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Art as a Catalyst of Religious Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Art in Nigeria from the early Christian Missionary's perspective was an embodiment of traditional African religion. Therefore, Nigerian art was considered to be a taboo to the Christian religion, hence it should be abolished. The Islamic Jihadists on the other hand saw art as ensembles of idolatry which must be destroyed while the traditionalists seemed to see art as the exclusive preserve of their religion, therefore, every art object should be venerated. However, art is essentially a tool for the promotion of all religions. The thrust of this paper is therefore to assess the Siamese relationship between art and religion in Nigeria irrespective of the coloration.

Introduction

In traditional African society, art was the issue of the day as art seemed to have given breath to life in all ramifications. It manifested in different aspects of national life; the daily chores, socio-political, economic and religious matters. However, because all aspects of life were then anchored on religious beliefs, religion became the pivot upon which art rotated. Art inevitably thrived most extensively on religion, that both seemed to be inseparable.

Art permeated every strata of life because it was then prestigious to be associated with art and art works more also that it was religiously expedient to do so. These areas of life included the often used domestic objects, farm

implements, hair-dos, body ornamentations, architectural decorations and other paraphernalia of office of political and religious leaders. Religion on the other hand was intimately tied to all life endeavours which made a common identity between religion and art inevitable. Nigeria nation, though a conglomeration of cultural nationalities and of multifarious gods and deities, have shared religious practices which were exemplified in art. Without art there would probably have been no traditional religion, as all religious activities were anchored on art, hence the near assumption that art was the exclusive preserve of the traditional religion.

This concept of exclusivity gave the wrong signal to the early European Christian Missionaries and Islamic Jihadist who assumed that traditional arts are idols which must be abolished,. This assumption stalled the growth of art in Nigeria for quite some time until the irrepressible vitality in art broke loose and splashed on Christianity, Islam and other religions till it soaked and permeated them. Art thrived in Nigeria because religion in the traditional time was of great impetus, as religion provided a great avenue for commissioned jobs, as most social and economic engagements were based on religious practice which made it compelling for various rites of passage to be observed (Leuzinger 1976:9). The clothes, the bodies, the buildings and the tools dedicated to such ceremonies were ornamented by artists and the images were carved by sculptors. (Adepegba 1995:39).

Various themes are today predicated on various religious beliefs and persuasions which have over time provided inspirations for artists. The Yoruba, Igbo or Ijaw based their socio-economic life on religion while art became the vehicle. Brain (1980:103) while commenting on 'Eke', the Igbo trading cult group, observes that these cults and their spirits are usually symbolized by wooden figures between two and five feet in height, professionally carved in hardwood, freshly painted and polished in cam wood, red, blue and white. Art has been used to make many religious statements by Nigerian artists, both in the traditional and contemporary times; which covered as many noticeable religious practices in Nigeria. These are, traditional religion of varying shades, Christianity, Islam and other modern religious practices which are here enuciated.

Art in Traditional Religion

The traditional African society manifested art in their daily chores, social engagements and particularly in their religious practices. Art was a major tool by which their religious beliefs were enhanced as their gods were

represented in three-dimensional arts, while the places of worship were gleefully or grotesquely decorated with various artistic symbols and motifs that emphasizes the importance of the gods to the community. The socio-religious lives of the people were entangled in a web of art and religion. Igaro (2005a: 99) observes that our art works are as much part of our daily living as Christmas cloth is to Christians. They were not museum pieces as the Westerners took them.

Traditional religion was a veritable outlet of economic empowerment for many artists who carved images that represented various gods as recognized and revered by individuals, families or the community. Great in number were these images. Other images include *Ere-ibeji* (among the Yoruba) to be possessed by a twin who has lost the twin partner (Carroll 1967:26). The image is assumed to represent the dead twin brother or sister in order to prevent harassment of the living by the dead. This is similar to the practice by the Baule, a sub-group of the Akan society of Ghana who migrated to Cote d'Ivoire and some can be found in Senegal where every one was believed to have a spirit-spouse which must be adorned or appeased, therefore anyone who was troubled would carry a small carved spirit-statue (Encarta Encyclopedia 2008).

