

RELIGIOUS POSTERS IN KANO, NIGERIA: ADAPTING IMPORTED MEDIA INTO LOCAL VISUAL PIETY

Chromolithographs depicting scenes from the Quranic/Old Testamental narrative and personalities of Muslim history were imported from Cairo, Egypt, to Kano, Nigeria, from about the 1950s to the early 1980s. Once importation ceased, prints were almost identically reproduced locally and continue to be so in small numbers. Displayed out and inside houses they served as markers of the household's Muslim identity and affiliation with one of the locally active Sufi tariqa. Today their representation of the events from the Quranic narrative is critically assessed against the scriptural account and increasingly considered distortive. As a result their popularity has waned and they are increasingly squeezed out of the market by a new generation of prints with religious subject matter. Produced using new technologies, i.e. scanners, photographic images freely circulating on the internet and computer graphics, the latter are perceived to better satisfy the contemporary demand for 'authentic' representations of historical personalities and contemporary events.

In this sense, the set of chromolithographs discussed bears witness to the circulation of visual media and the ideas attached to them before the advent of modern mass media. Alongside other objects of visual culture they introduced design ideas and new ways of relating to visual media that were selectively adapted and locally contested. As such, they illustrate an important step towards the medialisation of this contemporary Muslim society. Modern visual media such as TV, video and internet might have introduced new concepts of visual 'authenticity.' But, as the new generation of religious posters suggests, rather than replacing established media they have supplemented and modified them.

This paper discusses one aspects of the visual culture of Kano, the most populous town of Nigeria's predominantly Muslim north – religious posters. It will focus on a set of religious chromolithographs imported from North Africa and the Levant from about the 1950s until the 1980s. They depict renowned religious leaders, scenes from the Quranic/Old Testamental narrative and al-Buraq, the legendary winged horse that carried the Prophet Muhammad on his night journey to Jerusalem, heaven and back to Mecca. They bear witness to the circulation of visual media before the advent of modern mass media and their adaptation into local religious cultures. In addition I will argue that they introduced a prototype and practices of visual piety that were adapted as new technologies became available. Thus, they informed the new generation of religious posters currently available from Kano's traders of religious commodities.

1. The importation and distribution of religious prints

During a group interview (15/07/2008) traders of religious commodities at Kurmi Market, Kano, suggested that religious chromolithographs were originally imported from Egypt. The chief imam of Sheikh Ahmad Tijani Mosque, Kano, Muhammad al-Nasir Adam (pers. comm. 19/07/2008)

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proposed they had been imported from the Levant and Egypt from about 60 to 75 years ago. These testimonies are roughly corroborated by research into the history of popular religious print in Egypt and elsewhere in West Africa. If anything, they suggest that importation might have commenced even earlier.

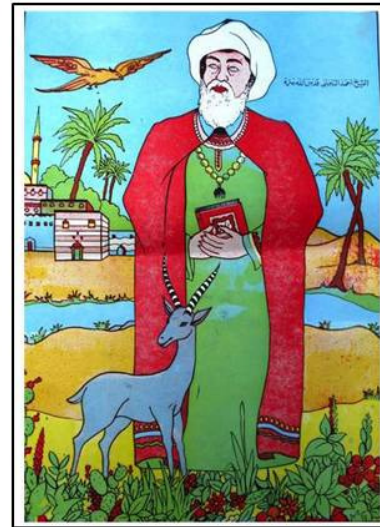
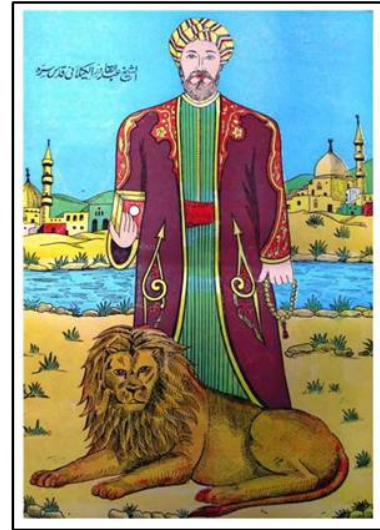
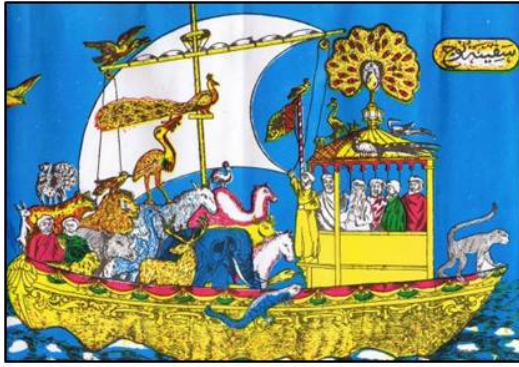
In Egypt Schienerl (1985: 185) has documented prints dating back to the 1920s in the collection of the Ethnographic Museum of the National Geographic Society in Cairo. During the 1950s Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich collected in Egypt a print depicting al-Buraq that closely resembles a chromolithograph of the same subject matter acquired at Kurmi Market, Kano, in 2008. With regard to the chromolithographs' distribution in West Africa, in 1908 William Ponty, then Governor of French West Africa, expressed his concern about the importation of what he described as 'poorly executed [*grossière*] colour engravings representing scenes from the Muslim life [for the consumption of Senegalese] marabouts, and their literate followers or those who pretended to be ...' (transl. by Roberts & Nooter-Roberts 2000: 78). In 1927 the British colonial government also expressed concerns about Islamic political propaganda in northern Nigeria (Tomlinson & Lethem 1927). Bravmann (1983: 72-73) mentioned a chromolithograph depicting al-Buraq that has been collected in Ghana during the 1940s and displays a close resemblance to an Egyptian print documented by Schienerl.

