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YORUBA RELIGIOUS CARVING (A REVIEW)

by A.K. Quarcoo*

The purport of the main title of Father Kevin Carrol's book 'Yoruba Religious Carving'¹ is greatly elucidated by the sub-title, Pagan and Christian Sculpture in Nigeria and Dahomey. Although the word 'pagan' is not, to my mind, a very expressive term, readers may have heard and seen this word often used and are likely to know what he refers to that way. He may regard the term, at best, as a technical one.

Father Carrol sets out to indicate how investigation and experimentation are proceeding in Nigeria on Church Art to find out whether Orthodox Christian Art can or cannot be supplemented or substituted by the sculpture of any particular culture. He is primarily, of course, concerned with Ekiti district sculpture as a microcosm of the Yoruba or Nigeria sculpture.

Throughout his book, he keeps putting forward the proposition that Yoruba sculpture is not so heavily religion-orientated as the general, but scanty, literature on African Art tends to suggest. According to Father Carrol, (Chapter 1) the experiment which commenced as far back as nearly three decades ago was inspired by the finding that pagan, christian and moslem adherents were familiar with the pagan liturgical year and could describe it in detail. When this occurred to Father Patrick Kelley, Provincial Superior of the Irish Province of the African Missions Society, he decided to establish a centre to adapt African crafts to Christian uses, since it was evident that recognition of the traditional arts or/and crafts would be more meaningful to the local converts or those yet to be converted.

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1. Pagan and Christian Sculpture in Nigeria and Dahomey by Kevin Carrol. Forward by William Fagg. Published by Geoffrey Chapman, London, Dublin, Melbourne, 1967. Chapters XIX Illustrations 128. Line Drawings XXII Colour Plates 2. Price 90/-.

Father Carrol's book has XIX Chapters; Notes to the Plates, Bibliography and Index sections. The sequence of the chapters leads the reader gradually but surely to the theme and the main hypothesis of the book. As I see it, Father Carrol was concerned in drawing our attention, not only to the fallacy of labelling all 'African sculpture' as religion-orientated or motivated, but also to the rudimentary paedagogic principle of reaching the unknown from the known. That it is unrealistic to put all types of African sculpture, or arts in general, in one 'pegion hole' of 'art with a religious background' or art for religion has, of course, been already recognized by a few recent art historians and anthropologists or sociologists who look at society through art. Father Carrol's meticulous first hand field study of the problem is very significant, and it puts him among the class of scholars whose work on the liturgical arts must be examined painstakingly.

Carrol talks generally first about the Ekiti experiment, and then discusses, in chapter two, his view of African Imagery. To him African sculpture ranges from highly naturalistic to very abstract figures, and both the style and subject matter cover a wide field. This, of course, is true and its restatement is necessary only because many books on African sculpture do not make this clear.

The 'result' of the experiment is yet to be specifically determined, but the fact is that it invokes the vital teaching or communication principle. The substance of the book should be able to stimulate more interest and observation of traditional art in relation to the Christian Church.

Yoruba Religious Carving is easy to read. The style is simple and the order of the subject matter of the chapters attempts to lead the reader sequentially to the heart of the problem being investigated. Chapter III talks generally about Nigerian art, and here, Carrol draws our attention to or, at least, reminds us of the range of style and subject matter of Yoruba sculpture. The earliest known example of the Nok culture is cited and the reader is reminded of the usually stylised interpretations of natural forms. The famous Ife and Benin bronze works are mentioned.

Chapter IV reveals the type of objects usually carved

in Yoruba. Among those named are masks, religious objects, and Ibeji figures. Yoruba carvers illustrate Yoruba life, dress, tools, ornaments and anecdotes of village life. The writer expresses doubt about symbolism as a feature of Yoruba art being as pronounced as is depicted by such writers as Leon Underwood or Elsy Leuzinger. He, however, does not rule out symbolism in Yoruba art.

The point about Yoruba religion in the fifth chapter is very relevant. The outline of Yoruba cosmology is discussed to show that Yoruba carving, and art generally, could be used as a medium for effective evangelization.

There is God the supreme being, but a host of spirits are considered only because they are supposed to be sent by God. Hence Yoruba verbal art suggests that God is Immanent, although the style of the traditional liturgy does not clearly indicate this. There is carving devoted to religion and religious behaviour but as is suggested:

"The Yoruba do not identify any spirit with an image; nor could it be said that they believe spirits come and dwell in images. Reference is made to Talbot's analysis of the beliefs of southern Nigerians. That with few exceptions the deities are represented by symbols before which sacrifices are offered they are never thought of as gods themselves, but only convenient means of concentrating the attention and providing a point of worship."

