

Early Christian Church and the Byzantine Art: Inspiring Contemporary Christian Architectures and Arts in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper explores the profound influence of the early Christian church and Byzantine arts on contemporary Christian architecture and artistic expressions in Nigeria. It examines the historical development of Christian iconography, architectural styles, and liturgical practices that originated in the early church and evolved through the Byzantine period. By analyzing selected case studies of modern Nigerian churches and artworks, the study highlights how these ancient traditions have been reinterpreted and adapted to reflect local cultural contexts and contemporary societal values. Additionally, the research investigates the role of these artistic forms in fostering community identity and spiritual engagement among Nigerian Christians. Ultimately, this exploration underscores the continuity and transformation of Christian artistic heritage, illustrating its relevance and vitality in the modern Nigerian landscape. Byzantine art focuses exclusively on religious expression, particularly on the precise interpretation of church dogma in artistic form. The styles of architecture and painting that emerged from these concerns were characterized by uniformity and anonymity, as they were developed within a strict tradition and polished over time. This article examines the significance of Byzantine art, costume liturgy, chant, music, architecture, and painting in relation to the contemporary Christian church in Nigeria. The study applies a qualitative research methodology and anchors its theoretical framework on cross-cultural architectural semiotics, drawing on Mead's cultural translation and Bourdieu's field theory. It views church architecture as a symbolic code conveying religious meaning, shaped by the interaction between Byzantine legacy and Nigerian socio-cultural norms. The major findings reveal a growing interest in integrating Byzantine-inspired elements such as domes, mosaics, iconographic art, and cruciform layouts with indigenous materials and symbolism. Recommendations include greater theological and architectural literacy among stakeholders, expanding local craftsmanship training in mosaic and iconography, and developing a national guideline for culturally resonant sacred design.

Keywords: *Byzantine, Byzantium, Arts, Early Church, Contemporary Christianity, Architecture, Arts.*

Introduction

The phrase Byzantine arts refers to the cultural output of the Byzantine Empire, which began in the fourth century when Constantine the Great relocated the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome

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to Byzantium, which he renamed Constantinople [1]. The significance of Byzantine art cannot be overstated, as it greatly influenced early clergy members in expressing the spirituality of the church. This led to a continuous absorption in the church, with the aim of avoiding divine judgment or wrath. Their attire symbolizes celestial beings or revered individuals of divine origin. The early church utilized several pictures, including depictions of Christ, the Virgin Mary, angels, and saints, to evoke a profound spiritual experience and facilitate the conversion of its members. The architecture and artwork of the early church portrayed the presence of God, His angels, and Jesus within the church, instilling a sense of awe and reverence in the people. This greatly contributed to the conversion and belief of individuals, allowing them to personally experience the divine presence within the church. The essence of sacredness and divinity in the early Byzantine era is evident. The Nigerian church currently exhibits Byzantine traits, which have been embraced by denominations other than the Catholic Church in Nigeria and conveyed to other Christian nations. There is a certain liturgical procedure in the Catholic Church, and the hymn and attire of the priest can be traced back to Byzantine Christian culture. The architecture and art of numerous old churches in Nigeria now exhibit the distinctive character of Byzantine Christian civilization. Collectively, these factors have significantly influenced contemporary members of the Christian church. Indeed, the African independent churches imitate the styles and patterns of the early Byzantine Christian civilization. In this regard, Ojcowie Kościoła w teologii anglikańskiej and Ks. Sławomir Nowosad [2] stated the following: The Church of England, via its prominent ecclesiastical and theological leaders, has made efforts to understand the Protestant idea of sola Scriptura within the framework of tradition. Therefore, the Fathers of the Church assumed the role of "luminous celestial bodies" to direct Christ's followers towards a deeper comprehension of God's teachings and a more genuine expression of their Christian faith. The Book of Common Prayer and the 39 Articles often cite the Fathers as evidence of the Church of England's connection to the early Church. T. Cranmer, R. Hooker, and J. Jewel were proponents of the Anglican adherence to Church Fathers, despite facing criticism from Puritans. J. Cosin, J. Taylor, and G. Bull employed their approach to advocate for the episcopal nature of the English Church. The Tractarians, through their production of the Library of the Fathers, sought to resuscitate the Catholic faith, sacramental practices, and liturgical traditions within the Church of England, thus instigating a renewed interest in Catholic antiquity. To underscore the significance of Byzantine arts to the Christian church in Nigeria, Ks. Piotr Szczur Szczur [3] proposed that the iconoclastic structures of the Byzantine period served the Christian and liturgical purposes. This is evident from their adornment with Christian themes and their placement within church complexes today. This statement strongly supports the concerns raised in the article.

