

***Visualizing the Divine: Christian Art and the Quest for Afrocentric Expression for National Development***

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**Abstract**

*This study explores the intersection of Christian art, Afrocentric expression, and national development in Africa with a particular focus on the tensions between traditional African spiritualities and Christian theology in art. The study discusses how Afrocentric Christian art contributes to post-colonial nation-building and cultural decolonization, as well as explores the intersections between Christian faith, cultural expression, and socio-economic development in Africa. Using a functional structuralist framework, the study explores the complex dynamics of Afrocentric Christian art. The study demonstrates how Afrocentric art subverts western-centric narratives, reclaiming African cultural heritage and promoting distinctive African Christian identity. Ultimately, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection of art, culture, religion and power in African context.*

**Keywords.** African art, Afrocentric Christian art, functional structuralism, African Christian identity, national development

**Introduction**

The evolutional and transformative role of art in human society cannot be overstated. The role of art in giving expression to religious belief across human societies has attracted enormous scholarly debates (Reddaway & Quash, 2024). The earliest Christian artworks, such as wall paintings in Dura Europos, the catacombs in Rome, stone carvings, and signet

rings served didactic, commemorative and inspirational roles, shaping the spiritual development of individuals (Mbiti, 1969).

In African societies, art offers valuable insights into the complex cultural, religious and spiritual foundation of Africans (Thompson, 2015). African traditional religion is rooted in polytheistic and pantheistic worldviews that rely heavily on tangible artifacts to manifest spiritual experiences, facilitate worship, and engage spiritual entities (Sanda & Oladokun, 2017). From masks, sculptures, textiles gourds and symbolic paintings, these forms showcase the creative and spiritual depth of African societies. These artifacts enable devotees to interact with the sacred, creating a multisensory experience that affirm the interconnectedness of the material and spiritual realms. In both Christian and African traditional religious contexts, art serves as a bridge to the divine.

While considerable scholarship exists on the intersection of art and religion in African societies, there is a critical need to investigate Afrocentric Christian art as a vehicle for national development and cultural preservation. This study addresses the role of Afrocentric Christian art in promoting sociocultural development and maintaining Africa's cultural heritage, especially in a time when decolonization influences virtually all facets of African life.

Afrocentricity was initially framed as a paradigm shift in historical and cultural discourse, positioning Africans as agents in documenting their own historical trajectory (Smith, 2020). Over time, the term has expanded to the various spheres of the society including art, culture, spirituality, language, and religion. Afrocentric Christian art emerges from the need to express Christian theology through African visual culture and indigenous identity and theology.

Afrocentric Christianity emerged amidst identity crisis, arising from the marginalization of African traditions at the dawn of Christianity. Intellectuals sought ways to indigenize the universalized Christian faith, using art as driving force. According to Bediako (2011), using indigenous art forms such as sculpture, textile, among others, to depict biblical themes affirms African Christian identity within global Christianity (Bediako 2011). Scholars like Mbiti (1969) and Idowu (1974) also documented African artworks that reflect cultural and religious synthesis.

### **The history of Christianity in Africa**

This discourse on African Christian origin will be engaged from structural functionalism perspective, which sees a society as a product of evolution and various interconnected

components (Spencer, 1860). Its relevance hinges on religion's centrality in the pre-Christian African social structure. De Jager's (1988) analysis of African art emphasizes its functional and religious integration, implying that art was created as part of a larger cultural-religious whole.

Christianity, though emerged from the Middle East, shares similarity with African traditional religion, including ritual and symbolic tradition. It was influenced by Roman law, Aristotelian philosophy, and Greco-Roman art rooted in pagan practices, many of which are parallel with African spiritual customs (MacCulloch, 2009). Picton (2020) further stressed Christianity's historical root and cultural connection with Africa, citing its Ethiopia and Egypt's contributions.

