ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The Religious Themes in The Art works of Two Nigerian Artists: Professor Yusuf Grillo and Professor Bruce Onobrakpeya

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**Abstract**

This paper examined the works of these two famous Nigerian Artists, Professor Bruce Onobrakpeya and Professor Yusuf Grillo, who have considerable inspiration from the Bible for many of their Christian themes in their artworks and who have used their artworks to illustrate and interpret the Bible. Professor Bruce Onobrakpeya since 1967 has been handling important commissions for the Churches around Nigeria and abroad. In 1967, Onobrakpeya completed fourteen paintings based on the Stations of the Cross for the Saint Paul's Catholic Church at Ebutte Metta, Lagos, Nigeria. A year later he completed 60 illustrations for the Catholic National Catechism in Nigeria. In 1977 Onobrakpeya's print titled 'Life of Saint Paul' was presented by Bishop Fitzgibbon to Pope Paul VI on the occasion of his 80th Birthday. Professor Yusuf Grillo on the other hand appropriated the Stained glass technique towards the creation of Nigerian Christian Art. Professor Yusuf Grillo has produced several stained glass commissions in various Churches around Lagos and Nigeria. Grillo is probably the most popular African Stained glass artist in Africa. Though a Moslem, Grillo has profound knowledge of Biblical scriptures and his stained glass illustrations are evident. The paper examines the artworks of these two famous Nigerian artists, the locations, the materials used and the messages, themes and iconographic meanings these artworks convey.

**Keywords:** Christian Themes, Stained glass, Churches

## Introduction

Many of the Churches are replete with carvings and paintings which help to convey the essence of Christianity. However there is a kind of negative attitude which is working against the use of images in Holy places particularly when local figures motifs and symbols are employed. Onobrakpeya and Grillo have produced several Christian artworks with themes that drew inspiration from biblical incidents. Both Professor Grillo and Professor Onobrakpeya are academically trained artists who emerged on the Nigerian Art scene in the fifties .They both belong to the old Zaria Art Soceity with members like Professors Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Jimoh Akolo, Okechukwu Odita, Simon Okeke who are popularly known as the Zaria Rebels who responded to the ideas set forth by creating works that reflect the diverse culture of the Nigerian State. The Society was formed in 1958 by a group of undergraduate students in the Fine Art Department of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology later renamed Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. This paper discusses two important artists Professor Grillo and Professor Onobrakpeya, their contribution to Art and how their Christian Art has inspired the younger generation. Grillo invented a form of Stained glass painting that helped ease the challenge he encountered while designing the National Theatre during the Festival of African Art and Culture (FESTAC) held in 1977. The research is intended to provide a detailed study of Grillo and Onobrakpeya's artwork with emphasis on the Christian themes around the Churches in Lagos and Nigeria. As a Moslem Grillo has created Christian Art and according to him Islam and Christianity are from the Same Source. Onobrakpeya has Nigerianized his Christian themes to enable him to bring its universal message nearer home. Professor Bruce Onobrakpeya has contributed to the development of Nigeria Art by interpreting the Christian message through the use of local forms. His wall paintings of Stations of the Cross were eloquent of the new direction. Onobrakpeya has produced his artworks depicting several Christian themes such as Ore ri Canaan (Feast of Canaan), The Last Super (Life of Christ), Mother and Child (Life of Christ), and "Ofa Gbinowe' which was

presented to the Archbishop of Canterbury during his visit to Nigeria.

**Grillo's Religious Themes: Stained Glass Decoration in Lagos**

Grillo's stained glass designs had features of collage whereby he takes coloured pieces of Plexiglass Perspex and joins them together to form a design. Grillo's religious themes using stained glass works are used to embellish many churches in different Lagos metropolitan diocese. The stained glass paintings of Grillo celebrates Nigerian Stained glass of post Vatican ll Church. Grillo's plexi glass at the Holy Trinity Church Isaga Mushin was done in 1978. One of the works depicts Moses holding two tablets containing the Ten Commandments. Another work depicts Elijah as the first person to be restored before Jesus Christ. Then a representation of the son of a woman who fell sick and Elijah carrying the child from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his Mother in good health.

The artwork at the Presbyterian Church in Yaba, Lagos juxaposed coloured perspex of various sizes. It was made in a dome form depicting different abstract designs such as the Cross and Trinity. The idea of this work is said to have evolved during a discussion with the architect. The plexi glass work at the School of Nursing was amongst Grillo's earliest windows made with Stained glass technique between 1972 and 1973. (Dike & Oyelola, 2006). The windows made with wooden frames was titled the Medical Care Delivery depicting Medical care delivery in both the traditional and contemporary ways. The traditional way was illustrated with somebody cooking herbs for treatment while the modern way depicts a nurse preparing a medication also for treatment. The stained glass was commissioned by an architect who also suggested the appropriate theme for the work (Dike & Oyelola, 2006). Furthermore Grillo adroitly adapts superb painting colouration in his stained glass technique in St. Dominic Church Yaba. The artwork at St. Dominic Church Yaba was made to illustrate two giant shapes, a rhomboid dominated by twelve giant petals, giant iconographic Christian motifs are depicted with varied cross shapes, the anchor and an imperial cross in a crown of thorns. Grillo has used his technique of plexi glass to decorate some churches in Lagos and its environment thereby creating a great legacy for himself.

