

ART IN THE SERVICE OF THE CHURCH IN YORUBALAND OF SOUTH-WESTERN NIGERIA: AN APPRAISAL

Emi Rod Adoh, PhD

Department of Creative Arts Tai Solarin University of Education Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria

Babatunde Samuel Olufemi

Department of Linguistics and European Languages University of South
Africa (UNISA) Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

The association of artworks with religion is dated back to the pre-historic times. The Yoruba who live in south-western Nigeria have traditional religions which were serviced by local artists before the advent of Christianity in the area. Utilizing some Western artworks as well as traditional ones, which were produced by local artists/artisans with materials and tools derived from the immediate physical environment, the Christian missionaries built and decorated the early churches they constructed in Yorubaland during the nineteenth century A.D. Christian patronage increased from the 1980s in south-western Yorubaland with the founding and proliferation of Pentecostal Christian Ministries. The aim of this paper is to conduct a concise historical survey of Christian's patronage of art in the area. This is done with a view to revealing the extent to which art contributed to the success of Christian church liturgies and evangelism there. In the end it was observed that art has contributed immensely to the planting, growth and sustenance of Christianity in the end it was observed that art has contributed immensely to the planting, growth and sustenance of Christianity in Yorubaland of southwestern Nigeria.

Keywords: Christian missionaries, Churches, artworks, Yorubaland

Introduction

It is pertinent to open a discussion on a topic like art - a very broad subject, by defining its scope and citing examples of it in this paper. Art within the scope of this paper is limited to the visual arts, which consist of graphic and textile designs, ceramics, paintings, sculptures, architectures and their allied crafts. It therefore, excludes the literary and performing arts, which pertain to dance drama and music.

Prior to the early fourth century A.D. when Christianity was legalized and the arts used in its practice became common in the Roman Empire, art has been associated with man's religious practices in ancient world. It is believed today that prehistoric cave drawings and paintings of Paleolithic man, which were found in several parts of the world, were the vestige of early man's magico-religious rituals (Bazin, 1958: 1-7 Gombrich, 1972: 19-79). Indeed, all the different peoples of the world have practiced some kinds of religions that were related to their various traditional belief systems. The Yoruba had such religions before the arrival of Western missionaries in their area. These, like Ogun Sango, Obatala and Esu religions, had depended on traditional arts and crafts like statues/statuettes that were carved in wood, woven/dyed costume and hair weaving/plaiting, tattooing in performing their rituals and liturgies.

Although European explorers had reached the Nigerian coastal towns of Warri, and Gwatto at the mouth of the Benin River in the Gulf of Guinea in the 15th century, it was not until September 24, 1842 that missionaries of the Wesley Methodist Church arrived in Badagry, a coastal town in southern Yorubaland. They were subsequently followed by members of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) of the Anglican Church in 1843; the Southern American Baptist Society in 1850, and the Society of African Missions (SMA) in the 1860's (Ajayi, 1965: 13-15).

From their initial stations in Badagry and Abeokuta, the Christian missions made vigorous attempts to open stations in the interior of Yorubaland and elsewhere in southern Nigeria. These were stalled for sometime in Yorubaland by the Yoruba civil wars and the hostilities of some Yoruba people, like the Ijebu, to Christian missionary enterprise (Ajayi and Smith, 1971: 9-122; Johnson, 1921: 235-637). Christianity was, eventually, planted firmly in Yorubaland following the intervention of the British colonial government in the civil war at the close of the 19th century (Johnson, 1921: 606-668). Consequently, several Yoruba towns and villages had churches most of which have since collapsed, dilapidated or renovated. Some have new churches built to replace them.

New indigenous Christian churches were founded in the late nineteenth century in Yorubaland. Their founding was facilitated by the discrimination against indigenous clerics by Western missionaries; the persecution of some indigenous converts because of their traditional African lifestyles; doctrinal differences, and the schism arising from management problems in the orthodox Churches. Some of the earliest churches to be established as a result of these reasons are the United Native African Church and the African Bethel Church founded in 1891 and 1901 respectively (Ajayi, 1965: 272-273).

