INDIGENOUS IMAGES AND LITURGY: THE SPLENDOUR OF NIGERIAN CATHOLICISIM

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Abstract
This study investigates the state of indigenous sculptures in Nigerian Catholic Parishes. It attempts to encourage the use of indigenous Christian sculptures. This is necessary given the fact that western images in Nigerian Parishes look alien. A careful analysis of some sculptures in St. Thomas Moore Catholic Parish, University of Lagos, Nigeria will help to reveal the state and level of acceptance of indigenous sculptures in Nigerian Catholic Parishes. The practice, among others will help to preserve the cultural heritage of the host community and in addition, make Christianity more acceptable.

Keywords: Indigenous, Sculpture, Catholic

Introduction
The Catholic Church in Nigeria is part of the worldwide Catholic Church, under the spiritual leadership of the Pope. Visual arts, particularly sculpture is closely associated with the Catholic liturgy. Unlike other Christian denominations, the Catholics use sculpture in prayer and meditation; these two worship system are among the major aspects of the Catholic liturgy. In addition, sculpture creates aesthetics in the church auditorium and environment. The close ties between the church and visual arts are traced to the period of 320 century AD. Since then, the church has been involved in the collection of art works, ranging from sculpture to painting and murals. The themes of the art works found in churches are derived from Christian scriptures. In the words of Pope John 11 as recorded by O'Neill, (1982): “Ever since the founding of St. Peter’s, about320 AD, the Popes have commissioned, preserved, and acquired works of art”. It is remarkable to note that the early Roman Christian artists adopted and transformed their traditional arts into Christian religion with new meaning. The images of Roman traditional art formed what we know today as Christian art. According to Huyghe (1968:23) “Early Christian art was not the product of a specific religion, nor was it based on any artistic tradition of its own; it derived its form from the art around it. On the other hand, it sometimes adopted in full the forms current in pagan art, but endowed them with a new meaning”. This is supported by Harcourt (1980).

However, the adoption and transformation of traditional art into the church did not take place in Nigeria at the early stage of Christianity; Perhaps the early Christian missionaries did not see Nigerian art as the product of interaction between the people and their natural environment, or a sociological object that mirrors and tell the story of the culture that produces it. Probably that is why they suspected Nigerian arts, seeing them as ritual objects as observed by Willett (1971).

The rejection of Indigenous images in Nigerian Catholic Parishes continued until 1947 when the Irish missionaries established a workshop at Oye-Ekiti, in Ekiti, Western part of Nigeria. This workshop grew and flourished for seven years (1947-1954). After the closure of the workshop in 1954, the sculptures produced at the workshop were used in Nigerian churches particularly in the western part, until recently when most Parish leaders began to make changes. In St. Pauls Ebute-Meta, for example, different parish priests continued to use and cherish the sculptures of Oye-Ekiti until the year 2012, when Rev. Jonathan Okafor (the Parish Priest) decided to replace them ‘with what he termed modern’ because he believed that the indigenous Christian sculptures were unfit for the house of God.

However, in 1960s, the quest for African consciousness continued to wax strong. During this period, there was a conscious effort to produce indigenous works of art and St. Thomas Moore Catholic Church University of Lagos was not left out. The church commissioned BisiFakeye a carver
Alien in one’s own land

The population of the Catholic Church in Nigeria as released online by nationmaster.com (2009) is about 16.8 million baptized members, recording among the highest Christian denomination in the country. Most of the catholic parishes in Nigeria seem to be more comfortable with western sculptures rather than indigenous ones. This represents a wide acceptance of western culture, and rejection of one own culture. Many years after the European missionaries had left Nigeria, the Catholic Church seems to be doing what could be best described as ‘singing and dancing to the old drum beat in the area of church sculpture. Regrettably, they seemed to be comfortable with the adaptation of other aspects of art such as music and dance but not sculpture. Ukaegbu in Iheanacho (2004) advises, “The Nigerian Catholic Church must adorn herself with her own values”. There is a serious need for the Nigerian Catholic to inculcate her culture and values into liturgy, particularly because the global church encourages it (Mount, 1973).