Again, the point is made that 'words like fetish, juju and 'idol' are pejorative and cannot be applied to Yoruba imagery with any precision'. We are told that Yoruba 'orisha' are personifications of attributes of God and it is not very right to accuse them of idolatry. This, of course, is a point of opinion. Father Carrol has, to my mind, raised a number of vital hypotheses for further field examination and this point is certainly one of them. In his book 'West African Religion', Geoffrey Parrinder made the same point about the so-called joujou, page 9. (See also M. J. Field, Religion and Medicine of the Ga People, pp. 77 - 78). Carrol's references should

be invaluable to those who wish to have a more detailed background to the sociology of the Yoruba.

In Chapter VI, Carrol seeks to describe the 'orisa' and what it meant to the Yoruba -- that description is excellent. Chapter VII is important, considering the title of the book. Typologically, religious carving, he says, could be divided into four: (a) Carvings which portray orisa; (b) those which portray cult members; (c) the mask - as distinct from the superstructure, implements, (d) architectural units decorated with 'scenes' from Yoruba life, pots, drums, shrine houses, and bowls. Eshu, the trouble maker, is often depicted with something in his mouth. His discussion of the types of carving showing cult members, masks etc., are helpful and his conclusion in this chapter, namely that the art of Yoruba carver, at least, as far as he has known it, is 'humanistic' rather than deeply religious even when directly concerned with the creation of objects is central to his hypotheses. If this is correct, the experiment aimed at adapting some Yoruba types of carving to Christian evangelism may be successful.

Next, in Chapter VIII, Carrol talks about what he calls 'humanistic art'. His suggestion that Yoruba art observes and reports the life of Old Yoruba people is valid. Their art illustrates their history - the court, religious cults and the farm. Village festivities, animals, and traditional history are also illustrated.

For the purposes of adaptation of aspects of the culture, the author observes, the culture must be known. Father Carrol is by this again re-stating the necessity of reaching new knowledge through the known.

In Chapter IX, the author tells us about the masked pagan feasts and how they are not serious things today. He says, now the dances are a pretext for collecting money. The feast is described efficiently.

Chapter X is the beginning of a survey of the work of carvers of three generations. Ulli Beier agrees that it might be valid to say that a great deal of carving serves no immediate religious function but it must be remembered that in Yoruba it is impossible to divide the sacred from

the profane. He has not been too happy about some of the figures and suggests that the 'puppet-like' and dull figures give only a 'profane impression'. However, he has said elsewhere (*Ibadan Magazine*, page 38, November 1960) that an African carver abandons the 'deeply expressive art of religion and settles down comfortably to tell anecdotes of Christ'. Father Carrol is anyway unable to accept Ulli Beier's thesis - that Yoruba art is 'deeply expressive' of religion. He thinks the Ekiti experiment is worth pursuing, for a fully developed Christian art is not impracticable or beyond attainment.

The Chapters XI - XIV are devoted to the examination of artists of four generations. The comments on their techniques and intentions make interesting reading. Maybe, readers would be helped from Carrol's first-hand knowledge of, and association with, Auregon, Bandele, Lamidi and Otooru, to decide whether the belief that African carving is inseparably connected with pagan religion is valid or not. The reader may be able to see the degree of involvement of each of the four representatives of the four generations, in religion. His case studies strengthen his belief that there is much more humanistic art than is known of Yoruba carvings.

Examination of carvers does not stop here with these traditional carvers. A few modern artists have been highlighted in Chapter 15. His hope for the success of the experiment stems also from the trend of Yoruba carving today. He mentions Ben Enwonwu; (painting of Madona), Benin carvers for tourist trade, Felix Idubor; Festus Ideben and Paul Osagie Osifo. None of these modern carvers could be said to be influenced in his work by religion or religious ideas only.

The account in Chapter XVI is not unlike what one comes across in a few parts of Ghana where some effort is recently being made to turn away from the orthodox Gothic style of church building. (See A.K. Quarcoo in *Research Review* Vol.4 No.3, 1968, Institute of African Studies, Legon). It is not surprising that Arabesque patterns from Hausa mud wall decoration appearing on Ondo Church aroused opposition. Carrol's account from which quarter comes the greatest opposition to the new forms of churches and the church art generally is typical of what I have found in Ghana recently.

The opposition comes mostly from the older generation and some of the more 'sophisticated' church men. Trained as they happened to be to accept nothing but the Renaissance art or the commercial art to which they have been used in their new 'acquired culture', they find the experiment not worthwhile. Opposition to new forms of church art is a universal attitude not confined to Africans and this is rightly hinted at by the writer. The chapter should be read by all people desiring to have an idea of the odds that anybody or people wishing to bring about such changes are bound to face. (cf. Ecumenical movements).