Images in form of dolls were carried by those who were seeking children as recommended by *Ifa* oracle or Priests among the Yoruba, this is similar to *Aku'aba* fertility dolls carried by maidens among the Ashanti of Ghana. The spirits of the ancestors were and are represented in masks made either of carved wood, bronze or ivory (Leuzinger 1976:11). While most masks were worn by maskers during festivals and other social engagements, some were miniature objects worn by various individuals to adorn the body. Ancestral figures were also elegantly carved to proclaim their presence (Plate 1). Others are decorative body scarifications, clothing, jewelry, staffs or other objects of prestige that identify a man's social status which at the same time could be ritual objects to protect the wearer from malevolent forces (Encarta 2007).

The various rites of passage as practiced by the people provided an avenue of economic survival and professional articulation for artists as they advanced skillfully through commissioned jobs, by which they exhibit their latent talents. Such as in wood carving, body tattoo and ornamentations, wall decorations, leather works and hairdos, some of which are specifically dedicated to the gods (Plate 2). Olurode and Olusanya (1994:80) observe that before the advent of Christianity and Islam, Yoruba believed in the existence

of one Supreme Being they alternatively referred to as *Olorun* (Lord of Heaven) or *Olodumare*. However, because of the awesomeness of this being, He has to be approached through the ancestors which are represented in carved images that can be practically related with rather than through cheer imagination. Religion is real but art makes it more practical as it has to be felt. Art provides the physical vehicle for spiritual transportation to the esoteric world. Vadenais (1972:11) observes that the true artist communicates with nature and ends with the Divine. Everything therefore to him is a symbol of the divine force.

Uli as a modern derivative of *Uri*, a traditional African iconography rooted in Igbo land, entails linear designs derived from *Ikal*, the lines on the palm which are believed to tell the future of a man. (Aka 1987, Igbaro 2005b:101). The essence of the *Uli* design on a bride is to illustrate the beauty of life which the bride would live in marriage. *Uli* is a major art practice in the South-East of Nigeria borne out of religions persuasion rather than cheer aesthetic expression. However, both art and religion in essence collaborated in presenting the bride to the groom in an atmosphere that guarantees a great future for the couple.

The Kalabari Ijaw life is anchored on the sea and fishing economy, this is aptly promoted through the art practice which enhances the promotion of the cult of the water spirit. Brain (1980:47) observes that the masks, headdresses and sculptures of the cult are associated with their water spirits (Owu) since they are specifically associated with the sea and Ijo fishing economy. Oyekola (2003:26) observes that similarly, the sculpture of the Kalabari in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, addresses itself to the spirit rather than man while among the Yoruba of south western Nigeria, the Egungun Masquerades are created both at ensuring that the spirits of the ancestors are alive and for entertaining the living during religious festivals.

Contemporary Nigerian artists continued to draw inspirations from these religious practices. Igbaro R.J.O. (2005b: 102) observes that Ukut E., a Nigerian contemporary painter, in one of his works at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Lagos titled 'Peace' portrays a man with his right hand raised up bearing a white cock presented to the gods in sacrifice. He explained that the calmness of the cock suggests that the gods have accepted the offering for 'peace' (Plate 3). Amateis (1971:7) observes that in fact, aside from commemorating some heroes or deed of prowess, the sculptor's main efforts has been in the service of religion.

Art and Christianity

The Early Christian Missionaries who though had great intension for converting Africans to Christianity and the subsequent abolition of the killing of twins in some parts of the country, did a great disservice to the growth and development of art in Nigeria as they saw and treated art practice purely as idolatry. To them, these arts must be destroyed, and indeed they were not only destroyed, the growth of the residue was also stalled for many years. In spite of these initial set back, art has and is being used to promote the Christian religion in diverse ways while Christianity also serves as a vehicle for the promotion and advancement of art in Nigeria. Art in Europe has been a great tool in the hands of many great artists in promoting Christianity. Michael Angelo Bournaroti was a great exponent of Christian themes who illustrated various Biblical heroes in colossal statues and painted the single largest church frescoe of his time. He was literarily venerated by Popes who were rulers of his time. Art not only provided the means, Christianity also provided the platform for him to excel. Many other artists also made names for themselves and their nations through master pieces of Biblical stories. The traditional art of Western Europe was tempered towards Christianity which pave way for art and Christianity to grow *pari-per-sue* (Igbaro 2006:106).