Schienerl (1986: 319, 329) observed that by the mid-1980s popular religious prints had almost completely disappeared from the market of religious commodities in Egypt. The popular interest for locally produced colour prints appeared to have generally decreased, probably under the influence of criticism by religious scholars, to an extent that prompted Schienerl to foretell the extinction of this tradition of religious imagery. This suggests a time limit to the importation of religious chromolithographs to Kano sometime in the mid-1980s. Depending on particular motifs' popularity with northern audiences traders' stock of imported prints might have lasted from a few months to years. After that local demand was satisfied by local reproductions. Low numbers of locally reproduced prints, largely preserving the original iconography, were on sale at Kurmi Market in summer 2008.

The following discussion will focus on the portraits of the sheikhs in order to explore both the impact of these prints on local and regional iconographies as well as the adaptation of the chromolithographs into local regimes of visual piety.

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III. 1-7 Religious chromolithographs acquired at Kurmi Market, Kano in July 2008. From the top anti-clockwise: Nuh/Noah's Ark, Ishmael's Sacrifice, Al-Buraq, Ali ibn Abi Talib with his sons Hassan and Husayn, Ali ibn Talib at the Battle of the Trench, Sheikh Ahmad Tijani al-Hasani, and Sheikh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani.



2. Portraits of Sheikhs

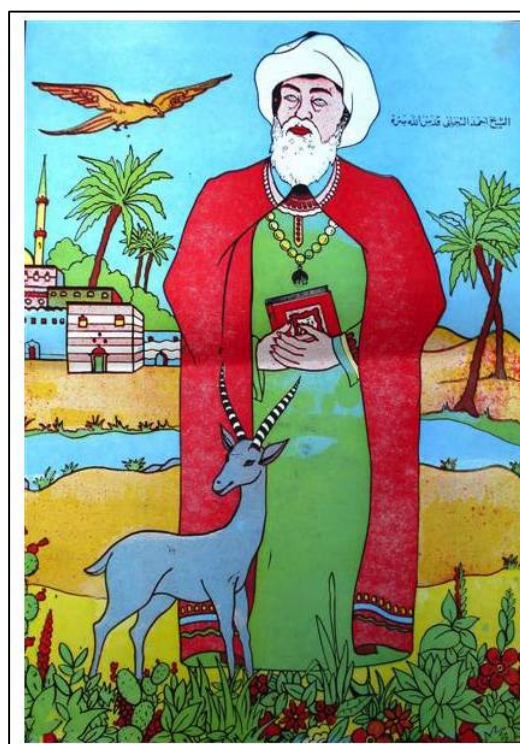
Among the chromolithographs originally imported from Egypt and locally reproduced were

portraits of Sheikh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani and Sheikh Ahmad Tijani al-Hasani.

