Drewal, 1989, Honour and Fleming, 2005). During this time, the Yoruba began to use iron to create metal tools and weapons such as machetes, axes, and hoes. These tools made it easier for them to farm the land. They planted crops including yams, their staple food. They also harvested seeds from palm trees, the seeds which produce vegetable oil that is used in various cooking. Kola nuts were also grown and harvested. Soon the Yoruba began trading with neighboring areas for rice and sorghum. Due to increased agriculture, the Yoruba community began to grow in size and large towns were created. They arranged their communities by clan lines or extended families. Families who had the same ancestors lived next door to each other in large compounds. An elder (*Baale*) was put in charge as the head of the compound while another (*Baale*) is in charge as the head of the family. Towns became organized by the type of work that people did.



YORUBA KINGDOMS

There were about 20 Yoruba kingdoms at one time with a different king ruling over each one. Ife was the center of cultural and religious life.

Oyo was the strongest kingdom with the largest military and political system. The kingdom of Oyo was close to the Niger River. The rich soil in Oyo allowed the people to grow more crops than they needed. This helped the kingdom of Oyo to easily trade with neighboring groups. They also created a strong military. Oyo was in control of 6,600 towns and villages by the end of the 18th century. Internal wars and fighting with neighboring groups, along with the beginning of the slave trade, eventually led to the decline of these great kingdoms.

In the 18th century, European countries were beginning to create colonies all over the world. Europeans were taking villagers from West Africa and bringing them to the New World to be slaves in the new colonies. The British came to Yorubaland in 1852. By 1884 European nations were meeting to discuss how they would break-up Africa into different colonies. The British was granted the right by the other European nations to colonize Yorubaland, and in 1893, Yorubaland became part of a larger colony known officially as Nigeria.

In 1960, Nigeria became an independent country. Ten million Yoruba were known to live in Nigeria at that time among many other ethnic groups. Today, the Yoruba still continue many of their traditional ways of life. Many Yoruba live in large towns and cities, and many towns are still based on the extended family dwellings in compounds. This give the Nigerian Yoruba Muslims the ease at the access to practicing the prophetic injunction and the Qur'anic allowance for polygamous marriage and family. Lagos is the largest city in Nigeria and over ten million people live there, including a large Yoruba population. Many Yoruba today still profess in carving, blacksmithing, farming, weaving, and leather working, as briefly depicted below. Today, the Yoruba still makes some of the world's greatest works of art (William, 1969).

FEEDING

Tubers, such as yams and cassavas are the most important food for the Yoruba people, although others such as grains, plantains, corn, beans, meat, and fish are also consumed, and poultry, goats, sheep, pigs, and cattle are raised as livestock. Large rivers, lagoons, and the ocean provide fish and shrimp for the Yoruba. Fishermen sell fresh and dried fish through traders at the local markets. The Yoruba make stews out of yams, plantains, corn, cassava, and many others. Palm oil, as mentioned earlier, is often used in cooking.

Potters, blacksmiths, carvers, and leather and bead workers are important to Yoruba society because they all contribute to the economy. The goods that they produce are meant to be used and also have great artistic value.

SCULPTURING

There are some works distinctively known to be for women and those for men, as well as those for both sexes. Sculpturing is one of those unisex works in Yorubaland. The Yoruba people began creating magnificent sculpture out of terra cotta clay in the 12th through 14th centuries. Bronze figures were made during the 14th and 15th centuries (Fagg, 1982). To create bronze sculptures, artists first make models out of clay. When the clay becomes dry, they would put a thin layer of beeswax over the clay and engrave details in the wax. Next, they would cover the wax with more layers of clay until they have created a thick mold. The mold would then be heated over a fire until the middle layer of wax is melted. They would pour the bronze into the top of the mold through cubes. Moreover, the bronze would now take on the form of the wax that was once there. When the bronze is cooled and hardened the outer layer of clay would be broken off and the sculpture would be completed. These life-like sculptures may represent kings and gods. The Yoruba began to fashion more abstract wooden sculpture as their major art form later on. Many African cultures choose to fashion sculptures of humans in an abstract form rather than a realistic one.