Statement of the Problem

Contemporary church architecture in Nigeria often defaults to international modernist or neo-Gothic styles, missing opportunities to embed deeper theological and cultural symbolism. This study interrogates the scant attention paid to Byzantine-derived visual theology and seeks to evaluate how such motifs could enrich Nigerian ecclesial spaces without compromising local identity.

Aim & Objectives

Aim: To assess the influence of early Christian Church forms and Byzantine art on contemporary Nigerian Christian architecture and arts. Document key Byzantine features: domes, crosses, square plans, iconostasis, mosaics in Nigerian church buildings. Investigate local adaptations of these features in Nigerian ecclesiastical contexts. Analyze theological and cultural rationales behind their integration. Propose guidelines for harmonizing Byzantine-inspired designs with Nigerian cultural identity.

Literature Review

In Matthew's gospel, specifically in chapter 28, verses 19-20, Jesus instructed his disciples to go out and convert people from all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and instructing them to follow all of his teachings. These words are considered to be the missionary commandments or commission of Jesus. The initial five centuries of Christianity encompassed the era that commenced with the advent of the church's founder, Jesus, and concluded with the definitive foundation of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Despite facing initial and prolonged resistance from the pagan Roman Empire, the church managed to acquire acceptance during this time and spearheaded the first significant surge of missions. Christian missionary endeavors not only established Christianity as the dominant religion in the Hellenistic (Greco-Roman) cultural sphere of the Mediterranean world, but also in regions such as Syria, Egypt, North Africa, the lands surrounding the Black Sea, Georgia, Armenia, the Persian Empire, Arabia, Abyssinia, and the Malabar Coast of India [4].

Christianity spread among the Roman, Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic populations, establishing the medieval Roman Catholic culture in the Western regions. Simultaneously, this millennium witnessed the imposition of severe restrictions on Christianity due to the Islamic threat from the west and south, as well as attacks on the western regions by non-Christian tribes such as Avars, Huns, Mongols, and Turks, which greatly disrupted the Christian communities in the East [5]. In 1463, the city of Constantinople, which served as the headquarters of the Eastern Orthodox ecumenical patriarch, was conquered by the Turks. The Turks swiftly seized control of Bulgaria, Moldavia, and Walachia. In 1453, the city of Constantinople, which served as the centre of the Eastern Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate, was conquered by the Turks. The Turks swiftly seized control of Bulgaria, Moldavia, Walachia, Hungary, Serbia, and Greece. The boundaries of Christendom were becoming constricted. The eastern border of the region extended from the Elbe River to the Carpathian Mountains, while the western line reached the Atlantic Coast. The endeavours of Franciscan missionary monks to expand their missions to Islamic populations in North Africa, Syria, Egypt, and Palestine did not yield successful outcomes during the Crusades, which primarily took place from the 11th to the 13th centuries as a Western response to the advancing Islamic forces. These missionary efforts eventually became inconsequential in the face of defensive actions. The late Middle Ages witnessed a decline in the expansion of Christianity [4].