The effect of non-compliance of the Popes encouragement paints a picture of the pre-independence days in Nigeria, (during the colonial era), when the visit of District Officers was celebrated in communities. The practice was for villagers to assemble at the village square to welcome the officer who comes with a lieutenants to help in interpretation of English to indigenous language. The irony was that even the lieutenants barely understood English language and thus interpreted what he felt or imagined. At the end of the meeting, the villagers were left with little or no impact made, in most cases, the messages were wrongly interpreted. Iheanacho (2004) observes that such a situation as described above can only resolve to the welcoming of the visitor, possibly, the visitor and the interpreters will be cheered by the audience but the purpose of the visit will be defected. The people will be left with little or no information from the encounter and little appreciation of what was intended for their own wellbeing.

This seems to be the state of Nigerian Catholics today particularly with their perception of the western sculptures in their Parishes. They seem to have remained on the same spot that the Europeans had left them, especially in the arts. This shows that art particularly sculpture has not yet attained any appreciable height in Nigerian Catholic inculturation movement in spite of the efforts of the Irish missionaries at Oye-Ekit, which unfortunately did not spread throughout Nigeria. However, the workshop was a creative effort to make the religion less western and more indigenous. The placement of indigenous Christian art works in every corner of the church psychologically, will make the worshippers feel part and parcel of the entire worship. Iheanacho (2004) further writes “But what is usually needed to keep the interest and enthusiasm of a throng of people is creativity….a body that loses its power of creativity cannot hold its crowd for a long time to come”. The alien nature of Catholic liturgy presently makes some members of the church to attend the early mass on Sundays and thereafter retire to Pentecostal churches later in the day, where they feel at home through listening and dancing to African drum beats.

Nigerians have a rich and diverse culture; this is seen in their various arts. In traditional Nigerian setting, the three major aspect of art (sculpture, music and theatre) are interwoven. A festival is not complete without the three coming together. One of the major aspects of Nigerian traditional culture is the masquerade performance. An image cannot be referred to as a masquerade if it is not covered with a mask, which is a product of sculpture. The dressed masquerade on the other hand is incomplete if there is no performance, and the performance is associated with the beating of the drum which is music and the dance steps which represents theatre. These and many more seems to be present in the Pentecostal worship. In Catholic Church, the hymn is sung solemnly in an European manner. However, in Pentecostal churches, the atmosphere changes the moment the choir sing and beat the drum, worshipping and celebrating liturgy in an African way.

Indigenous sculptures for Nigerian catholic liturgy
Nigerian indigenous sculptures, which are supposed to be the beauty and flavour of catholic liturgy, is ironically being viewed in the mind of some Nigerian Catholics as guest rather than partners of Nigerian rich culture. In other words, the visual liturgy in the churches seems to be a source of decoration rather than contributing spiritually, the way the use of sculptures in traditional ceremonies contributes to the Nigerian people.

The present state of indigenous sculptures in the Nigerian catholic parishes can as well be compared to the state of their total liturgy in the past. (The period when mass and hymn where only said in Latin without the people understanding what they say). There is ample evidence to suggest that the western sculptures in most Nigerian parishes are not yet part of the people that uses them, rather they were forced down their throat by the European missionaries who rejected African sculpture because they did not understand their concept. This resulted to none acceptance of indigenous sculptures in Christian places of worship started with the European missionaries as documented by Willett (1971), “Christian missionaries were ignorant of indigenous African religions. In their attempts to undermine the African indigenous religion they had attacked African sculptures with the emphasis that they were idols and objects of fetish worships”. This view was also expressed by Bier (1960) that: “African sculptures were burnt publicly by the early missionaries. To them, they were objects associated with idol worshipping and were seen as ‘fetish’. He, however, noted that they did not know that that they were destroying a great cultural heritage of a people”. However, many years after the introduction of the Christian religion by the Europeans, efforts were made by Rev. Dr. Patrick Kelly, the Irish Provincial Priest (1946-52) at Oye-Ekiti, to encourage the use of indigenous Christian art in Nigeria Catholic Parishes. This effort was not embraced by all Nigerian Catholics particularly the priests; who were expected to be at the forefront of indigenization of their people’s culture in the church. They criticised and condemned this effort. Caroll (1966) reports a Nigerian Priest thus, “what you are doing is good; we like to develop our old art and styles, but it should be put in the Museums not in Churches”. The discouragement did not hinder the Irish Priests from continuing in the workshop which lasted between 1947 and 1954.

