

A DEBUT OF GHANAIAAN TRADITIONAL VISUAL ART
INTO LITURGICAL ART OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF GHANA

by A.K. Quarcoo*

The Christian biblico-liturgical arts which Ghana inherited was a whole 'system' of early and later Christian art via Europe. This is not only so in the visual arts but also in Church music, and the patterns of worship have been also principally alien.

Since a work of art is an attempt to express something that is 'unique' - an affirmation of something that is whole, complete and absolute - it is a form of language in its own right. As language, it must be communicative. Again good art may attempt, among other things, to represent an integral part of complex relationships.

As an aid to communication, the Christian Church has liberally used this phenomenon, art, for a very long time. Starting from a late period, as when Rome was transformed into a Christian city after the 'conversion' of Emperor Constantine (306-337 AD), we read of masses of people who developed a new hope which was reflected in their patterns of life and so, art. To begin with, the new communities met in rooms around tables like families and without formal leadership. The basilica was among the first type of Christian 'Church houses' which superseded the 'one room' in people's homes as the congregations grew. Leadership emerged and this became the clergy. The development of 'ritual' and other forms of visual aid to give expression to the speciality and importance of the new religion was a follow-up. Christian art, which was to a great extent a unified system, responded to the social structure and became 'several', depending on the band to which people belonged after the Reformation.

Introducing Christianity into Ghana, the missionaries brought the Gospel in the garbs to which they were accustomed. Therefore, the

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'missions' preached the Gospel with their divisions plus their structural and aesthetic predilections. The Roman Catholics, and to a slightly lesser extent, the Anglican denominations, used a lot of visual liturgical arts in worship; but the plastic arts diminish or disappear with the extent of a church's removal from Roman Catholicism. The crucifix, with or without 'the body of Christ', is the one plastic art which is used in all churches. It appears that the crucifix which symbolizes the life and death and, of course, the resurrection of Christ - that is, the central figure and message of Christianity - has become an essential part of the "paraphernalia" of worship.

In the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches in Ghana there are usually naturalistic figures of Christ, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and many other figures of martyrs and saints. On the walls, varied pictures - imaginary paintings, respecting the canons of renaissance art, are hung.

The most elaborately decorated part of the church houses are the regions of the altar, pulpit and lectern. On the altar, usually stand many candlestick holders cast in brass or bright metals. Some altars have a number of 'effigies' which are mostly devotional but also sometimes biblical figures. The altars are not only brightly lit but are also covered with yellow, red, white or black, depending on each particular occasion.

On or around the altar incense-burning receptacles, fonts, and apparatuses for sprinkling holy water on the altar or the congregation, bells and other devices, as visual aids in worship, are found.

For the lectern, a brass eagle with outspread wings has become prestigious. The pulpit, which used to be in the middle of the region of the altar, is now often pushed to one side - right or left - but in front of the altar.

Church buildings in Ghana were easy to tell apart from other types of houses. Romanesque churches (100 BC-AD 1150), and those in Gothic style (1150-1400) were the types aimed at in Ghana. The English and Welsh types of cathedral littered the whole country. Recently, however,

there has been a break in this trend, and some new church houses in Ghana are rather 'unorthodox'. The following Methodist Churches, are examples of such unorthodox ones: the Winneba Church, Calvary Church in Accra, St. Paul's in Tema and Emmanuel Church in Labadi. Then the Trinity College Chapel at Legon, the St. Louis Church in Kumasi are also unorthodox buildings; the Altar of St. Mary's Secondary School, Aggrey Chapel in Achimota are not of the 'old school'. This catalogue does not exhaust the list of all the church houses in Ghana which are 'unorthodox'. Indeed, the denomination which used to be most orthodox is becoming the least orthodox in this matter.

Significantly, the Roman Catholic church has, since the appeal of Pope Paul in 1967, been almost in the forefront of research into the type of art which will be really meaningful in the African context. From south-western Nigeria, Father Kelvin Carroll reports that several commissions to quite a few artists and craftsmen in the task of crystallizing the Gospel visually have been given. Today, artists from the schools of Yaba College and Zaria University are also being given this type of assignment. As in other countries, it is reported that the task of creating living Christian art is made difficult by the 'cultural background' of the church leaders who have accepted the canon of Western Christian art as the norm - the art of the church militant.