Early missionaries attempted to suppress African traditional religion, based on their perception that it was idolatrous. This led to cultural alienation which Nwaozuru (2019) referred to as identity crisis. However, Africans theologians began challenging colonial narratives, emphasizing Christianity's compatibility with African culture (Nwaozuru, 2019).

Upon missionary's realization that Christianity could coexist with African tradition, they began commissioning African artists to create church arts, facilitating Christianity's spread while affirming Africa's indigenous identity. They did this by commissioning African artist to produce art works for the church. This contributed to the rise of Afrocentric Christian art, rooted in both African tradition and Christian theology (Picton, 2020)

### **The intersection of Christianity and arts in Africa**

Religious expression in Africa has traditionally been embodied in artefacts and sacred objects. The concept of "art for art sake" is foreign to the traditional African context where art serves communal and spiritual purposes. Both polytheism and monotheism Africans use art to represent deities and facilitate human-divine interaction. It is this ritualistic-religious background that aligns Christianity with Africanism (Pemberton, 2004). Early Christian practices, including liturgy, sacrament and sacred regalia mirrored African ritualistic expression. These common grounds reinforced Afrocentric Christian artistic practice, blending indigenous and Christian elements.

The idea that colonialism inspired both positive and negative changes in Africa is a narrative that can hardly be refuted. Despite its destructive aspect, colonialism introduced new artistic techniques, such as oil painting and printmaking (Igboin, 2011). Also, European colonial administrators, white missionaries, and the church inadvertently fanned the flame of

Afrocentric Christian Art, paradoxically promoting its growth through their patronage of African artists, who in turn continued to weave African visual culture and worldview into Christian themes, creating a unique blend of African and Christian artistic expression (Mbembe, 2001). Artists like Ben Enwonwu, Uche Okeke among others exemplify this blend. Enwonwu's "the Risen Christ" (Fosu, 1993), Okeke's "station of cross" showcased biblical themes using African visual language. These efforts reflect a hybrid spiritual identity shaped by colonialism and indigenous influences (Kasfir, 1999).

The trend continued in the post-colonial Africa, when decolonization inspired artists to reinterpret spiritual themes. There was also a wave of innovative techniques, resulting from the use of foreign materials and tools, which expanded the possibilities for expressing spiritual and cultural identity in these global contexts. Artists like Obiora Udechukwu, El Anatsui, and Gerard Sekoto explored Afrocentric themes with innovative techniques (Picton, 2020).

From the foregoing, it is apparent that art and religion enjoyed peaceful coexistence and consequent depth of scholarship in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In recent times, however, art and religious practices have suffered an apparent disconnect. Reddaway and Quash (2022) attribute this to the recent secularization in religious studies, which undermines the spiritual connection between art and religion. Moreover, formalism has greatly influenced contemporary art historical discourse to a point where form is discussed to the exclusion of content, meaning and interpretation. This ignores the religious elements and relevance of art works (Omatseye, 2010). Another dimension to this disconnect is the dematerialized turn that Christian religious practices have taken in recent years. Hence, the threat to the continual existence of Afrocentric Christian art and artists.

### **Principles of Afrocentric art**

Afrocentric art is anchored on the philosophy of animism and animatism (Omatseye, 2010). This is the belief that material and non-material objects possess supernatural forces that must be harnessed and controlled to shield man and maintain balance in nature. Animatism is evident in the prominence of rituals, worship and the offering of sacrifices in African Traditional Religion (Agbakoba, 2023). Agbakoba explains how metaphysical power enforces moral order in traditional governance. This principle influenced Afrocentric Christian art with visual representation in varieties of shrine objects, masks, figurine, and textile among various forms of adornments (De Jager, 1988). African art transcends aesthetics. For example, the Adinkra symbols of the Asante convey values and philosophical insights (Kissi et al. (2019). The Yoruba concept of Ori (head) represents human destiny, while the concept of Iwa (character) is symbolic of inner beauty. These philosophies inform