The necessity for the reformation of the church began to emerge as early as the medieval era. During this period, several Western monarchs began to view the church as an extension of their own authority that they needed to govern. Undoubtedly, their desire to exert control over the church in all aspects had an impact on the church's organization. The issue of church control was exacerbated by the challenges surrounding church punishment. Certain zealous Christians during this period did not remain silent in response to the moral decline that impacted the Western Church [6]. In the 12th century, attempts were made to reform the church by enhancing its spiritual vigor and separating it from state-controlled churches. At the individual level, certain church leaders expressed their strong disapproval of the state's involvement in church matters and the accompanying authority by strengthening their loyalty to the Bishop of Rome, also known as the pope. These causes, together with others, led to the Bishop of Rome assuming a position of authority over other bishops. Over time, he proclaimed himself as the rightful heir to the position of St. Peter, thus gaining the loyalty of the Western followers who recognized him as the supreme authority of the Catholic Church. In 1054, the bishops in the East disagreed with this assertion and, as a result, they broke away from the West [7].

Norman and Tesche [8] argue that the term "Byzantine" itself reflects the misunderstandings that have frequently surrounded the history of the empire, as its residents would not have found the title fitting. In their perspective, the Roman Empire was none other than a state established shortly before the start of the Christian era, believed to be divinely ordained to unite God's people in anticipation of the arrival of his son. With a sense of pride in their Christian and Roman ancestry, and a firm belief that their earthly dominion closely mirrored the heavenly blueprint, they identified themselves as Roman or Rome. Contemporary historians concur with them to a limited extent. The title "East Rome" precisely referred to the political entity including the eastern regions of the former Roman Empire until 476 AD, during which there were only two emperors. The same phrase persisted until the latter part of the 6th century, as long as men continued to behave and think in ways similar to those of the previous Roman Empire. However, these centuries still experienced significant changes that had a deep and cumulative impact. As a result, by the 7th century, the state and society in the East were noticeably different from their previous manifestations. Historians have conventionally referred to the medieval empire as 'Byzantine' in order to acknowledge its unique characteristics.

Additionally, Norma and Telsche provide another example of the term Byzantine being derived from the name Byzantium, which was used to refer to a colony established by ancient Greeks on the European side of the Bosphorus, located halfway between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Due to its strategic location, the city naturally served as a transit station between Europe and Asia Minor (Anatolia). Constantine, the emperor, re-founded the city in 330 and named it Constantinople, after himself, referring to it as the "new Rome." The connection to Byzantium is significant as it highlights a key element of Byzantine civilization. In a subsequent examination of the Byzantine Empire, Hussey [9] observed that the empire's geographical location and enduring existence allowed it to bring together multiple realms, geographically, Asia and Europe.

The two periods being referred to are classical antiquity and the Renaissance, in chronological order. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the fate of the empire was closely interconnected with the success and downfall of individuals whose accomplishments and shortcomings shaped the medieval history of both Europe and Asia. The connections between Byzantines and individuals whom they

regarded as 'barbarians' were not always marked by hatred. Despite the Byzantine intellectual's conviction that civilization was limited to his own world, he was willing to extend it to the barbarians on the condition that they, together with their relatives, would embrace Baptism and pledge fealty to the emperor.

According to Jenkins [10], Byzantium was a society where different social classes mixed together, especially in its early decades. This challenges the notion of Byzantium being a rigid society with fixed social classes. Furthermore, while Byzantium's geographical location was advantageous during the early Middle Ages, it became detrimental to its interests in the 10th century. The conquest during that era introduced novel challenges in terms of organisation and assimilation, which the emperors had to address precisely when existing issues with economic and social policies demanded urgent and updated solutions. No satisfactory resolutions were ever discovered. The empire's last centuries were characterised by heightened ethnic and religious animosity, which undermined its strength in the face of incoming adversaries from both the east and west. The empire ultimately crumbled due to the inability of its administrative systems to sustain the weight of leadership imposed upon it as a result of successful military campaigns in Europe and Asia [11]. The Byzantine Empire refers to the eastern portion of the Roman Empire. It endured for a millennium after the western part disintegrated into different feudal kingdoms, until it ultimately succumbed to the attacks of the Ottoman Turks in 1453. The city of Byzantium was established on the European side of the Bosphorus as a colony. In 330 AD, the Roman emperor Constantine decided to re-establish Byzantium as Constantinople, which became the new capital of the eastern portion of the empire. This move was made with the intention of bolstering the empire's strength. Upon his demise in 395, Emperor Theodosius I partitioned the empire among his two offspring, and it remained permanently fragmented. Theodosius also established Christianity as the official religion of the empire, and Constantinople became the foremost Christian centre. Furthermore, the Roman Empire's western half came to an end with the fall to the Ostrogoths in 476 AD. The eastern portion persisted as the Byzantine Empire, with Constantinople serving as its capital.

