

Indigeneous Art and Religion in Africa

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Abstract- Traditionally it is generally believed that indigenous art and religion perform similar function in different forms. This paper attempts to X-ray the importance of indigenous art in religion in the African context and discuss the issues in Art, Christianity and Islamic ideas. It equally discusses different relationships of art to the cultural experiences of African society .The use of masks in religious festival in Nigeria and some African societies as a whole and conclusively the paper shows the reflection of African Art culture with religion

I. INTRODUCTION

Majorly a Art performs different functions such as funeral, initiations and festivals in different parts of Africa. Whatever form like drawing, paintings, carvings and casting the work of art takes in African setting, its religious function covers mainly of rituals, Ancestral worship, worship of deities and rite of passage to the loved ones. The word religion can be defined as belief in the existence of supernatural ruling powers, the creator and controller of the universe who has given to man a spiritual nature, which continues to exist after the death of the body. Religion is differentiated from philosophy in that it operates by faith or on the basis of faith and intuition and not by reason. Religion is an aspect of human behaviour and culture. It permeates every society. It has diverse manifestations in every human society. Religion addresses human behaviour and gives meaning to human-culture and institution. Religion involves groups and organizations. Religion addresses the main issue yet it cannot be defined with precision. This is because it has a wide range of phenomena and conflicting beliefs. Another reason is that it suppresses certain realities, which are beyond description. That is death is a reality. It addresses personal and intense experiences, which are beyond the knowledge of other person for example mysticism. Religion participates in impression speech and indefinable mystery of life. African religion is seen in myths liturgies, proverbs and aphorisms. In this manner, one can say that the traditional African is religion conscious. Africans believe in the existence of a supreme being who consolidated the affairs of the universe.(Idowu 1987) This is evident in their ritualistic observation and worship or appeasement of ancestral spirits and deities in reference of their belief in the Supreme Being. It was (and it still is) the belief of the traditional African that there is a supreme being who cannot be reached or approached by man but through an agent or deity. This agent or a deity varies in form of, object and material from land to land and culture to culture. Some are represented in carved wood, moulded clay, stone and other objects. There are many

Africans who ,in spite of their adherence to either Christianity or islam,still openly perform certain rites or rituals of traditional religion . Adherents of traditional religion worship the supreme God.(Olodumare in Yoruba, Chukwu in Igbo,Osanobua in Edo,Ubangiji in Hausa and Abasi Ibom in Ibibio) through a number of intermediaries or lesser gods. The worship of deities by the traditional African is a means to an end, Traditional African religion is mixed with culture and it will be very difficult for anybody to separate religion from culture . Nevertheless it is, the distinctiveness of religion that gives direction, goal, and completion to culture. Without religion, culture will have no goal or destination. Religion affects the cultural dimension. Culture consists of pattern implicates commands of behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols constituting this destined achievements of human groups including their embodiment artifact. Religion is not an object with a single fixed meaning, or even a zone with clear boundaries, It is an aspect of human experience that may intersect, incorporate, or transcend other aspects of life and society and in some other sense religion includes patterns of behaviour but also pattern of language and thought .It is sometimes a highly organized institution that sets itself apart from a culture, and it sometimes an integral part of a culture.

II. ART AND RELIGION

Religion as defined by the Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary is the belief in the existence of a god or gods and the activities that are connected with the worship of them ,and since religion cannot be separated from culture, and culture in Africa extents so many things including art. Africa has one of the best cultures in the world. To an average African, art or creative work is a natural thing. There is always a very strong relationship between religion and art. The traditional art in Africa is basically for worshipping purpose. Except in the area of pottery and textile where some of their works are for utilitarian purpose, that is for domestic and day-to-day use, but some of the textiles and ceramics are still being associated with some religious beliefs. A close relationship could be identified between art and religion across history .Art could serve as a means of expression in religion as well as an object in the process of worship. Art and religion sometimes exhibit similar features. In addition, meanings derived from and functions ascribed to both do sometimes overlap. Thus, the relationship between art and religion could be regarded as being polemic. Art, like religion, could be regarded as a means of revelation. Like religion, art re-creates by offering assets of symbols of our own being, of community, and of sacred. Again , like religion ,art heals and recreates, just as it offers categories for evaluations in the society. The precinct of the connection between art and religion seems largely