Events, which engendered the proliferation of churches in Yorubaland, took place in Ijebu-Ode and Ilesa simultaneously during the First World War (1914-1918) in the second decade of the 20th century A.D. Two prayer groups that were organized in these towns by some members of the Anglican Church crystallized into a Pentecostal church, which was affiliated to The Faith Tabernacle (a Pentecostal church in USA) in 1923. Serious misunderstanding with the authorities of Faith Tabernacle abroad and the persecution of its Nigerian members such as Apostle Joseph Babalola, by officials of the British colonial government compelled the Nigerian body to terminate its affiliation with the church and forge a new one with the Apostolic Church of England. It is from this new relationship that the Apostolic Church and the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) of Nigeria metamorphosed (Adebanjo, 1996:2; Emi-Oliseyenum, 2007: 109-118).

Some other indigenous Nigerian Christian religious movements which sprang up in south-western Yorubaland in the 20th century are The Church of Our Lord (Aladura) (1931), the Cherubim and Seraphim (1925), the Celestial Church of Christ (1947), The Redeemed Christian Church of God (1948) and The Deeper Life Bible Church (1973). A number of foreign Christian religion organizations have also planted churches in south-western Nigeria. Examples of these are the Apostolic Faith (1944), the Foursquare Bible Church (1955) and The Seventh-Day Adventist Church (1914).

Christian Art in Yorubaland

In the beginning, Christian missionaries applied some artworks in carrying out their work in Yorubaland. The first type of artwork created for Christian religious worship in south-western Yorubaland by the early Christian missionaries is church architecture. In doing this, the missionaries, like their contemporaries in other parts of Nigeria, took cognizance of the physical environment of the area (in terms of its climate and weather) and the indigenous people's architectural materials and technology. The diverse features of the land, which is situated within the rain forest zone, savannah, riverine and coastal areas determined the

missionaries' use of materials like mud, bamboo, raffia palm frond, timber, leaves and grasses in the construction of church buildings. The walls of the churches in the riverine, lagoon and coastal areas were made mainly with raffia palm fronds and propped with strong wooden posts. The latter were derived from the mangrove trees, which exist abundantly in the area and could withstand the physical condition of the area. Some towns in which such building were and are still being constructed are Lagos, Ikorodu, Epe Itebu-Manuwa, Iwopin, Imeko, and Imobi. Others are Makun, Eleko, Lekki and Ebute-Oni in Yorubaland.

Initially, the walls of the churches built in towns, like Abeokuta, Ijebu-Ode, Ijebu-Igbo, Ago-Iwoye, Ibadan, Oyo, Iwo, Ikire, Ile-Ife, Ondo, Akure, Ile-Oluji, Ogbomosho, Osogbo, Ilesa, Esa-Oke, Ikole-Ekiti, Ikere-Ekiti and Ado-Ekiti, which are located in areas of highland were made of swish mud or daub and wattle (Emi-Oliseyenum, 2007: 9). Church building roofs were often made with thatches created with palm fronds and grasses. For example, the *bere* grass (sacrophyrynium species), *ewegbodogi* (anadelphia arrecta), bamboo and raffia fronds were used for this purpose in the savanna, rain forest, and riverine areas, respectively (Emi- Oliseyenum, 1984: 38-39).

The arrival of liberated slaves from Brazil via Liberia and Sierra Leone provided much impetus for church architectural development as majority of the missionaries constructed churches. Some of these churches, which were characterized by the flamboyance of Baroque art style, have been pulled down, ostensibly with the intention of replacing them with the so-called modern ones in recent times (Godwin, 1996: 21-23; Adeleke et. al. 1999: 51-65). The Holy Cathedral in Lagos, the old St. Peter's Anglican Church, Ake in Abeokuta and the Anglican Church at Kudeti in Ibadan exemplify the churches of this era.

