

Original Article | **Open Access** | Peer Reviewed



Traditional African Art Forms and the Church Art: Incompatible Companion

Isaiah Tundé Ògúnjímí¹, Foluso Modupe Abejide², Michael Adeyinka Okunade² and Eytayo Tolulope Ijisakin²

¹ Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, PO Box 2011, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Department of Fine Art, Rhodes University, PO Box 94, Makhanda, South Africa; ogunjimiit@oauife.edu.ng; +2348054876468.

² Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, PO Box 2011, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Copyright and Permission:

© 2024. The Author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits sharing, adapting, and building upon this work, provided appropriate credit is given to the original author(s). For full license details, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Address for Correspondence:

Isaiah Tundé Ògúnjímí, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, PO Box 2011, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Department of Fine Art, Rhodes University, PO Box 94, Makhanda, South Africa. (ogunjimiit@oauife.edu.ng)

Article History:

Received: 13 June 2024; Accepted: 25 June 2024; Published: 30 June 2024

Abstract

The traditional African art forms were condemned and rejected by the Western missionaries at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the colonialism of African countries, especially in Nigeria, where most of this artistic heritage was destroyed because they were labeled “fetish” and “evil.” This paper attempts to evaluate the process and the eventual adoption of traditional African art forms and styles by the same missionaries for the use of the church. The paper examines the area of compatibility and incompatibility of Traditional African art and Church art with a view to establishing the relationship that exists between art and religion, irrespective of race, culture, and tradition being rooted in such an affiliated religion. Findings show that art, tradition, and religion are inseparable and that the Catholic Church realizes the importance of this in propagating the gospel of faith. The paper submits that art is significant in the service of religion, irrespective of religious affiliation, and that art differs from one culture to another. Hence, it is derogatory to say all African art forms are evil and fetish.

Keywords

Church Art, Companion, Incompatible, Missionaries, Traditional African Art, Western Art

Volume 14, 2024

Publisher: The Brooklyn Research and Publishing Institute, 442 Lorimer St, Brooklyn, NY 11206, United States.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30845/ijhss.v14p21>

Reviewers: Opted for Confidentiality

Citation: Ògúnjímí et al. (2024). Traditional African Art Forms and the Church Art: Incompatible Companion. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 14, 237-249. <https://doi.org/10.30845/ijhss.v14p21>

1. Introduction

Ẹni tí a ní kò le p'àgò, òun ni ó kọ ilé alááruru (alárinrin).

"Someone who is said not to be able to build a tent is the one who has built a complex house."

The above Yorùbá proverb is an antithesis to traditional African art and Church art. It is usually expressed to denote the acceptance, honor, and celebration accorded to someone who is considered destitute and rejected in society, after witnessing his achievements at the end, and so the proverb reads: *Ẹni tí a ní kò le p'àgò, òun ni ó kọ ilé alááruru*. This points to the irony of the scenario painted when the Western missionaries first came into contact with African art forms. In African society, it is believed that no one is useless, and this is where the proverb, *Ọmọ burúkú nàà ní ọjọ tí rẹ* (even a bad child has his day) comes from. No matter how bad a person is, one day he will make a kind gesture to the one he has once been rude to and therefore it is not ideal to condemn someone, especially because of their affiliation. African art was rejected, vandalized and the people were humiliated by the colonial masters and missionaries. According to Jegede (1996), "The advent of the white man in Africa produced cultural tension, as pious missionaries insisted that the work of God could not go apace until heathenish fetish and idols had been destroyed". Today, African art is not only used by the same missionaries as a tool to win converts but has also brought about an evolution in the art tradition of Western Art, as many of the proponents of modern Western artists were brought into the limelight after their encounter with African art masks (Ogunjimi 2017:149).

Art and religion, right from the prehistoric period, had become intertwined and thus became companions. Art was charged with the responsibility of mediating between man and God. The two terms have also shaped their infinite impact on human civilization in the prehistoric, medieval, Renaissance, and modern eras (Khawaja 2011:227). It was the endeavor of early man to find a way to communicate and connect with the Supreme Being. In his search for knowledge of this Supreme Being, he found solace in art. Thus, began the use of art in worship to connect the physical and spiritual worlds. Art was a mediator that connected man with God, for God is a Supreme Being to whom one should not have direct access. Thus, art becomes an object of religion (Itanyi 2014), serving as a mediator between man and God.

Evidence of magico-religious rituals performed by early man before a hunt can be found in cave drawings and paintings of animals discovered in many parts of the world (Beaumont and Bednarik 2013, Gallinaro 2013, Ambrose 1998, Adepegba 1995). In some ways, these prehistoric rituals were similar to the religious traditions that people practice today (Adoh and Olufemi 2014:466). So, there is a connection between early humans and our indigenous communities. Evidence of prehistoric drawings, engravings and paintings depicting symbols and icons of indigenous communities in relation to their various traditional belief systems have been found in many parts of the world (Kleiner 2011). Examples of such artistic symbols and icons include the Cupule Panel, located next to a hillcrest rock pool at Klipbak 1, the southern Kalahari meat feast paintings in Laikipia, northern Kenya (Figs. 1 and 2), and many others¹ (Adepegba 1995; Bednarik 2003; Kleiner 2011).

