



Article

The Artist and The Arts: Traditional and Religious Consciousness in Nigeria

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Abstract: Art has always been part of the African's way of life and worship. It manifested in different aspects of national life; the daily chores, socio-political, economic and religious matters. However, because all aspects of life were then anchored on religious beliefs, religion became the pivot upon which Art rotated. This paper "The Artist and Arts: Nigeria's Traditional & Religious Awareness" engages a literary exposure, examining how artists have through the creative visual practice become a pathway for traditional and religious civilization/ awareness. This study reviews the influence of art in African traditional religion, art as a tool for Christianity and Islamic practices in Nigeria, noting however, how art has essentially become a tool for the promotion of all religions. Interestingly, this research reveals how the utility of art works in terms of imagery and communication among the different religions in Nigeria can never be overemphasized. Among these three main religious bodies in Nigeria which are Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religion, the use of art has become predominant. The researcher observes that even though these religious bodies subscribe to the positivity, relevance and utility of artworks, they hardly share same ideologies and doctrines. Therefore, this study intends to uncover the relationship and relevance of artists and art among the three main religions in Nigeria which are Christianity, Islam and Traditional worship and also their indisposition to share same doctrine as they willingly share art. Finally, this paper concludes that the artist has continued to influence religion and culture through art practice.

Keywords: Utility, Communication, Ideology, Doctrine, Traditional and Religious Awareness

1. Introduction

Nigeria is a culturally and religiously plural society in which different systems of belief have developed through long historical processes. Christianity and Islam are the two major world religions with large followings in the country, while African Traditional Religion continues to influence cultural practices, social institutions, symbols, festivals, and conceptions of the sacred. Religious practices and artistic expressions vary across geographical and cultural communities, and these differences have influenced the ways in which people understand, produce and use art.

The relationship between religion and art in Nigeria is therefore not simply a relationship between two separate fields [1]. Rather, artistic practices have frequently developed within religious, social and cultural contexts. Sculpture, painting, craft, architecture, textiles, body adornment, masquerade, calligraphy and graphic imagery can communicate beliefs and values while also serving practical, ceremonial, educational and commemorative functions. Art can make abstract religious ideas visible and can provide

material forms through which communities remember, celebrate, teach and participate in their traditions [2].

This article examines the position of the artist and the arts within Nigeria's traditional and religious consciousness. It considers the interaction between art and religion generally, the role of art in African Traditional Religion, the development of Christian artistic expression, the distinctive forms of Islamic art in Nigeria and the broader relevance of art to religious communication and cultural continuity. The purpose is not to establish a hierarchy among religions or to suggest that their doctrines are identical, but to demonstrate that artistic production has been an important means through which religious and cultural ideas are expressed and transmitted. Thus this artistic ingenuity reflects creative skill in visual forms, such as painting or sculpture [3]. It may also refer to the creative activities like music, drama, as well as a subject of study concerned with human culture [4].

It suggests that the intersection of arts and culture could give rise to the propagation of religion. This means that artists create expressive objects of visual form which supports human realization: culturally or traditionally, thus making them great crusaders of human existence [5], [6].

Art and Religion

Art may be understood broadly as the creative production of forms through which human beings express ideas, emotions, experiences, values, and perceptions. Soanes et al. associate art with creative skill and with activities such as painting and sculpture, while also relating it to human culture and intellectual achievement. Culture, in this sense, provides a context within which artistic meanings are created and interpreted. The intersection of art and culture can therefore become an important channel for the expression and transmission of religious ideas [7].

Religion is similarly difficult to reduce to a single definition because religious systems differ in beliefs, practices, institutions, and cultural expressions. Tylor's classical formulation emphasized belief in supernatural beings, while Durkheim described religion as a system of beliefs and practices associated with sacred things. Durkheim's later work also emphasized the social and moral dimensions of religious systems and their capacity to organize collective life. Akpomovie notes the complexity and diversity of religion and its relationship with cultural formation.

The relationship between art and religion can consequently be understood as a relationship between visual form and meaning [8]. Art can communicate sacred narratives, represent religious personalities and symbols, organize sacred spaces, support ritual activities and provide material forms through which communities encounter religious ideas. Cappadona discusses the multidisciplinary relationship between art and religion, emphasizing the significance of images, meaning, experience and religious practice. Otto's discussion of the numinous is also useful for understanding the capacity of religious experience to evoke responses that may be expressed through artistic forms [9],[10].

Historically, the connection between art and religion has persisted across cultures despite changes in religious institutions and artistic conventions. In many societies, the artist has operated not merely as a producer of aesthetically pleasing objects but as an interpreter of communal experience [11]. Artistic forms may therefore function simultaneously as aesthetic objects, cultural documents, ritual instruments, educational resources and repositories of collective memory.

2. Materials and Methods

Art in African Traditional Religion

In many traditional African societies, art was closely integrated with religious life. Sculptures and other visual forms could represent deities, ancestors, spirits, or ritual

concepts, while shrines and places of worship could be marked by artistic symbols and motifs. Art consequently provided a material and visible dimension to beliefs that were otherwise expressed through oral traditions, ritual performance, music, dance and communal practice.