**Onobrakpeya's Religious Themes**

Professor Bruce Onobrakpeya who draws inspiration from biblical incidents produced several religious themes such as

**Saint Paul**

This is a plastograph produced in May 1979, a plastograph and a complete picture which was adapted from earlier bronzed relief painting now in the Vatican City collections. It was presented to Pope Paul VI during his 80th Birthday Celebrations in 1978. This picture tells the story of Saint Paul from the time he saw the light that led him to Christianity. The picture depicts his conversion to Christianity, his missionary voyages, his preachings as well as symbols of God's omnipotence.

**Pope John Paul l:**

Apreme pontiff to Nigeria in February 1982: The focus of this artwork is a message addressed to the Nigerian Child. The face of the pontiff comes out as a mask which serves as a pedestal for his full figure, staff in one hand while the other is raised in blessing.

**Ore Ri Canaan**

A plastograph made in 1982: Ore ri Canaan is a picture which illustrates the biblical feast of Canaan. It is based on the New Testament story about the marriage feast in Canaan, where Jesus Christ performed the miracle of turning water into wine. According to the story the celebrant exhausted their wine. On seeing this Mary implored her son Jesus Christ to save the situation by using his miraculous powers. Christ directed them to fill the empty pitchers with water which he subsequently turned into wine and so there was enough wine for the feast and the ceremony went on.

**Life of Christ**

A plastograph relief made in 1972: This is a

composite picture based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. A collage of used blocks from a border round a large central piece. The top and bottom fringes show plates that have been used to print some passion print.

**Jesus and the Women of Jerusalem**

The subject is a biblical one with each of the prints depicting a different moment from Jesus' last days on earth as a man beginning with his condemnation by Pontius Pilate and ending with his crucifixion and laying on the tomb. The episodes known in Christian theology as Stations of the Cross are precisely detailed and dramatises but have been placed within an African setting. The apostles are adorned with vividly patterned local adire prints. The overall pallette is blue and green with hues of yellow and geometric shapes abound.

**Obaro Ishoshi**

This is a plastocast painting made in 1983. This is a picture based on the theme of Christ's resurrection. Obaro Ishoshi in Urhobo means the frontal view of a church. This composition shows the frontal view of an imaginary church which appears to retain some of the buildings scaffolding. There are two images of Christ. The first one shows Christ on the Cross during crucifixion and the twelve apostles whose figures are shown in the composition at the apex of the intricate mesh. Also shown in the picture is a crown of thorns.

**Annunciation**

A plastograph made in 1983: The picture shows Mary surprised at the message from the angel. She is shown asking the angel "How can this baby be born seeing that I know not a man? It tells a story of the Virgin Mary and Angel Gabriel during the annunciation. The picture is a series inspired by the Annunciation in the New Testament. The angel Gabriel acting on God's instructions appears to the Virgin Mary and reveals that she would be the Mother of One who would grow up to be the Saviour of the world. There are different versions.

**Challenges: Diminishing Culture, Conservation, Preservation of These Religious Art**

The challenges of arts in Nigeria range from diminishing culture and tradition which are major inspiration of arts. Poor preservation and conservation of these pieces of valuable resources such as Grillo stained glass has not been properly conserved in recent times. His stained glass was recently pulled down in the All Saint's Church Yaba because of the church politics and the renovation of the church.

Other factors are poor capacity development, funding and institutional development amongst little collaboration between the public and private sector.

In a personal Interview with Professor Bruce Onobrakpeya in his home, he mentioned that Christian Art was not a popular theme because many of the Christian artworks produced by Nigerian artists were rejected and others were barely tolerated. Examples of the modern Art rejected was the fourteen Stations of the Cross paintings he was commissioned to produce used to embellish the St. Paul's Church in Ebutte Metta, Lagos that was pulled down and the Stained glass artwork at All Saint's Church Yaba Lagos because they wanted to renovate the Church altar and that Grillo was a Moslem. He further says that they seems to be some kind of demand for contemporary artworks with Christian themes. Professor Bruce Onobrakpeya mentioned that in the fourteen Stations of the Cross he produced for the church he faced criticisms from the church because the people wanted to see Jesus Christ as a white man and not a black man and adorned in European robes not in the appearance that resemble the local. They believe that Jesus' image should be white and not black.

**Conclusion**

Onobrakpeya and Grillo have made several contributions to Religious Art. Both artists have been inspirations to their contemporaries as well as the younger generation of artists in Nigeria and African Art.

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