The Qadiriyya, the Sufi order that took the former's name, has been present in the region for several centuries. It played an important role in the 1804-09 jihad under the leadership of Sheikh Usman dan Fodio (Loimeier 1997: 19). At the beginning of the 21st century the Qadiriyya continues to be one of the two most popular northern Nigerian Sufi orders. The Tijaniyya, the *tariqa* Sheikh Ahmad Tijani al-Hasani founded in 1781 in Algeria, was introduced to northern Nigeria by the Senegalese Sheikh Umar Tall. It was popularised in Kano following a visit by Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse during his pilgrimage in 1937 and subsequent visits during the late 1940s and early 1950s (Kane 2003: 71-72).



III. 8 Sheikh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani,
acquired at Kurmi Market, Kano, July 2008

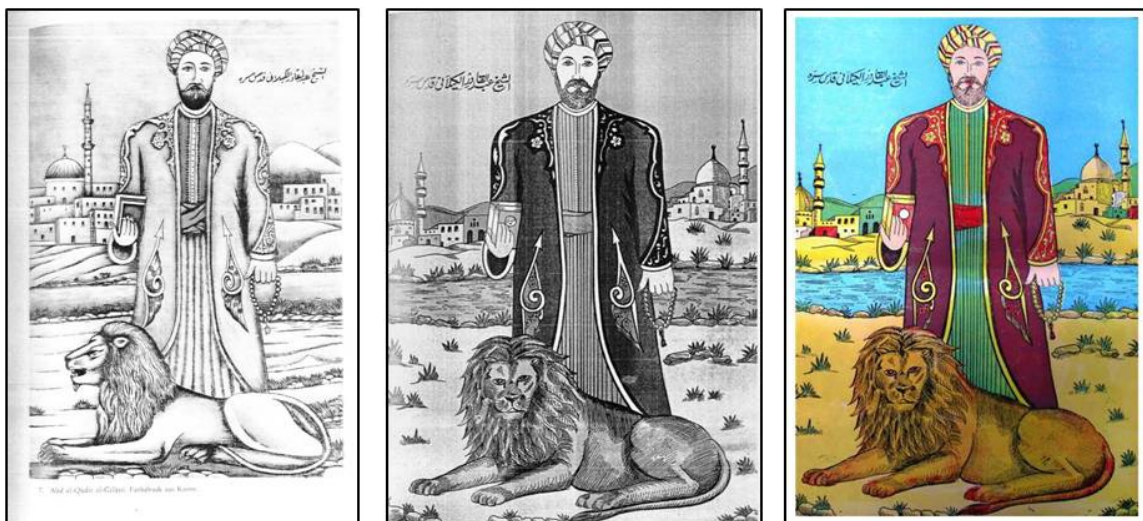


III. 9 Sheikh Ahmad Tijani al-Hasani,
acquired at Kurmi Market, Kano, July 2008

The print collected in Kano (III. 8) shows Sheikh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani dressed in a green striped caftan combined with an elaborately decorated dark burnous and a striped turban. Looking straight at the beholder he carries a book, most likely the Qur'an, in his right hand and in his left a rosary. At his feet rests a lion. The scene is set in a rather barren landscape. The only flora consists of the occasional tussock. Abd al-Qadir's sacred persona is visually separated from the mundane world of ordinary people through a river or pond. On the other side of the water, behind dunes, a settlement can be identified. Predominated by two mosques with high minaret towers it localises the scene in a Muslim environment.

The Nigerian portrait of Sheikh Ahmad Tijani al-Hasani (Ill. 9) shows him standing in a barren landscape reminiscent of his place of birth, the desert oasis of Ayn Madi in Algeria (Abun Nasr 2000). A body of water separates him from a settlement depicted in the left hand corner of the background. The sheikh is distinguished by a white beard and wears a voluminous white turban, a free falling long shirt and a red cape held together at the neck. He wears prayer beads around his neck. As if seeking eye contact with the beholder his gaze is directed towards the onlooker. In his hands Ahmdad Tijani al-Hasani holds the Quran. He is accompanied by a spiral-horn antelope. An eagle or hawk circles across the sky.

For both portraits closely related images depicting the sheikhs have been documented in Egypt and the Levant as well as North and West Africa respectively. They attest to the circulation of images along the routes of trade and pilgrimage that connected Kano with the wider world of Islam.



Ill. 10. Chromolithographs depicting Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani. Left: Egyptian colour print collected by Kriss & Kriss Heinrich (1960: Ill. 7) in Egypt during the 1950s; Centre: Colour print collected by Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont (Centlivres-Demont 1997: 48, Ill. 39), undated; Right: Colour print collected in acquired at Kurmi Market, Kano July 2008.