It should be noted that before colonization, art in Traditional African society was created to serve a specific purpose. Art reveals who the people are, reflecting factually in all aspects of their lives. Art is used as a mediator in Traditional African Religion. This mediator is a god exemplified in art and directly approached by worshipers. Art has been deeply driven by the people's religious consciousness. Art was the issue of the day in traditional African society because it seemed to have given breath to life in all ramifications, such as daily activities and socio-political, economic, and religious matters. So, art and religion appeared to be inseparable (Igbaro 2010:494). Art is essential to the lifestyle of any community in Africa. It is remarkable, therefore, to note that many African artworks were created to serve different purposes, such as religious, social, cultural, and political functions. Several works of art produced in traditional African societies were religious items that embraced elements of which cults, fertility cults, and magical and totemic rites (Brain, 1980). The Supreme Being is petitioned through these intermediaries, or lesser spirits or gods, which are embodied in art (Clarke 2006:24).

When the missionaries arrived on the African continent and Nigeria in particular, during colonialism, they condemned the traditional African art forms which they believed could embody spirits and be a fetish. Therefore, they are not art forms to be reckoned with. Fọlárànmí (2015:4) noted that in 1930, Apostle Ayọ́ Babalọ́lá destroyed

¹ Prehistoric rock art in African societies recorded much of this evidence of which one of the oldest is those of Apollo 11 Cave Stones, Namibia, quartzite, c. 25,500–25,300 B.C.E. Namibia. They are also found in many places such as Birnin Kudu, Igbeji, Geji, Igbara-Oke in Nigeria, South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique etc.

and burnt these so-called 'fetish' images and shrines brought by the new converts as a sign of their obedience to God's word and commitment to their new faith. Similarly, Itanyi (2014:28) shows that the advent of Christianity almost eroded African traditional religion as most of the shrines depicting images of African art were demolished and their followers converted to Christianity. The advent of missionaries during colonialism brought about a new art in Africa (Jegade 1996; Adepegba 1995). The beginning of the new art in Africa is thus attributed to the emergence of colonialism and Christianity. Postcolonialism experience brought many changes to people's lifestyles and art practices. Clarke (2006:19) claimed that the colonial period in Africa brought radical changes that disrupted local political institutions, patterns of trade, and religious and social beliefs. This contact with the colonial masters and missionaries led to the African artists who were influenced by European style, cultures, and philosophies of art (Ikoro 2015), and the artists trained in formal education saw the contact to establish new identities in art.

Despite the vast destruction of African artifacts and religious objects by the missionaries because they claimed they were evil and fetish, thousands of these art objects and Nigerian artistic heritage were looted, carted away, and become sources of wealth in their countries. Many rich bronze works were carted away in the Benin Kingdom alone because of its proximity to the border through the Ivory Coast (Adepegba 1995). According to Clarke (2006:19), in 1923, the Brooklyn Museum became the first American museum to present African works as art. Meanwhile, they claimed these artworks were evil. The African art styles and forms, especially Yorùbá, were eventually adopted by local indigenous artists to create art with Biblical themes for the Church because they needed the new converts to be familiar with their culture. In doing so, they could win their hearts. Are the Traditional African art and the Church art compatible or incompatible? Is there any difference in using art in traditional African religions, Christianity, and other religions of the world? Is there any companionship between Traditional African art and Church art? This is the kind of irony that this paper aspires to interrogate.

2. Traditional African Art: Definition, Nature, and Characteristics

There can be no art without a people. This aspect best begins with the definition of who an African is. There are several ways to define an African: those born and live within the continent, Africans in the diaspora, and African descendants who probably have not set foot on the continent or live there. To categorize these people as Africans, they must be connected to the source and have African blood running in their veins. There is no doubt that Africa has extensive, wide-ranging historical and cultural links with other continents in terms of colonialism, slave trade, and migration. Some of these people can trace their art and artistic identity back to the continent; hence, they are Africans. Blood is people! Regardless, all this points to Africa as a geographical location and a people with a distinctive culture, art, and tradition.

According to Lynch (2010:7), "African's ways of life, religions, traditions, and mythologies vary greatly from region to region and even from one ethnic group to a neighboring people. Wherever they lived, Africans developed lifestyles, worldviews, religions, traditions, and mythologies that were as different from one another as their physical environments. Similarly, Clarke (2006:14) also claims that throughout the continent, there is a diversity of societies, languages, and cultures, and culturally, the people define themselves in many ways, such as occupational caste, village, kinship group, regional origin, and nationality. However, there are related belief systems and art forms that connect the diverse cultures and ethnicities in Africa, as identified by Ademuleya (2009). This relatedness of belief systems and art forms includes the functionality of art forms being multi-dimensional, African art forms being beyond aesthetic significance, the concept of God, Africans' belief in life after death, Kingship systems, and art forms such as ancestral masks, style of writing such as Hieroglyphs from the Tomb of Queen *Amonherkhepsef* and *Nsibidi* writing of the Ejagham people of Nigeria (Ademuleya 2009:60). Generally, the people's way of life and belief system reinforce the art, which is common to all African cultures and peoples.

Based on the definition of Africans above, it would be appropriate to look at African art from the perspective of the concept behind the creation of the art, the content of the art form, and the context in which the art form is created and put. The concept describes the motivation and the inspiration behind the art creation. The artist's environmental and cultural backgrounds and the indigenous people's lifestyles often determine the concept or rationale behind creating an art form in African society. African art is known, based on the theme of an art form coded by the artist, a legal member of the larger society. An artistic form usually reflects who the artists are and from which culture they come, often reflected in their art creations. However, some artists study people's culture and traditions before creating their artworks. These artworks, irrespective of who makes them, could also be categorized as African art works since they represent an ideal African tradition and cultural people. However, from the content perspective, African art describes the elements or features contained in an artwork. These are the identifiable characteristics of

the art form. African art has general characteristics across the continent. This talks about the composition of the work. The context or the purpose of the art form within African society is essential. There are specific reasons or functions art forms, irrespective of the medium of creation, are meant to perform.