Major Findings and Discussion

Early Christian Church and Byzantine Art: Inspiring Contemporary Christian Architecture and Arts in Nigeria. Byzantine art refers to the art, architecture, paintings, and other visual arts created during the Middle Ages in the Byzantine Empire, with its centre at Constantinople. These artistic forms were characterised by specific pictorial and architectural styles that were established in the 6th century and remained consistent within the empire until its ultimate demise in 1453, when Constantinople was captured by the Turks [12]. All these architectural structures and arts are embodied in Nigerian Christian churches illustrated below: Horsley [13] emphasized that many contemporary churches in Nigeria incorporate elements such as domes, arches, and intricate mosaics reminiscent of Byzantine architecture. These features symbolize the connection between heaven and earth, a common theme in early Christian and Byzantine church designs. Horsley further discusses the early Christian Church's socio-political context, which can be paralleled in contemporary Nigerian Christian architecture as a response to modern challenges. Like Byzantine art, which often used icons to convey theological messages, modern Nigerian churches frequently feature murals and paintings that depict biblical narratives and saints. This practice serves both educational and decorative purposes, bridging the historical with the contemporary. Stokstad and Cothren provide a comprehensive overview of Byzantine art and its characteristics, which can be traced in modern Nigerian ecclesiastical designs [14].

The early Christian Church emphasized communal worship, which is reflected in contemporary Nigerian church architecture. Designs often include large auditoriums and multipurpose spaces to accommodate congregational activities, aligning with the Byzantine focus on community gathering according to Nwankwo [15]. His article specifically examines how Byzantine architectural elements have been incorporated into Nigerian churches. Contemporary Nigerian churches frequently utilize symbolism in their architecture, drawing from early Christian traditions. For example, the cross is a prominent motif, similar to its significance in Byzantine art, representing faith and salvation [16]. He postulated that the impact of early Christian art on modern expressions of faith in Nigeria is significant. Ferguson [17] aptly maintained that symbolism in early Christian art, which continues to inspire contemporary Christian iconography in Nigeria, is inspiring the revival of traditional crafts. Influences from Byzantine art have led to a revival of traditional crafts in Nigeria, such as wood carving and stained glass, which are used in church decorations. These crafts are reminiscent of early Christian artistry and serve to enhance the spiritual atmosphere of worship spaces. The design of altars and sanctuaries in contemporary Nigerian churches often mirrors Byzantine layouts, emphasizing the significance of the

Eucharist. This design philosophy reflects a continuity of worship traditions from early Christianity to present-day practices [18].

In Onians [19], it is noted that Nigerian architects and artists are increasingly blending indigenous motifs with Byzantine and early Christian influences, creating unique expressions of faith that resonate with local cultures while maintaining a connection to historical Christian art. These references and facts illustrate how the legacy of early Christian Church architecture and Byzantine art continues to inspire and shape contemporary Christian architecture and arts in Nigeria. The influence of the early Christian Church and Byzantine art on contemporary Christian architecture and arts in Nigeria is a fascinating subject. These two traditions, which flourished in the Eastern Roman Empire, have inspired religious architecture and artwork worldwide, including in Nigeria, where the blending of local culture and Christian tradition creates unique expressions [20]. According to Faroghi [21], Byzantine architecture is famous for its grand domes and arches, which symbolize the heavens and eternity. Nigerian churches, especially those built for larger congregations, often incorporate these features. For instance, the use of domed ceilings or high vaulted arches in Nigerian churches like The National Ecumenical Centre in Abuja is inspired by Byzantine prototypes such as Hagia Sophia. Byzantine architecture is renowned for its innovation in dome construction, as exemplified by masterpieces such as Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul). The dome, a symbol of heaven and divine presence, has made its way into Nigerian church architecture in key projects such as the National Christian Centre in Abuja. This architectural style was likely transmitted through missionary influence and the adoption of global architectural practices during colonial and post-colonial periods.