The experiment among the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria is significant, but it will be a bold venture to accept in its entirety the suggestion of Cardinal Lercaro, one-time president of the 'Liturgy Consilium' who said: 'Let even the most humble common things that are mass produced be introduced into churches.'¹ Maybe this is not exactly what is needed now.

Surely, Church art needs to be biblico-liturgical, but above all, art linked with architecture, mural painting, furniture, and symbolic signs in the case of Ghana, could be useful tools for Christian evangelism.

¹ See *Insight and Opinion* Vol.3 No.2, 1968, p.69.

In Ghana, the most recent and greatest 'deviant' in the matter of church architecture and building is the Emmanuel Church² in Labadi, near the well-known and older Presbyterian Church. Its uniqueness lies in the exploitation of some of the greatest art symbols of the people of Ghana and their incorporation in the biblico-liturgical arts of the Church. The Church was formerly opened for public worship by the president of the Methodist Conference of Ghana, the Rev. T.W. Koomson, on the 9th day of August, 1967.

Worked actually into the walls are motifs usually referred to as Adinkra designs. All along the walls of two long sides of the building, are the patterns; namely, the 'Gye Nyame' - God is the answer - or except God; the eight-ray sun or star; the 'Mmusuyide' - sacrifice; the 'Dwennimmen', the sign of a lamb, humility and divinity; and the 'Fihankra', the household. For the first time, at least in recent times, the attempt has been made to use the signs in such sequence as to run as a 'sentence'. God; son of the sky, sacrifice, ram and household.³ When verbs are supplied, we get something like this - 'God's son became a sacrificial lamb for the household'. This is the core of the Christian message. There is, of course, the cardinal point of the Resurrection on which the faith stands.

Far from being far-fetched, the translation is expressive of Ghanaian indigenous belief. The Supreme God expressed himself in a son.⁴ God in His Son was made a sacrificial lamb for the freedom and peace of humanity.

² Emmanuel Church is a little society of the Accra Methodist circuit. It started barely ten years ago to meet the needs of a few Methodist friends who had travelled principally from Akan areas to work in Accra. Soon it was joined by dynamic members in the vicinity. In a single year the church house was built and opened for public worship.

³ Mr. A.C. Denteh, in conjunction with the architect, Mr. B.A. Sackey (a deputy commissioner of police - Ghana), did this. They give the credit however to the building committee of the Church. Mr. Denteh is the most recent translator of the Bible into Ashanti, a dialect of Akan. He has been interested in Akan language and customs since 1928.

⁴ See the Sonship of the Lakpa. Research Review Vol.3 No.3 of 1967. A.K. Quarcoo.

The sign 'Gye Nyame' has a lot more to say than is usually assigned to it. It is the greatest single 'little sign' which epitomizes the attributes of the God of all creation. He is eternal, hence the spirit of man is eternal. Although, He died, He lives and the Atonement makes man alive. As long as God exists man lives, and it is He alone who has final jurisdiction over the spiritual self of man. Gye Nyame wu na mawu 'My death comes only when God dies.' This echoes the belief in life after physical death which is shared by all in the indigenous belief systems.

The Nsoromma or son of the sky, makes comprehension of the doctrine of worship of Christ possible; for the ideas of the son of God and the sons of God are prevalent in Ghana.

Musuyi (sacrifice) is a familiar occurrence. That the son of God, as a ram, Dwennimmen, was sacrificed is comprehensible. The Fihankra, household, as a sign for humanity is established in the mind of the Ghanaian. A synthesis of the idea depicted by the signs in the minds of those who enter the chapel should be a great means of impressing on them the reality of the God they seek to worship. Above all, the identity of the 'indigenous God' to the Christian God appears to be revealed. The curtain is raised and the disillusion which often comes to the Ghanaian Christian in times of 'crisis' may also be mitigated.

The Fihankra the sign of the household, reminds men of the universal brotherhood of man. This is again the message of the church which is also a value of Ghana expressed visually. Christian theology underlines this same idea. It teaches fervently that the sons of God are marked out by their love for one another. The famous parable of the Good Samaritan⁵ and the Song of Love⁶ tell the story. On the top of the 'Church of Christ the King' in Accra, this stylized form of the type

⁵ St. Luke 10 : 33.

⁶ I Cor. Chapter 13: 1 - 13.

of house very much loved by the Ghanaian is displayed. The significance of this is that all who enter should live in love as people of one household.

