Oye-Ekiti Workshop: Creating African Christian Art in Nigeria

Nicholas J. Bridger

In 1947, Irish missionary priests and Yoruba artists began developing a unique genre of visual expression, a Yoruba-Christian art fusion, for the use of churches, schools and laity in Yorubaland in British colonial Nigeria. A radical departure from both the customary arts of the Yoruba people and European Catholic visual practices utilized in missions in the early twentieth century, this art production was centered at a newly established workshop in Oye-Ekiti, in rural northeast Yorubaland. The ideas of the Oye-Ekiti art workshop (1947–1954) challenged the dominant colonial and clerical attitudes towards the local culture and signaled a clear step away from the Eurocentric status quo.

During the first half of the twentieth century and the last decades of European imperialism, the Church itself began the process of decolonizing its Asian, African, and Latin American dioceses. A key promoter of these efforts was Archbishop (later Cardinal) Celso Costantini (1876–1958), the secretary of Propaganda Fide (its directorate of missions). In the 1930s, Costantini formalized the approach called “inculturation” which is “the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures” (Shorter 1988: 11). In a mission context, it refers to the creation of indigenous Christian art, thereby helping a person, through artistic expression, to figure out how to be both a Christian and an African at the same time.

Father Patrick “Doc” Kelly (1911–88) of the Society of the African Mission (S.M.A.), was influenced deeply by this farsighted, high-level Vatican discourse. In 1946, his fellow missionaries elected the dynamic Kelly to be superior of the Irish province of the S.M.A. from which he planned to build a new kind of institution to inculturate Christianity within African culture (Carroll 1982: 1). He recruited two young priests with aptitude and enthusiasm for art and innovation, Kevin F. Carroll (1920–93) and Sean Oliver Plunkett O’Mahoney (1920–2001) to establish a workshop and create a new genre of art at Oye-Ekiti in rural northeast Yorubaland, hoping thereby to establish a new relationship between the Church and the local people.

 Carroll recruited dozens of local Ekiti men and women as wood carvers, weavers, bead workers and others to develop a Yoruba-Christian art production for the uses of Catholic churches in Yorubaland. He carefully assembled three woodcarvers whose work became emblematic of the workshop and its new art. The central figure among these Oye-Ekiti artists was an accomplished Catholic sculptor, George Bandele of Osi-Ilorin (1908–95), the son of “one of the greatest masters of the pre-modern tradition” of the Ekiti region, and trained by one of his father’s assistants in the Opin-Ekiti style (Picton 2002: 100). Another recruit, a home-trained, 23-year-old carver, Lamidi Olonade Fakeye (b. 1927), a Muslim from a distinguished carving lineage in Ilu-Orangun, had agreed to a formal apprenticeship under Bandele for three years in the workshop context. A third significant carver, who put in a brief stint as a carver for Carroll, was Bandele’s father, the elderly but greatly respected carver and Yoruba traditionalist, Areogun (1880–1954). Carroll successfully wooed him in the last year of his life to try his adept hand at the new Yoruba-Christian art and thereby aligning the workshop and its new Christian genre even more strongly with the illustrious pre-modern carving tradition of Opin-Ekiti. Carroll’s open acceptance of non-Christian artists in the workshop paralleled his belief and encouragement that the artists, especially the carvers, should continue to accept commissions from their traditional sources of patronage, the royal courts and the traditional religious shrines, to keep them in touch with their cultural roots, the source of their artistic inspiration (Bridger 2002: 55).

In terms of collaboration between the patron and the artist, Carroll was reluctant to allow much exploration in the uncharted waters of the new genre. Carroll believed that the tactic he used with Bandele of challenging the newly employed carver to attempt a Christmas Nativity set was a successful catalyst. He asked Bandele to carve the kings in the mounted Yoruba verandah post style, who were followed by the Holy Family in a less characteristically Yoruba style (Carroll 1967: 4). Carroll encouraged Bandele to illustrate Bible-based stories in a literal approach, using Yoruba techniques and formal elements. He also recruited a well-versed...
parishioner to tell Bandele the particular story and then sometimes Carroll personally followed up on specific details (Carroll 1967: 4). Anticipating the Vatican's second international exhibition of "sacred art" from the missions for the Holy Year of 1950, Carroll, Bandele, and other artists collaborated on a series of pieces beginning in 1949 to comprise the international debut of this Yoruba-Christian fusion in Rome (Carroll 1967: 5–7). The workshop's Nativity sets from this experimental period reflect local Ekiti region's artistic practices merged with well-established European custom, as well as the Workshop's own innovations (Figure 1). Incorporating woodcarving, beadwork, embroidery, leatherwork, and weaving, the mixed-media art program of the crèches sent to Rome at this time exemplify well the concerns of the missionaries to explore the adaptation of Yoruba art forms to communicate Christian ideas for an African audience.

