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Exhibition: *Talismanic writing practices from Northern Nigeria*. Naples (Italy), Maschio Angioino Cappella Palatina, 7th of May to 21st of July 2021.

Curated by: Andrea Brigaglia, African Studies, the University of Naples “L’Orientale” and Gigi Pezzoli, director of the African Archaeology Study Center of Milan. And Andrea Aragosa for Black Tarantella srl, in collaboration with African Archaeology Study Center. And Gigi Pezzoli, director of the African Archeology Study Center of Milan. From an idea by Andrea Aragosa for Black Tarantella srl, in collaboration with African Archeology Study Center.

Reviewed by: Barbara Fiore, lecturer of Anthropology, the University of Naples, Italy,

A better setting for this exhibition could hardly be imagined: the 14th century Cappella Palatina inside the Maschio Angioino, the mighty medieval fortress overlooking the Bay of Naples. Undoubtedly, the first impression on entering an exhibition space has a determining influence on the visitor, and here, the transition from the almost blinding light of the summer day on the grey stone esplanade of the fortress to the bare interior of the Chapel created a sort of suspension, blotting out what was left outside, a necessary pause for concentration.

Along the white walls of the single nave, filtered in the daylight through the rose window above the gate and the narrow single-lancet windows, the *alluna* were displayed as if they were paintings. *Alluna* (sing. *allo*) is a Northern Nigerian Hausa term indicating the rectangular wooden tables of Islamic origin used as a support for Qur’anic and magical-talismanic scriptures. The rectangular tables have a T-shaped handle on top which evokes a head; and, together with the two extremities created by the convex base are given an anthropomorphic look, like stylized human bodies covered in writing. The successful choice of the two curators, Andrea Brigaglia and Gigi Pezzoli, to opt for an absolutely minimalist staging in favour of the items on display, meant that one’s gaze automatically grasped a sort of parallel between the pure Gothic architecture of the church and the simple shapes of the tables. Visitors could then move on to the complex elaborations of Arabic writing and immerse themselves in its intertwining calligraphy.

All this gave rise to a reflection on how an object, conceived, manufactured, used in keeping with the culture that produced it, when removed from its environment and taken elsewhere, to a distant social context that distorts its function, does not in fact lose its identity. Instead, in a sort of *rite de passage*, it acquires new status depending on the viewer’s perspective: for the anthropologist, it becomes the *objet témoin* of the

culture that produced it; for the art expert, an artistic object; for the specialist, an object of analysis; a collector's item for the collector; a curiosity for the occasional visitor, thus revealing all its functional, aesthetic and symbolic dimensions.

Writing makes it possible to produce models and messages maintaining the cohesion between the members of a group through the circulation of ideological forms. For Muslims, Arabic is the sacred, shared language that transcribes the divine word, whose veneration is accompanied by the imaginative elaborations of calligraphy. The *alluna* on display provided the opportunity to observe how such elaborations on the graphic sign can embellish it to the point of almost depleting all its potential, in terms of both sense of art and devotion to rich and ornate forms, similar to the verbal art of *griot* in oral cultures.

Besides the *alluna*, writing tools are displayed: the reed quill ("Your Lord is the most generous. He who taught the use of the quill" (Qur'an XCVI, 3-4)), with the tip cut obliquely "like a dove's beak", as a poem says, its case and the little pumpkin inkpot. Once used to write the sacred text, a ritual was performed on the ink, which was then washed and safely kept.

The exhibition featured objects from private collections dating from the 20th to the 21st century, whose display followed different criteria: tables used for learning the Qur'an, talismanic tables and skins, Qur'anic manuscripts, divination tools, recipe books containing esoteric texts used in protective practices. The eighty *alluna* were displayed according to their functions, as were the learning tables, where pupils write the Qur'an in Arabic; end-of-course diploma tables, tables "to drink" talismanic recipes, talismanic tables for the protection of the house. *Allo* is the Hausa transposition of the Arabic *al-lawh*, a term found in the Qur'an to refer to the material used to write on and also "the hidden" or "the well-kept" table, *al lawh al-mahfuz*, considered the heavenly support of the Qur'an itself, and of all revealed Scriptures, receptacle of all divine decisions concerning creation before creation itself, later transmitted to the Prophet. This table, according to popular tradition, was made of white pearl and hyacinth, a precious stone with magical powers. Everywhere, including West Africa, every Qur'anic student has their table to learn reading and writing, and such a table is used by "those in the know" to compose, starting from verses of the Qur'an with a "special virtue" and magical-religious treatises, complex scriptures that heal, protect, at times aggressively, and defend from evil.

Starting from the age at which they are thought to have the right mindset (*aqli*), children are introduced to the knowledge of the founding book of Islam and its written language. In the Qur'anic school, each student starts by learning the first letters, *bā*, *sīn*, *mīm*, of the invocation *bismillāh* "in the name of God", which open the Qur'an and each sura and are inscribed on their palm by the teacher. Then they must lick them, suggesting that the text is supposed to gradually permeate them, just as it needs to permeate them through the sound of each word being chanted aloud repeatedly. Even without grasping their meaning at the beginning, they will have to learn how to write and memorize all the suras, as well as learning the rules of a specific style of writing, each character being different according to their position – isolated, initial, middle, or final form. Among the learning tables on display, even the simplest ones testified to

the great care taken in writing the words on its upper half and the childlike taste in decorating the lower half: for instance, a chessboard with filled and empty squares surrounded by small arrowheads, a square with a naïvely decorated circle in it, etc. With the intermediate level plates, the writing becomes more and more elaborate, until, with the diploma plates, it reaches a graphic perfection highlighted by the rich multicoloured decorations that frame it and enhance the visual effect.

A further aspect of writing lies in its role as mediator between a human being and the cosmos, the common thread in the rich and masterfully presented collection of talismanic items. Skins covered with scriptures used by ascetics and mystics as prayer rugs; tables whose inscriptions are washed off with water, which is then either rubbed on the body or drunk; tables for the secret protection of the house; handwritten copies of the Qur'an; divination objects and the *Ummu Musa*, a recipe booklet widely used for centuries, even in Muslim scholarly circles, where it occasionally raises eyebrows but where it is also printed, read, possibly used and circulated by travelling sellers, who brought copies of it to the market squares of remote villages. It is from the *Ummu Musa* that come many of the sometimes terrifying, zoomorphic figures and the impressive intertwining of characters that compose the images illustrating the protective talismanic tablets.

Through the infinite paths indicated by the letters, the Macrocosm and Microcosm are interconnected. Thus, those who have mastered the sacred text and deepened their knowledge of the esoteric sciences, astrology, and the science of numbers and letters, will be able to discover, investigate and operate through writing in order to perform miracles, heal and ward off evil.

For those interested in the cultural aspects of writing, the exhibition offered such a vast, almost endless amount of material that the precious catalogue accompanying it, full of splendid reproductions of the tables and specialist essays, proves to be indispensable to go back to.

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