Somehow, the younger and more educated generation is more sympathetic towards the introduction of the new forms, which may be called 'African', into the church. This may be due to better understanding of the message of the Christian gospel and or the desire of the African to 'rediscover' himself. The chapter mentions the efforts of some of the scholars of Nigeria who have been eye-openers in this sphere. Dr. S.O. Biobaku is said to have helped in co-ordinating the efforts of those working in the field of Nigerian culture. Ulli Beier has also helped to get intellectuals informed about Yoruba art. Dr. K.O. Dike, for example, pleaded for the preservation of traditional art and symbols at the Africanists Congress at Accra in 1962.

In Chapter XVII, the idea of 'imagery' regarded as Christian is discussed. His analysis of why the Yoruba converts looked upon the garb in which the gospel was presented to them from Europe as "the church art" is worthy of note. Surely, this is the major factor in the artistic taste of most African Church men.

Even in Ekiti, Christ and Mary have been represented in an art tradition recognized as christian - an 'archtype the long gown with 'girdle and perhaps a cloth - (veil for Mary). Other figures could be represented in traditional Yoruba style. Incidentally, Carrol hints that long hair is not worn by either men or women in the area and this should normally make the form strange to those not accustomed to the 'long haired Christ'.

One of the causes of narrowness is isolated by Carrol. He points to the lack of understanding of even 'christian art'

by foreign evangelists, who pass on their narrowness to African converts and evangelists. The scope of sculpture is large. Apart from statues, and doors, he says other church furniture could be carved, or carvings shown, on them. Going by canons of orthodox Christian imagery some of the carvings of Paul Osagie and Otooru are judged to be rather 'pagan' and so 'sacrilegious' and unacceptable.

The writer shows that he is aware of the dangers in the experiment. For example he says on Page 158, that 'An over-emphasis on, and an isolation of personalities in christian iconography can expose the poorly instructed Catholics to the danger of a type of orisa worship'. Although, as he also says, that could not be strictly called idolatory he nevertheless admits that it is inadmissible. Probably, some ecclesiastics may like to disagree with him. Examples of syncretized christian and pagan liturgies in Haiti, Cuba and Brazil are quoted. There is the danger of religious stavism. Hence the author acknowledges what through his background, he regards as legitimate fashions or styles in Catholic art. (e.g. Statues of 'our lady of Lourdes, or Fatima'). However, he still feels that other biblical figures - could be more meaningfully depicted to the people of Ekiti or Nigeria, for that matter, through the artistic idiom of their culture.

He does not appear to me a writer caught up in a romantic fantasy. He does not advocate a mere iconography of African art. He does not say so, but his arguments seem to bear this out.

One other very general view that is held about African, or so called primitive sculpture, is that, it is all symbolic, and some even think that no form of it is ever naturalistic. Carrol attacks this view and draws attention to the error in regarding all Yoruba art as symbolic. Indeed, he swings almost to one extreme side in this argument. He however, admits that there is, nonetheless, some symbolism in Yoruba sculpture. This may be a worthy hypothesis for anyone who is interested in further investigation in this field of study.

In this Chapter XVIII, Carrol assets that the 'Bible imagery' in many ways is close to 'African imagery', the common factor being that meaning is dependent upon the context.

It is a bold stand to take in representing on the screen in the baptistery of Paul's Church, both pagan and christian traditions of art. It can be inferred that evidence is being marshalled to prove the practicability and necessity of using traditional arts in the Christian Church.

The idea, as the facts show, is to seize upon elements of 'good and truth' in the Yoruba concept of beauty, for effective christian evangelization. There is a desire to secure true and inward conversation and it is hoped that the use of elements of the culture would act as allies in the exercise.

The arguments, I think, are scholarly. There is awareness that the present art on the screen in the baptistery of St. Paul may not be absolutely satisfactory. However, it shows the type of thinking essential in Nigeria, for the development of church art, not excluding poetry and music. In addition to expressed views of the Vatican Council's constitution of the church, Father Carrol's book helps us to know more about the realization, desire, and stand of the Catholic Church in this matter of the Christian liturgical arts in Africa.

After the survey documented in Chapter I - XVIII a very crisp summary is made under the heading 'The Church and African Culture'. Attention is drawn to Catholic documents and pronouncements on African culture and the church, which interested readers may do well to examine.

A word about the pictures. The pictures are good. May be, more colour photos would have been an asset to the explanations he gives on colour schemes of Yoruba art, but the cost of such addition may not justify the meagre improvement that would have been brought by them.

The notes to plates are good and very helpful. Father Carrol's book has many implications. It should be able to stimulate interest in more and further scholastic examination of Yoruba art and African art generally in the context of the Christian liturgical art.

The style of the book is simple and the points he makes which can be regarded as hypotheses for further examination of the subject, stand out.

I cannot help agreeing with William Fagg, who has devoted a great part of his life in studying African ethnography, when he admits that the book comes to fill an important gap in every library on the study of Yoruba culture, and the Christian liturgical arts in Africa. It is the type of book for Museums, Institute of African Studies, and Art departments in schools and colleges; it is a book which private individuals interested in African visual arts should profitably own.