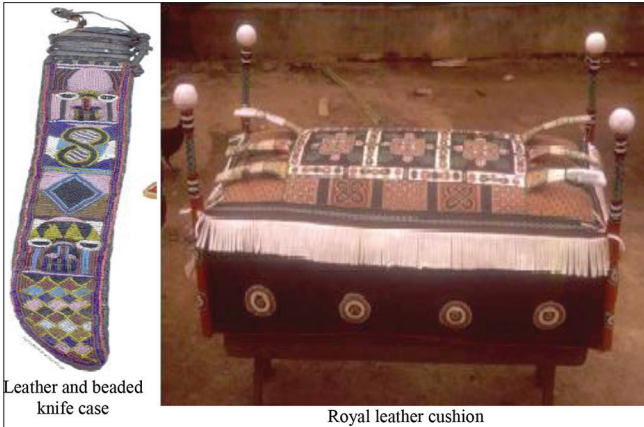
POTTERING

Women were, and still are, in charge of pottery in Yoruba society. They make many different types of pottery including pots for cooking, eating,

and storage. Palm oil lamps are also crafted. Unique pots are made in honor of Yoruba deities. Pottery is only made in towns where clay is available. Moreover, it is sold to neighboring towns that do not have access to clay.

LEATHERING AND BEAD WORKING

Men are usually in charge of leather and beadworks. Goat, sheep, and antelope skins are used to make things such as bags, cushions, and sandals. Leather scraps in different colors are often pieced together to form designs. Beads are used to decorate crowns, hats, bags, and other items worn by kings and sages and diviners (*Babalawo*) (some of these products are now utilized in religious practices by Shaykhs, Malams, Alufas, Pastors and Priests of importance in the society). Popular bead designs include human faces, birds, and flowers. Examples of such are given below.

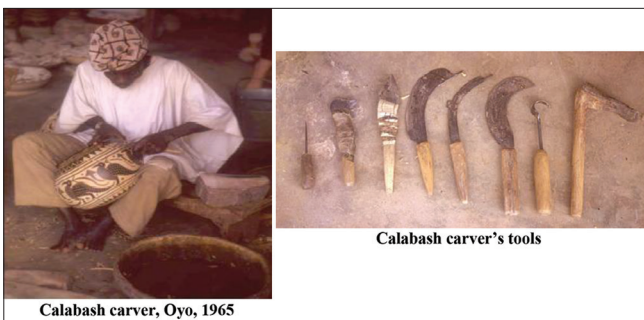


BLACKSMITHS AND CALABASH CARVING

Blacksmiths are very important to local towns and are responsible for making tools that many other professions use, such as hoes, axes, knives, chains, and hammers. Calabashes (dried gourds) are carved by men and are used to serve food or drink; they are used as local plates, pans, and spoons. Goods carried to markets are often caravanned in materials carved from calabashes. They are also used as containers for storing medicines and food. Calabashes are also carved into musical rattles.

It is important to note here that Islam came to meet all these and approves them; Islam does not have any problem adopting them and their usages. In addition, one can be an Islamic cleric and at the same time being a calabash carver, a potterer, a sculpture, a knitter... and so on. An example is the calabash carver depicted below. He was a local cleric who taught children Qur'anic recitation and had calabash carving as his source of income.

Also depicted below are some tools used in various carving work and activities, they were there and still existing among the people today; it is enjoyed by traditionalists as well as Muslims.