Vadenais emphasizes the relationship between artistic practice, nature and the divine. Within such a worldview, natural forms and artistic symbols can become vehicles for communicating ideas about spiritual forces. The significance of an artwork in a traditional religious setting therefore cannot always be assessed solely in terms of formal beauty; its social and spiritual functions are equally important.

The Igbo Uli tradition provides an example of the interaction between art, identity, gender and belief. Uli designs, associated with traditional Igbo visual culture, employ linear patterns and motifs applied to the body and other surfaces. Aka and Igbaro associate Uli with traditional symbolism and cultural meanings. In the context of marriage, body decoration could communicate beauty, identity, social status and aspirations associated with married life. Its significance thus extends beyond decoration to include cultural and symbolic communication.

Among the Kalabari Ijaw, artistic practices are similarly connected with the cultural and religious significance of the sea. Brain observes the association of masks, headdresses, and sculptures with water-spirit traditions and the fishing economy. Such works demonstrate how artistic production can embody the relationship between a community, its environment, its economy and its religious imagination.

Yoruba Egungun masquerade provides another important example. The masquerade combines costume, textile design, movement, performance, and communal participation in ways that connect the living with ancestral memory. As the source material indicates, Egungun masquerades can serve both religious and social functions, maintaining the symbolic presence of ancestors while also providing occasions for communal celebration.

Contemporary Nigerian artists have continued to draw on traditional religious themes. Igbaro discusses Ukut's painting *Peace*, in which a man holds a white cock associated with sacrifice. The work demonstrates how contemporary painting can reinterpret traditional religious symbolism and translate ritual concepts into a modern visual language. Amateis similarly notes the historical importance of religion in the work of sculptors.

3. Results and Discussion

Christianity - Art and Iconography

Christian art encompasses visual representations and artistic practices associated with Christian narratives, beliefs, personalities, worship and sacred spaces. Across Christian traditions, art has included painting, sculpture, stained glass, architecture, carving, decorative arts and graphic imagery. Subjects have included Christ, biblical narratives, the Virgin Mary, saints, biblical heroes and scenes associated with Christian history.

The relationship between Christianity and art in Nigeria has, however, been historically complex. Early Christian missionary encounters with indigenous artistic traditions sometimes interpreted traditional religious objects as idolatrous [12]. The resulting destruction or rejection of some indigenous objects disrupted aspects of local artistic continuity. At the same time, Christianity subsequently became an important patron and user of artistic production in Nigeria, creating new opportunities for artists working in sculpture, architecture, painting, woodwork, decorative arts, graphics, and related fields.

The European Christian tradition provides major historical examples of the relationship between artistic patronage and religious institutions. Michelangelo

Buonarroti's paintings and sculptures, including works associated with biblical subjects and the Vatican, demonstrate how Christian institutions provided commissions and contexts through which artists could develop major bodies of work [13]. The historical relationship between Christian patronage and artistic production consequently illustrates how religious institutions can provide both subject matter and material support for artistic practice.

In contemporary Nigeria, Christian churches employ artistic forms in numerous ways. Church interiors may contain architectural ornamentation, sculpture, paintings, inscriptions, decorative woodwork, marble or stonework, stained-glass designs, banners and graphic imagery. The growth of indigenous Pentecostal and other Christian movements has also encouraged new forms of visual communication, including photographs and printed images of church leaders on banners, posters, stickers and digital platforms. These practices demonstrate the continuing adaptability of art to changing religious environments [14], [15].

Islam and Religious Art in Nigeria

Islamic artistic expression in Nigeria reflects religious principles as well as regional histories and established craft traditions. Attitudes toward figurative representation vary among Islamic communities and interpretations, and these differences have influenced the forms of artistic production that receive prominence. In contexts where three-dimensional representations of living beings are discouraged, artists have developed alternative visual languages based on geometry, ornament, calligraphy, architecture, textiles, leatherwork and other craft traditions [16].

The source material notes that religious attitudes toward figurative sculpture affected the public display and development of sculpture in some northern Nigerian contexts. At the same time, restrictions or preferences concerning representation encouraged other forms of creative production. Geometric architectural decoration, Islamic motifs, calligraphic designs, mosaics, manuscript illustration, leatherwork, calabash decoration, mat and rug weaving as well as architectural ornamentation provide examples of artistic practices that can flourish within Islamic cultural environments.

Thompson emphasizes the importance of book arts and functional approaches within Islamic artistic traditions. In Nigeria, artistic production associated with Islamic communities is often embedded in everyday life, making it difficult to draw a rigid distinction between art, craft, architecture and religious culture. The work of leatherworkers, calabash designers, architectural decorators and textile producers illustrates this integration.

