

AFRICANIZATION OF ICONS A TRIPTYCH OF RELIGIOUS PAINTINGS

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ABSTRACT

Painting on a wall (mural) is one of the oldest forms of self expression known to man. From the caves of South Africa, Tassili mountains of Algeria, to France and Spain, man has left images of his lifestyle on the walls of caves which were used as places of worship. Murals of icons which began in Europe around the 3rd century BC, continued through the Byzantine era and were refined in the 16th century. Murals with Christian themes are found in many chapels in Ghana, particularly in Catholic chapels. However, most of the icons are Caucasian or European and have not been acculturated to identify with the indigenes as in Europe. This paper discusses three paintings - THE CREATION AND FALL OF MAN, THE NATIVITY, THE CRUCIFIXION AND ASCENSION - which are part of the Efiia Kuma mural project. The project was commissioned by the Franciscan Friars with the aim to put in pictures, any three biblical stories and also to beautify the chapel. Cultural artifacts, the architecture of the chapel, the occupation of the indigenes, West African models were some of the points considered and incorporated in the paintings to indigenise icons in Ghana.

Key words: *Mural, icons, triptych.*

INTRODUCTION

A mural is a painting on a wall. Throughout history, man has made paintings on walls for either religious or decorative purposes. From the caves of South Africa, Tassili mountains of Algeria, to France and Spain, man has left images of his lifestyle on the walls of caves. Religious Paintings or Icons begun in Europe around the 3rd century BC and gained prominence during the Byzantine era. Murals of icons became the pastime of many artists of that period and in the 16th century, Michelangelo Buonarroti painted his masterpiece in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome. (Getlein, 2002).

"Religious Paintings" with African icons have not featured much in Ghanaian contemporary paintings. The few that are available in most cases have been direct copies of European models or were imported from Europe. A typical example is found in the St Cyprian Anglican Chapel in Kumasi painted by Amofa, a city artist of Kumasi. There are other decorations in the form of mosaic, as found on the façade of the Catholic Chapel at St Louis Secondary School in Kumasi or in stained-glass windows at the Christ the King Chapel at Efiia Kuma in Takoradi.

The Catholic Church in Ghana, has been in the forefront in Africanizing icons and using African symbols in the churches. Examples can be found in the Catholic chapels at Elmina and Achimota School in Accra, painted by Leroy Mitchell, an African American Artist and former lecturer at the College of Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. St Peter's Cathedral in Kumasi, also displays stained glass windows with Asante traditional symbols. Other examples are found in the Catholic Chapel at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi and the Assembly Hall of the University of Winneba, North Campus, the latter painted by Godfred Akrofi, a lecturer of the University.

The best example the writer believes, is found in the Catholic chapel of Navrongo in the Upper West region of Ghana, where a traditional style and technique of painting have been adapted to the biblical stories, doctrines and architecture of the church. The main reason for these murals could be to illustrate the Bible and thereby draw the faithful closer to God.

A triptych is three paintings on one theme with the central panel usually twice the width of the wings. A common form of triptych as an object of private devotion, is to have a Madonna at the centre with one's patron Saints at the wings. (Murray, P and L. 1969)

Objectives of the Efia Kuma Project

The general objective of this project was to promote the cultural and artistic exchange between Europe and Africa. Thus twenty five artists, six Ghanaians and nineteen Italians - participated in the project the result of which was published in the exhibition catalogue titled "Akwaaba". (Dagama, A. 2001). The specific objective was to create three large paintings (tryptich) of free religious themes to be hanged or painted directly or marouflaged on the walls of the new chapel - Church of Christ The King - at Efia Kuma in Takoradi, Ghana. The artists were requested to present sample sketches on canvas forming the triptych with the following dimensions, two of 61cm x 91.5cm and one of 91.5cm x 91.5cm for consideration.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the triptych painted by the author and to promote the Africanization of icons.

Points considered in the composition of the mural.

i. Size

The actual wall space available for the mural was two of 5.5m x 7.5m at the sides and one of 7.5m x 7.5m in the middle. The mural to be located at the main entrance of the chapel, could best be seen when the congregation is moving out of the chapel. That therefore demanded a mural imposing enough to engage the attention of the congregation after the church service.

ii. Location

Sekondi-Takoradi, though a cosmopolitan city lying along the coast has fishing as the main occupation of the natives. The church, located within a fishing community of Efia Kuma, will therefore have fisher folks making up the majority of its members. An indication of the main occupation of the people therefore had to be depicted.

iii. Architecture

The modern architecture of the chapel with its glass windows had to be complemented with a

modern, colorful and a contemporary painting style to enhance the beauty of the interior.

iv. Cultural Symbolism

Cultural artifacts considered were: Asafo flags (flags of the traditional military), adinkra symbols (traditional Akan symbols for communication), Akan colour symbolism and the African sculptural idiom which is an idiom of expression that excuses disproportionate representation as a legitimate means of expressing contextual ideas. (Fosu, 1993). The sculptural idiom in this instance was used as a personal style of expression.

v. Christian dogmas

Some Christian dogmas - the Genesis and the fall of man, the birth, death, resurrection and the ascension of Christ, were also considered.

vi. West African Models

Many African Christians are accustomed to and have accepted the complexion of the Holy Family as Caucasian. This perception has been of much debate over the years to date and it is strongly influenced by several factors. Two of the factors are the culture of the country and the time period in which the art was done. In addition, the religious beliefs of the artists and those who commissioned them affected how the Holy Family was portrayed. At times native features are added to their appearance and thereby acculturated to identify with the people; each period therefore created the type of the holy family it desired. (Anon 1998). Jesus Christ, for example, was portrayed as Apollo driving the horses of the sun-chariot through the heavens. (Getlein 2002).