Domes and arches in Nigerian church designs, especially in larger cathedrals and basilicas, often feature domes or vaulted ceilings, evoking the spiritual transcendence and cosmic symbolism that are central to Byzantine church architecture. The National Ecumenical Centre in Abuja, with its central dome and cross-shaped floor plan, embodies this fusion of Byzantine influence with modern construction techniques. Many Byzantine churches, such as the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, feature a centralized layout, which is reflected in some Nigerian church designs where the altar is central and visible from all sides, facilitating a communal worship atmosphere [21]. The centralized, cruciform layout commonly found in Byzantine churches (like the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna) serves a liturgical purpose by drawing worshippers' attention toward the altar. Nigerian churches, particularly in urban centers, often utilize such designs to facilitate large congregations while maintaining a focus on the sacred center. Stokstad and Cothren [14] are of the opinion that the use of religious icons in Byzantine art is characterized by its rich use of religious icons, mosaics, and frescoes. Although traditional Nigerian Christian art favors local motifs, contemporary churches have started adopting iconographic styles, particularly stained glass windows and murals that are reminiscent of Byzantine iconography. Churches like Holy Trinity Cathedral in Lagos use stained glass with biblical imagery similar to the mosaic art of Byzantine churches.

Also, Nwankwo [15] opined that Byzantine religious art often used gold leaf to convey the divinity of figures. Some Nigerian Christian artists incorporate similar techniques in creating artwork for churches, using gold or bright colours to highlight the sanctity of biblical figures. Liturgical furniture, decor, altars, and religious furniture are other aspects of Byzantine arts emulated by Nigerian Christian churches. Here, Ogunyemi [16] postulated that Byzantine liturgical art greatly influenced the design of altars, pulpits, and other church furniture. In Nigeria, there has been a trend toward commissioning ornate, handcrafted altar pieces that echo the rich detailing and spiritual symbolism seen in Byzantine altars, with intricate carvings or decorations that blend Christian and African motifs. Moreover, the influence of Eastern Orthodoxy in Nigeria is perceived; the growth of Eastern Orthodox Christianity has permeated Nigerian Christianity, and the church has seen the establishment of Eastern Orthodox Christian communities, such as The Orthodox Archdiocese of Nigeria, which adhere to Byzantine liturgical traditions [16]. These communities build churches that directly reflect Byzantine architecture and art, using domes, icons, and interior décor typical of Byzantine influence. Their services are also characterized by the use of Byzantine chant and iconography. Similarly, iconography in Nigerian Christian art and the local adaptation of Byzantine icons are noteworthy; Nigerian Christian artists have increasingly engaged with the practice of creating icons, a practice central to Byzantine art. Onians [19] stated that some artists blend traditional Byzantine iconography with African styles, creating hybrid works that reflect the fusion of early Christian influences with Nigerian cultural elements. This synthesis can be seen in the artwork of religious spaces, where saints may be depicted with African features but in a Byzantine compositional style.

Inadvertently, contemporary Nigerian Christian art and global influences are felt through Nigerian Christian artists and architects, blended with international connections, study, and incorporation of elements from ancient Christian and Byzantine art into contemporary practice [19]. Schools of art and architecture, along with international exhibitions, facilitate dialogue between Nigerian creators and Byzantine-inspired works from Europe and other regions. This cultural exchange continues to influence the design and decoration of churches in Nigeria. The cultural and religious landscape of Nigeria has long been a convergence point for indigenous traditions, colonial influences, and global religious trends. Among these, early Christian and Byzantine art with its deeply symbolic architecture, iconography, and liturgical elements has significantly impacted the development of contemporary Christian architecture and art in Nigeria. A detailed exploration reveals how this ancient artistic tradition continues to shape modern expressions of faith in Nigeria. The prevalence of Mosaic Art and Iconography in Nigerian churches is notable, with Byzantine religious art characterized by extensive use of mosaics, frescoes, and icons depicting biblical narratives and theological themes. These elements have been integrated into Nigerian church interiors, often through stained glass windows and murals [19].

