

A Contextual Analysis of Sacred Qādiriyyah *Sufi* Paintings in Kano, Nigeria

By

Nadir A. Nasidi

Department of History

Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

nanasidi@abu.edu.ng

Abstract:

Despite the well-known prohibition of figurative representations by Muslims world-wide, some figurative art forms are still accepted by many Muslims. Thus, images of Angels, saints and other religious figures form part of the artistic repertoire of many Islamic sects, or orders. Indeed most followers of the *Sufi* order give some religious signification and connotations to such paintings, which invariably transform their status from the profane to the sacred. Such paintings however, are placed within certain socio-political contexts. In this regard, this paper attempts a contextual analysis of selected Qādiriyyah *Sufi* paintings in Kano. Though largely built on oral sources, this paper shows that *Sufi* paintings play an important role in explaining some socio-political contexts of Kano religious space.

Keywords: Context, sacred, Qādiriyyah, Sufi, Paintings.

Résumé : Malgré l'interdiction bien connue des représentations figuratives par les musulmans dans le monde entier, certaines formes d'art figuratif sont encore acceptées par de nombreux musulmans. Ainsi, les images d'anges, de saints et d'autres figures religieuses font partie du répertoire artistique de nombreuses sectes ou ordres islamiques. En effet, la plupart des adeptes d'un ordre soufi donnent une certaine signification et connotation religieuses à ces peintures, ce qui transforme invariablement leur statut de profane en sacré. Ces peintres apparaissent dans des contextes sociopolitiques précis. À cet égard, cet article tente une analyse contextuelle de quelques peintures soufies de Qādiriyyah à Kano. Bien qu'il s'appuie largement sur des sources orales, cet article montre que les peintures soufies jouent un rôle important dans l'explication de certains contextes sociopolitiques de l'espace religieux de Kano.

Mots-clés : Contexte, sacré, Qādiriyyah, Soufi, Peintures.

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Introduction

Scholars have put forward various arguments in relation to the meaning(s), origin, nature and functions of *Sufism*. Being of Arabic origin, the word ‘*Sufism*’ according to Solagberu (2009:5), refers to a unique esoteric science concerning human state of mind and its spiritual purity through prayers and abstinence to worldly life. While commenting on the functions of *Sufism* Iqbal (2001:83-85) and Hassan (2014:7-8) argue that, *Sufi* adherents, especially among the members of *Qādiriyyah* and *Tijjāniyyah* brotherhoods find solace and spiritual satisfaction through abstinence, mediation and self-denial.

The paintings of *Sufi* saints are holy to *Sufi* followers. Lewis (2010: 155-157) maintains that, such paintings play a number of roles ranging from mediation to visual representation of the divine. Thus, religious artists use their skills for spiritual communication with both the Saviour and His Saints whom they represent artistically. This is because, despite widespread Muslim iconoclasm, most *Sufis* believe in the legitimacy of the visual representation of their saints. However, this has generated a lot of tension between mainstream Islam and its local adaptations as regards the legality, or otherwise of visual imagery. This form of iconoclasm as Jari (2007:1) posits, is not only restricted to Islam, but to Christianity and Judaism as well. To avert any such religious criticism, Muhammad (2015:6) argues that, most Muslim artists (especially in the Sunni tradition) focused mainly on Arabic calligraphy, which was used to spiritually protect and beautify mosques and palaces. This diversity of perspectives on the nature, legality and compositions of *Sufi* saint paintings in Kano, Nigeria inspired this researcher into the contextual study of such art works. . Here, ‘context’ means (1) the symbolic meaning(s) attached to the *Sufi* paintings (2) the role they play and (3) their iconography.