confined to rituals in religion though not exclusively so. Ritual space provides the avenue for the expressions of art in religion. These would include verbal arts (recitations, songs, praises and worships) and visual arts (sculptures, paintings, and decorations). The traditional carvers work mainly for the worshipping of one deity or the other. The art of Africa has one thing in common irrespective of language or culture and that one is the relationship of art and religion. Going from the South to the North, and East to the West, distinctive commonness is found everywhere in African continent. Let us consider the Egyptian art for instance. The belief in life after life by the Egyptians made the rich and the powerful among them to take enormous trouble to make sure that their bodies were preserved forever. That is the reason why the pyramids and the rock tombs were built at such cost. The worship of ancestral Egyptian mummy helps the Egyptians to advance in the area of grave or tomb architecture and the work of art used to decorate the tomb and ancestral resting place of their loved ones. (Rukeme, 2000) Also the belief of the Egyptians in many gods has been the reason for their art. They worship different gods and one of these gods or the strongest of their gods was Ra, the sun god. Though the Ra god, Amen, became identified with the sun god as Amen-Ra. Osiris was another god. He was known as god of the Nile and life; oddly enough, he was also god of the underworld, or Kingdom of the dead. There were other gods peculiar to each city some of which took form of Animals, such as Anubis, the jackal-headed god, and Amemit the Devourer, with crocodile head, for parts of a lion and hind quarters of a hippopotamus. Religion was the major cause of the reason for the Egyptian art. The belief of religion of Egyptians made them to go to the extent they ventured into in the world of art and this has helped to print Egyptian's name on the stone as far as art is concerned in the whole world. Egyptian Art has also demonstrated their adherence to tradition. Until the reign of Akhnaton (18th dynasty). Egyptian Art has always been to religion. Due to his introvert nature, he was only interested in the philosophical aspects of religion, he disbanded the worship of the ancient gods and introduced the worship of only one god, the sun, Aton the sun disc was the object of worship. Hence he was the first to introduce the worship of one god (monotheism in Egypt). This decision affects the Egyptian Art. It was not very easy, because the Egyptian priesthood was very powerful as at that time.

III. ART AND CHRISTIANITY

Christianity has influenced painting and sculpture to the degree that images have played a part in the Christian religious experience. It has influenced architecture through buildings dedicated to worship and through the founding of religious communities. In a critical sense, it is more accurate to speak of artistic theories and practice inspired by Christianity than of Christian art as such. For the fathers of the church, the problem of images and their role in religious experience arose from the conflict between the two traditions to which Christianity was bound, the Hebraic and

the Grecian or Hellenistic, which had assumed opposing attitudes with respect to the function of images in religious experience. Christianity had, in a certain sense, to choose between sedulity to the Hebraic interdictions and assimilation of the representationism to which the Gentile cults were deeply committed. The first alternative would have seriously affected Christian proselytism; the second presented the danger of idolatry. St. Theodore Martyr, emphasized the beauty of places of worship as an element of great importance to religious experience. It was not a question of presenting divinity directly but of narrating events to edify the soul of the observer with examples. A fundamental role was that of painting that portrayed the deeds of a Martyr and the cruelty of his persecutors, depicting such episodes in the manner of a book, which benefits those who seek instruction from it, and adorning the words of the temple with colour. Man and human activity were to be represented, in the comprehensible events of this world. (Olopade 2006) According to this view, the custom of adoring places of worship with images was sanctioned without contravening either the inner meaning of the Biblical interdictions, which forbade giving God a human appearance, or the repugnance of Christian culture of the early centuries to anthropomorphism and idolatry of popular pagan worship.

