

WHEN IDENTITY BECOMES “FORM”: CALLIGRAPHIC ABSTRACTION AND SUDANESE MODERNISM

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The late Osman Waqialla's pioneering experimentation with classical Arabic calligraphy led to the rise of a distinct style within postwar Sudanese art.¹ Based on a mastery of this calligraphy's diverse styles, and an extensive knowledge of its aesthetic balancing of masses of light and dark, Waqialla's contribution lay not only in his creative treatment of the sacred text of the Qur'an—clearly evidenced in his calligraphic variations on Qur'anic themes, as in his "*Al-Anbiyya*" (Prophets) series (1952–2002)—but in liberating Arabic calligraphy from its association with the Qur'an through a pioneering treatment of secular Arabic texts, exemplified in his series on Sudanese modern poetry and starting with his earliest surviving work, *Al Sufi al Mu'azab* (The Tormented Mystic, 1952; fig. 1).² This interest in revolutionary experimentation was shared by his relatively younger colleagues Ibrahim El Salahi and Ahmed Shibrain, prominent figures in what by the early 1960s had evolved into the influential Khartoum School.

In his early works Shibrain further developed the potential of the Arabic letter as abstracted form, seeing it as a figural element with an "inspiring plastic aesthetic value" that he applied to an Africanized Sudanese framework.³ In his innovative pen-and-ink paintings of c. 1960, such as *Untitled* (fig. 2), Arabic-like characters are arranged in a Kufic style on a plain white background. Individual characters are barely decipherable, being shortened or elongated, compressed or expanded, to become part of a larger abstracted composition. Shibrain's oil painting *Message 40* (1966) includes both calligraphy and traditional Islamic decorative motifs, such as rosettes, crescents, and semifloral arabesques. The paintings from this period, such as *Untitled* (1965),⁴ deploy earthy colors recalling the references to landscape in the work of other other Khartoum School artists, including El Salahi. Shibrain envisions colors such as blue and bluish green as referring symbolically to the Nile river—a major life presence in Sudan—and red, yellow, and brown as the hues of the earth and of northern Sudanese traditional architecture.

Concerns with calligraphic forms and abstracted figurations also appear in the work of El Salahi, who began to break down Arabic letters and abstract their shapes in the early 1960s, focusing on their formal properties rather than on their meanings.⁵ Through this process of

experimentation he revealed the abstracted rhythmic shapes of calligraphy, finding in them the presence of objects, figures, and a fantastic world of imagery. *The Last Sound* (1964; fig. 3), *Allah and the Wall of Confrontation* (1968) and *Untitled* (early 1960s), three representative works from this period, clearly evidence Arabic script and Arabic-like characters, in addition to the Islam-inspired crescent motif and West African masklike figures. These works reference events in the artist's life—*The Last Sound*, for example, was made on the death of his father—but cannot be interpreted as narrative or realist depictions. Both demonstrate El Salahi's pursuit of a new, modernist visual vocabulary and mark a trans-

formation in his practice, a shedding of his Western academic training, first at the College of Fine and Applied Art (formerly known as the School of Design in Gordon Memorial College in Khartoum), beginning in the late 1940s, then at London's Slade School of Fine Art in the 1950s. These concerns had parallels among artists in other metropolitan centers of the Arab world.

The well-known *Funereral and the Crescent* (1963; plate 118) refers to the killing of Patrice Lumumba, the democratically elected leader of Congo, executed



Fig. 1. Osman Waqialla. *Al Sufi al Mu'azab* (The Tormented Mystic) (title page). 1952. Ink and color on hand made paper, 46 × 36 cm.

in a coup in 1961. Lumumba's assassination had been a turning point in the era of decolonization, creating an outcry against imperialism and neocolonialism not only in Africa but in the rest of the Third World. The crescent moon, seen in other works of El Salahi's from the early 1960s, recurs here with a procession of mourners, their facial expressions masklike, carrying a corpse. Abstracted, elongated, and emaciated figures cover the painting's surface. Points of articulation such as knees and elbows are delineated with spiral forms, and the male sexual organ is deliberately exaggerated, in a style recalling certain West African sculptural forms and styles.