The Historical Development of sacred *Sufi* Paintings in Kano

Historically, non-figurative *Sufi* saint paintings largely of motifs and symbols were originally brought to Kano by Arab and Berber merchants during the Trans-Saharan Trade and then,

evolved over time as local versions were produced. Figurative *Sufi* saint paintings emerged as a result of Sheikh Ibrahim Niass's (1902-1975) visits to Kano in 1946 and in the 1950s, which were followed by the dissemination of mass produced posters of him.¹ According to Quadri:

During the Shaykh's visit to Lagos in 1970, I met a student of his, selling the Shaykh's pictures and saying to the eager spectators that whoever hang his picture in his house, he would receive a special protection from God and would also prosper in his endeavours. This made thousands of people buy the pictures readily, hoping to derive such benefits (1985: 1).

In some parts of Nigeria, notably Ilorin and Ibadan, artistic representations of Sheikh Ibrahim, deriving from the famous paintings of Sheikh Amadu Bamba of Senegal could be seen on many commercial and private vehicles since the 1950s.² This is because some of the owners of such vehicles were *Tijjāniyyah* followers who believed in Niass's mysterious spiritual power to make them prosperous and to protect them (Hassan, 2014:8). With the lapse of time, the followers of *Qādiriyyah Sufi* order also joined in the visual representations of their saints. As well as the painting of Niass, other *Sufi* saints both local and international also began to feature in *Sufi* paintings of Kano in particular and Nigeria in general.

According to Yahya (2012:9-11), *Sufi* paintings are considered sacred by most of the followers of *Tijjāniyyah* and *Qādiriyyah* in Kano. Discussing this theme Livingston (2005:39-46) says that the 'sacred' seems to represent the 'two poles of a single dreadful domain; as both sanctity and defilement'. Thus, the care and concern given to *Sufi* paintings attract sanctity and solace, while its desecration and defilement leads to 'divine punishment'. This difference according to Eliade (1961:11) represents the two fundamental modes of being in the world as regarded human beings throughout the realms of history. He also argues that, the sacred always appear to be something extraordinary, which is quite distinct from the profane, common, or simply utilitarian. In view of this therefore, Eliade maintains that, both natural objects and artefacts have the potentialities of transforming from a common use to a sacred presence, which is referred to as '*hierophany*' (from the Greek *hieros*, meaning "sacred", and *phanein*, meaning to "appear").

¹ For more clarification on Sheikh Ibrahim Niass and his role in the emergence of sacred *Sufi* paintings in Kano, see, Quadri (1985).

² See, Nasiru (1976: 8).

Humans have devised various ways of connecting with the Supreme via language and images that are symbolic expressions of the divine (Eliade, 1961:11-12). Through this process, Eliade observes that, humans developed a number of illustrations of the ways in which religious symbols and imageries can ‘bridge’, or ‘bring together’ the profane and the sacred or various forms of religious meanings, or concepts directly attached to them. In this regard therefore, visual representations are powerful conveyors of religious meaning, particularly by making present the ‘holy’, or the ‘sacred’.

According to Durkheim (Haralambos, Holborn, Chapman and Moore (2013:432)), sacred things must be symbols representing something divine. That is why to understand the role of religion in societies, the relationship between the sacred symbols and what they represent, should be established. In the light of this, although the *Sufi* paintings emerge from the profane, the religious and spiritual connotations attached to them made them sacred to the followers of the two *Sufi* orders in Kano.

By extension, *Sufi* painters in Kano and most Northern states in Nigeria began to diversify their paintings by representing their Nigerian *Sufi* saints, along with Niass and other foreign *Sufi* saints, like Sheikh Ahmad Tijjani, Abdulqadir Jilani. These like the portrait of Niass, also started circulating as posters and photographs. In Kano, for instance, the most famous *Sufi* saints whose posters and photographs are widely in circulation are Sheikh Muhammad Gibrima, Sheikh Aliyu Harazimi and Sheikh Tijjani Uthman.

Furthermore, there emerged self-taught artists who were inspired by Senegalese art during their trips to Senegal to visit Sheikh Niass at Kaolak, especially the paintings revering Sheikh Amadu Bamba and other *Sufi* saints. At the local level in Kano, they began to paint the portraits of *Sufi* scholars both indigenous like Sheikh Muhammad Gibrima, Sheikh Tijjani Uthman, Sheikh Abul-Fathi, as well as foreign saints like Sheikh Ahmad Tijjāni, Sheikh Abdulqādir Jilani, Sheikh Ibrahim Niass, among others (see, fig. 1).