Portraits of Sheikh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani derived from the same prototype like the above discussed Nigerian chromolithograph have been documented in the literature on popular chromolithography in Egypt (see Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich 1960: Ill. 7) and the Levant (Centlivres & Centlivres-Demont 1997: 48, Ill. 39 & Puin 2008 Ill. L-4, discussed 576-80). They all share a basic iconography suggesting that despite the image's wide distribution a canonical image of the sheikh emerged that was preserved in the Nigerian reproductions. Major differences between them and the Nigerian chromolithograph concern the position of the inscription, the lion's pose and the features of the settlement on the other side of the water. In particular

differences in the latter might reflect attempts to increase the image's significance to local audiences without alternating its iconographic core.

The same features that characterise Sheikh Ahmad Tijani al-Hasani in the Nigerian chromolithograph also identify him in illustrations documented in North and West Africa. These depictions attest to the not only to the *tariqa*'s presence throughout the region but also active networks of exchange of, among others, images among its members. One of these images was acquired by Allen (pers. comm. 01/08/2009) in the streets running alongside Kairaouine Mosque in Fes in August 2008.² Stylistically and iconographically closely related portrays can be found on the front page of an Arab-French bilingual edition of the *Wird Tidiane* published in Dakar³ and in behind-glass paintings documented by Hill (pers. comm. 05/08/2010) in Koosi Mbitteyen, Senegal.



Ill. 11. Illustrations of Sheikh Ahmad Tijani al-Hasani. Left: Behind-glass painting in Koosi Mbitteyen, Senegal, undated; Centre: Front cover of the *Wird Tidiane*, an edition published in Dakar, Senegal, undated; Right: Colour print collected in acquired at Kurmi Market, Kano July 2008.

Religious chromolithographs, then, bear witness to the circulation of images and practices of visual piety along the pilgrimage routes from West Africa via Cairo to Mecca (see al-Naqar 1972: 139) as well as the regional networks of the *tariqas* before the advent of modern mass media. The fact that the prototypes of the chromolithographs (as well as other personalities and scenes

² Allen (29 August 2009) on his blog *Thicket and Thorp* [<http://thicketandthorp.wordpress.com/2008/08/>, accessed 31 July 2009]

³ Sami Wayzani, transl. (nd.): *Wird Tidiane: Texte Arabe, Traduction Francaise*. Dakar: Editions Hilal. The manuscript has been reproduced by Abdulwadud Louws (2005) on his blog [http://abdulwadud weblog.nl/abdulwadud/2005/08/introduction_au.html, accessed 16/08/2009] The book's entry in the Library of Congress catalogue suggests it might have been published in the 1980s.

from the religious narrative) were preserved almost unaltered through several years and editions of local reproduction indicates their sustain relevance to some local Muslim's practices of visual piety. The sheikhs' portraits in particular have informed a tradition of murals of locally renowned sheikhs that appears to be discontinued. The following discussion will highlight some of the images' uses that were suggested during fieldwork in Kano.

3. Local Practices of Visual Piety

Providing a Local Presence of the Depicted Sheikh

As they attest to the circulation of images along pilgrimage and trade routes, these religious chromolithographs also indicate the relevance of portraits of sheikhs such as Sheikh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani and Sheikh Ahmad Tijani al-Hasani to 'maintain far-flung networks of personality cults' (Smith 1995: 43):

'While the funder or exemplar may not always be able to travel to cult outposts, and may long since be dead, the image serves to carry that personality's message and sense of abiding presence and power. Personality cults that were once confined to a particular geographical, linguistic, or cultural region now have the potential, through the dissemination of powerful visual imagery, to breach parochial barriers. The accessibility and portability of [religious] poster images of saintly figures has much to do, then, with the spread and maintenance of the cults associated with them.' (Smith 1995: 43-44)

In this sense, portraits of collectively respected sheikhs provided a local presence of the religious leader and connected his disciples in one shared image of the respected teacher and 'draw[s their owners] everywhere into a common vision of the divine and its manifestations' (Babb 1995: 7). Thus, they consolidated group identities.

For the individual believer, Muhammad al-Nasir Adam (pers. comm. 19/07/2008) explained, the significance of portrait chromolithographs in particular in terms of their role as constant reminders for the disciple of his love and respect for the depicted sheikh and his own faith, submission to God and religious obligations.