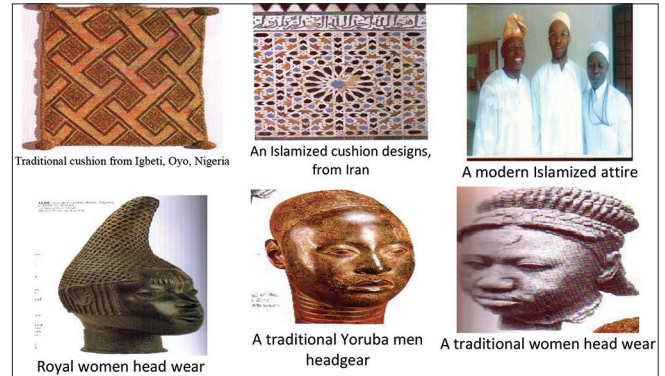
WOODCARVING

Men are responsible for woodcarving. Woodcarving is the most important art form in Yoruba culture. Men use knives and adzes to carve

wood. Divination trays and many other sacred objects are carved out of wood.

TEXTILES

Men and women both engage in weaving and dying. Weaving is done on different types of looms. Weavers make hundreds of different patterns on their looms. Wild silk and cotton are used to make cloth. Indigo, a native plant, is often used as a dye to color threads.



RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Traditional Yoruba beliefs see the world made up of two connected realms. The visible world of the living is called "*Ile-Aye*" (the Temporal Life), and the spiritual world of the *Orisas* (deities or gods), the ancestors and spirits, is called "*Orun*" (the Hereafter). *Asẹ* (the power of "Be" and "It is") is the life force that is given to everything by the Creator of the universe. *Asẹ* is in everything, plants, animals, people, prayers, songs, rocks, and rivers. Existence is dependent on *Asẹ* because it is the power to make things happen and change.

The Yoruba believe in the One-Creator who rules over the entire universe, controlling many other gods that serve underneath him. The Creator of the universe is called *Olurun*. *Olurun* lives in the heaven, hence the name *Olu-Orun* (The ruler of the Heavens) and is considered to be the father (Creator, Controller, and Watcher) of gods. *Olurun* is the one who never lived on earth, He is the supreme (The First, The Last, The Manifest, The Hidden, The Alfa and Omega, and to whom all servant) and has no special group of worshippers or shrines, like the other gods do.

The traditional Yoruba people worship over 400 different deities, they refer to as *Orisa*. While some of these are adored by most, some others are only adored by certain towns and/or families. It is projected that everyone has a peculiar deity called *Ẹlẹda* (a twin spiritual being of a person). Moreover, while some adore their paternal deities, some other adore the maternal ones. Moreover, some others are contacted by a particular deity in their dreams and are instructed to adore them, like the twin deities. The following Stool depicts *Iroko* (a deity assumed to dwell in trees), a deity who makes peace when *Eṣu* (Satan-like), the trickster and divine messenger, causes a fight.

CREATION MYTH

Every culture has stories that explain how the universe was created, and Yoruba is no exception in this perspective. This is one version of a creation story that is told by the Yoruba to explain the beginning of the universe.

Olurun or *Olqhun* lived in the sky with all the other gods. He commanded that *Orisanla* or *Orisaala* (the great god of whiteness) design the earth for Him. *Olurun* gave *Orisanla* some soil, a chain, a five toed chicken, and a snail shell and sent him on his way. When *Orisanla* got to the gates of the heaven he noticed some other gods having a party. He stopped to chat with the other gods for a bit and drank some of their palm wine. *Orisanla* became drunk from the palm wine and fell asleep. *Orisanla's*

younger brother, *Oodua*, noticed his brother fast asleep. He took all the creational material substances that *Ọlọrun* had given *Orisanla* and went to the edge of the heaven with a Chameleon.

Oodua dropped the chain and climbed down, throwing some of the soil onto the already available endless sea water. He then released the chicken and the chicken scratched out the earth, expanding it in many directions until the ends of the earth were reached. Chameleon then stepped on the earth to make sure that it was safe and stable for a walk. *Oodua* followed and settled at a place called *Ile-Ife*.