IV. CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHY

It is in religious art, where Christianity has been adopted in the place of paganism, that we ought to find the most profound and interesting changes of both content and expression. But it is extraordinarily difficult to find works of early original Christian African art which are genuine. Protestantism did not normally encourage the arts, fearing that the primitive African might place a magical value on material works of art. The mission churches combined to produce the Christian influence on primitive civilizations and the adaptation of local art to the new religious subjects introduced by the mission churches combined to produce a form of Christian art predominantly devotional. Western Iconography was generally imitated, and naïve element was limited to background and decorative motif. The Christian themes most widely diffused among native populations in every country are, first, the crucifix, then the feeling. Africa offers an extensive production of Christian art. Many iconography themes are treated, including even the Stations of the Cross, Nativity. The regions best documented are Western Africa (Nigeria, Dahomey), Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya and Tanzania should also be included. One of the earliest representations of Christ is the good shepherd of Benin (Rome, Lateran Museum), a small bronze group representing a Negro Shepherd Bearing a lamb on his shoulders; he holds the lamb's legs together with his left hand and carries a pail in his right. This is a reinterpretation of the Good Shepherd in accordance with a purely indigenous understanding; it is a Shepherd bringing water to his sheep. In Nigeria, painted wood statuettes of Magi adorned with red mantles and ornamental necklaces (in the style of the heads from Benin),

Casqued, fans, etc. Protestantism did not normally encourage the arts, fearing that the primitive African might place a magical value on material works of arts. Catholicism took the risk, and we are given a most interesting account in *The Arts in Belgian Congo and Rwanda* published during the Holy year of 1950. Here, we find a description of “The era of Christ the Redeemer”, the first Catholic evangelization of the ancient kingdom of Congo from the end of the fifteenth century to the end of the seventeenth century. Here, crosses and crucifixes were so absorbed into indigenous culture that they received a type of veneration which differed little from that of fetish objects.(Toyin et al(2002).

V. ART AND CHRISTIANITY IN NIGERIA

The first impact of Christianity on Nigerian Art was purely destructive. The early missionaries associated African wood carving with what they called “Idol worship and there was a time when missionaries publicly burnt the “fetishes”, not realizing that they were destroying a great cultural heritage of the people of Nigeria. Later on, the Catholic Church in Nigeria tried to stimulate a new Christian art. Wisely enough, no attempt was made to impose entirely foreign styles and ideas on these art. In Nigeria, Christian art was developed from traditional forms, the late Pope Pius XII had ruled that traditional cultures were not to be suppressed by the missionary, unless they could prove that they are “inseparably linked to error or immorality”(Toyin et al 2002) The traditional carvers were made to attempt the representation of Christian themes and stories. They were told the story of Christ and the ideas he stood for. It was very easy for the missionaries to make use of Yoruba carvers since it was the Yoruba belief that “Yoruba art can be adapted for Christian purposes, because they were not very much linked with the “pagan” religion as believed by some people.

VI. ISLAM AND ART

Islamic art is the art of Middle East. It is associated with the religion of the Mohammedan conquerors of the Persia, Mesopotamia, Egypt, North Africa and Spain, was even more rigorous in this matter than Christianity had been. Islamic Art forbid making of images or anything that could be used to represent God. This is as a result of their belief that there is only one Allah and Mohammed is his prophet. He has no rival or competitor. Representation of human beings was not allowed in this sect of religion. Most of their works were subtle lacework ornamentation known as arabesques. We may owe their subtle designs and rich colour schemes to Mohammed who directed the mind of the artist away from the objects of the real world to his dream world of lines and colours. Later on, some sects among the Mohammedans were less strict in their interpretation of the ban on images. They did allow the painting of figures and illustrations as long as they had no connection with their religion. Among the media in Islamic Art are textiles, carpets, mats jewelries and silk brocade. Islamic architecture and mosques were given the same treatments.

The materials used were varied according to their dictate. A motif of ornamentation can be adapted, It can be formed from Islamic writings, plant, animals; most of the forms are stylized. Their Sculpture is informed of relief stucco or plasterwork. Islamic art are based on free flow of lines having no beginning and their Idea of rugs was taken from the Persian culture. Having fought and won the Persians, the Arab killed Ruston's and his army was routed, and their possessions plundered. They discovered in one of the apartments palace decorated with carpet of silk called the “Spring of Chortles; sixty cubes one hundred feet in length and as many in breadth; a paradise or garden was depicted on the ground; the flowers, fruits and shrubs were initiated by figures of gold embroidery, and the colures of precious stones were on these materials. They weave rugs by means of wool of different colours, taken from all kinds of beast; they weave on them birds, beasts, human figures and dead objects, grass, trees, clouds and numerous astonishing tricks, apart from Arabic calligraphic to the work of visual/creative arts like painting and sculpture, Islamic architecture, Music ,folklore and clothing, The relationship between Islamic religion and art starts and end at ornamentation.