The opening up of the interior of Yorubaland by the creation of motorable roads and railway lines from Lagos to Osogbo in 1910 facilitated the transportation of building materials and personnel into central and northern Yorubaland (Akinwunmi, 1996:16). Thus churches with cement walls and corrugated zinc roofs began to appear. Many of such buildings which had the conventional crucifix ground plans that were common features of ancient orthodox churches have, since the Second World War (1939-1945) years, given way to the construction of free form ones that conform with the international styles. The Dominican Chapel in Ibadan, which was designed by Demas Nwoko exemplify these. The palatial Methodist Cathedral in Ilesa, which is in the form of a rotunda and the new St. Annes' Anglican Church in Ibadan, both of which were built during the cocoa and oil-boom economic era in Nigeria respectively, symbolize the extent to which the economic condition of a society can impact on the design, size and construction technology of buildings and hence, churches. The free form church buildings were preceded by churches with facades of austere flat rectangular shapes and forms that were sometimes erected by fledging Pentecostal ministries.

It is noteworthy that the interior of some of the churches in Yorubaland, like those built elsewhere in Nigeria, are decorated with stained glass. Some churches in the area of this study have facades that are decorated with mosaic tiles. A series of artworks, usually in the form of paintings that illuminates Biblical stories such as *Christ's Last Supper*, *The Storm*, *Christ's Temptation by Satan* as well as the fourteen *Stations of the Cross* are used not only to adorn the church interior but also to remind the congregation continually of the passion of Christ and his sacrifice to save mankind. Pulpits, lecterns and altars were executed with wood and glass.

There are many churches of the era in Yorubaland with carved wooden door panels. Some Christian chapels, especially those of the Catholic and Celestial Church of Christ, have statues of Jesus Christ, Holy Mary as well as those of some other revered Christian figures or objects such as the crucifix of iconic significance, which executed in wood or cast with ferro-concrete materials, erected within and outside them. For instance, Rod Adoh Emi

designed a commemorative centenary anniversary cenotaph for the Emmanuel Anglican Church, Italupe in Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria, which was executed by the staff of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of the Tai Solarin College of Education, Ijagun in Ogun State, Nigeria, in 1992. In a similar vein, the Saint Sebastian Catholic Cathedral, Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria, commissioned Rod Emi and Samkay Adekoya, (sculptors) to execute the lie-size statue of its patron saint (St. Sebastian) in fibre glass in 2011. This was unveiled during the Cathedral's centenary anniversary in November that year.

Churches have also used copies of the Bible, catechism, prayer books, hymnals and wall hangings in form of posters, which portray the images of Jesus Christ and notable scenes from the Bible in their religious works. These graphic art products as well as wooden crucifix in various sizes were used to facilitate the education and indoctrination of the new Christian converts and their liturgies. The wall hangings were also used to beautify the interior parts of the churches.

Post- Independence Christian Art

Post-independence Christian art was influenced by the introduction of Western art education and further development in the visual art forms that were associated with Christian religious worship. Church architectural designs experienced a kind of rejuvenation as attempts were made to imbue its church facades with African identity. This was doubtlessly a result of the clamour of Nigerian artists, who had acquired formal Western art education, for the restoration of Nigerian or African character or images in their artworks immediately after independence. Demas Nwoko designed the Dominican Chapel at Samanda in Ibadan. Indigenous Nigerian artists also created artworks for church decoration. Ben Enwonwu's wooden sculpture the *Risen Christ*, which some radical Muslim students of the University of Ibadan attempted to set on fire in the late 1990s, was used to adorn the interior of the Chapel of Resurrection in the University.

Yusuf Grillo executed stained glass works for the Presbyterian Church in Yaba, Lagos. The church was designed by Atkinson, an indigenous Nigerian architect. Ajidaun, a Nigerian artist who was formerly an art teacher at the Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo cut a niche for himself in the Nigerian art world by producing several stained glass works for Christian churches in towns, like Owo and Ilesa in central and eastern Yorubaland.