It was perhaps in the light of this that the Oye-Ekiti workshop experiment by father Kevin Carroll who trained some young Nigerians to produce sculptural works on Biblical themes based on traditional concepts (Carroll 1967:67). This eventually led to the emergence of Lamidi Fakeye, an internationally acclaimed neo-traditional wood carver. Many door panels reminiscence of Yoruba wood carvings populate many churches in the South-western states. These were done to illustrate various church doctrines (Plate 7). Igbaro et al

(2010:553) observe that the Oye Ekiti workshop experiment of Father Kelvin Carroll has led to the revolution of church architecture, particularly the carved door panels in Yoruba community. Other themes also found expression among many artists. Ottenberg (2004:122) while commenting on Essien Nsikkak, a prominent member of AKA Group of Artists, observes that Christian tittles such as 'Armageddon' and 'Women crucified' featured prominently in his works.

The Christian religion provided a lucid avenue for self expression for many Nigerian artists, among whom are Bruce Onobrakpeya with the '14 Stations of the Cross' as well as Ben Enwowu's 'Resurrection' at the Chapel of

Annunciation University of Ibadan. While the former is plastocast, the later is wood carving. Lamidi Fakeye, a prolific wood carver of international repute produced a wood carving at Annunciation Seat of Wisdom Catholic Church also at the University of Ibadan. Fakeye, though a muslim find fulfillment in producing works for churches and many door panels were carved to this affect. Yusuf Grillo also a muslim, produced many art works covering different subjects which adorn many churches in Lagos and environ. The stained-glass designs he made in those churches are standing tributes to his ebullient professional accomplishment.

Rufus Ajidahun, an erudite art educator, who taught art till he retired from active service in Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo in 1990, would be remembered for the numerous stained-glass designs he did for about 60 churches in the South Western States as well as Kwara and Edo States (Igbaro et al 2007). Designing of stained-glass in churches provided him an avenue for professional fulfillment that after he retired from teaching, he kept the fire aglow in art practice until he passed out of this life in 2008. (Plates 5&6). David Dale and Ajakaiye are equally extensively involved in stained-glass designs in churches while Akinmoladun Eric, a disciple of Ajidahun lives exclusively on stained-glass design in churches. Christian religion provides a strong platform for these professionals to express themselves as formidable Nigerian artists. The production of stained-glass designs provide fertile ground for promoting the Christian faith as the life of Jesus are powerfully illustrated in visual form. Both art and religion have in this wise collaborated together for mutual expression.

Stone cutting (marble designs) have equally found expressions in church pews, lecterns and pulpits; various types of woodwork designs have also found a place in church ceilings and pews. Wall decorations and inscriptions in sculptural designs have also found expressions in churches in recent time. Many Nigerian artists find solace in the Christian religion in experiencing personal fulfillment through their works. Essien Nsikkak for example, usually made volatile political statements through his works but later resorted to Christian themes and claimed to be happier. Ottenberg (2004:15) observes that he began creating what he called his 'Happy' or 'Happy day' paintings freed of the anxieties and stresses associated with his earlier works after Essien became 'Born again' and moved from negativism in commenting on political issues in Nigeria to positivism. With this move to religion, his colours became brighter and have continued to remain so. All these are

manifestations of the siamese relationship between art and religion in Nigeria.

Art and Islam

The Islamic fundamentalists frown at three dimensional arts as any image that casts shadow is considered to be an idol. This position has affected the development of art in the Muslim strongholds. Most of the northern states in recent past have prevented sculptures from being displayed in public and private places since the religious riot of 1987 that witnessed the mass destruction of sculptures in public places.

Prior to this time, prestigious sculptures of various heroes were located in strategic places in Kaduna metropolis which added value to the city as a melting pot of northern politics. It is equally considered to be the nucleus of Northern socio-consciousness. Therefore, whatever happens in Kaduna diffuses to other places. However, the quest for artistic expression in these cities has encouraged new lines of artistic production. Architectural sculptures of purely geometric shapes now adorn strategic places (Plate 8), while ornamentations were made on the façades of architecture, using Islamic motives and calligraphic designs (Plate 9). Islam has provided, alternate avenues of artistic expressions which has engendered skilful diversification in Nigerian art. Mosaic decorations are found in mosques, palaces, private and public buildings with figurative expressions such as 'Dubar the Race'. Book illustrations on Islamic subjects are also practiced. Thompson (2006:34) observes that Islamic art focused on book arts rather than easel painting because it was believed that art should serve a function, that of education.

In the North, Islamic activities are synonymous with daily life, hence their art and religion are intertwined just as the case was in the South of the traditional time. It would be a herculean task to attempt drawing a line of distinction between art and Islam among the leather workers, calabash/guard carvers/designers, and architectural decorators as well as the mat and rug weavers.