VII. SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF MASKS

Majority of African Art stems from communal activity for example among the Ibo community. Olopade; (2006; 41) concludes that “the environment of art in African follows upon the interaction between players, objects and audience; several different art forms or expressive media appear simultaneously or at least are overlapping and interdependent form, such as masks and figures in African context. It is practically impossible to determine either the meaning or use of a mask by its appearance alone, since there is a learned and inherent pattern of conduct of each culture. The importance of mask can be determined only by the reference to account or personal observation of the masks in the setting of their own culture although they have aesthetic and religious effects since they derive their forms and the disposition within the design which, can readily be evaluated as art objects. The various organizational set-ups of masks accounts for their importance in the socio-religious life of any community.

VIII. MASKS OF INITIATION

The importance attached to some social phenomena such as the initiative ceremony becomes more of annual ceremony with much communal attachment and seriousness. The use of masks makes the ceremony an event for the society and individual. In some societies, masks are used to mark the passage of childhood to adulthood in boys and at circumcision in girls. In Bayaka dance mask, the boys dance in masks in all the villages after their district. There is no secrecy about the identity of the dancers, who receive prizes for their skill. The initiation masks of the Basuku are related to those of the Bayaka. At times the officials are the ones that wear these masks, for example the women's Bundu Society mask worn by official at the initiation

ceremonies. The Balwalwa, Congo also use masks at dances after circumcision. Masks are also worn at the third birth (i.e masks appear again at the burial of the initiated and take care of their passage). Among the Dogon of Mali mask is used in rites to expel the souls of the recently dead. The use of these masks, tend to bring together children of the same age group thereby giving them the opportunity to know each other, hence appositive growth and unity is expected to affect the community as a whole.

1) *Funerary And Commemorative Masks*

In some cultures where burial customs are important, anthropomorphic masks are often used in ceremonies associated with the dead and departed spirits. Funerary masks were frequently used to cover the face of the deceased. Generally, their purpose was to represent the features of the deceased, both to honour them and to establish a relationship through the mask with the spirit world. Sometimes, they were used to force the spirit of the newly dead to depart for the spirit world. The face mask for the Egungun cult among the Yoruba is connected with funeral ceremonies but also provides entertainment. In Egypt (C 2040 – 1786 BC) middle kingdom, the funerary mask served to guide the spirit of the deceased back to its final resting place in the body. Among the Romans of North Africa, masks resembling the deceased were often placed over his face or worn by an actor hired to accompany the funerary cortage to the burial site.

2) *Fertility Masks*

Africans attach great importance to procreation, growth of crops, seasons of agricultural year, the sowing and harvesting of the crops, these whole cycle of events that preserve and renew the community. Pregnant women in Ghana carry the Akuaba doll. Thus, having a psychological belief for safe delivery, this symbolic spiritual authority in a ritual context is to bring an order of reality through their presence in everyday affair. The dance mask is worn among the Igbo Community during the yam festival to show the beginning of new yam every year. This is worn at the celebration of the festival of the first yam harvested in the community. The Ogoni mask of Southern Nigeria is used during the dedication of farming season to the local deity, the Guro mask is the mask of the Zamle society, which produces antelope's rhythm dances by the wearers to ensure increase of the crops, all these masks were used to appease their gods to pray for a bountiful harvest during the season

3) *Secret Societies*

Social class cults, form cults of pressure and influence in the society because of their wealth, hence the insignias are worked in most expensive taste with beads, bronze and precious stones and wood. Their drums are carved and their dresses heavily embroidered e.g. Ogboni, Ozo Okpalas. These masks are simple since they are meant only to hide personal identities. These masks serve as a means of social stratification and designate their ranks e.g. large secret societies like the Poro society. The Dea mask of the Dan of

Ivory Coast and Liberia that are worn by the Poro society, have been able to exert political power via the power of masks. Political practices are often linked with social function. women are at times involved in cultic association example of this can be seen among the Mwo society of Ibo land in Nigeria which shows the crested mask of the Mwo society worn by women. The involvement of these secret society serves as a social check and balance for its members in case of misappropriation, misconduct or any unruly behavior, within the society.

