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Utilization of African Designs on Religious Artifacts: An analysis of Religious Artifacts at the All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi

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Abstract

Historically, African Designs were used as inspirations in paintings by European cubist and expressionist artists. Inspirations of African designs are also seen on religious artifacts that are today exhibited in modern cathedrals, chapels and churches all over the world. Scholars are concerned however by the minimal utilization of inspired African designs on religious artifacts in churches in Kenya. They note that this has a negative effect on the quality of worship in the churches. This paper sought to determine the ontology of artworks inspired by African designs at All Saints' Cathedral, Nairobi. The paper employed a descriptive research design and utilized a Formal Concept Analysis (FCA) in deriving a concept hierarchy of the collection of objects at the Cathedral. This was with a view to determining and documenting the properties of religious artworks at the Cathedral that have been inspired by African designs.

Key words: *African Designs, Inspiration, Formal concept analysis, Ontology*

Introduction

Designs from Africa have been used as inspirations on prints, textiles, sculptures and paintings that are displayed in prestigious museums of the West (Opoku, 2017). Historically, European cubist and expressionist artists were inspired by African designs as they produced indelible paintings (Venderame 2020, Awe 2010). Opoku (2017) and Venderame (2020) assert that religious artifacts with inspired African designs on religious art are regarded as commodities of curiosity. On the African continent, there exists minimal use of religious artifacts inspired by African designs in use in churches (Arowolo (2010), Kow (2011), Awe (2010) Wambugu (2012), Kanogu (2012), Githinji (1992)) despite the realization that utilization of inspired Africa design on the religious artifact would edify worship as it brings it to the heart and mind. (Githinji,1992). This paper sought to determine the ontology of artworks inspired by African designs at All Saints' Cathedral, Nairobi. The paper employed a descriptive research design and utilized a *Formalconcept analysis* (FCA) in deriving a concept hierarchy of the collection of objects at the Cathedral. This was with a view to determining the properties of religious artworks at the Cathedral with inspired African designs.

Religious Artifacts Inspired by African designs

Ocvirk, et al (2010) define 'design' as the underlying plan on which artists organize unified compositions of visual elements using line, colour, shape, texture and form. Clarke (2006), and Coffman (2015) posit that African designs were inspired by cross cultural assimilation through the adaptation of two or more cultures, ideas or beliefs. Russell (1993) and Azeez (2010) write that religious artifacts had been utilized as items of spiritual nourishment in Africa, even before

the arrival of early missionaries and the expansion of European colonial power in Africa. These artifacts were believed to be vessels for the spirits of the African supreme deity. Russell (1993) and Azeez (2010) further state that the type of designs utilized on the African religious artifacts included abstracted human figures, masks and ceremonial art objects.

The following are examples of religious artifacts inspired by African Designs

a) Traditional African religious artifacts were inspired by African designs. The traditional artifacts included rock paintings and bronze pots from the Igbo-Ukwu.



Figure 1: Running Horned Women; Pigment on rock, Tassili-n-Ajjer, Algeria. c.6000 4000 BCE.

Adams (2010), Mittler (2006), Stokstan *et al* (2005) explain that rock paintings range inform from highly abstract geometric designs to naturalistic representations of human and animal forms. Fig 1 is an example of rock painting at Tassili-n-Ajjer in the south of Algeria. Whitley (2011) notes that images of Tassili-n-Ajjer paid close attention to design details of clothing, body decoration, and headdress.



Figure 2 Roped Pot on a Stand; IgboUkwu. 9th 10th century CE.

The 'Roped Pot on a Stand' (Fig 2) is an example of bronze casted pot from the Igbo-Ukwu made with inspirations of African Designs. Adams (2010) and Stokstan & Cothren (2005) point out that Igbo-Ukwu items had designs inspired by African animals or insects. They pots were also highlighted using linear circular spiral designs.

b) Assimilation of Christianity and Islam religions in Africa also hadan influence on African designs which were eventually replicated on religious artifacts. The crucifix (Fig 3) from the Democratic Republic of Congo was such an example.



Figure 3: Crucifix, 16th century, Democratic Republic of Congo

- c) In contemporary Africa, euro-centricism had the most influence on African designs which were eventually replicated on religious artifacts. (Mugendi, 2020, Osanjo, 2020).

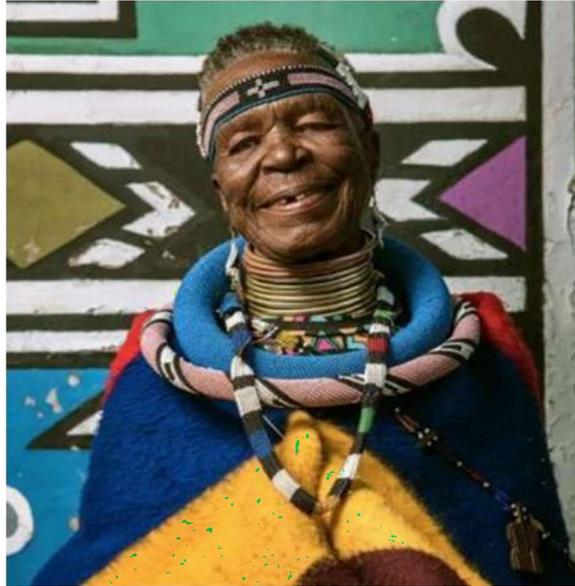


Figure 4 Ndebele Arts: A photo of Mahlangu, (2018.)