The real breakthrough in Sudanese visual modernism came in the late 1950s and early '60s in the pioneering work of Waqialla, Shibrain, and El Salahi. Iftihkar Dadi's argument that El Salahi's work should be situated between "[Arabic] textuality, African plastic forms, and transnational modernism" holds for the other two as well, and they also shared a distinctive role in "developing an aesthetic of decolonization for the Sudan and much of Africa."⁶ The uniqueness of the dialectics and intertextualities in the work of these three artists becomes evident when analyzed in the context of artistic developments in the postwar period,

which saw the rise of a distinct postcolonial modernism that was imbricated with Western metropolitan modernism. Calligraphic abstraction, which originated in different metropolitan centers of the Arab and Islamic worlds, was one form of this expression. It has continued to inform modernist experimentation, particularly in Sudan, where the early generation of the Khartoum School embraced it in the mid-to-late 1950s.



Fig. 2. Ahmed Shibrain. *Untitled*. N.d. Ink on paper, 76.3 × 45.8 cm. Iwalewahauss, Universität Bayreuth. Courtesy DEVA, Universität Bayreuth

Rooted in Islamic discursive traditions, it must be understood within the modernist quest for a new formalist visual language that emerged in the context of decolonization in the Middle Eastern Arab world.

The end of World War II signaled not only the defeat of fascism in Europe but the beginning of decolonization in Africa, Asia, and the Arab world. The impact of decolonization on art and culture is still insufficiently well studied. It advanced through several landmark events that shifted world politics and created a new international order—the

Bandung Conference in 1955, the Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris in 1956 and in Rome in 1959, the Pan-African Festival in Algiers in 1969.⁷ The postwar era both engendered and intensified new and emerging schools of thought such as Négritude, Pan-Africanism, Pan-Arabism, and African socialism, in addition to the rise of movements for Afro-Asian solidarity and tricontinentalism.⁸ Decolonization shaped the rise of a distinct postcolonial modernism, producing some of the period's most exciting developments in visual expression. Such “new” art forms were the result of a process of hybridization that shaped them in terms of media and material, technique, and personal and cultural identity.⁹

In the Arab and Islamic worlds, the rich tradition of the Arabic letter was available to artists in search of a new visual vocabulary. The letter and its various calligraphic styles generated complex and diverse forms of abstraction and figuration. In art-historical discourse this movement has come to be known by different terms, including *al Hurufiyya* (letterism) and calligraphism.¹⁰ “Calligraphic abstraction” seems to me a more appropriate designation: the juxtaposition of calligraphy and abstraction encompasses more of this multifaceted movement, and of its multifarious intersections with Western and transnational modernism.

Although nationalism remains central to any analysis of postwar art in the context of decolonization in North Africa and the Arab world, African and Arab modernist artists had crossed geographic and cultural boundaries since the early twentieth century, moving beyond national identities to express themselves in a transnational visual language that incorporated an array of motifs, images, and objects. Arab literacy, and a well-developed corpus of art and literary criticism, facilitated forms of Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism in the modern visual arts.

In North Africa and the larger Arab world, this tendency was further reinforced by a phenomenon of “diglossia” specific to Arabic, namely the coexistence of two forms: the standardized “high” version of Arabic known as Modern Standard Arabic, which is used across the Arab world in education, the mass media, and the press, and the various vernaculars specific to regions and countries. Modern Standard Arabic further facilitated the diffusion of artistic and literary ideas across the Arabic and Islamic worlds in North Africa and the Middle East. As the vehicle of the Qur'an, the Arabic language is considered sacred, but given the fundamental role played by calligraphy in the aesthetic and style of classic Islamic art—the nonreligious poetic verses on the walls of palaces and on everyday items not intended for sacral use—this tradition did not forestall modernist experiment with the Arabic letter.