Figure 1: Salisu Sa'id Alasan (Wales), *Sheikh Tijjani Uthman*, Paint on Wall, 175x165 cm, 2009, Dukawa, (Photograph: Nadir A. Nasidi, 2018)

A Contextual Analysis of Sacred *Qādiriyyah Sufi* Paintings in Kano

This paper contextually analyses and interrogates the values of *Sufi* paintings in Kano with particular reference to the *Qādiriyyah* sacred figurative representations of their saints.

Discussions and Analysis

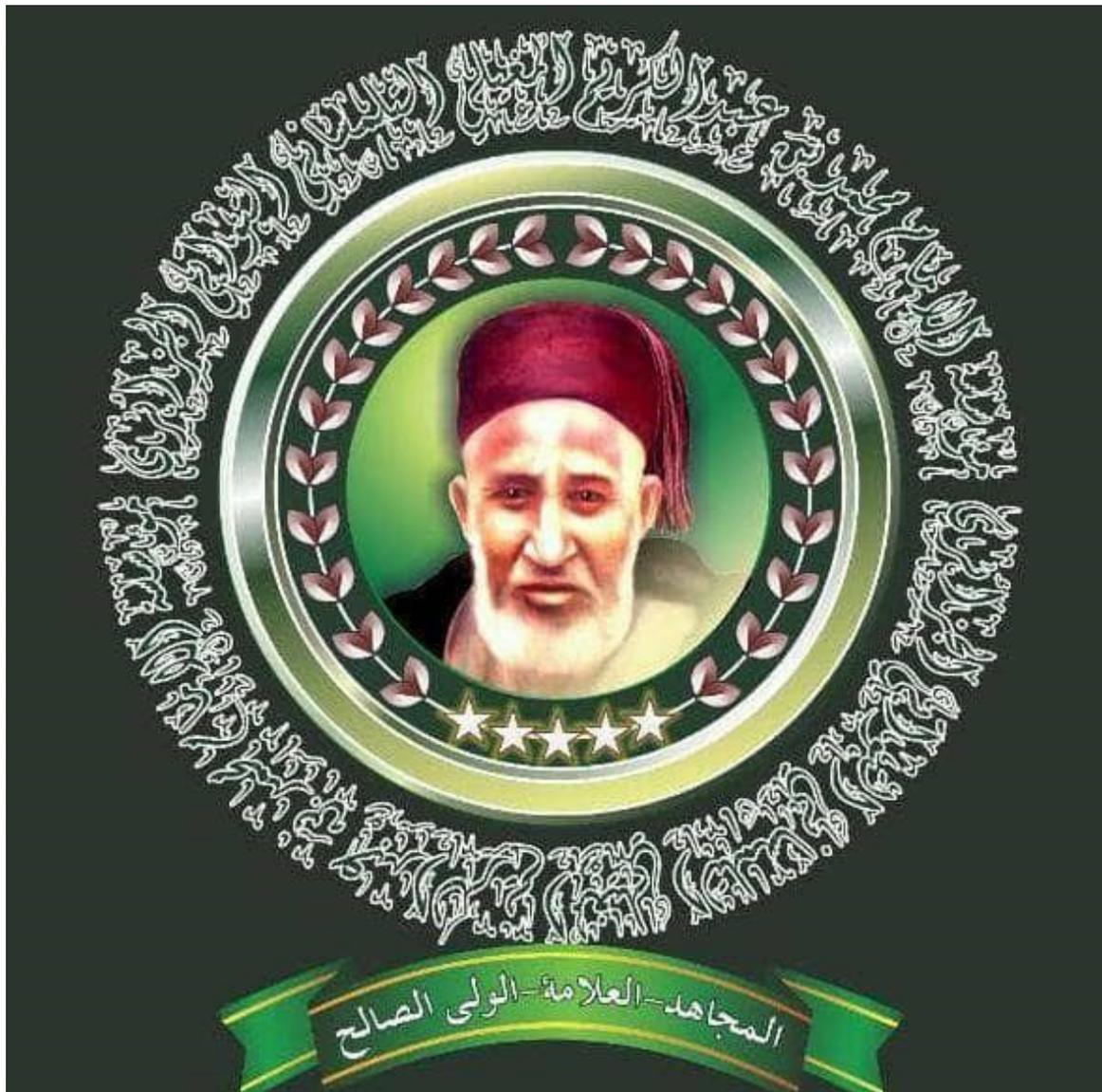


Figure 2: Gausu Nuhu Wali, *Sheikh Abdulkarim Al-Maghili*,
Oil on Canvas, 74x74 cm, 1990, Sharifai, (Photograph: Nadir A.
Nasidi, 2019)

Figure 2 is the painting of Sheikh Abdulkarim al- Maghīli done by Gausu Nuhu Wali. Wearing his typical North African red cap, Sheikh Maghīli was a Berber *Sufi*, from a town called Tlemcen in the present day Algeria. He was born in 1440 A.D to a learned family of Maghīla clan. He studied under erudite Islamic scholars of his time like Imam Abdurrahman al-Tha'alibi and Abu Zakariyya Yahya bn Yadir bn Atiq al-Tadalsi. In the 15th century, when he visited Kano, during the reign of Sarki Muhammadu Rumfa (1463-1499 A.D), Sheikh Maghīli drafted a constitution titled '*Tāj al-Mulūk*' for the people of Kano, as demanded by

their leader (Smith, n.d: 37) and Naniya (2002:18). The treatise spelt out the responsibilities and rights of the State and its people, in terms of governance and administration.

According to the painter Wali (27 Dec. 2019), the work in Figure 2 was conceived from a dream he had in 1990. Though Maghīli's picture was not available, due to the lack of the technology of photography in North Africa during that time, scholars of his time have described him through their writings (al-Qadiri 13 Jan. 2020). Thus, it was from the dream that the artist got the visual details of Maghīli whom he