The positive results of experimental art workshops such as the ones, which were organized for indigenous artists, craftsmen and women between 1947 and 1953 by Reverend Fathers P.M. Kelly, Kevin Carroll and O' Mahoney in Ondo, Ikole-Ekiti and Ijebu-Igbo respectively began to show in the period immediately after independence, in Yorubaland (Beier, 1960: 14-15; Adepegba, 1995:81; Oladimeji, 1999: 65-68; Geteloma 2005: 238-239). This followed Papal approval that indigenous artworks could be used by its missions abroad if they (the works) do not contradict Catholic Church doctrines. Some of the beneficiaries of the workshop at Ikole-Ekiti of which Lamidi Fakeye, the renowned wood carver is inclusive, won commissions to produce carved wooden door panels, pulpits, altars, wooden crucifix and other objects of Christian religious worship for churches (Willett, 1971; 228-237). For instance, Our Lady of Wisdom Catholic Church in the University of Ibadan has carved wooden and metal repoussi door panels, which were executed by such artists. The new St. Anne's Anglican Church at Molete in Ibadan has several of such doors that were carved by Tunde Allen-Taylor, an avant garde artist (Emi, 2009: 20). The churches also request for that artist and craftsmen and women produce pulpits and lecterns with animal motifs like eagles and lions portrayed on them.

Filade Marble Works, an indigenous marble works company has produced several works for church decoration. Among these are baptismal fonts, altars as well as pulpits and lecterns that were initially made of wood. It is remarkable that some churches, especially new

generation Pentecostal churches have availed themselves of the advancement in metal and glass working technology in contemporary times to produce their church furniture. They have altars, pulpits and lecterns that are made of glass sheets, which are set in aluminum; silver or chrome-coated metal pipes and rods.

The interior of the churches in Yorubaland, like those built in other parts of Nigeria are decorated with different materials. The Methodist Cathedral, Otapete in Ilesa has timbered walls and ceiling. Rug is often spread on church aisles, altars and often in the apse in which the presiding priests, pastors or ministers seat.

Church Vestments

An aspect of church art that is seldom paid due attention is Christian textile fabric designs and costumes. This is in spite of the fact that they have implication for church life and operations. Unlike some new generation church ministers, like those of the Mountain of Fire and Deeper life Bible Church, the ministers of Catholic, Methodist and Anglican Churches wear garments, which are designed specially for their offices. Indeed, the ministers and entire members of some indigenous Nigerian Pentecostal churches such as the Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S), the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) and Church of the Lord (Aladura), which are located in Yorubaland, wear assorted cassocks, caps, belts that are made of satin, velvet, damask and brocade of different colours. The costumes may also be decorated with sequin, metallic lace and tassels. The cross, dove, sheep and other motifs of iconoclastic significance could be sewn onto them (Renne 2005:209-210).

These costumes are worn with the objective of distinguishing church leaders from the rank and file members of the churches. Church choir members wear uniforms, which were usually in the form of gowns, hoods and caps. Geleloma (2005:239-246) informs that Yoruba textile designs have also been used as altar cloths and seat covers in churches, aside their use to produce chasuble. He cited the use of green (*adire oniko*) for the altar and seat cover by the SMA Chapel in Bodija, Ibadan as an example of this practice.

Church societies or groups have special textile materials designed for their corporate use. These may be in the form of tee-shirts or vests, caps, wrappers and head ties with the societies' names and logos printed on them. In fact the Catholic Church commissioned a Nigerian textile industry to produce *ankara* prints which were used nation-wide for the commemorative service organized as part of the late Rev. Father Tansi beatification programme in 1998. The *ankara* prints were created in three colours: namely white, green and purple, and they featured the images of Father Tansi, Pope John Paul II and his coat of arms, among other motifs (Geleloma 2005:245). The Saint Sebastian Catholic Cathedral in Ijebu-Ode also commissioned a textile industry in Lagos to produce Ankara fabric with motifs of its patron saint that was worn by members during the commemoration of the church's centenary anniversary in November, 2011. It is remarkable that the Catholic women in Nigeria seem to have adopted customised Ankara textile fabrics as uniforms which they wear when they attend special events that pertain to the Church or congregational members.