**The fruits of Oye-Ekiti workshop in Nigerian Catholicism**

The workshop was the first recorded effort in Nigeria to indigenize visual arts in the Catholic Church. It produced a number of art works particularly sculptures which were used in some catholic Parishes in the western part of the country. This practice continued many years after the closure of the workshop. The reason for the continuity was basically because the workshop produced quite a number of carvers, who continued their practice after the workshop. One of such carvers was LamidiFakeye. During the early period of the workshop and after, some Nigerian Christians leaders saw the need to tell the Bible story using indigenous images. This effort was kept and practiced by some Catholic Parishes in Lagos, Nigeria. Among the stakeholders of this practice was St. Thomas Moore Catholic Chapel, University of Lagos. The dates on the available works in the Chapel (1986), tells that they were not produced during the period of the Oye-Ekit workshop, rather the works were produced byBisiFakeye, who trained under LamidiFakeye, one of the carvers at the workshop. The awareness created at the workshop which lasted between 1947 and 1954, the then vice Chancellor of the University of Ibadan Nigeria, a resolution was passed that all institutions of religious or other nature should not bring in foreign art forms”. He further suggested that churches should encourage indigenous artists and also make good use of them; particularly the new generation of educated ones rather than relying on the imported art works from Europe. He believes that these artists are capable of laying the foundation for matured Christian art just as was done at the catholic chapel that was built in Ibadan in 1954; (though it was designed in a Morden style), it was furnished and decorated through African workmanship. This encouragement among others yielded fruits in many catholic Parishes in
Nigeria. By 1960 and 1961, Nigeria produced the first set of art graduates from Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, now Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. Among the students were Bruce Onabrakpeya, UcheOkeke, and Demas Nwoko. These three products of the institution were among Nigeria first trained artists that did quite a number of indigenous Christian art works for the Catholic Church. Bruce Onabrakpeya produced works for St. Pauls Catholic Parish, Ebute-Metta, in Lagos. Representing most of the images in Ughrobo traditional out-fits. UcheOkeke who is known for his Igbo folk lore such as Asele and Badunka, Ana, and Uli styles also produces indigenous catholic images for churches in the Eastern part of Nigeria. Among the catholic Parish that he worked for was the Holy Trinity Cathedral, Onitsha (Ottenger in Ekwuemesi, 2010).

In the case of Demas Nwoko, he did a lot in the area of sculpture and architecture for Catholic Church in Nigeria. Most of the church buildings designed by him, were done in African architecture and decorations by incorporating indigenous motifs. Among the Parishes are: Miss Pearce Chapel ‘Isele-Uku’, Christ the King Parish ‘Idumuje-Ugboko., and The Dominican Institute Ibadan. The infusion of Nigeria indigenous style and motifs has for many years brought splendour to Nigerian Catholicism.

St. Thomas Moore catholic parish
Some images in St. Thomas Moore chapel

Fig. 1: (Old) Condemnation of Christ: (Wood Carving) by Fakeye
St. Thomas Moore, Uniwersity of Lagos.