painted, which corroborates the available literature on the physical features of Maghīli (Faira 12 Jan. 2019). According to the North African scholars, who later came to know about this painting, it might be a true dream, due to the miraculous nature of the saint (Haido 20 Jan. 2020). From that time onwards, the painting composed by the Kano *Sufi* artist (Gausu Nuhu Wali) became widely circulated, not only in Kano, but also in the North African region (Wali 27 Dec. 2020).



Figure 3: Ado Abdu, *Sheikh Nasir Kabara*, Paint on Wall, 157x183 cm, 2000, Dala, (Photograph: Nadir A. Nasidi, 2018)

Figure 3 is a portrait of Sheikh Nāsir Kabara (1912-1996), a leading scholar and saint of the *Qādiriyyah* brotherhood not only in Kano, but throughout West-Africa. Sheikh Kabara was born at Guringawa village, located some few kilometres outside Kano.³ He received his *Ijaza*⁴ from Sheikh Abul Hassan Al-Sammān, the grandson of the founder of the *Sammāniyyah Sufi* brotherhood. In the 1930s and 1950s, Sheikh Kabara was able to link his locally based *Qādiriyyah* brotherhood to its international primary sources located at Khartoum, Timbuktu and Baghdād. This development was subsequently followed by his

³ Kabara was an influential Qādiriyyah Sheikh in Kano who was a descendant of one Malam na Kabara, a Malian Islamic scholar who settled in Kano during the Sokoto Jihad years.

⁴ Being an Arabic word, *Ijazah* refers to a form of certificate given to students and adherents by their teachers testifying their studentship or spiritual linkages between them. Thus, whenever a student studies a book before a scholar, or passed through his spiritual training, the *Ijazah* would be issued.

appointment during his travel to Baghdād as the leader of the *Qādiriyyah* brotherhood in West Africa by Sheikh Sayf al-Dīn al-Jilani.