Van Vuuren (2012) notes that the purpose of native Southern Africa religious artifacts were to promote self-expression by religious deity, for ceremonial rituals, and for self-efficacy on body adornment. Lalioti, et al (2014) presupposed that contemporary artists such as Esther Mahlangu merged African designs with eurocentric designs on Ndebele contemporary religious artifacts. (Fig. 4). The resultant designs were characterized by brightly colored patterns, and geometrical shape and forms in varying sizes.

Religious Artifacts at the All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi

Ogutu (2020) writes that the All Saints Cathedral in Nairobi is the National Cathedral of the Anglican Church in Kenya and has its roots from the Cathedral of Canterbury, England. Cathedral Guild (2008) and Ogutu (2020) note that that All Saints Cathedral houses various

religious artifacts with inspired Africa design. The religious artifacts include piers, wall plates, baptismal font basin, stainless windows, Alter table/elements, candle stands, crucifixes and glittering rose windows.

The paper employed descriptive research design. A few artworks were sampled for analysis and discussion. The paper employed a descriptive research design and utilized a *Formal Concept Analysis* (FCA) in deriving a concept hierarchy of the collection of objects at the Cathedral. The analysis was based on line, colour, space and texture as Wango (2020) pointed out that elements of design can be used in interpretation of composition any artworks. . Adam (2010) explained that formal concept analysis is a principled way of deriving a concept hierarchy or formal ontology from a collection of objects(in this case artworks) and their properties.

The following is a presentation and *Formal Concept Analysis* of religious artifacts inspired by African Designs sampled at the All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi.

a) Prayer Texts

The themes on these plates in Fig 5 and Fig 6 below are prayers and the history of the early Anglican mission in Kenya respectively. The prayer texts are framed with glass while the Anglican Church History in Figure 6 is laminated using clear Perspex sheet. *Fig 5* is placed on the cathedral pillar while Fig 6 is in the charter house.



Fig 5 : Prayer texts

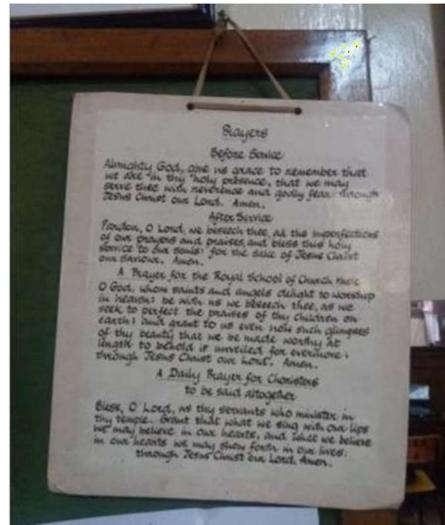


Fig 6: Anglican Church History

Source: All Saints, Cathedral, Nairobi

Fig 5 is framed with brown colour natural wood with a symbol of the golden crucifix at the top. The brown wooden framed is smoothed with texture toned of natural hue. The bold lines of crucifix symbol are partially engraved with golden colour. The symbol is meant to give an authorities significance on Euro-centric religion on that art form (Clarke 2006, Coffman 2015, Stoktan & Conthren 2005). The top of Fig 5 is an abstracted African landscape predominately expressed using primary colour harmonies. However, the abstract shape is depicting a tree at centre is express by red hue to reinforce the religious significance of the artwork. The background of the landscape is saturated by primary hue and foreground is saturated by complementary colour. The bottom of the Figure has calligraphic text aligned in five columns and done using black ink.

Calligraphic text is also used in Fig. 6 but in a single horizontal format. This implies that the use of color theory and media in the artistic design is euro-centric. The frame is of the artwork is a transparent clear glass used to protect the calligraphy art form

atmospheric degradation. Fig. 6 contains calligraphy text with minimal designs inspired from Africa.

b) Memorial plates



Fig 7: Memorial plate



Fig 8: Memorial plate

Source: All Saints, Cathedral, Nairobi

These engravings in Fig 7 and 8 are inside the Cathedral are done on metal. The purpose of these engravings were to commemorate important events in the church's history and also to commemorate distinguished deceased members of the church. They are both rectangle in shape. With Fig 7 bring orientated in landscape format and Fig 8 in portrait format. The remaining parts on all these engraving have tactile textual effects due to font of the text.

Fig 7 has an image of an African wild animal in relief at the top centre. This was similar to designs depicted on rock paintings and reported by Whitley (2011) and Stoktan & Conthren (2005). The border design in Fig 8 is also beautifully decorated with patterns of twigs and leaves that are inspired from Africa.

c) Textile Fabrics



Fig 9: Picture of a printed Fabric



Fig 10: Picture of a Cushion used for kneeling on

Source: All Saints, Cathedral Nairobi

Fig 9 is a print fabric of an abstracted African man carrying a cross. Whitley (2011) and Stoktan & Conthren (2005) report on the usage of abstracted human figures in the African context. The printed fabric has a variety of solid action lines in brown hue. Clarke (2006) and Coffman (2015) argue that brown hues are a depiction of African nature.