Fig. 2: (New) Condemnation of Christ (Painting)
Photograph by the Researcher

The Oye-Ekiti workshop created awareness on the use of indigenous images in Nigerian Catholic Parishes. Prior to this time, the church was dominated by European images, which was possible of passing the wrong message to the Nigerian people, that the church belonged to the Europeans while Nigerians are only mere visitors. The workshop made indigenous sculpture to be accepted by the church leaders which led to continuity some years after the closure of the workshop. Among the catholic parishes that towed along the way of the workshop was St. Thomas Moore catholic Parish University of Lagos. Perhaps, to make sure that they were among the partakers of the workshop, they employed BisiFakeyeto produce Christian carvings for the parish. BisiFakeye used his knowledge and expertise acquired from his master LamidiFakeyein the creation of set of Stations of the Cross for the Parish as well as the Parish two entrance doors. These works were produced in 1986, the church continued the use of the work till they built and moved into a new chapel in year 2007.

The movement into the new chapel shows a non-acceptance of indigenous images by the new generation of Nigerian Catholics. They abandoned the indigenous sculptures in the old chapel and replaced them with imported paintings of station of the cross. This is similar to what St. Paul Ebute-Metta, also in Lagos did.
This is the first station of the cross found in St. Thomas Moore Catholic Parish university of Lagos. The University of Lagos chapel was relocated from its former Chapel within the university. The former chapel was being used by both the Catholics and the Protestants, which explains the reason for the relocation in April 2009 to a new chapel also within the University. The first station of the cross above was formally used in the old chapel of the university. The work is carved in wood and represents indigenous figures. These works were not moved to the new chapel. They are still hung in the former chapel. However, it was discovered that the chapel changed its concept and type of art used in the new chapel. They replaced the carved indigenous images with painted western images. The paintings, according to the Priest in charge of the chapel, were imported, the artist and date of production are not known.

![Fig. 3: Christ Receives the Cross (Old)
(Wood Carving)
St. Thomas Thomas More, Unilag Photo: Researcher](image1)

![Fig. 4: Christ Receives the Cross (new)
(Painting)](image2)

These are the second Stations of the Cross showing Christ receiving the cross at St. Thomas More Catholic Parish, University of Lagos. The pictures above show both the former carved wood in the old chapel as well as the painted picture that is in the new chapel. The wooden sculpture above measures about 10”x8” while the painted one measures about 12”x10. The painted station shows Christ receiving the cross from two men while the carved image shows Christ and one man. The Wooden sculpture was traditionally carved by BisiFkeye. Identity of the artist and year of production of the painted work is not known.
Fig. 6: Christ Falls with the Cross (new) (Wood Carving) (Painting)

Fig. 5: Christ Falls with the Cross (Old) St. Thomas Thomas More, Unilag Photo: Researcher

The images show one of the falls by Christ on his way to Calvary where he was crucified. The first image which is from the old chapel was carved in wood by an indigenous artist and shows Christ and the image beside him as Africans in African attire. The second picture is simply an imported painted picture.

Fig. 7: Christ is Nailed on the Cross (Old) (Wood Carving)

Fig. 8: Christ is Nailed on the Cross (new) (Painting)

The two pictures above are among the series of Stations of the Cross from St. Thomas More Catholic Parish, University of Lagos. The wooden sculpture measures about 10”x8” while the painted one that is used in the new chapel of the same Parish measures about 12”x10. The painted station is with an inscription ‘XI’ which is eleven in the Roman numeral. The painting is laminated on wood with a section of the same wood which is in the natural colour of the wood representing the frame of the work for neat presentation. The painting shows Christ being nailed unto the cross by two men at the same time and the other two watching. Also seen in the painting is a garment on the floor which obviously belongs to Christ. The Wooden sculpture which was traditionally carved did not show the cross unlike the painted art work.
However, both images have both hands spread as though on the cross.

![Fig. 10: Christ Dies on the Cross (Old) (Wood Carving)](image1)

![Fig. 11: Christ Dies on the Cross (new) (Painting)](image2)

St. Thomas Thomas More, Unilag Photo: Researcher

The pictures above show both the former carved wood in the old chapel as well as the painted picture that is in the new chapel. The painting shows Christ clearly hung on the cross with several images surrounding the cross and two women in a sorrowful mood. Unlike the painted art work with many images, the wooden one has only two images one each on both sides of Christ. The cross is not shown but the only thing that signifies cross is that the image of Christ has both hands spread as though on the cross.