African art is not art in Africa. Art forms within Africa encompass all artworks in any media, style, form, and origin, irrespective of the creators, which could be in this category. However, African art could be defined as art produced to reflect the culture and tradition of the African people, whose technology/techniques, style, inspirations/themes, and materials are sourced from indigenous society. Hence, African art could simply be art of the people by the people and for the people. It is an art that reflects Africa in the real sense of it. This is an art that is not influenced by any cultural style or form. Engowa (1994:15) defined African art as the creative objectification of Africans, which bears the imprints of African aesthetics on their styles and subjective content.

African art integrates into every aspect of life, from formal ceremonies and religious rites to daily household tasks of African people. African art reflects the whole life of the people, from childbirth to death, so African art is human centered. One of these aspects of life is the belief in life after death. Ademuleya (2009:55) expresses that African religious activities and belief systems are chiefly focused on the relationship between the human being (living), the departed (ancestor), and the Deity (Creator). This perhaps informs the Yorùbá people of southwestern Nigeria's concept of ancestors, which is exemplified in the *Egúngún* (masquerade) tradition². African art is characterized by a deliberate elongation of forms to convey an idea and reveal the essence of the phenomena being represented. The sculpture is often highly stylized and symbolic by deliberately distorting the proportions to emphasize the most important elements or parts of the whole. For instance, the head is the seat of knowledge, wisdom, and personality, and in sculpture, it could be enlarged than other parts of the body, which are believed to be unimportant, so that it accounts for about one-fourth to one-third of the total height of a human figure instead of an ideal ratio one to seven (Coffman 2015:27). African art is characterized with Abstraction mostly and this is the exaggeration or distortion of one or more aspects of the body.

Using geometric shapes such as oval, circular, rectangular, conical, or a combination of these shapes mainly characterizes traditional African art forms. African art is identified through the expression or gesture of the image's face, which is generally known for the coolness of the face. Other identifiable features include a representation of images or figures at a young age, i.e., most representation of the human figure in traditional African art shows youthfulness. African art forms are mostly created by the artists to perform specific functions and to put artistic creations to practical purposes, making functionalism and utilitarianism the core purposes. The geographical location and availability of materials determine the type and form of art in Africa. Art and craft practices often prevail in African areas where a particular indigenous material is a domicile. For example, where wood or forestry is abundant, artists practice wood carving abundantly. Static posture and frontality is another feature of African art. The position of the human body, depicted in a frontal form, aligns the posture as in a straight line, which refers to static posture and frontality.

3. Church Art: Its Origin and Practice

From the beginning, Church art followed the tradition of Western art forms in doctrine, nature, and characteristics because many Western artists who were within the circle of the conventional art practice of the avant-garde artists worked for the church, ranging from the Renaissance to Byzantine periods. Western art before the late 20th century featured highly urbanized principles and highly polished techniques in painting and sculpture, which made up the conventional tradition of realism up to the 19th century until artists began to change their orientation after coming in contact with traditional African art forms (Ogunjimi 2017:136). The realist style, especially of the Renaissance period, formed a comprehensive, mature, systematic, and complete realistic painting system, which explored how to show three-dimensional real nature on a flat surface (Xinglong, Zhiwen and Ran 2021:3). The adhering to the style is too strict that whoever artist does not follow the principles of the art to arrange the elements would not be reckoned with, so realism was the standard of the day. According to Kleiner (2001:823), there was an annual exhibition called "Salons" in France, which were highly competitive, as was membership in the academies. For instance, the French Royal Academy supported a limited range of artistic expression by focusing on traditional subjects and highly polished techniques, generally categorized as aesthetics, which differs quite from the perspective of African art.

² *Egúngún*, otherwise called *Ará Òrun* is an ancestor who died and is believed to constantly come to visit his people on earth. The Yorùbá people believe that these ancestors connected living with the dead to bring about continuity, harmony, and peace in the coexistence of his people (living).

Since the Renaissance, churches have actively related art to their life by becoming primary patrons of art and artists (Adoh and Olufemi 2014, Igbaro 2010, Holdge 2008). Early Christian art is said to survive right from the beginning of Christianity itself (Williamson 2004). The oldest existing Christian paintings are dated to around the 70th year and are from the Megiddo site. In contrast, the oldest Christian sculptures are found in Sarcophagi, dating back to the second century (Ghartey 2011:29). Christian art continuously emphasized the spiritual character of God and the saints (Moshe 1998:157). The use of art for biblical teachings and embellishment of church buildings was common during early Christian art. It is noted that not all artists producing sacred art of Christianity have necessarily been Christians. Yet, the Christian art continued to be produced in great quantities, both for churches and clergy and for the laity, especially after the Church Reformation led by Martin Luther in 1517 (Molloy 2002, Freeland 2001). Most of the early Christian artworks (Figs 3-5) especially in Rome are dated to the third and fourth centuries and are found on the walls of Christian tombs in the catacombs³ (Kleiner 2011:291). According to Williamson (2004:4), “the prevalent sets of paintings were found in Rome, in the catacombs, the elaborate underground tomb chambers in which the Christian communities buried their dead”. They revealed the development of Jesus’ representation. This process was completed in the sixth century when the conventional depiction of Jesus Christ in art became more remarkable.