In Figure 3, Sheikh Kabara is painted placing the Holy Qur'an on his head, while holding in his left hand, a rosary used for litanies, especially by the *Sufi* saints during *Khalwa* (spiritual seclusion). As seen in the lower part of the plane, the artist uses neutral colours; the black as the background and white as a means of writing the saint's name (Sheikh Nāsir Kabara) in a purely *Magribi* script. Using a shade of green, the artist achieves a level of value, while the use of light brown in both the positive and the negative areas, as well as, red, for the Qur'an give the composition a sense of variety, yet complementary in a sense that excludes unity.

It should be noted that this painting marks an important historical event that took place in Kano when scholars of different sects; *Tijjāniyyah*, *Qādiriyyah* and *Izāla* debated certain religious practices, including theology and belief. After a long intellectual discussion, Sheikh Kabara placed the glorious Qur'an on his head and swore that his brotherhood is the only right way to salvation (Rashid 8 Jan. 2020). From that moment onwards, this artistic representation by *Sufi* painters was used as a poster on vehicles and elsewhere. However, this argument was disputed by Kabara (12 Jan. 2020) who said that he was there when the picture was made. According to him, the picture was initially made in front of Sheikh Kabara's house during *Maukib* (annual visitations to the graves of saints by members of the *Qādiriyyah Sufi* order in Kano). The informant also added that, as soon as, Sheikh Kabara placed the Qur'an on his head he began to recite a verse, which says 'We have placed our covenant on the heavens, the earth and the mountains, but they refused and shun-away from it, but was accepted by a human. Surely, he is a transgressor and ignorant' (Qur'an 22: 76), which invariably signifies Sheikh Kabara's spiritual accession onto the highest position of authority as a *Sufi*, but could not publically say it due to his humility.



Figure 4: Ado Abdu, *Sheikh Nasir Kabara*, Paint on Wall, 173x183 cm, 2000, Dala, (Photograph: Nadir A. Nasidi, 2019)

This figure is also a portrait of Sheikh Nasir Kabara dressed in a typical royal cum-scholar's attire and at the same time, wearing a turban and a hat. The application of green in the negative area and on the embroidery of his garment gives the work a sense of unity and balance, while the use of light and dark blue, provides variety.

Although a turban was widely used by royalty, Sheikh Kabara's style shows that, it was also worn by scholars. This is because Islamic scholars have for a long time been identified with wearing them, as they aspire to imitate the Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H). However, the woven style of hat worn primarily symbolizes royalty. Contextually, Sheikh Kabara according to Fadīl (20 Jan. 2020), had a dual status for most of his life: as an Islamic

scholar and cleric, and also as a member of the royalty. Apart from his role as a religious and spiritual leader, in 1949 Kabara was appointed by the Emir of Kano, Abdullahi Bayero, as a member of his Council of Advisers (Abdallah 28 Jan. 2019). Kabara served as a legal consultant to the Northern Muslim Court of Appeal, as well as one of the two scholars of Qur'anic exegesis (Tafsīr) in the palace (Nazir 28 Feb. 2020) although he was later replaced in 1954 by the leaders of reformed *Tijjaniyyah* school (*Mallamai*) by Emir Muhammad Sunusi I. With the appointment of Emir Ado Bayero in 1963, Sheikh Kabara was again appointed an adviser to the Emir. This was combined with his role as a member of the Kaduna Council of *Mallamai* (scholars) since 1963. Sheikh Kabara was also appointed to lead numerous local and regional committees, ranging from the Kano Native Authority Committee on Prostitution to the Northern Nigerian Special Committee on Education in the defunct Kano Province.

During his life time Sheikh Kabara was known for his elegant and royal style of dressing because of his dual social status within the Kano's religious and political terrains. From the foregoing therefore, it is apparent that his depiction wearing both turban and hat (one representing scholarship and the other royalty) references the dual roles he played, as a religious guide to both leaders and commoners, as well as his role as political advisor to many Emirs of Kano.