Orisanla soon woke and realized what happened, and from that time on he put a curse and taboo on palm wine. Even today those who adore *Orisanla* forbid the consumption of palm wine and all its products. *Orisanla* descended to claim the earth but *Oodua* insisted on the ownership since he was the one who had fashioned it. The two brothers continued fighting until *Ọlọrun* heard them and called them to report to Him. *Oodua's* ownership claim was confirmed and was granted rulership right over the land, while *Orisanla* became the fashioner of mankind in the heaven. To keep the two brothers on check *Ọlọrun* sent them back to the earth along with *Sango* (the god of Thunder), *Ifa* (the god of Divination), and *Eleshije* (the god of Healing). Depicted hereunder is the replicated stand of *Sango*:



Stool Made by Duga, Meko, Nigeria, 1950

Sango dance wand, 1950

Although every adorer of *Sango* owns a wand for his personal shrine, it is carried only by the group member who has been initiated with *Sango's* spirit. The central figure represents such a devotee, carrying a *Sango* staff in his right hand. At his left is a female worshipper of *Oya* (the goddess of River Niger)¹ and *Sango's* most loyal wife; and on his right is a man beating *Sango's* drum. At the top-left is a ram, *Sango's* favorite sacrificial animal, and at the top-right, the dog that is sacred to him.

Apart from the aforementioned, there are other Yoruba deities. *Eṣu* acts as a messenger for the other deities, and he is also a great trickster. He assists *Ọlọrun* and the other gods by causing trouble for people who offend them or fail to adore them. Everyone adores *Eṣu* just to be safe from his harm.

Ifa is the god of Divination, and no matter what other deities one adores one asks *Ifa* for information and guidance when in distress. *Ifa* is a great wiseman, and he acts as the interpreter between all gods and humans.

Ogun is the God of Iron and War. He is a great blacksmith and a fearless hero. Woodworkers, leatherworkers, and blacksmiths adore him. There may also be taboos². For example, *Eṣu's* favorite foods are corn, beans, and palm wine. These things are often placed at his shrine. His followers often wear black beads around their neck, they do not eat or use palm oil because this is said to attract the wrath of *Eṣu*. Similarly, some Yoruba of *Tariqah* orders also enjoy putting around their necks their counting beads (*sibhah*) which differentiates them from other sects.

DIVINATION OR CONSULTATION

Divination or consultation (*istikharah* in Arabic) is a troubleshooting method of problem-solving and foretelling. It has existed for

1. *Oya* was the first wife of *Sango*, while *Osun* was said to be the second wife. They both engaged in rivalry war as to who was supposed to be the dearest to *Sango*. This led to both turning to *Oya* and *Osun* rivers respectively.
2. Foods or things that people cannot partake in because of the god that they worship. This also manifests in some of the Yoruba sufi scholars' divine supplications, they forbid some food at a certain period of time, most particularly anything that has to do with blood and lively food.

thousands of years throughout the world in different forms. *Ifa* divination is a traditional way to solve problems among the people. This also exists among religious scholars. Take a close look at the traditional divination tray and the ones used by the spiritual Yoruba Muslim clerics, most of whose sources of income depend on the proceeds gotten from divination (inspirational prayers or *istikharah*). Divination helps to explain why certain misfortunes are happening to someone. For example, if a farmer's crops are not growing or if someone in is ill, they would seek the help of a diviner. *Ifa* diviners are called *Babalawo* while those of Muslim clerics are called *alufa* and/or *malam*. The function of the *Ifa* diviner is to determine the reasons that are causing a person's misfortune. He does this by performing a ritual with the person which reveals the source of the problem. Yoruba Muslim clerics similarly engage in spiritual supplications in solving misfortunes.

THE DIVINATION AND CONSULTATION

Divination depends on interpreting marks made on the divination tray. Divining powder, used to make the marks, and 16 palm nuts, being symbol of *Ifa*, from the African palm tree are the most important of all the objects used in divination. Yoruba Muslim clerics use sea salt and/or white sea sand dunes and *sibhah* some other times. The diviner tries to pick up all sixteen palm nuts in his right hand. If one nut remains in his left hand, he makes a double mark in wood dust on his tray; if two remain, he makes a single mark. The diviner recites a verse based on the marks made. These verses act as the advice to help solve the person's problem. Below are the representation of the divine tray and the diviner's bag. The carved face of the tray represents *Eṣu*, the messenger of *Ifa* and the other deities.