A few other arts present in the church are the following:
The baptismal font in this church is a traditional dwasen (Akan) Kaduo (Adangme), pitched on the Nyamedua. The Nyamedua being a branch or trunk with a three-pronged fork. The Altar is a male and female replica of the great traditional Akan Stool, used as a household stool but also especially as an artifact of regalism and mysticism. As seen in the picture, the stool has embossed on the central piece, Sekyedua, the 'Gye Nyame' symbol. Instead of one type of teeth on the 'legs' of the stool, both the female-sharp or pointed v-shaped spikes, symbolizing femininity and the blunt u-shaped which indicate masculinity are incorporated. The combined design is meant to indicate that God, whose 'stool' the altar is, is both male and female - father-mother God. Above the altar is a plain crucifix, and a half-moon state umbrella as seen in the picture.

What are the special points about this new type of liturgical art? The idea of God as a King and the King of Kings is blended with the great idea of God's blessing coming to men like the dew. The kingly art underscores the idea that God is enthroned not only over us but in us. Christianity is universal and not alien to or incompatible with, the indigenous Ghanaian God and belief.

The railings which cut off the altar from the font, lectern and pulpit are decorated with replica of the Akan traditional state swearing sword made of iron. The hilts are painted golden and the blades grey, with black binding. Worked into the blades are traditional designs, and also the traditional Christian cross - the pendicular crossed with a shorter horizontal bar.

The state swords remind people of God's promise and covenant with humanity. He has sworn to men that wherever they are, He is, and that, He will never fail humanity. This reminds us of the chief in Akan, and for that matter most parts of Ghana, who swears an oath to his chiefs and people to be up at their call and be their chief and defender. The

essence of the state sword is therefore not only to add to the elegance of the regal decoration but also to be a constant reminder to all who enter of God's promise. His promise is, surely, to all who enter and take Him seriously. Anytime people kneel at the railings to receive the elements, they are again visually reminded of His promise even as the accompanying words from the priest, as he offers the elements of the Holy Communion, are said.

The phenomenon called the celebration of the Holy Communion is, of course, also known as the 'Sacrifice of mass' in the Roman Catholic denomination, but 'Eucharist' or 'Thanksgiving' in the Anglican society. The purposes are an obedience to the divine injunction of Christ, an act of Remembrance of Christ, His love and the 'Covenant' to men; an act of 'appropriation' in which Christians claim their merits in His death and the blessings of the 'Covenant'; an act of 'Spiritual nourishment', Confession, Consecration and fellowship with other believers past and present. In the Emmanuel Church, the elements are brought from the altar with the sign of Gye Nyame - the sign, we have said, reminds us that we die only when God dies.⁷ In a visual form the belief in the eternity of life is crystallized.

The cross displayed is in the form of the Christian cross, but the crux decussa, Mbeamu (X), could have been equally applicable; for it is a sign for Nyame, the Creator of the Universe. Danquah agrees with Meyerowitz⁸ that the same sign (X) which is a symbol for queen-mothers, represents the Genetrix. The male cross is the 'equal-limb' cross. This is often combined with an (O) with a dot in the middle. Kanto.

Not unlike the Christian cross, they draw attention to the father-son-and spirit trinity and focus attention on the indestructibility of the human spirit.

⁷ Galatians 2. 20 (Christian Bible)

⁸ Eva Meyerowitz - Review of the Culture of the Akan by J.B. Danquah in Africa, 1952, p.360.

The Christian cross, of course, is symbolic of Life, death, and resurrection. Specific and many are the ideas conjured by it. Its presence is, therefore, a 'book' wherein may be read the whole fact of Christianity, Christian Life and Christian worship. It seems that the idea of using the accepted Christian form of the cross, which nonetheless is not too removed from the indigenous form, is to help indicate the sameness of the idea they both convey.

'Nyamedua' and the pot are the usual way of indicating that God is with the household or shrine or whatever has this piece before it. It has been noted that in the religious system of the Ghanaian, God is transcendental and incomprehensible and it is impossible to represent Him naturalistically. The commonest way of reminding people of God and His blessings is by this simple means of the Nyamedua.

One of the 'essentials' of this Nyamedua is that the forks which carry the pot should be three. I have seen four forks in a few places; but this form of the Nyamedua is not particularly Akan. Of course, in parts of the North there is a type of this shrine representing the idea of the Nyamedua, which has no forks at all but a broad hollow top. The principle of the Christian Trinity is read into Nyamedua with the three forks, and appears to fit in well. This is the reason for the adoption of the three-forked Nyamedua in Emmanuel Church as the base of the pot for the font.