Figure 5: Abubakar Uba Adam, *Sheikh Yusuf Makwarari*, Gloss paint on wall, 54x33cm, 2015, Kurawa, (Photograph: Nadir A. Nasidi, 2020)

This portrait of Malam Yusuf Makwarari (Figure 5) is by Abubakar Uba Adam. The Malam is depicted wearing a white robe and a turban. The brownish colour, with white touches in the background make the painting not only simple, but also harmonious. Born at Makwarari

quarters of Kano in 1919, Malam Makwarari descended from the famous Wangarawa people, originally from Mali, as a result of their efforts in spreading Islam in the ancient city of Kano.⁵ He is artistically represented mostly wearing a white robe which is a pointer to his cleanliness of the mind attained through litanies and rejection of the material world. Though figurative representations of saints like him is discouraged by most *Qādiriyyah* scholars, his paintings exist in many houses of his adherents, especially within Kano metropolis.⁶ Like every *Sufi* painting in Kano, it is considered to provide a spiritual protection to those commissioning it.

Sheikh Makwarari was one of the leading disciples of late Sheikh Malam Nasir Kabara (Atamma 7 Jan. 2020). During his lifetime Nasir Kabara used to delegate Makwarari to represent him in many important occasions. Makwarari published a poem titled '*Begen Shehu Abdulqādir*' (Longing for Sheikh Abdulqādir). Though hagiographical the poem plays extensively on the miracles and blessings of Sheikh Abdulqādir Jilāni who was the spiritual leader of the *Qādiriyyah* movement. Apart from establishing a historical nexus, between the leaders of the historic Sokoto Caliphate that was founded in 1804 and Sheikh Kabara, the poem also identifies the latter, his mentor, as the *Ghauth* (spiritual leader of the *Sufi* order who emerges in every century) of his time (Boahen 1967).⁷

Sheikh Makwarari was an erudite Islamic cleric in his own right. Unlike most Islamic scholars of his time who used to organize special sessions for Qur'anic exegesis (*Tafsir*), especially during the month of Ramadan (the Islamic fasting period), scholars like Sheikh Makwarari taught it throughout the year. He was also considered not only a pious man, but also a great *Sufi* saint, mainly for his piety and disregard to the flashy nature of this material world. The Sheikh had learnt Islamic knowledge including *Sufism* in the hands of notable *Sufi* saints like Sheikh Nasir Kabara, Sheikh Abdurrahman Mazan Kwarai, and Malam

⁵ The Wangarawa were a migrant group of people from Mali who according to history, were the vanguards in spreading Islam to present day Nigeria. They are called 'Wangarawa' because they hailed from a Malian city with lots of gold deposits. In Kano, there are three different clans of the Wangarawa namely; Dukurawa, Yolawa and Sankawa. However, Sheikh Makwarari belonged to the Yolawa group.

⁶ Presently, Kano metropolis is made up of nine Local Government Areas which are; Kano Municipal, Dala, , Fagge, Gwale, Kumbotso, Nassarawa, Tarauni and Ungogo.

⁷ When Sheikh Ibrahim Niass claimed to be the *Gauth* of his time, he was opposed by a lot of *Sufi* scholars in Kano, especially the house of Sheikh Mahmud Salga whose chain of transmission came directly from Sheikh Umar al-Futi. For details about this issue and the historical evolution of the Sokoto Caliphate see e.g. ADELEYE 1977: 11-12, BALOGUN 1975: 18, BELLO 1957, EL-MASRI 1963: 435 and 1968, FUDI n.d.: 4-14, LAST 1967, MANGA 1980: 141, PADEN, 1973, SA'ID 2012:40 as well as WEBSTAR and BOAHEN 1967: 3-4.