According to Jensen (2000:3), “art in churches during the early Christian era were purely depiction of biblical stories and liturgical⁴ practices which are difficult to understand for whoever does not have the knowledge of biblical stories and scriptural interpretation. Both ancient and contemporary people undoubtedly cannot completely appreciate the intricacy of the best of the enduring early Christian arts without being familiar with biblical stories, liturgical practices, and the mutual traditions of scriptural interpretation (Kant 1993). It has been observed that the Christian art of early medieval northern Europe is theatrically diverse in character from concurrent works made in Italy and the Byzantine Empire (Figs 6 and 7). Byzantine art departed from the classical artworks that were highly realistic and were concerned with religious symbolism. The early medieval on the other hand was concerned with the religious subject matter and stylized figures, elaborate decoration, and patterns as well as the use of bright colors and luxurious materials. These Christian arts are amongst the most distinguishing ever made and testify to the productive fusion of native and imported artistic traditions (Kleiner 2011:410). Hence, the missionaries came to the African territories with the aim in mind that their art was superior just because it emphasized realism with urbanized principles and highly polished techniques as introduced to the church by the Renaissance and Byzantine art masters.

4. Incompatibility of Traditional African Art Objects and the Church Art

African art emphasizes the essence of the image being depicted rather than the proportion and physical properties of the work. Hence, the Western principle of proportion is irrelevant in the artistic process of creating traditional African art forms since the focus or emphasis is on a particular part of a whole, which sometimes looks bigger in depiction than other parts to communicate a message. For example, the depiction of women at every stage of life in many African societies symbolizes many things, as indicated in Figures 8 and 9. The woman in Fig. 8 (Ancestral Couple) depicts the role of women in the continuity of human life. It represents a woman in her prime age. Her exaggerated conical and protruded breasts and swelling belly indicate fertility, and she still bears and nurtures children. The protruded breast indicates life because she is still in her mid-age, so the breast milk symbolizes life. The flat, pendulous breasts in Fig. 9 (Headdress: D’mba or Yamban) imply that the subject is a mature woman who has nursed many children and is in her old age, unlike the woman in Fig. 8, who is in her prime age (Clarke 2006:67, 79).

On the other hand, Western artists believe in depicting what they see in real life, hence incompatibility and conflicts of perception when Western missionaries encountered the traditional African art forms and scornfully labeled the art evil. At the advent of the West, missionaries to Africa, coming with the orientation of the artistic tradition of the West, saw African art as ‘no art’ because it did not follow the artistic style of Western art. They saw African art as an artistic tradition that was below standard because, mostly, they were not proportional and did not represent the

³ The name derives from the Latin *ad catacumbas*, which means “in the hollows.” They indicate vast subterranean networks of galleries (passageways) and chambers designed as cemeteries for burying the Christian dead. To a much lesser extent, the catacombs also housed the graves of Jews and others. The builders tunnelled the catacombs out of the tufa bedrock, much as the Etruscans fashioned the underground tomb chambers in the Cerveteri necropolis. See Kleiner Fred (2011).

⁴ The word *liturgy* is the customary public worship performed by a religious group, according to its beliefs, customs, and traditions. As a religious phenomenon, liturgy is a communal response to and participation in, the sacred through activity reflecting praise, thanksgiving, supplication, or repentance. Christian liturgy is developed on the basis of an apostolic tradition and by the work of the Church Fathers. See also, Burckhardt, T. (2009): *Art of Islam, Language and Meaning*, Commemorative Edition World Wisdom, Inc.

realist style and what could be seen in real life. Mainly, traditional African art adopts abstraction, representation, or naturalism instead of Western realism rooted in the accurate caption of objects in their proportional state.

The incompatibility of the two artistic traditions is shown in the style each of them adopts and the motives behind the creation. While African art is rarely art for its own sake but for its functionality and the essence of the people, Western art focuses on the technicality of the object being depicted to emphasize physical beauty, for the audience to derive pleasure and enjoyment from admiring such an aesthetic form of art. Western/European artists give attention to the formal qualities of art objects, which is the realist style of art using principles of proportion, balance, harmony, contrast, emphasis, movement, pattern, rhythm, and unity/variety, emphasizing the beauty of the physical properties/features of the art forms. Art is presented the way it appears in real life or the way the artist sees the object or subject to be depicted in nature, while African artists present art the way they think it and identify status and rank within society. The king is usually represented as more significant than his subjects (Fig. 10) when it comes to art, and precious materials are sometimes reserved for the king alone, while materials of low quality are used for his subjects. Traditional African artists use the principle of emphasis by emphasizing the essence/significance rather than the formal properties/ features of the work. African aesthetics lies in the essence/significance of things. For instance, the philosophical statement among the Yorùbá people of Nigeria *Ìwà l'ẹwà* (beauty is a character), alludes to the fact that beauty without character/good conduct is useless. Hence, beauty, in this sense, is not physical but inner. Aesthetics in Western culture, on the other hand, refers to those principles governing the nature and appreciation of beauty, especially in visual art. However, in many African languages, the words “beautiful” and “good” mean the same. When defining African aesthetics, the idea of beauty is present, but there is equal emphasis on the importance of the “good” or moral values conveyed by art (Coffman 2015:25).

The incompatibility of African art and church art became clear at the beginning of the 19th century when Christianity and Islam were introduced to African countries. When the church missionaries arrived, especially in Nigeria, they preached against traditional African artworks because they were perceived to be fetishes and idols that had to be abolished. Because of this notion that African art is embodied by an evil spirit and therefore rejected as a form of aesthetics, the Western orientation of art, such as the beautification of houses and surroundings, which serves more secular purposes, began to take precedence over its sacred and religious purpose. According to Akintonde and Kalilu (2013:26), sculptures that were previously confined to shrines and other sacred places in traditional Yorùbá communities became objects of environmental beautification and commemorative art. The reason for the rejection was that the traditional African art forms as sculptures in their then state could not be used to decorate the church and for biblical teaching to win converts because they were considered fetish and the essence of their creation was quite different from the purpose of their use today, hence they are incompatible. Furthermore, these forms are used to glorify the gods because they were created for the gods, whereas today's art forms for the church come from biblical stories.