**Problem of neglecting one’s culture**

Visual arts particularly sculpture, is a major aspect of a peoples culture, over the years, it has served a good purpose of telling a peoples history. Among all the other aspects of art, it was recorded as the medium used by the Irish Priests at Oye-Ekit workshop. The workshop coincided with the period when most African nations were clamouring for independence and Nigeria was not left out.

Like every other colonised nation of the world, Nigerians’ struggle for independence was not only for political gains. It was a struggle for its people to regain freedom from colonial domination and operation both in their social and religious life. Nigerians realized that for them to improve their living conditions and develop their culture, they needed freedom. This is because, during the colonial era, Europe made Nigerians to believe that their own culture was barbaric and out-dated. They made them to believe that it was best to emulate the Europeans and abandon their indigenous culture. To get on with the business of joining the modern world, Nigerians seems to agree with the west and rejected their art. This also affected the church. It is accepted that Christian religion was not of Nigerian origin just as it was not of Roman origin; but unlike the Romans that adopted and translated their traditional arts into the church as recorded by Harcourt (213) “Early Christian art shows simple transformation of pagan themes into Christian and the freest kind of borrowing of pagan motifs and manners”. While Walls (23) assert: “There is nothing distinctive about the earliest Christian art except its subject matter…It brought no style, form or technique that was not already employed in pagan Roman art”. Nigerians were brain washed and they abandoned their indigenous arts, and did not give it a place in the church. They also did not consider that the art which is the culture of a people and a visual language that the people understand will be the best form of
communicating the new religion to converts (Shorter, 1988).

However, Nigerian Catholic Churches seem to have ignored the above reasons to bring in Nigerian culture into their worship through visual arts. There is need to accommodate the culture of every society into its new religion particularly the Catholic Church. Pope John Paul II (1981) advised the church through his message ‘to the people of Asia’ on his visit to the Philippines that: “Christ and Church cannot be alien to any people, nation and culture.

Although, help came to Nigerian Catholic Church through the Oye-Ekit workshop, that was facilitated by Rev Kelvin Carroll and Rev O’ Mahony. It is however painful to note that Nigerians criticized the effort and could not continue with the good work of Irish missionaries after they left. Ogbechie in Nzeogwu (1999) says: “An artist who negates his or her cultural background runs the risk of becoming socially and culturally irrelevant”.

The idea of modernity imported into Nigeria by the European colony seems to have created fundamental problems for the nation. Though some Nigerians accepted the doctrine of the “colonial mentality”, on the other hand, there were some, probably few in number who opposed the Europeans by words or actions, according to Robert (1988).

The above statements by Ogbechie and Robert, seems to be the driving force behind the reasoning of some young Nigerian undergraduates in the early 1960. They seem to have understood the problem that could arise from neglecting ones culture, which made them to advocate through their works both in public places and the church that Nigerian culture should be paramount to every Nigerian. This they preached though their works both in public places and in the church.

Conclusion
It is sad to note that the problem of rejection of Nigerian culture in the church is presently the problem of Nigerian Christians, who are cut between Christianity and tradition. This explains why some Christians are not contented with the Christian message and secretly consult the traditionalist. This is as a result of not getting satisfaction from the church and they seek for alternative help from the tradition which they are familiar with and which gives them joy and satisfaction.

What all this implies is that the Liturgy of Nigerian Catholicism of today is clearly in desperate need of a cultural vehicle to transport it to her home in the Nigerian people. And that vehicle is the visual arts, particularly, sculpture. The liturgy needs to be conveyed to every nook and cranny of Nigeria. This is the task confronting the Nigerian Catholicism. The Nigerian Catholic church needs to procure a cultural vehicle to assist her in transporting from its present statues as an alien in its land to a noble position of a king in her land.

This way, indigenous sculpture will not only complement but will indeed ultimately add to the splendour of Nigerian Catholicism and it teeming adherent.

References