Graphic Artworks

(a) Advertising Agencies

The origin of the proliferation of new generation Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria could be traced to the United States of America where church ministers, like Billy Graham, applied business-like approach to Church organization and evangelism in the 1960s. although the practice was adopted by some Pentecostal church pastor in Nigeria, the proliferation of churches in the country of which Yorubaland is inclusive, did not reach its present peak until in the period between 1980s and 1990s during the implementation of the structural adjustment programme (SAP) in Nigeria. The graphic communication needs

created by the new converts who thronged the new churches with the desire to benefit from the miracles performed by the church ministers and their prosperity preaching, became lucrative patronage for advertising agencies.

The orthodox and indigenous Pentecostal churches which were already in existence in the pre-colonial era (Lintas, 1978:17), also provided advertising agencies with ample graphic art jobs. The new generation Churches needed the service of graphic artists to forge unique identities for themselves through the design of logos, letter-head papers, complimentary cards, calendars and signposts. Graphic artists were generally required for the execution of posters, handbills, billboard designs and newspaper advertisements for communication purposes.

Church outreach programmes, which are rather frequent are, nowadays, promoted with screen-printed banners, tee-shirts, face caps of both paper and textile fabric, and vesolim tapes. The stupendous art works produced by advertising agencies to boost the attendance of the Redeemed Christian Church of God's annual programme, referred to as *Holy Ghost Convention* is an example of the extent to which churches have adopted multi-media approach in their dire bid to attract more converts and expand their ministries.

(b) Printing Press

Copies of the Holy Bible a vital Christian religious document were originally produced by monks and nuns in the monasteries using the woodcut and engraving methods in the medieval era in Europe. Before this time, they produced the Bible calligraphically. The printing technology which was revolutionized much later with the movable types invented by Johann Gutenberg in the fifteenth century A.D. in Europe (Adewusi 2002: 5-8), made the production of copies of the Holy Bible, which was imported into Nigeria by the early missionaries easier. However, Henry Townsend the Anglican missionary introduced printing into Yorubaland in the nineteenth century. With a hand press that he obtained from his brother in England, he published pamphlets, hymns, catechisms and prayer books. He began to publish the *Iwe Irohin*, a fourth nightly journal in Yoruba in 1859 at Abeokuta. The journal disseminated news of the church and the nation. The printers he trained in Abeokuta become the frontline workers of the printing presses which were established later in Lagos and elsewhere in Nigeria at the close of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century (Ajayi. 1965:158-159).

The Church has used other publications with Christian religious contents, like the Catechism, printed portraits, church calendars and almanacs to enhance evangelism in Yorubaland. Many Christian authors such as Pastors Enoch Adeboye, Kumuyi and Oyedepo have also written and published books of scriptural values as a part of their soul winning drives. Some ministries have published magazines, and other in-house periodicals, like bulletins and newsletters for the dissemination of information about the church to their members. The covers and pages of these publications are often spiced with photographs, cartoons and other kinds of illustrations and line drawings. Examples of these publications in recent times are the *Christian Women Mirror*, *The Redemption Light* and *The light of Hope*, which are published by the Deeper Life Bible Church, The Redeemed Christian Church of God and The Apostolic Faith respectively.

It is however, noteworthy that the use of computer for graphic design in recent times has revolutionized Christian art in Yorubaland and in the world at large. Although the computer quickens graphic design and production processes, the visuals of the posters, the handbills, newspaper advertisements and most graphic designs, which are produced with it sometimes appear similar and banal (Odotokun, 1989:146). The result has been the production of graphic art designs that lack the artistry with personal individual touch, which characterized the cherished graphic designs of the pre-computer era.

Conclusion

Art has served churches in Yorubaland in several ways since the advent of Western missionaries in the territory in the nineteenth century. Both Western and traditional Yoruba arts and crafts have been deployed to facilitate and enhance Christian religious practices within the area in question. Art provided means by which some vital aspects of Christian religious beliefs and life could be perceived visually. In doing so, it enhanced the understanding and provided means for achieving effective communication channels between the clergy and the congregation within and outside churches. The invaluable didactic values of art in its role of facilitating Christian education and evangelism and its provision of shelter for fellowship and liturgy are functions of art that have sustained the religion in Yorubaland since its introduction there over a century and half ago.