The Cushion used for kneeling on in (Fig 10) are used for ritual worship. They are embroidered with appealing medieval designs that have spiritual connotations and which were imported to Africa. (Lalioti et al, 2014). The woven borders have intertwined patterns made from bold lines that cross over each other. The lines and small crucifixes within the designs are dyed in yellow. The central part of the cushion is woven in red hue, contrasting the predominant central yellow of a large crucifix. The outer border is woven in blue, a cool hue that concentrates attention to the central dominating crucifix.

d) Gift platters



Fig 11: Basketry



Fig 12: Metal plate

Source: All Saints Cathedral Nairobi

Fig 11 and 12 are circular gift platters used in religious worship (Russell, 1993, Azeez, 2010). Fig 11 is a basket woven using palm leaves while the artifact in Fig 12 is made out of metal sheet.

The basket in Fig 11 is woven in a spiral shape with square woven shapes randomly inter woven in the weave. It has made using natural hues of palm leaves that have a variation of red- orange and green orange hue. The edge of the basket has dyed purple palm. The choice of hue is inspired from euro-centric with colours similar to those used by the Ndebele (Laloti et al. 2014)

The gift platters in Fig 12 are metal platters made in a circular shape. They have more concentric semi-circular shapes depressed in the middle. There are also intrinsic decorations similar to those on the bronze pots from the Igbo-Ukwu.

e) Sculptural forms: Lecterns and Baptism fonts



Fig 13: Lectern



Fig 14: Baptism font

Source: All Saints, Cathedral Nairobi

Sculptural forms at the All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi include Lecterns (Fig 13) and baptism font (Fig 14). Russell (1993) and Azeez (2010) have attributed religious functions to such artifacts in Africa. The Lecterns are constructed in wood in low relief carved while the baptism fonts are marble sculpture of the round. Both forms are in three dimension and heavily decorated.

The Lectern (Fig 13) is made of two sections: the upper part is a triangular form decorated with Euro-centric inspired motifs of African depiction. Adams (2010) reports that low-relief decoration was used to propagate the authority of British colonials. The lower section of the lectern is a cuboid form with Euro-centric design from the medieval and gothic ages. These are on the pillars supporting the triangular top. The use of low relief and application of natural colors on the wood has formed tactile provides an appealing visual texture to the artifact.

The baptism font (Fig 14) has a top semi- circular ceramic pond of smooth texture. The hollow pond is used during baptism. Lines and shapes are rhythmically used to pattern geometric shapes on the three pillars that hold the ceramic basin. The pillars are made of marble and symmetrically hold the pond. The three pillars are reminiscent of the three legged African stool (Adams, 2010, Mittler 2006, Stokstan and Corthen 2005).

f) Stained glass windows



*Fig 15: Stained Glass Window.
Source: All Saints, Cathedral Nairobi*

Fig 15 has examples of stained glass windows at the All Saints Cathedral that have art with theological themes and subject matter. All the windows glitter with harmonious colours in their compositions. The choice of colour harmonies on the stain glass have significant meaning to the worship rituals in the cathedral. The stain glasses are designed with geometrical shapes such as circles and arches inspired by medieval and gothic period (Adams 2010 and Mittler 2006). The intrinsic shapes of stain glass have incorporated inspired Africa

design that creates a good appeal (Coffman, 2015, Stokestan and Corthen, 2005). All stained glass windows have pictorials of human spiritual leaders leading worship in different poses. The two examples in Fig 15 portray a Caucasian and Black leader. The human figures are submerged in the backgrounds using colour harmonies that have significance to the role they play. Bold black lines are used to create a divide between the subject matter and the background in all compositions. The extensively use of line has been compared to that in Ndebele art (Lalioti et al, 2014) with visual texture being used extensively to create appeal and to communicate the message in the composition.

g) Memorabilia



Fig 16: Memorabilia

Source: All Saints, cathedral Nairobi



Fig 17: Emblem

The All Saints Cathedral also holds memorabilia related to events that happen in the community. Fig 16 for example shows memorabilia of preserved British Army sword, a Kenya Police tear gas canister and a broken rod. These are reminders of the struggle of citizens' rights in the country. Fig 17 is an emblem logo donated to the church for

preservation by a member of the congregation. These memorabilia clearly show influence of religious art at the Cathedral that has direct inspiration from events and designs in the community.

Conclusion

Using Formal Concept Analysis (FCA), this paper has derived a concept hierarchy of the artworks at the All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi, by documenting the artworks displayed there that have been inspired by African design. The paper has determined that apart from African design there is strong euro-centric influence in the religious art forms. Africa designs have been portrayed in a number of ways: by use of different kinds of shapes and clear portrayal of elements and principles of design. It is clear that there is need for enhanced utilization of religious artifacts inspired by African designs in African churches as they are said to edify worship by the congregants.

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