Muhammad Mai Doki, (Haido 20 Jan. 2020). However, he received his knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence from his father who was also an erudite *Sufist* and scholar. Meanwhile, Makwarari's notable students who he taught various sciences of Islamic knowledge were Malam Abdurrahman Maibushira, Malam Sadik Alfindiki, Malam Muhammad Sanusi Maikasida, Malam Sharu Bala, Malam, Tasi'u Bala Ja, Malam Bulyamin Makwarari and host of others.

Before his death in 2000, Sheikh Makwarari had the power to appoint *Qādiriyyah Muqaddams* throughout Kano city. Apart from that, he also had a special class for such category of people. Thus, for his spiritual position and *Karāmāt* (miracles), he is presently figuratively represented on the walls of many followers among which figure 5 is an example.



Figure 6: Ado Abdu, *Sheikh Abduljabbar Nasir Kabara*, Paint on Wall, 177x183 cm, 2000, Kumbotso, (Photograph: Nadir A. Nasidi, 2020)

Figure 6 is the portrait of another *Sufi* scholar, Sheikh Abduljabbar, one of the sons of Sheikh Nasir Kabara, the leader of the followers of *Qādiriyyah* in West Africa in the 20th century.

Born at Kabara quarters of Kano Municipal, Sheikh Abduljabbar was educated at Ma'ad Addīn Islāmiyyah, a school established by his father. Later, he had his secondary education at Government Arabic College (GAC) in Kano. At a very tender age, he had represented his father at both national and international fora. For instance, he represented his father in countries like Niger, Chad, Libya, Iraq, Russia, Azerbaijan, to mention, but a few (Indabawa 2018).

Sheikh Abduljabbar is the founder of *Mujamma'ul Ashāb al-Kahfi* in the year 2000, which is a school of Arabic and *Hadith* (Prophetic traditions) studies, the model of which was copied by the Sheikh during one of his intellectual tours to Azerbaijan. He is considered the Spiritual Commander in Chief of the House of *Qādiriyyah* in Kano. He too, like his father, is considered a revered *Sufi*, by his followers and hence, the emergence of his artistic representations on the walls of their houses.

The artist, in figure 6 painted Sheikh Abduljabbar in one of his sittings, teaching people the various aspects of the Islamic sciences, particularly the *Hadith* classes, clasping the rosary for litanies used by the *Sufi* scholars. The Sheikh wears a turban and *Jubba* (an Arab garment mostly used by Islamic scholars, or members of the royalty). The use of light brown, in the negative area compliments the grey, white and the green colours in the positive area. Green is used in the embroidery of his garment, which is positioned at the centre of his chest. However, the meaning attached to white in *Sufism* is cleanliness of the heart, while green stands for the divine centre (Indabawa, 2018).

Conclusion

This paper provided a contextual analysis of five selected sacred *Sufi* paintings in Kano, Nigeria. These paintings explain certain socio-political contexts within the Kano religious space with particular reference to the Qādiriyyah *Sufi* order. The paper also traced the historical evolution of such paintings, especially during Sheikh Ibrahim Niass visit to Kano in the 1940s. The paper argued that *Sufi* paintings in Kano were directly influenced by the Senegalese *Sufi* paintings of Sheikh Amadu Bamba, which Kano based artists paying visits to Kaolak, Niass's home town, had seen then decided to produce similar works in their own country, but then widened the horizon by artistically representing both their local and international saints. The paper also brought to the fore discussions revolving around the sacredness of the *Sufi* paintings in Kano which are believed to provide a sense of spiritual protection to those commissioning and owning them.

Interviews

Dayyab Rashid 8 Jan. 2020, Kano.

Gausu Nuhu Wali 27 Dec. 2019, Kano.

Hadi Abdallah 28 Jan. 2019, Kano.

Hassan Mutari Atamma 7 Jan. Kano.

Jamil al-Qadiri 13 Jan. 2020, Kano.

Muhammad Fadle Haido 20 Jan. 2020, Kano.

Muhammad Nazir 28 Feb. 2020, Kano.

Tijjani Faira 12 Jan. 2019, Kano.

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