Research conducted by a number of scholars, suggest that the Holy Family was black or at least dark in complexion. The British orientalist, Sir Godfrey Higgins in his archeological work, "The Anacalypsis, or An Inquiry into the Origin of Languages, Nations and Religions", stated that, "in all the Romish (Catholic) countries of Europe. France, Italy, Germany, the God Christ, as well as his mother, were described in their old pictures to be Black. The oldest statues of Mary the mother of Jesus were Black Madonna statues. Some of the earliest depictions of Jesus by artists showed a Black Jesus. Cathedral at Moulins—to the famous Chapel of the Virgin at Loretto—to the Church of the Annunciata—the Church at St. Lazaro or the

Church of St. Stephen at Genoa—to St. Francisco at Pisa—to the Church at Brixen in Tyrol and to that at Padua—to the Church of St. Theodore at Munich—to the Cathedral at Augsburg, to Rome and the Borghese chapel of Maria Maggiore—to the Pantheon—to a small chapel of St. Peters on the right hand side on entering, near the door; and in fact, to almost innumerable other churches in countries professing the Romish religion. The early Christian artists as expressed above painted Christ and his parents Black or at least dark.” (Jackson, J. G. 1933).

Other articles on the Internet – “Jesus’ Black Ancestors” (Reinckens, R. 1998), “Jesus Christ the Black Healer-Prophet”, (Adonai-Adoni S. I. 2000), “Was Jesus a Negro?” (Jackson, J. G. 1933), “What was the race of Jesus Christ the Messiah” (York, M. Z.), testify to the Black ancestry of the Holy Family.

In 1775 however, Pope Ignatius ordered artists to paint the holy family as Europeans. (Anon, 1998). Since then the works of famous artists such as Michelangelo (Getlein, 2002), Rembrandt, and Rubens, have also greatly influenced the general perception of the Holy Family.

A compelling evidence of the complexion of Jesus Christ is stated in the Book of Revelation. The Bible describes Jesus as having a brass burnt skin and woolly lamb’s hair. “This is an Afro” - states York, M. Z. (York, 2002). The objectives of the artist in using West African models for the Holy Family therefore were:

- i. To present the Holy Family, as one of their own and thereby assist the African faithful to identify with it
- ii. To orient the consciousness of African believers to the European complexion of Christ (as seen in many paintings of the Holy Family) and focus on his message as the redeemer.
- iii. To be true to the complexion of the Holy Family as stated in the Bible.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials used were: acrylic paints due to their versatility, durability and adaptability to the tropical climate and coastal weather, canvas for its durability, bristle brushes for their flexibility and acrylic varnish to brighten up the painting and act as a protective coating.

The accepted methods associated with the sizing and priming of canvas supports were used. A number of black and white sketches in pencil and a few in coloured pastels of African models, were made in a sketch book and finally transferred onto the prepared canvas. As the painting progressed, the compositions were refined.

A colorful, hard edge two dimensional style was adopted for the following reasons:

- i. It is modern and in harmony with the architecture of the church.
- ii. It is convenient for scaling the sketch on to the wall surface.
- iii. It is a simple and effective way to communicate without being superfluous.

The theme selected for the triptych was CHRIST OUR REDEEMER which the author believes is the core message of the Bible; that is, God’s love and redemption for mankind, through the birth, death and resurrection of His only Son - Jesus Christ.

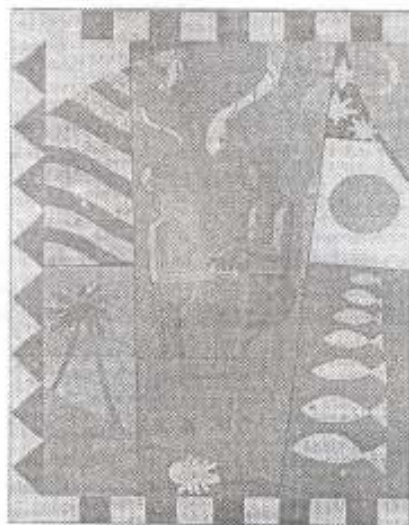


Fig. 1 The Creation and Fall of Man
Dimensions: 61cm x 91.5cm

Description

Figure 1 has the theme “The Creation and Fall of Man”. It is the left wing of the triptych. The dimensions are 61cm x 91.5cm. The painting is

divided more or less into three compartments. The central composition is a picture of Adam and Eve, with Eve offering Adam the fruit of knowledge in this case an orange. A brightly coloured serpent coils around a tree supervising the activity. Surrounding the central composition, (read anti-clockwise) is the creation story. The top left corner has been left void to represent God's presence before creation. This is followed downwards with the creation of the heavens and earth, the separation of the seas and land, the creation of flora, fauna, the moon and the stars.