In both garb and features, the Three Kings appear as oba, or Yoruba kings. The Holy Family presents a much less clear cultural identity, distinguished from the Magi by their lighter skin tone and their carved and painted (i.e. non-textile) garments in the European Holy Family tradition (Carroll 1950: 344–54). But their physical features seem quite compatible with an African identity, except when grouped alongside the dark-skinned Magi. In his 1950 Nigeria Magazine article, which published the first photos of the workshop's new Yoruba-Christian fusion, Carroll, pointedly denies the Holy Family even a symbolic African identity: "She [Mary] is not painted dark as an African because everyone knows she was not an African but a Jew" (Carroll 1950: 353).

In retrospect, perhaps attempting to forestall the foreseeable criticism, Carroll seems to be protesting this inevitable African interpretation of the Holy Family. He rightly anticipated a strong negative reaction to the image of a black-skinned Jesus and Mary and the path of Africanization that this art experiment was taking. Seventeen years later in 1967, while still relating anecdotes to illustrate the patrons' watchful eyes and insistence that the artists follow biblical details rather literally in their work, Father Carroll's own comments reflect a fully comfortable acceptance of a clearly Africanized Jesus and Mary in the Yoruba-Christian art he continued to patronize and promote (Carroll 1967: 128).

The three dark-skinned Kings of 1950 appear unmistakably as traditional Yoruba oba wearing Kente-type strip-woven cloth, sacred beaded crowns and carry the accoutrements associated with Ifa divination, symbolizing Carroll's view that Yoruba traditional religion was a legitimate precursor religion to Christianity. In Lamidi Fakeye's recollection years later, he strongly felt that Father Carroll had always given the carvers great freedom in such matters (Bridger 2002: 70). Despite the many positive comments and a growing international clientele for Oye-Ekiti's art production, pronounced opposition to the project also appears among the Nigerian hierarchy and the indigenous clergy, laity, and college students (Bridger 2002: 70). Their attitude is reflected in the critical comment of an older Yoruba monsignor to Carroll, "Are you trying to take us back to what we have left?" (Carroll 1982: 6). The workshop's instigator and mentor, Fr. Patrick "Doc" Kelly, was not renewed in his term as provincial in 1952 due to a backlash within the Irish province against his more African-centered mission policies, including the workshop. By 1954, the new provincial superior ordered the workshop closed, although Carroll and O'Mahoney were allowed to carry on with their Yoruba-Christian experiment with a lowered profile in a decentralized way at their new assignments in Yorubaland (Bridger 2002: 68–9). For almost four more decades Father Carroll continued his leadership in promoting and commissioning African Christian art in Yorubaland and Nigeria's Middle Belt until his death in 1993 in Ibadan.

Postscript
In a period of recent fieldwork in Yorubaland inventorying Yoruba-Christian art in the summer of 2006, I visited St. Paul's Church in Ebute Metta, Lagos, where Fr. Carroll had commissioned the interior art in the Workshop's Yoruba-Christian style for this new church in
1960. At the time Carroll believed that some of the congregation's discomfort with the Africanized Christian art was based on the newness of the genre, which the passage of time would resolve. Forty-six years later, it became apparent that Fr. Carroll's forecast that popular discomfort with the Yoruba-Christian art would disappear was overly optimistic.

I noted the large Oye-Ekiti style Nativity figures, a carved baptismal font, and a baptismal screen dusty and pushed out of the way and unused. The biggest shock to me inside the church was the utter neglect and demotion of an imposing African Madonna by Carroll's carver Osifo in a prominent side altar, also dusty and obscured by a subsequently interposed statue of Our Lady of Fatima (a European devotional image) (Figure 2). Outside, the final shock was

![FIG 2](image)

The African Madonna, commissioned by Father Carroll from the Yoruba carver, Osifo, in a side altar, obscured by a subsequent statue of Our Lady of Fatima, at the St. Paul's Church in Ebute Metta, Lagos. Photograph: Nick Bridger.

Africanized Christian art still presents a contested terrain at least on the parish level.

**references**