Folaranmi (2015:4) noted that the neglect is because people have converted from their traditional religions to other forms of religion, which has manifested in the neglect and destruction of numerous cultural assets of the people. Christianity preaches against images and idols (Jegade 1996), while Islam forbids the worship of idols as this is in the perspective of Abrahamic monotheism⁵ which is directly opposed to idolatrous polytheism (Burckhardt 2009:29). Some of these images and religious objects were therefore destroyed in the traditional religious worship centers to show the obedience and total submission of the new converts to the God that was preached to them. However, some of these objects of inestimable value never had any religious significance. This notion has led to much of Africa's cultural heritage undergoing several changes in the fields of art and architecture since contact with the West (Folaranmi 2015:1) and eventually hindered the growth of art in some parts of Africa like Nigeria (Acquah 2011, Igbaro 2010, Adepegba 1995).

5. Relatedness in African Art and Church Art: A Companionship

The affinity between traditional African art and church art lies in the art forms and styles adopted by the African artists who worked for the churches after the conversion of the people and the founding of churches. African art forms and styles were adopted to tell biblical stories used for the new converts' biblical teaching. The African art style and the biblical stories complemented each other to form a single artistic tradition, hence, there is

⁵ Monotheism is a belief in the unity of Allah in every respect because He is seen as one in person and He is the only creator. It is He alone who manages the world and who deserves worship and adoration. See also, Burckhardt, T. (2009): *Art of Islam, Language and Meaning*, Commemorative Edition World Wisdom, Inc.

companionship. The artists merged with the new tradition of blending biblical themes and African forms and styles into what could be called a new art. To a certain extent, African art has changed from traditional, neo-traditional to contemporary art, which is also evident in the art in the churches (Figures 11-17). However, many art forms still in shrines and sacred places are used for religious purposes today, and whose style remains traditional and spiritual. The fact is that art in the service of religion is important and still is, regardless of religious affiliation. Any art used in worship, whether be it traditional or Christian religion or any other religion in the world, is sacred if it is used as a devotion to connect with God, the creator of the universe. So, it embodies the spirit, now it depends on the kind of spirit.

The shift away from traditional African art and the change in people's orientation toward Western education and academic art continued for quite some time until the newly introduced Christianity, Islam, and other religions adopted the use of art in their places of worship (Igbaro 2010:495). The churches then became patrons of the arts. This was a result of the establishment of art workshops initiated by the Catholic missionaries, which eventually led to many churches, especially the Orthodox ones, using art to beautify their churches to convey the aesthetics and biblical teachings - until today. The initiatives of the *Oyè Èkìtì* Art Workshop of 1947 by Rev'd Fr. Kelvin Carroll introduced the African style of art (Geteloma 2005, Bamisile 2011). So that the missionaries would not discourage the people who had just converted to Christianity, this art workshop was organized to engage the traditional Yorùbá artists, especially the carvers, who could use their skills to create artworks that depicted biblical stories for the teaching of the Bible in the indigenous Yorùbá style. Art was introduced to churches in the nineteenth century by missionaries who built the first churches and decorated them with their idea of art, but the new converts needed to be introduced to the indigenous art style for better understanding. This workshop, according to Ndubuisi and Emodi (2014), was the first of its kind in Nigeria to indigenize the arts, especially in the Catholic Church.

During this period of the *Oyè Èkìtì* art workshop, many artworks, especially door panels were carved in the traditional Yorùbá style to bring the culture closer to the people, even while they were still loyal to the newly accepted religion. This is what the missionaries should have done from the beginning instead of condemning and writing off the culture and artistic traditions of the people. Even though not all aspects of the people's culture may be ethically good and healthy, the warmth of acceptance in the first place would have been more convincing to their potential converts. Not everything that was perceived to be fetish and satanic truly represented their perception. Indeed, this alludes to the Yorùbá maxim, *Ènì tí yóó mú ọ̀bọ, á se bí ọ̀bọ*. (Someone who wants to domesticate a monkey should pretend to be one). It is not that they could not use the Western form of art in the church, it is that they considered the culture of the converts and how they could be helped to merge their culture with the new religion. At this time, there was a statement that *Ìgbàgbọ kò ní kí á má se orò idílẹ̀* which meant that "Christianity does not keep us from the traditions of our ancestors". However, this style continued to flourish because the workshop produced many artists, especially carvers, who adopted this style while working for the church. Meanwhile, other churches continued to enjoy an original form of art introduced by the missionaries.

The irony of the scenario is that these traditional art forms, initially rejected by the missionaries, were useful tools in their hands. This alludes to the biblical statement that the stone that the builders rejected became the cornerstone⁶. African art and church art became companions when the missionaries needed African art styles and forms to hold their converts. This means that it is so difficult to separate art from the culture and tradition of the people. Art is important in all traditions and religions of the world because art and religion are inextricably linked. The traditional African art style was introduced into church art to connect the tradition and culture of the new converts with the new faith in Africa. The workshop was to satisfy the needs of the new converts to become aware and secure of their own identity (culture and tradition) and not the foreign culture and tradition. This is what some believers in Nigeria during the workshop described as a return to idol worship in the Catholic Church because of the traditional art style used in depicting biblical themes. The African perspective of art and culture rather than the Western and Israelite perspective of the forms and style of artworks was used in the production of the artworks. Most of the works, especially the wood carvings, were depicted in ebony⁷ (black wood), wearing the Yorùbá dress for the wood sculptures (Fig. 17). The artists intentionally used ebony, which is black, and indigenous clothing to depict these images in the Yorùbá context. We are who we are, nothing can change the race/gene in us, our culture, our lives, and our worldview are different from all others. When people cannot cope with the new culture of religion, they go back to the origin and what is familiar to them. What distinguishes traditional African art from the art created at the

⁶ Acts Chapter 4, Verse 11: The Holy Bible, New International Version.