Afrocentric Christian art, which merges symbolic African traditions with Christian narratives (Ajíbóyè et al., 2018)

### **Art as a catalyst for national development in Africa**

Afrocentric art played significant roles in Africa's socio-political landscape. By fusing African traditions with Christianity, it addresses issues such as identity, migration, and globalization. Afrocentric Christian art attracted commercial value that cannot be ignored in the complex economic development of the neo-colonial Africa. The church was the major patron and source of economic empowerment for many neo-traditional African artists. Beyond the far reaching effects of African art in the spread of Christianity, the economic energy generated in the missionaries-artists transactions resulted in the establishment of numerous art workshops and art centres across Africa. For example, the Cyrene mission, established in 1936 in Bulawayo, in former Rhodesia, Oye Ekiti workshop in the Southwestern Nigeria (Hooke, 2024), among others. In education, integrating African cultural studies has fostered a renewed interest in heritage. Afrocentric Christian art serves as both spiritual and cultural expression, offering an inclusive vision of Christianity.

### **Challenges facing Afrocentric Christian art**

Despite its significance, Afrocentric Christian art faces threats from modernity, including shifting aesthetic tastes, dematerialized worship, and philosophical individualism. Contemporary artists prioritize personal expression over communal values. Art has become detached from its traditional religious context, weakening its societal function. Additionally, Westernized Christian practices have displaced traditional art forms. Printed Bibles are giving way to digital formats, further distancing faith from material expressions. The loss of cultural appreciation and symbolic meaning in contemporary Christian practices is alarming.

Unlike in the traditional African society where the scope and style of the artist depend on patrons from the religious-sacred sphere, contemporary artists celebrate individuality and freedom to the exclusion of the social value of art. Consequently, art results from the subjective impulses of the artists rather than socio-cultural values.

There is also a concern for loss of cultural appreciation and identity. While the use of African visual culture to project Christianity signifies a witty outplay of cross-cultural enrichment, a dangerous disregard for the deep-rooted meanings, spiritual significance, and cultural contexts of African art is evident. This is particularly concerning when one considers the gradual fadeout of Africa's cultural heritage and symbolic language that once defined Africa in the contemporary Christian practices.

### **Strategies towards revitalization of Afrocentric Christian art**

Contemporary Christian practice must prioritize cultural appreciation and appropriation in a manner that values uniqueness and promote inclusive participation. To do this, African churches should collaborate with artists and reintroduce art into worship spaces. More so, the Church can, on periodic basis, organize artist-in-residence programme or community-based art projects to strengthen the bond between the church, artists and community. Such move will go a long way to further encourage theological reflections on art. Similarly, popularization, through workshops and exhibition of Christian art, should be encouraged from time to time in the church. There is also the need to further deepen understanding of the importance of Afrocentric art in contemporary Christian practice. Theological education should include courses on art and Afrocentricity to foster appreciation and integration.

### **Conclusion**

Afrocentric Christian art embodies Africa's cultural and spiritual identity. It challenges Western dominance in religious expression and offers a more inclusive Christianity. Despite challenges, revitalization of Afrocentric Christian art is essential for preserving African identity and enriching global theological discourse. Educational initiatives, institutional support, and cultural appreciation are critical for this renaissance. Afrocentric art represents a powerful tool for community engagement, spiritual development, and cultural pride. It is an essential component of national development and a testament to Africa's enduring creative spirit.

### **Recommendations**

1. Scholarly attention should be further directed at the concept of Afrocentrism, particularly in the religious dimension, to correct the historical dislocation of Africans from their own documentation
2. Church should allow creative use of biblical themes in African contexts in sermons' preparation and presentation. This will not only make sermon more meaningful and engaging to African audience, but it can also facilitate the development of contextual theology.
3. African Christian artists should continue to experiment with various indigenous art forms to further reinforce African visual culture in the global Christian context. This will enrich global Christian culture, and promote diversity and inclusivity.

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