In the context of the Arab and the larger Islamic world (North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia), calligraphic abstraction has evolved into a complex set of artistic practices. El Salahi, Shibrain, and Wagialla in the Sudan have pioneering counterparts elsewhere: Shakir Hassan Al Sa'id in Iraq, Nja Mahdaoui in Tunisia, Pervez Tanavoli in Iran, Sadequain in Pakistan—all have reworked Arabic calligraphic motifs in

modernist forms that defy any literal interpretation. These experiments continue among younger artists such as the Algerian Rachid Koraïchi and the Iraqi Dia Azzawi, who have developed a more conceptual approach. As Dadi argues in the context of Muslim South Asia, the imbrication of modernist calligraphy with post-Cubist art represents a broad artistic movement that can be understood in a variety of ways.¹¹ In the work of these artists, abstraction and figuration can be interpreted as a renewal of a traditional artistic form in a modernist fashion; as a vehicle of individual expression and subjectivity; as fostering a renewed sense of

period, the search for a common denominator—for a Sudanese national culture that would cut across its ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity—became a focal point. Totalizing terms such as “Sudanese culture,” “Sudanese identity,” “Sudanese literature,” and “Sudanese art” became central to discourse, forming the basis for the vocabulary of a new social, literary, and artistic consciousness.¹³

The overall ideology guiding this intellectual drive evolved into what Ahmed El Tayib Zein El Abdein has called *al-Sudanawiyya*, “Sudanism,” an evolving cultural process through which Sudan has developed a



Fig. 3. Ibrahim El Salahi. *The Last Sound*. 1964.
Oil on canvas, 121.5 × 121.5 cm. Collection of Abdulmagid A. Breish

nationalist pride; or, as in the case of El Salahi and Shibrain, as a critical engagement with Western modernism.

While the art of Waqialla, Shibrain, and El Salahi resonates with these analogous visual vocabularies in other parts of North Africa and the Arab world, these artists are unique in the interconnectedness of their work with classical African forms, and in their quest for a new identity in the context of independent Sudan. No discussion of art and modernity in Sudan can be isolated from a deeper knowledge of the cultural geography of this ethnically diverse country, within which almost every major African ethnic or linguistic group is represented.¹² In the decolonization

unique ethos based on principles of hybridity and layering of cultural continuities. Zein El Abdein understands this multiple layering as the common denominator that distinguishes Sudanese cultures—despite their internal variations and differences—from neighboring nations in Africa and the Arab world.¹⁴ The roots of the Khartoum School were intricately related to this larger quest for a shared Sudanese identity. Germane to our understanding of the school’s intellectual tenets is its relationship to the literary group *Madrasat al-Ghaba wa al-Sahra*, the “Jungle and the Desert School,” which included major poets, literary critics, and intellectuals such as Muhammad al-Makki Ibrahim,

Muhammad Abdul-Hai, and Salah Ahmad Ibrahim. The main ideological and intellectual concern articulated by this group was the creation of a true “Sudanese” literature, art, and aesthetic. Their literary production clearly reinforces the symbolism behind the name: the goal of representing not only the geographical landscape of the country but its hybrid cultural framing of Islamic and African elements.¹⁵ The poet Salah Ahmad Ibrahim passionately expressed such concern for hybridity and racial intermixture in his collection *Ghabat Al Abanus* (The forest of ebony) of 1958. He wrote,

Liar is he who proclaims: I am the unmixed, the pure pedigree.
The only.
Yes!, a liar!¹⁶

Indeed, Waqialla, Salahi, and Shibrain, who were closely associated with the poets, novelists, and literary critics in the Jungle and the Desert School, shared the goal of constructing a new ethos for Sudanese identity in the visual arena. A major question was how far artists should be obliged to shake off Western and other influences in their schooling and to produce art that was uniquely “Sudanese.”

Experimentation with calligraphic forms continued in Sudan into the 1980s, then took a more conservative ideological turn under the current Islamist regime, which came to power in 1989. A circle of artists that included Shibrain joined in the wave of Islamic revivalism that swept the region, mostly propelled by the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran after the mid-1970s.¹⁷ In 1986, a group of artists led by the painter Ahmed Abdel Aal, a student of both El Salahi and Shibrain, issued the manifesto of a new school called Madrasat Al-Wahid, “the School of the One.”¹⁸ While acknowledging pioneers such as El Salahi and Shibrain, members of Madrasat Al-Wahid claim that a spiritual link with the Islamic faith gives their work a spiritual dimension. In advocating an exploration of the arts of Islam, especially calligraphy, *Madrasat Al-Wahid* echoes the ideas of the Iraqi modernist Al Sa’id, who claimed to have connected his concern with calligraphy as an artistic practice to spiritual salvation.¹⁹ Few of these artists abandoned figuration for pure calligraphic forms, but not all artists who use calligraphy work strictly abstractly. Indeed, calligraphy is an influential motif within representation for many Sudanese artists.