⁷ Ebony wood is a good food for carving. It is black in colour, durable, hard and has the ability to retain polish. It is often found in the tropical areas.

request of the missionaries for the church to introduce people to their tradition is what they call “fetish” and “evil”, although the style and form adopted from traditional African art are the same. Can we imagine these so-called “fetishes” and “evil”? No, of course, not! They are spiritual and philosophical. Every art that is put at the service of religion and devotion to God is spiritual.

6. Conclusion

The article has attempted to evaluate the adoption of traditional African art forms and styles, originally rejected by the missionaries as evil and fetish, for the biblical teaching of the new converts by examining the area of compatibility and incompatibility of traditional African art forms and church art. From the foregoing, it is evident that there is a close relationship between art and religion of any kind in the world, depending on the type of spirit embodied in the art form. The results of the study also show that the influence of traditional African art and its artists on church art is enormous. Art, tradition, and religion are inextricably linked and the Church, especially the Catholic Church, is aware of the importance of African art and its styles in spreading the Gospel. This alludes to the opening proverbial expression *Eni tí a ní kò le p'àgò, òun ní ó kọ ilé alárruru* (Someone who is said not to be able to build a tent is the one who has built a complex house). African art became the model for what church art should look like in forms and styles to bring the indigenous culture and tradition closer to the new converts by merging their culture and tradition with the new religion, thus preserving their belongingness. The discourse is an indication that culture and tradition cannot be separated from religion. This is the reason why many people of different cultures and languages can come together and still have their differences even after a moment of being together under the umbrella of a religion or a social gathering. Art is important in the service of religion, regardless of religious affiliation. Art and tradition differ from one culture to another. Therefore, it is derogatory to say that all African art forms are evil and fetish. All cultural art should be respected. However, it is undeniable that some art forms combine the physical with the spiritual, and this is true of all cultures and artistic traditions in the world. Every culture and ethnicity have a way of connecting to the Supreme Being through art.

Conflict of Interest: None declared.

Ethical Approval: Not applicable.

Funding: None.

References

- Ademuleya, B. A. (2009). Egypt and the Rest of Us: The Relatedness of Belief System and Art Forms. *The African Symposium: An Online Journal of African Educational Research Network*, 9(2), 51-60.
- Adepegba, C. O. (1995). *Nigerian Art: Its Traditions and modern Tendencies*. Ibadan: JODAD.
- Adoh, E. R. & Olufemi, B. S. (2014). Art in the Service of Church in Yorubaland of South-Western Nigeria: An Appraisal. *European Scientific Journal*, 2, 466-473.
- Akintonde, Moses, A. & Kalilu, Rom, R. O. (2013). Thematic and Stylistic Appraisal of Sculpture in Public Places in Nigeria: The Example of Southwest. *Journal of Humanities and Sciences*, 13(2), 26-37.
- Ambrose, S. H. (1998). Chronology of the Later Stone Age and food production in east Africa. *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 25, 377-392.
- Acquah, F. (2011). “The Impact of African Traditional Religious Beliefs and Cultural Values on Christian- Muslim Relations in Ghana from 1920 through the Present: A Case Study of Nkusukum-Ekumfi-Enyan Area of the Central Region”. An Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Exeter, England, United Kingdom.
- Bamisile, H., (2011). *Emergence of Public Outdoor Sculptures in Western Nigeria*. [Online] Available: <http://www.ezinearticles.com> (January 30, 2015).
- Beaumont, P. B. and Bednarik, R. G. (2013). Tracing the Emergence of Palaeoart in Sub Saharan Africa. *Rock Art Research*, 30(1), 33-54.
- Bednarik, R. G. (2003). The Earliest Evidence of Palaeoart. *Rock Art Research*, 20, 89-135.
- Brain, R. (1980). *Art and Society in Africa*. London: Longman.