The establishment of experimental art workshops which encouraged the execution of artworks and crafts with Christian themes rendered in African motifs and images by traditional Yoruba artists resulted inadvertently in the creation of a new visual art idiom.

The visual arts, in responding to technological advancements in their production systems in contemporary times, have met perennial needs resulting from the dynamics of the churches effectively and efficiently. They have thus proved that they could be relied on to serve the continual artistic needs of the churches now and in future.

References:

- Adebayo, S.A. (1996). *Christ Apostolic Church, 88 Folagbade Street, Ijebu-Ode: 60years of its existence (1935-95)*. Ijebu-Ode: Christ Apostolic Church.
- Adeleke, K. Godwin, J. et al (1999). Sites, Monuments and Buildings listed by N.C.M.M. In *The Nigerian Field*, Vol. 64, Parts 1-2.
- Adepegba, C.O. (1995). *Nigerian Art: It's Traditional and Modern Tendencies*. Ibadan: Jodad Publishers.
- Adewusi, S. (2002). *Repromethod Technique in Printmaking*. Ibadan: Sico Publishers.
- Ajayi, J.F.A. (1965). *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891: The Making of New Elites*. Essex: Longman Group Ltd.
- Smith, R. (1971). *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press & Cambridge University Press.
- Akinwunmi, R.S. (1996). *Methodist Church in Ilesa Diocese- How it all Started. Methodist Church Nigeria. Ilesa Diocese. 1896-1996: Years of Evangelism*. Ilesa: Centenary Committee.
- Bazin, G. (1958). *A Concise Story of Art*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Beier, U. (1960). *Art in Nigeria 1960*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Emi-Oliseyenum, R.A. (1984). *Six Decade of European Architecture in Nigeria: A Case Study of Old and Ibadan Provinces (1900-1969 A.D)*. M.A Dissertation, University of Ibadan.
- Emi-Oliseyenum, R.A. (2007). *A Century of Church Architecture in Ilesa, Osun State, Nigeria 1901-2000 A.D*. Ph.D Thesis, University of Ibadan.
- Emi, R.A. (2009). On the Works of Mr. Tunde Allen – Taylor. In *Celebration of Life: Babatunde Allen – Taylor*. (Funeral Brochure).
- Geteloma. C. (2005). Yoruba Indigenous textile and Catholic Liturgy. In Renne. E.P. and Agbaje-Williams, B. (eds.), *Yoruba Religious Textiles*. (Essays in Honour of Cornelius Adepegba). Ibadan: Book Builders.
- Godwin. J. (1996). Nigerian Architecture as Historical Monuments. In *The Guardian* (Nigerian).
- Gombrich, E.H. (1972). *The Story of Art*. London: Phaidon Press Ltd.

- Johnson, S. (1921). *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*. Lagos: CSS Bookshops.
- Lintas, (1978). *Lintas 1928-1978. Fifty Years Growing*, Lagos: Lintas.
- Odotokun, G. (1989). Art in Nigeria Since Independence. In Ekeh P.P. and Ashiwaju, G. (eds.), *Nigeria since Independence: The First 25 Years. Vol. VII. Culture*, Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Publishers (Nigeria) Ltd.
- Oladimeji, T.A.G. (1999). Oye-Ekiti Art Workshop: An Instrument for Cultural Colonialism in Nigeria. *Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 4.
- Renne, E.P. (2005). Visions of Sacred textiles in a Yoruba Aladura Church. In Renne, E.P. and Agbaje-Williams, B. (eds). *Yoruba Religious Textile* (Essays in Honour of Cornelius Adepegba). Ibadan: Book Builders.
- Willett, F. (1971). *African Art: An Introduction*, London: Thames & Hudson.