To assert a Sudanese identity, many Sudanese who engaged with calligraphic abstraction emphasized local styles associated with popular Islamic schools, an approach known as the Khalwa style.²⁰ In practice, the work of Madrasat Al-Wahid is a continuation of the Khartoum School’s attempt to synthesize the African and the Islamic elements of Sudanese culture. While Madrasat Al-Wahid puts more emphasis on the Arabic and Islamic identity, and (like Al Sa’id) its member artists claim to seek spiritual salvation through artistic creativity, its manifesto also acknowledges Sudanese culture as hybrid and Africanized. After all, the reworking of calligraphic forms in the art of Ahmed Abdel Aal, Ibrahim Al-Awam, and Ahmad Abdallah Utaibi differs little from the Khartoum School approach seen in the works of El Salahi and Shibrain.

Calligraphic abstraction was intricately linked to the Western avant-garde tradition, which was significant in the revival of calligraphy in the context of a postcolonial modernism. Western modernist movements such as Cubism, Surrealism, Lettrism, *art brut*, and others proved more engaging for the mid-twentieth-century non-Western artist than did older realist and academic schools of European painting. This does not make calligraphic abstraction merely a derivative of Western modernism. Decolonization presented a challenge for Arab and African modernists, who faced the urgent task of recovering and reviving expressive visual practices that had been suppressed or interrupted in the colonial period. Nationalism offered one crucial avenue in the practice of calligraphic abstraction, whether in Sudan or elsewhere, but calligraphic abstraction is also a transnational aesthetic form that has been shared across the region. This becomes acutely important when we consider the facts of diaspora and mobility in the life and work of artists such as El Salahi, Shibrain, and Waqiallah, whose Western schooling, and experience of living in the West in the early 1950s, challenged them to create a new transnational modernism in which the development of forms out of experiments with calligraphic modes was fundamental.

at the College of Fine and Applied Art until 1954, when he formed Studio Osman, in the center of Khartoum. After Sudan won independence, in 1956, Studio Osman received major visual assignments, such as the calligraphic design on the first Sudanese currency, and served until 1964 as a meeting place for artists and others.

2 *Al Sufi al Mu'azab* is among the few surviving works dating to Waqialla's post-Camberwell studies. This twelve-page manuscript, executed on large-format handmade paper (46 x 36 cm, 18 x 14 inches), is based on a famous poem by the late Sudanese poet Al Tijani Yusuf Bashir, "*Al Sufi al Mu'azab*." The manuscript, which is bound in brown coated cloth and paper, is rendered in the classic Diwani style and framed in a colored calligraphic formation based on extracts from the poem, exemplifying Waqialla's pioneering experimentation with calligraphic abstraction.

3 Ahmed Shibrain, quoted in Evelyn S. Brown, *Africa's Contemporary Art and Artists* (New York: Harmon Foundation, 1966), p. 109.

4 It is worth noting that Shibrain rarely titled or dated his early works.

5 See Ulli Beier, "Ibrahim El Salahi, an Interview, Bayreuth," Iwalewa-Haus archives, University of Bayreuth, 1983. Repr. in Salah Hassan, ed., *Ibrahim El Salahi: A Visionary Modernist* (New York: Museum for African Art, 2013), pp. 107–13.6. Iftikhar Dadi, "Ibrahim El Salahi: Calligraphic Modernism in Comparative Perspectives," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 555.

7 See Hassan, *How to Liberate Marx From His Eurocentrism: Notes on African/Black Marxism*, dOCUMENTA (13): 100 Notes—100 Thoughts No. 091 (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012).