- Burckhardt, T. (2009). *Art of Islam, Language and Meaning*. (Commemorative Edition). Indiana: World Wisdom, Inc.
- Clarke, Christa. (2006). *The Art of Africa: A Resources for Educators*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Coffman, P. (2015). *West African Tribal Art: Sculptures, Textiles & Artifacts Study Guide*. DeLand, Florida: Museum of Art.
- Engowa Osa, D. (1994). *African art: A Contemporary Source Book*. Benin City: Gosay Publishers (LPE)
- Freeland, C. A. (2001). *But Is It Art: An Introduction to Art History?* London: Oxford University Press.
- Foláránmí, S. A. (2015). "Oyo Palace in the History of Yoruba Palace Art". An Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Oḡbáfẹ̀mí Awólówọ̀ University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.
- Gallinaro, M. (2013). Saharan Rock Art: Local Dynamics and Wider Perspectives. *Journal of Arts*, 2, 350-382; doi:10.3390/arts2040350. Accessed, January 18, 2018. <http://www.mdpi.com/journal/arts>.
- 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.
- Ghartey, K. E. (2011). "The Philosophical and Symbolic Meanings of Art Forms at Shrines and Churches in Ghana: A Case Study of the Central Region". Unpublished M.A. thesis, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana.
- Holdge, A. N. (2008). *The History of Art: Painting from Giotto to the Present Day*. London: Arcturus Publishing Limited.
- Ikoro, E. A. (2015). Painting and Society in Modern Nigeria. *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3(11), 087-093.
- Igbaro, J. (2010). Art as a Catalyst of Religious Development in Nigeria. *African Research Review, an International Multi-Disciplinary Journal*, Ethiopia, 4(4), 494-505.
- Itanyi, E. I. (2014). Archaeology and Traditional Mural Painting in Nsukka Area of Northern Igboland. *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, 22, 21-33.
- Jegede, D. (1996). Nigerian Art as Endangered Species. In P. R. Schmidt, and R. J. McIntosh (Eds.), *Plundering Africa's Past* (pp. 125-142). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jensen, E. (2001). *Arts with the Brain in Mind*. Alexandria, VA 22311-1714 USA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Kant, L. H. (1993). "The Interpretation of Religious Symbols in the Greco-Roman World: A Case Study of Early Christian Fish Symbolism". An Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Graduate School of Yale University, United States
- Khawaja M. S. (2011). Islamic Art and Its Spiritual Message. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 1(2), 227-234. Accessed, January 11, 2018. <http://www.ijhssnet.com>.
- Kleiner, F. S. (2011). *Gardner's Art through the Ages: A Global History*. (Enhanced Thirteenth Edition). Australia and United States: Wadsworth.
- Kleiner, Fred S., and Christin J. Mamiya 2001. *Gardner's Art through the Ages*. (Eleventh Edition). Harcourt Fort: Worth.
- Lynch, P. A. 2010. *African Mythology A to Z*. (Second Edition). Revised by Jeremy Roberts, New York: Chelsea House.
- Molloy, M. (2002). *Experiencing the World Religions: Tradition, Challenges and Changes*. (Second Edition). Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Moshe, B. (1998). *Modern Theories of Art, 2: from Impressionism to Kandinsky*. New York: University Press.
- Ndubuisi, C. and Emodi, A. (2014). Indigenous Images and Liturgy: The Splendour of Nigerian Catholicism. *JORIND*, 12(2), ISSN 1596-8308. Accessed June 29, 2018. www.transcampus.org/journals.
- Ogunjimi I. T. (2017). Revolutionary Influence of the Traditional African Art Forms on the Art Tradition of the Western World. *Art Monitor: A Journal of the Department of Creative Arts*, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Nigeria, 4, 141-157.
- Williamson, B. (2004). *Christian Art: A Very Short Introduction*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Xinglong, Z., Zhiwen, Z. Ran, R. (2021). An analysis of the Modelling Characteristics of Western Painting. *Frontiers in Art Research*, 3(7), 1-4, DOI: 10.25236/FAR.2021.030701.

Appendices



Fig. 1: Artist Unknown. The rock engraving is the portion of a horizontal Phase 2 cupule panel, located next to a hillcrest rock pool at Klipbak 1, in the southern Kalahari. Photo credit: Beaumont and Bednarik, 2013.

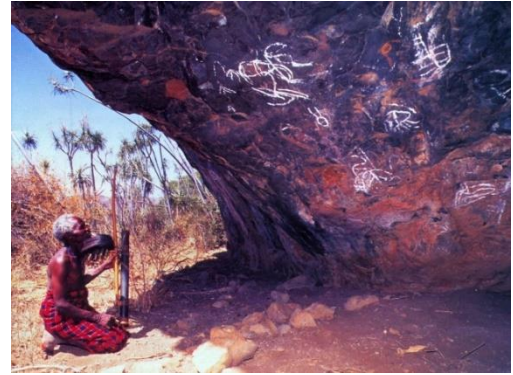


Fig 2: Artist Unknown. Ndorobo man has a bow and quiver of arrows in his hand, kneeling t a rock shelter adorned with white symbolic paintings which suggests a meat-feasting ritual. Roack Paintings at Laikipia, North Kenya. Photo credit: <http://www.africanrockart.org>, November 8, 2017.

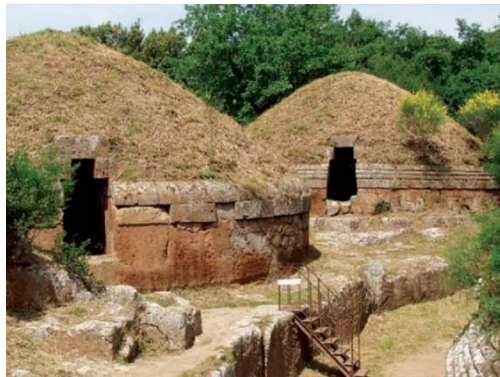


Fig. 3: Catacomb, Ancient Romans underground cemetery: Tumuli in the Banditaccia Necropolis (City of the Dead) at Cerveteri. Photo credit: Kleiner Fred, S. (2011).

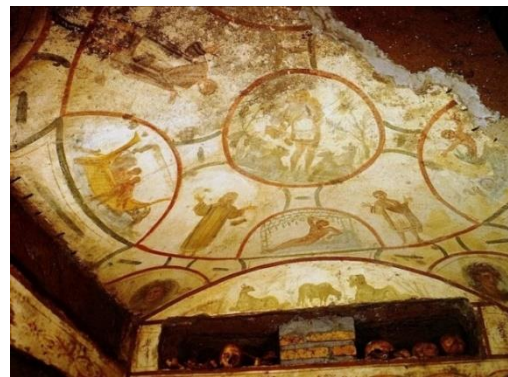


Fig. 4: Artist Unknown. Catacomb Art, wall Painting at Saint Peter and Marcellinus, Rome. Photo credit: Kleiner, Fred S., and Christin J. Mamiya, 2001.