Islamic artistic practice in Nigeria therefore demonstrates that religious consciousness does not necessarily depend on figurative sculpture. Artistic expression can communicate religious identity through pattern, proportion, calligraphy, architecture, material, craftsmanship and functional design. In this respect, Islamic art contributes to the diversity of Nigerian artistic practice. Islamic artistic expression in Nigeria reflects religious principles as well as regional histories and established craft traditions. Attitudes toward figurative representation vary among Islamic communities and interpretations, and these differences have influenced the forms of artistic production that receive prominence. In contexts where three-dimensional representations of living beings are discouraged, artists have developed alternative visual languages based on geometry, ornament, calligraphy, architecture, textiles, leatherwork and other craft traditions.

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Relevance of Art in Religion

Art performs several important functions within religious life. Primarily, it functions as a means of communication. Religious concepts that may be difficult to communicate through abstract verbal explanations can be represented through images, symbols, patterns, architectural forms and ritual objects. Art can thereby support religious teaching and make narratives accessible to wider audiences.

Furthermore, art contributes to memory and continuity. Religious paintings, sculptures, costumes, architectural forms and ritual objects can preserve narratives and practices across generations. They may function as visual records of beliefs, ceremonies, historical events and communal identities. In this sense, religious art can contribute to cultural memory even when the original social conditions under which an artwork was created have changed.

Again, art can contribute to the organization of sacred space. Churches, mosques, shrines, temples and other places of worship employ architecture and decoration to distinguish sacred environments from ordinary spaces. Artistic interventions can create visual focus, establish atmosphere, communicate identity and support ritual practice.

Accordingly, art can support identity and belonging. Religious communities use distinctive symbols, colours, patterns, architectural forms, dress and imagery to express collective identity. Such visual markers can help members recognize and participate in a shared cultural or religious tradition.

Consequently, art can encourage reflection and emotional engagement. A painting, sculpture, architectural space, musical performance, or ritual object can stimulate contemplation and communicate values in ways that differ from verbal instruction. Ottenbergs discusses the capacity of painting to give visual interpretation to religious and historical events. Because visual symbols can be interpreted differently by different viewers, religious artworks can also generate dialogue and reflection.

Finally, art can serve institutional and evangelistic purposes. Religious organizations may use posters, banners, paintings, sculpture, architecture, photography and digital imagery to communicate religious messages and attract or educate audiences. This function is particularly visible in contemporary Nigerian religious Art performs several important functions within religious life. Primarily, it functions as a means of communication. Religious concepts that may be difficult to communicate through abstract verbal explanations can be represented through images, symbols, patterns, architectural forms and ritual objects. Art can thereby support religious teaching and make narratives accessible to wider audiences.

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The Artist as Cultural and Religious Mediator

The Nigerian artist occupies a significant position within the relationship between art and religious consciousness. The artist translates ideas, experiences, beliefs, and cultural memories into material or visual forms. In traditional settings, this role may involve the production of ritual objects, masks, sculptures, costumes, body decorations, architectural elements, or other objects associated with communal ceremonies. In Christian and Islamic contexts, the artist may work with painting, architecture, graphic design, decorative arts, calligraphy, textiles, photography, or digital media.

The artist is therefore not simply a technician. Artistic production involves interpretation. Decisions about material, form, scale, symbol, colour, composition and context can influence how religious or cultural messages are understood. The artist may also mediate between inherited traditions and contemporary audiences, adapting established motifs to new social conditions.

This mediating role becomes especially important in Nigeria because traditional, Christian and Islamic cultural forms exist within the same national space. Although these religious systems maintain distinct doctrines and practices, artists frequently encounter their visual languages within everyday life. Contemporary Nigerian art can therefore provide a space for examining cultural interaction, continuity, adaptation, and change.

4. Conclusion

The study concludes that the relationship between art and religion in Nigeria is reciprocal, historically rooted, and culturally significant, with religious beliefs providing artists with themes, symbols, functions, patrons, and contexts, while artistic practices give material and visual form to religious beliefs, identities, narratives, and experiences. This relationship is evident in African Traditional Religion through sculpture, masquerade, ritual objects, and other artistic forms associated with ancestors, deities, community, and cultural identity; in Christianity through church architecture, sculpture, painting, decorative arts, and graphic imagery used for worship, biblical communication, and religious education; and in Islam through architecture, geometric patterns, ornamentation,

calligraphy, textiles, leatherwork, and other crafts. However, these traditions differ in their doctrines and attitudes toward artistic representation, sacred objects, and religious spaces, meaning that the role and interpretation of art vary according to theological, historical, cultural, and social contexts. Contemporary Nigerian visual culture further demonstrates this continuing interaction, as traditional symbols, Christian imagery, Islamic patterns, and calligraphic forms are reinterpreted through painting, sculpture, architecture, design, printing, and digital media. The artist therefore functions as an important cultural mediator who preserves inherited traditions while adapting them to changing audiences and circumstances. Ultimately, art and religion in Nigeria should be understood as interconnected dimensions of cultural experience, in which art provides visible and communicative forms for religious and cultural ideas, while religious and cultural contexts continue to shape artistic meanings, subjects, functions, and practices.

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