8 For more on the Afro-Asian solidarity movement in the art and literary arenas see issues of *Lotus*, the journal of the Afro-Asian Writers Association from the late 1960s to the late 1990s. *Lotus* was important in documenting the development of this body of thought, networks, and exchanges of ideas among African and Asian writers and artists in the 1960s and '70s. See Hala Halim, "Lotus, the Afro-Asian Nexus, and Global South Comparatism," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32, no. 3 (2012): 563–83.

9 See Amanda Alexander and Manisha Sharma, "(Pre)determined Occupations: The Post-Colonial Hybridizing of Identity and Art Forms in Third World Spaces," *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education* 33 (2013): 86–104.

10 See Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), chapters 15 and 16; Nada Shabout, *Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007); and Sharbal Dagher, *Al Hurutiyyah Al-Arabiyyah: Fan wa Hawiyah* (Beirut: Sharikat al-Matbu'at Lil Twazi' wa Al-Nashr, 1990).

11 See Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). See also his article "Ibrahim El Salahi: Calligraphic Modernism in Comparative Perspectives," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 555.

12 See Muhammad Abdul-Hai, *Conflict and Identity: The Cultural Poetics of Contemporary Sudanese Poetry*, African Seminar Series no. 26 (Khartoum: Institute of African and Asian Studies, University of Khartoum, 1976); Mohammed Omar al-Bashir, *Cultural Diversity and National Unity in Sudan* (Khartoum: Institute of African and Asian Studies, University of Khartoum, 1980); Muhammad al-Makki Ibrahim, *Al Fikr Al Sudani Usuluh Wa Tatawurhu* (Khartoum: Ministry of Culture and Communication, 1976); and Ali A. Mazrui, "The Multiple Marginality of the Sudan," in Yusuf Fadl Hasan, ed., *Sudan in Africa* (Khartoum: Institute of African and Asian Studies, University of Khartoum, 1971), pp. 240–55.

13 In the 1930s, Hamza al-Malik Tambal, an influential Sudanese literary critic and editor, proclaimed that "Sudanese identity is an ideal to which we should all aspire, it must be reflected in all our work." See Hamza al Malik Tambal, *al-Adab al-Sudani wa Ma yajib an yakuna 'alayhi*, 1931 (repr. ed. Khartoum: New Edition, 1972), pp. 66–67, 77; see also Abdul-Hai, *Conflict and Identity*, pp. 7–10. This ideal has evolved into intellectual movements characterized by conflict and by attempts at reconciliation of identities.

14 Ahmed El Tayib Zein Al Abdein, "Al-Sudanawiyya," *Majallat Al Thaqafa Al Sudaniyya* no. 15 (July 1998): 30–35.

15 For an excellent recent autobiographical reflection on the Jungle and the Desert School see Muhammad al-Makki Ibrahim, *Fi Zikra al-Ghaba wa al-Sahra'* (Omdurman: Abdul Karim Mirghani Center, 2007).

16 Salah Ahmad Ibrahim, from *Ghabat Al Abanus* (Beirut, 1958), p. 45, trans. in Abdul-Hai, *Conflict and Identity*, p. 52.

17 In the early 1980s members of the fundamentalist Islamic group the Muslim Brotherhood formed a Society for Islamic Thought, which, though, has tried to recruit artists and writers who are not fundamentalists.

18 See my translation of the manifesto of the School of the One in Clementine Deliss, ed., *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (Paris and New York: Flammarion, 1995), pp. 244–46.

19 See Shakir Hassan Al-Said, *al-Usul al-Hadariya wa al-Jamaliya lil Khat al-Arabi* (Baghdad, 1988).

20 The Khalwa style is closer to the Kufic-derived Maghribi tradition, known in North and West Africa as Sudani and in North Africa as ifriqi style, than to the Naskh tradition popular in the eastern part of the Islamic world.

1 Osman Waqialla was a poet, journalist, and broadcaster as well as a visual artist. After studying at the Camberwell School of Art, London, in 1946–49, he attended the School of Arabic Calligraphy and College of Applied Arts in Cairo. Returning to Sudan in 1951, he taught