Art and other Religions

In Nigeria today, aside from Christianity, Islam and the traditional religion, there are other religious practices that influence the art practice. Boniface Okafor, could be considered a surrealist whose works most often bother on meditation and astral travels. Even though Okafor was neither a christian nor

muslim, yet Ottenberg (2004:16) while commenting on him and Essien observes that Okafor's religious belief and art developed side by side, Essien's art matured and was then followed by a religious conversion. Thus Okafor's works and life were controlled by his religious persuasion. Though Okafor Boniface is dead, his works still speaks.

Conclusion

Without man there would have been no religion, religion is therefore giving to man as a guiding principle for his life. Every Nigerian from traditional time has a desire to cling unto something that would give him hope for a future. This definitely was the guiding principle for the art practice or an influential factor in the process of production. In the same vein, in modern time, art as a material vehicle for human expression cuts across racial and religious faith and it cannot be limited. Nigerians from traditional time have found life fulfilling as art has been used to fill missing gaps of life thereby satisfying the needs that letters cannot satisfy. Art also meet the needs that verbal communications are insufficient to cater for. Art gives sound to life and provides legs for religion to move.

Art has found its way into the inner chambers of worship centres, shrines, churches, mosques, pantheons of the gods, courts and secrete chambers of devotees of religion. Art is the singular subject that understood all languages of the world and can easily translate secrete codes to local dialects. Therefore, it has been a strong vehicle for the propagation of religion even from the Biblical time when Moses was instructed to assemble craftsmen and carvers to put aesthetic touch to the Tabernacle where God meets with His people. This grew to the time that Solomon built the temple and decorated it with objects in gold and cedar wood, then to the designs in catacombs of the early Christians, to the Roman Cathedrals and finally in our churches in Nigerian.

Fagg (1967:iv) in his forward in 'Yoruba Religious Carving' by Kevin Carroll, observes that in the past the baby has most often been thrown out with the bathwater, but in the present ecumenical atmosphere it may even, I suggest, be worthwhile to re-examine the bath water itself. The rock art of the ancient time reflected the religions belief of the people as seen in the ancient Egyptian art as well as the Greeks up to modern art. The traditional African art gave breathe to religion while religion provided wings for art to fly. Inspirations are daily drawn from these works in Nigeria.

The Islamic religion provides another approach for art to breathe, the ornamental art which found expressions in mosques, domestic architecture, leather works, calabash carvings/designs, mat/rug weaving and what have you are living and shining examples. Religion and art in Nigeria are inseparable phenomena in human existence. Igbaro et al (2010:553) concludes that sculpture, ceramic wares, textiles or any other form of art rather than being antithetic to Christianity or Islam has turned out to be a strong vehicle for the propagation of these religious tenets.



Plate 1: Oduduwa (Fakeye)



Plate 2: Devotee of Sango

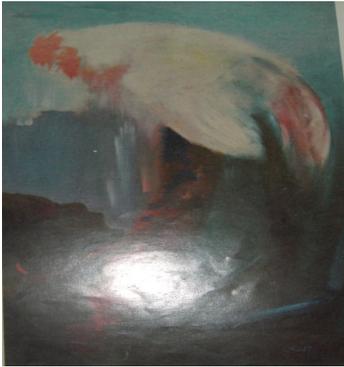


Plate 3: Peace (Ekpuk)



Plate 4: 14 Stations of the Cross. Bruce Onabrakpeya



Plate 5: Stain-glass. Rufus Ajidahun



Plate 6: Stain-glass. Rufus Ajidahun



Plate 7: Carved door panels, Lamidi Fakeye



Plate 8: Kaduna Metropolis (2008)
Northern Motifs, Zaria (1997)

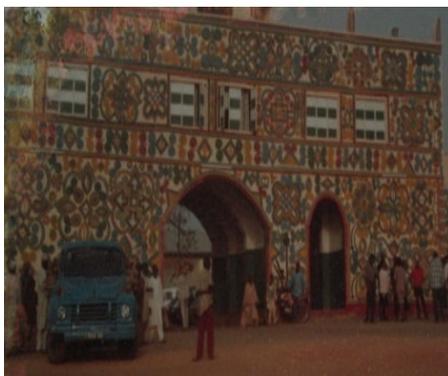


Plate 9: Calligraphic Design With

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