4) *Law Enforcement Masks*

Like the policeman or soldier's uniform, a mask serves as a symbol of authority and it can also be used as an instrument of law enforcement agent. Certain masks used in African tribunals could be compared to the wig, traditionally worn in British court. But the wig is invested with no force, the mask not only represents, but also embodies authority – full power of ancestral spirits, the mother mask of the Dan and the large-masks of the Kono and Guere administer justice to any irate offender.

5) *Witch hunting Masks*

In many African traditions, there are masking societies that identify witches and take steps to remove the danger they represent and they were also being used to avert misfortune, as with the Goli mask of Ivory Coast. The Kifwebe mask is used by witch doctors among the Baluba of Congo. These masks are used to search of witches and at times for their appeasement. The Yoruba wears the Gelede mask, as a headgear during the Gelede festivals, in order not to be identified by the said witches. The Ngi society masks in Gabon and among the Fang are worn by members when they were detecting and punishing sorcerers within the society.

IX. FUNCTION OF ARTS IN RELIGION

Works of Art in Yoruba land cover woodcarving, black-smiting, bronze casting, knitting, hand woven textile etc. However, woodcarving is regarded as the most prestigious among the forms of arts, it is mandatory that the carver must come from a wood carving family so that it will be easier for such carver to start the art of carving early in life, an example of such family in yorubaland are the Lamidi Fakeye, Bamidele Areogun families etc. The works carved for religious purposes includes diviners' figures like Ifa trays/bowls (Opon Ifa), twins figure, fertility doll and masks used for masquerades and shrines in some Yoruba religious festivals or during the egungun festival in Yorubaland some of the masks which are used for religious purposes also serves some other functions,.

X. AMONG THE BAMBARA

Bambara Sculptures are carved from the kapok tree and blackened with red-hot iron; shea butter is rubbed into them and finally decorated with little rings, glass, beads, cowries' shells or red bean. The figures are composed of cubic forms with arms hanged down at the side. The Chi-wair-head

dressers for the antelope dance for which the Bamabara have become world famous are amongst the most beautiful and indigenous works of African Sculptures. The proud Eland, the emanation of the creator god Faro is the tribal animal of the Bamabara and the mythical spirit of work, for it once taught men how to cultivate grain. Thus dance ceremony commenced before the clearing of the land or at the time of harvest among the Bambara.

XI. DOGON

The Dogon statue with their through going simplification produces a solemn and overwhelming monumental effect. Abstract to the ultimate degree and reduced as it were to a sign and these figures were found on cult objects, doors, door-locks butter ditches, pulleys and other implements. Dogon themes refer to the event of mythology and the laws of life and growth. For example, in the Dogon mythology, you see Yasgi who committed incest or Duugu-Seru, who hides his face from shame, raised arm signify entreaty for the protection mythical creative forces or an appeal to the rain cloud to pour rain upon the land. Dogon masks are made for religious purposes. It is usually for the art of carving to be hedged round with rituals since the tree which provide the wood is generally regarded as the home of the spirit which needs to be placated (appeased).

XII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, African art is the type of art that reflects the culture of a people and since culture and religion are two inseparable ways of life, we can then say that religion influences African art and it is for this reason that will make indigenous or traditional art to remain art of religion. African culture was interwoven with Africa religion, Art is therefore a mediating factor within both religion and culture in Africa. The predominant bearing of rituals on art in the African milieu becomes even more glaring with the appreciation of the fact that both art and religion are considered twins of the same transcendental offshoot. Thus, for most Africans, visible forms of art were but mirror of the unutterable myth of earth and heaven reflecting on each other. If art expresses reality in images and religion expresses ultimate reality in symbols, then art expresses religious symbol in artistic images. Art and Religion could therefore be designated ritualistic art.

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