Making Tangible the Religious Narrative

In a similar manner, Ibrahim recalled the chromolithographs inspired him to ask about and assisted him to remember the stories associated with the depicted persona or scenes from the religious narrative. This, the traders of religious commodities (group interview 15/07/2008) explained, many chromolithographs were employed in the teaching of religion. They provided for students a material presence for the depicted personalities and rendered tangible the historical scenes depicted.

Symbols of Religious Identity and Affiliation

As chromolithographs were adapted into the regimes of visual piety associated with locally represented *tariqa* they also became potent signifiers of their owners' religious affiliation. Such was suggested by the traders of religious commodities at Kurmi Market (group interview, 15/07/2008). They explained that displayed in- and outside houses chromolithographs depicting the founders of the Sufi orders as well as other personalities and scenes from the religious narrative 'demonstrate(d) to the outside world the owner's religious identity and piety' (Puin 2008: 13, my translation). A similar function was fulfilled by murals depicting renowned sheikhs. Unlike the chromolithographs murals allowed patrons and artist to extent the canon of depicted personalities to suit their requirements. Ibrahim (pers. comm. 15/07/2008)⁴ recalled that during his youth chromolithographs of the kind here discussed were displayed in his father's house as well as the houses of friends. There they denoted the family's religious identity as Muslims. Portraits of sheikhs signified the household's affiliation with this scholar and, by extension, the *tariqa* he belonged to.

Symbols of the Pilgrimage Undertaken

The chromolithographs' country of origin, Egypt, was also an important stop on the pilgrimage for Nigerian Muslims and the main source of imported chromolithographs. Religious prints formed one of the many kinds of collectibles pilgrims brought back as souvenirs and material proof they had undertaken the journey. As such they denoted the owner's status as a travelled man and, ultimately, Alhaji. In this sense, their 'foreign' character formed an integral part of their appeal. It formed part of their association with the pilgrimage. Herein might lay one explanation for the fact that the prints' imported prototypes were preserved almost unchanged. Prints

⁴ Ibrahim is a PhD researcher at the Department of Mass Communications at Bayero University Kano with an interest in contemporary poster production in the town.

originally purchased abroad faded and, especially if displayed outside, required regular replacement. To preserve the association with the pilgrimage customers would have sought out other imported prints. After importation ceased the market relied on local reproduction. Preservation of the original composition became a means to maintain the required foreign appeal.

Providing Access to Blessings

The question of mystical properties associated with the chromolithographs is raised by Roberts & Nooter-Roberts' research into the visual culture and piety of Senegalese Mourides. Mourides consider portraits of sheikhs and, before all others, of Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba icons of piety and belief that they possess '*baraka* or God's active blessings (Roberts & Nooter Roberts 2008: 7 & 11-12). Neither *baraka* nor any other talismanic or mystical dimension were mentioned by Imam Muhammad al-Nasir Adam (pers. comm. 19/07/2008). Ibrahim (pers. comm. 15/07/2008) and the traders of religious commodities at Kurmi Market (group interview 15/07/2008) suggested that some local audiences did indeed believe the portraits of sheikhs to carry blessings.

In recent years pietist criticism has profoundly affected the social and religious uses of these chromolithographs. Against the background of improved religious education the chromolithograph's illustrations of scenes from the religious narrative did not anymore satisfy changed, contemporary expectations of historical and scriptural accuracy in illustrations of religious history. They also compete with a new regime of visual representation based on photographic likeness. For many local Muslims, as a result, they cannot fulfil their previous social functions anymore. They have been discarded as teaching aids. They cannot anymore convincingly convey a Muslim identity to the outside world. Nor can they contribute to the making of collective Muslim identities in Kano to the same extent as in the past. As a result the demand for reproductions of the chromolithographs originally imported from Egypt has dramatically dwindled. Instead local traders and artists draw upon the possibilities provided by increasingly available digital technologies to produce a new generation of posters aimed at the local market of religious commodities.