As diviners travel often in the pursuit of their profession, they frequently carry a portable set of *Ifa* paraphernalia in bags. The divining chain is kept and carried in a shoulder bag, it is made of locally woven or knitted cloth, or sometimes of leather, and it may be decorated with cowry shells or beads. Beaded bags are often smaller. A diviner is one of the very few non-royal persons permitted to use solidly beaded materials; these are usually reserved for the Yoruba kings, who had beaded cushions, slippers, and gowns, and who alone may wear beaded caps and crowns as shown above.

Beaded bags, knife handles, hangings for the shrine, and other objects may be made by the diviners themselves, or by the bead workers who work for the kings. Palm nuts, divining tray, and bell may be carried in this bag if it is large enough, but for palm nuts other types of containers are usually provided, which remain at the shrine for *Ifa* most of the time (Ira, 2000).



Divination tray



Beaded diviner's bag

Ariwajoye I, Yoruba ruler of Ila-Orangun, Nigeria, shown in his beaded crown (*Ade*) and other regalia, 1977.

Sheikh Ibrahim Kaolakh

Days of the week and Months in Yoruba and their English correspondence

| | | | | | | | |
|---------|-----------|--------------------|-------|-----------|-----|-------|----------|
| Aiku | Sunday | 1. | Şèrè | January | 2. | Erele | February |
| Aje | Monday | 3. | Èrèna | March | 4. | Igbe | April |
| Isegun | Tuesday | 5. | Ebibi | May | 6. | Okudu | June |
| Ojo'ru | Wednesday | 7. | Aḡemo | July | 8. | Ogun | August |
| Ojo'bo | Thursday | 9. | Òwéré | September | 10. | Qwara | October |
| Eti | Friday | 11. | Bèlu | November | 12. | Ópé | December |
| Abameta | Saturday | Months of the Year | | | | | |

MUSIC AND DANCE

Music and dance have always been an important part of Yoruba culture for those living in Nigeria as well as in the diaspora. Yoruba music and dance are used for many different occasions in life such as religious festivals, royal occasions, and entertainment, the replica of which is made during *walimah* ceremony among the Yoruba Muslims.

Yoruba traditional music focuses on Yoruba deities. Drums and singing are the main elements of Yoruba music (Ruth, 1998). Instruments such as metal bells and wind instruments are sometimes used, and this has since been adopted into many religious and *seliseli alasalatu* wings Yoruba is a tonal language where words must be pronounced in the appropriate tone (pitch) to understand speech in its correct meaning. There are three major tones: High, mid, and low, and the music is based on these tonal patterns of speech. Presented below is the traditional Yoruba drumming of Oro during a festival.



Drumming, Oro, Nigeria, 1960

CONCLUSION

Art and culture cannot be simply defined due to complexities attached to them, and same is true of religious Islamic perspectives of them. The paper itself is an attempt at a general definition considered by all and sundry, drawing closer some conceptual usages that do not lead one to blasphemy. Islam as a comprehensive way of life preaches tolerance and moderation in most cases. Art and culture derived from natural instincts are not in antagonism with Islamic injunctions, based on proper dissection and appropriate elucidation. There are many aspects of Yoruba art and culture that are still maintained in Islam today among the Yoruba community. Moreover, Islam is silent on some others due to lack of a direct prohibition from the Shariah law and the Muslim scholars. Art and culture are not to be strictly placed under the prohibition acts and that has been the position of this paper. The misplacement of the artistic and cultural concepts stem from the misappropriation and misrepresentation of what art and culture are and what they are not. Art and culture are just what they are, and are not what they are not, a water-concept of life that is seldom felt but hard to jettison. They may be represented in different forms, poetry and painting, sculpturing and potting, painting and sculpturing, and many more other combinations.

In conclusion, if properly investigated, an artistic and cultural aspect of life derived from the nature and human vicinity itself cannot antagonize any religious tenet that has come to address human nature.

The conceptual problem thought to be generated from this might be unrelated to the sectional interpretational differences, there are among the religious sages.

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