The pot is symbolic of love, cleanliness, kindness and life. The pot "Dwasen" (Akan) "Kadu" (Adangme) is the bath pot. Its significance as part of the font is indicative of the cleansing effect of the Christian baptism - Though our sins be scarlet He washes us clean.⁹

The stool is crucial in the art of the Emmanuel Church. I am currently looking at the stool in Akanland and would like to suggest that it appears to be a very appropriate visual art in this new sphere. My hypothesis is that it is a symbol of solidarity, and love; at the same time

⁹ Isaiah 1. 18. Ps. 51 2.7 Acts 22. 16. 1 Cor. 6. 11.

an artifact whose association with government and politics, magic and ritual, the world of the living and the ancestors, is very significant. It is meaningful to the Ghanaian and it could be a medium through which the central message of the Christian Gospel could be made meaningful to Ghanaians who already know of the black stools, both as altars of the ancestors and the mundane things which help to remind them of their history, unity, solidarity, continuity and link with the dead, the living and the yet-to-be-born. This is why it may be a useful visual art to help people to comprehend the teaching of the church about the nature of the Christian Spirit world.

The way the President of the Methodist Conference and the whole council of the Clergy accepted this new idea, conceived and executed in this new Emmanuel church, is an indication of the apparent maturity of the church and her preparedness to do something concrete about the old method of evangelism which people have complained of in this country for some time past.

The keenness of the Akan, for example, about the duties and awe for the chief, and the veneration of the ancestors through stools could be well adapted to Christianity.¹⁰

More serious study of the arts of Ghana in general will certainly be useful to evangelists; for at least, the fundamental and rudimentary educational principle of teaching from the known to the unknown will be observed, and elimination, if there should be any, will be by healthy substitution and, or, adaptation.

¹⁰ Dr. P. Sarpong in the conclusion of his article on "Akan Stool", *Anthropos* Vol. 62 1/2 1967 reiterates this social fact - the fact that the concept of the stool and what it means to the Akan could be exploited in Christian worship. How to do this needs a lot of background research and planning. He is not alone in this hope. Indeed, the Catholic Church is showing a lot of initiative in this matter of finding and using meaningful church art today.



1. General view of Emmanuel Church from the front.

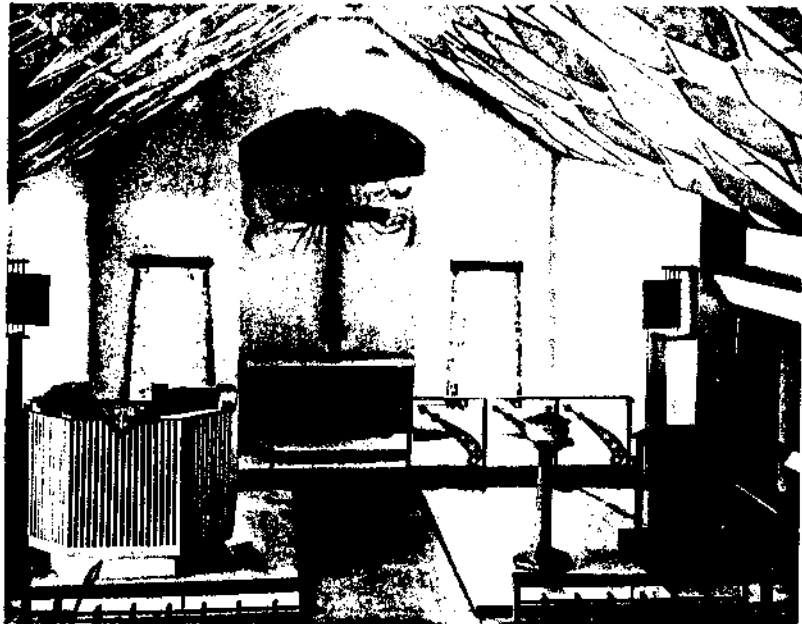


2. A side of the wall from inside the Church. The motifs serve as ventilations.



3. The font - in the fore-ground, with part of the altar area in the background.

4. The Altar - Akan Stool with the Crucifix and the half moon state umbrella. Note the 'eye' behind the crucifix.





5. The Altar. The Stool. Note the spikes on the S ky dua and rounded embellishment on it, and the embossed sign - Gye Nyame.

6. The Altar, crucifix under the state umbrella.