4. Contemporary Religious Prints

At the beginning of the 21st century increasingly available digital technologies had reduced the cost of reproduction and distribution of images. Possibly even more crucially, they had enabled local producers to digitalise existing photographs and, using digital picture editing programmes, incorporate them into the designs of posters, bumper stickers, badges etc. Digital technology

thus enabled the adaptation of a regime of visibility informed by photography into the local tradition of religious chromolithography. As a form of visual representation photography is less contested among religious scholars than other (naturalistic) art forms. Portrait photographs are less prone to criticism of caricaturing the respected religious scholars. In this sense, digital technology might have contributed to the continued acceptance of this tradition of religious arts within some local practices of visual piety against the background of an increased influence of pietistic movements. Instead it was expanded into other media such as stickers and badges displaying sheikhs' portraits.

Photography and digital picture editing technologies enabled the depiction of sheikhs of whom historical and contemporary photographs exist. As a result contemporary sheikhs of local prominence feature prominently in the new generation of religious posters. In this sense, digital technologies have facilitated the 'localisation' of this originally imported art tradition. Current public practice suggests they also enabled an increased identification between the sheikh, his teachings and his portrait photograph. In 2008 posters depicting contemporary sheikhs could be found pasted onto the walls along the commercially vital section of K'ofar Mata Road that runs alongside Kwari Market. Posters and murals of sheikhs had been applied to the walls of houses in the old town. Posters decorated the entrance to Qaderiyya House opposite Kano Central Mosque.

The design of posters commonly evolved around the central portrait photograph of a prominent religious scholar such as the Senegalese Tijani sheikh Ibrahim Niasse (1900-75) or the Nigerian sheikhs Dahiru Usman Bauchi.

The poster depicting Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse (here spelled as Inyassi) has been designed around one of the canonical photographs of the sheikh. The sheikh is identified through an inscription at the centre top of the poster. An Arabic inscription at the bottom identifies him further as an important scholar ('his eminence') and one who has undertaken the pilgrimage, i.e. Alhaji. Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse popularised the Tijaniyya in Kano during visits between the late 1930s and early 1950s. He had declared that in a vision Sheikh Ahmad Tijani al-Hasani told him

'that he was the *ṣāhib al-fayda*, i.e. the channel of the infusion of grace which the Tidjānīs

receive from their master.’ He referred to himself as the ‘Saviour of the Age’ (*Ghawth al-*

Zamān)(Abun Nasr 2000). In the top right corner a circular cartouche contains the word God written in Arabic. In the top left corner a similar Arabic inscription mentions the Prophet. The same calligraphic design provides the background against which the sheikh’s portrait has been set. In the bottom left corner a map of Saudi Arabia is depicted. It is the colour of the Saudi Arabian flag and displays the flag’s design of the sword underneath the *shahada*. Two praying hands were superimposed upon the map.

This particular poster of Sheikh Dahiru Usman Bauchi depicts the sheikh probably just giving a sermon or other kind of speech. His portrait is set against a blown up picture of the prophet’s mosque in Medina. He is identified beyond doubt by inscriptions in the right hand top corner and the left hand bottom corner of the poster. In the upper left corner the word ‘Allah’ has been placed in large white Arabic letters.

Although the design centred around a central portrait of a renowned sheikh appears to be most common, other designs can be encountered. One poster depicting Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse, e.g. consists of 114 images of the sheikh showing him in his native Senegal as well as on visits to Ghana and Nigeria. This is as many pictures of the sheikh as there are suras in the Qur’an. Another poster depicts several locally respected sheikhs and visualises their spiritual descent in a chain of learning from Sheikh Ahmad Tijani al-Hasani via Sheikh Ibrahim: A portrait drawing of the former has been placed at the top of the arrangement. It is more naturalistic and less stylised than the above discussed chromolithograph originating from Egypt. To his side a photograph of Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse has been placed. The portraits of the other sheikhs have been arranged in columns and rows beneath them. Together they amount to the number of years of Sheikh Tijani’s life (pers. comm. 15/07/2008).

These locally produced religious posters suggest an iconisation of locally renowned sheikhs and a prominent role of their portrait photographs in the visual piety of some northern Nigerian Muslims. This process was possibly initiated by the older generation of imported prints. It has been further promoted by technologies that enabled local producers to incorporate portrait photographs of locally renowned sheikhs into designs specifically addressed to pious local audiences. In addition to posters depicting locally renowned sheikhs the traders of religious commodities at Kurmi Market sold posters and calendars depicting other religious subject

matters. Showing the Ka'ba and other religious locations they connected the devotee with Islam's holy sites. Others provided instructions for correct worship and prayer. In addition to locally produced religious commodities some northern Nigerian Muslims have incorporated imported posters and stickers into their practice of visual piety.

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