Analysis and interpretation

The green colour of Eve's cloth symbolizes fertility and the mauve of Adam's, masculinity. An orange has been used instead of an apple simply because it is local and tropical. Adam and Eve have been composed in the African sculptural idiom to give them stability, an aura of mystery, reverence and acculturation. The lemon-yellowish snake stands out of the background and indicates the major role the devil played in this act. The fishes are part of the creation story; they symbolise Christ and the seven "creation" days. They also represent the main occupation of the indigenes of Takoradi. The coconut trees represent the coastal vegetation of West Africa, while the mite, the crocodile and the elephant represent the fauna from small to large.



Fig 2: The Nativity
Dimensions: 91.5cm x 91.5cm

Description

Painting 2 has the theme "The Nativity". It is the central panel of the triptych. The dimensions are 91.5cm x 91.5cm. The central subject is mother

Mary and the infant Jesus. Mary is represented by a typical Ghanaian (Fante) woman wearing the "tekua" headgear (which is the ceremonial wig of the Fantes). She sits on a traditional female stool feeding Jesus like any tender loving African mother. Jesus' father Joseph stands almost indifferently behind Mary, since the writer finds his role in the Bible being limited to Jesus' childhood. The central composition is encased in a pot with two of the same by the side of Mary. At the base of the stool is a carpet with silhouettes of animals. The background of yellow projects the figures and sets the tone for color configurations. At the top left corner are the Three Wise Men. Below are seven horn blowers, (musicians). At the top right side of the painting are typical round huts of Africa. Below that are the shepherds of Bethlehem.

Analysis and interpretation

The composition is in three parts. The left represents adoration, the middle, nativity and the right, the humility of Christ. The pot in which the main composition is encased symbolizes life, as Christ came to give life. The silhouettes of animals in the foreground represent the animals in the stable or hut in which Christ was born. The greens and blues are symbols of fertility, queenly presence and freshness. The horn blowers symbolize the kingship of Christ and also herald His birth. The tints of yellow at the background projecting the mother symbolize wealth, glory and kingship. The circles at the top left - *adinkrahene* - are the traditional symbols for God's presence and perfection.



Fig 3: The Crucifixion and Resurrection.
Dimensions: 61cm x 91.5cm

Description

Figure 3 has the theme "The Crucifixion and Resurrection". It is the right wing of the triptych. The dimensions are 61cm x 91.5cm. The painting has a portrait of Christ as the central subject. There are three crosses at the rear. There are human figures at the lower portion of the composition, with outstretched hands wailing and at the same time praising God. The bottom right represents a cemetery and above that is Christ, risen from the dead. At the top left is a section of the huts continuing from the central composition. At the bottom left is a "ladder", a Ghanaian traditional symbol for death.

The dominant colour is red. The main figure like all others has been painted in the African sculptural idiom.

Analysis and interpretation

All shades of red in the traditional set up represents mourning and intense affection. Red is usually worn with black during funeral celebrations. The three crosses represent the crosses on which Christ and the two malefactors were crucified. The sculptural figure of Christ emphasizes, in this case, the coldness and stiffness of the body at death. The -ladder- "*owuo atwre obaako mmforo*" symbolizes death as the ultimate end of all living things. The browns of the cemetery symbolize earth. Christ stands over the cemetery - in this instance death - with his arms raised towards the heavens, symbolizing his victory over death and sin. Christ is clothed in a white gown, which is a symbol of peace, purity and love.



Description

Painting 4 is the triptych. The dimensions are 91.5cm x 213.5cm. It has the title "Our Redeemer". The triptych, reading from left to right are "THE CREATION AND FALL OF MAN",

"THE NATIVITY", "THE CRUCIFIXION AND ASCENSION"

Analysis

The designs at the edges of the triptych are permanent features in Asafo Flags of the Fantes of Ghana. (Adler and Barnard, 1992). These designs, either in the shape of triangles or squares or a combination of both, frame the pictures in the flags. They have been replicated in the triptych to symbolize protection.

Blues and whites dominate the first painting. They are symbols for God's presence and peace.

Orange and yellow symbolise royalty and wealth, with green as the colour for fertility. These colours dominate the second painting. Reds, grey, black and browns which represent death dominate the last work.

CONCLUSION

Mural is an old art form in Ghana. Many Ghanaian "Asafo" and other traditional houses exhibit some forms of murals with traditional religious subjects or decorative symbols. The Catholic Church as an exponent of iconography has religious paintings in many of its chapels across the country.

The triptych with the theme "Christ our Redeemer", tells of the creation story, the birth, death and the resurrection of Christ. The style is simple and two-dimensional with patterns and colours native and symbolic to the culture of Ghana. These symbols express the spirituality of the people of Ghana.

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