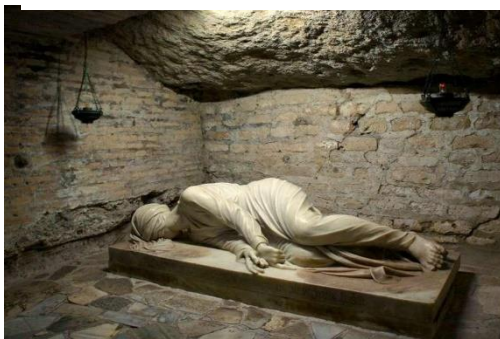


Fig. 5: Stefano Maderno (Palestrina, Italy, 1578 - 17 September 1636). Catacomb Art, Sculptural Figure of Callixtus, Rome, 1599. Photo credit: <https://www.catacombe.roma.it/en/le-origini-delle-catacombe.php>, October 21, 2018.



Fig. 6: Gislebertus (France, 12th century - 1135). Last Judgment, (Christ presides over the separation of the Blessed from the Damned). West Tympanum of Saint-Lazare, Autun, France, ca. 1120-1135. Marble. Photo credit: Kleiner Fred, S. (2011).

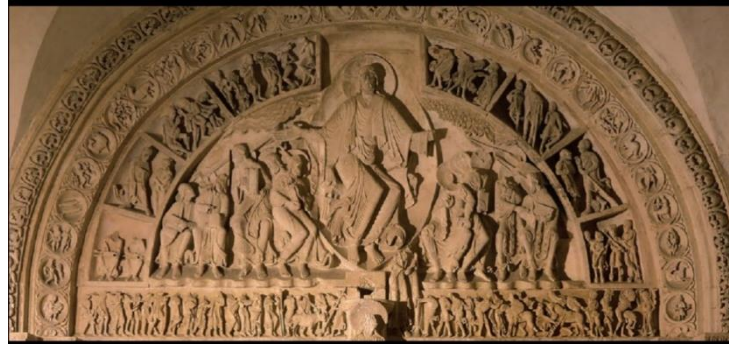


Fig. 7: Artist Unknown. The sculpture Pentecost and Mission of the Apostles depicts the light rays emanating from Christ's hands which represent the instilling of the Holy Spirit in the apostles. Tympanum of the Center Portal of the Narthex of La Madeleine, Vézelay, France, 1120–1132. Photo credit: Kleiner Fred, S. (2011).



Fig 8: The figures represented; Ancestral Couple (Pombibele) is an artistic tradition of the Senufo People (19th–20th century), Côte d'Ivoire, Korhogo region; Senufo. Wood, pigment; H. male, 23 1/2 in. (59.7 cm); H. female, 23 7/10 in. (60.2 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.193, 194). Photo Credit: Clarke Christa, 2006.



Fig 9: D'mba or Yamban Headdress is a Baga People's concept personifying local ideals of female power, goodness, and social comportment (19th–20th century), Guinea; Baga. Wood; H. 46 1/2 in. (118.1 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.17). Photo Credit: Clarke Christa, 2006.



Fig. 10: The plaques showed the Oba on Horseback and his entourage such as warrior, chiefs, attendants, and foreign merchants (ca. 1550–1680) Nigeria, Benin Kingdom; Edo peoples. Brass; H. 19 1/2 in. (49.5 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1965 (1978.412.309). Photo Credit: Clarke Christa, 2006.



Fig. 11: Attributed to Late Lámídì Òlónàdé Fákéyẹ (Ila Orangun, 1928–25 December 2009). The Annunciation is a carved door panel. Wood. Saint Peter's Anglican Church, Ife, Ilé-Ife, Nigeria. Photo credit: Isaiah Ògúnjimi, 2018.



A Fig. 12: Attributed to Late Làmídì Òlónàdé Fákéyẹ (Ila Orangun, 1928-25 December 2009). The carved door panel depicts wise men who visited Jesus at his birth. Wood. Anglican Communion: Cathedral Church of Saint Philip, Ayétòrò, Ilé-Ifẹ̀, Nigeria. Photo credit: Isaiah Ògúnjìmí, 2018.



Fig. 13: Artist Unknown. The carved door panel represents the miracle of feeding of five thousand people by Jesus Christ. Wood. All Soul's Anglican Church, Òkè-Fià, Òşogbo, Nigeria. Photo credit: Isaiah Ògúnjìmí, 2018.



Fig. 14: Artist Unknown. The carved door panel represents Jesus and Peter at the Sea Shore. Wood. Methodist Church of Nigeria, Òkè-Èsè, Iléşà, Nigeria. Photo credit: Isaiah Ògúnjìmí, 2018.



Fig. 15: Sẹsan Ajéwọlé. The carved door panel depicts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden after they ate the forbidden fruit, (1994). Wood and paint. St Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó, Òşogbo, Nigeria. Photo credit: Isaiah Ògúnjìmí, 2018.



Fig. 16: Artist Unknown. The carved door panel depicts the miracle of feeding of five thousand people by Jesus Christ. Wood. All Saints Anglican Cathedral, Balógun Àgòrò, Òsogbo, Nigeria. Photo credit: Isaiah Ògúnjímí, 2018.



Fig. 17: Attributed to Late Làmidì Ọlónàdé Fákéyẹ (Ila Orangun, 1928-25 December 2009). The carved door panel depicts little children brought to Jesus by their parents. Wood. Anglican Communion: Cathedral Church of Saint Philip, Ayétòrò, Ilé-Ifè, Nigeria. Photo credit: Isaiah Ògúnjímí, 2018.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The views, opinions, and data presented in all publications are exclusively those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of BRPI or its editorial team. BRPI and the editorial team disclaim any liability for any harm to individuals or property arising from the use of any ideas, methods, instructions, or products mentioned in the content.