Onians [19] also emphasized that Byzantine religious art is characterized by the use of sacred icons, which are more than mere depictions; they are considered windows to the divine. In Nigeria, there is a growing interest in the use of religious iconography, especially within Catholic and Orthodox Christian communities. Icons of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and saints are increasingly being commissioned by Nigerian churches, often adapted with African features and local elements. This reflects a fusion of Byzantine influence with Nigerian identity, preserving the spiritual purpose of icons while contextualizing them within African culture. In addition to architecture, Byzantine chant and iconography play a crucial role in Orthodox worship in Nigeria³². The use of Byzantine-style icons, including hand-painted depictions of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and saints, is a central part of the religious experience. Nigerian artists are now trained in this art form, blending Byzantine iconographic rules with African artistic traditions. The stained glass windows are an expression of Byzantine influence in the church; to this, Akinyemi [18] confirms that contemporary Nigerian churches, particularly those with higher budgets or large congregations, have incorporated stained glass windows, which recall the mosaic tradition of Byzantine art. These windows are often decorated with scenes from the Bible, the lives of saints, or abstract Christian symbols such as the cross, fish, or dove. While mosaics in Byzantine churches such as those at Ravenna were made from glass and stone, Nigerian stained glass serves a similar aesthetic and liturgical function, filling the interior spaces with colorful light that enhances the spiritual atmosphere.

Further, liturgical furniture and ornamentation, altars, pulpits, and crosses depict the Byzantine posture; thus, the Byzantine tradition placed a strong emphasis on the grandeur of liturgical spaces, where the physical setting of worship was intended to reflect the heavenly realm. This influence is apparent in the elaborate designs of altars, pulpits, and other religious furnishings in modern Nigerian churches [16]. In the same vein, altars and iconostases in Nigeria are a striking semblance of Byzantine churches. The altar is the focal point of the liturgy, often separated by an iconostasis (a screen adorned with icons). Nigerian churches, particularly those with Orthodox Christian influences, replicate this layout. Some Catholic churches in Nigeria have also adopted this aesthetic, creating altars with intricately designed retables (altar screens), rich in Christian symbolism and African craftsmanship [16]. The Cross Symbolism is one of the most well-known portrayals of the Byzantine church in Nigeria. For example, the use of the cross in Byzantine art was both spiritual and ornamental, with many variations such as the Greek cross and the crucifix being central symbols. Nigerian churches, especially in the Orthodox Christian tradition, have preserved the practice of prominently displaying crosses in their architecture and interior design [22]. These are often decorated with intricate patterns, combining Byzantine symbolism with Nigerian artistic motifs, such as geometric designs inspired by local art forms and fabrics. Similarly, Eastern Orthodox Christianity in Nigeria is noticed through the presence of Eastern Orthodox Christian communities in Nigeria, which have been a conduit for direct Byzantine influence on local religious practices and art. While not as widespread as Roman Catholicism or Protestantism, Orthodox Christianity has established a notable footprint in the country, particularly through the work of the Orthodox Archdiocese of Nigeria, which follows the liturgical and artistic traditions of the Byzantine Church [23].

A more persuasive Byzantine iconography is evident in the Church Buildings. Ferguson [17] aptly inferred that Orthodox Christian churches in Nigeria, such as those in Lagos and Abuja, are often modeled after Byzantine-style churches. They feature elements like domes, icons, and traditional Byzantine floor plans. These churches serve as centers of worship and community for Nigerian

Orthodox Christians while maintaining strong ties to Byzantine liturgical and architectural traditions. In the same vein, adapting Byzantine art to local contexts speaks volumes as Nigerian Christian artists and architects follow the design and pattern, while drawing inspiration from Byzantine traditions, often adapting these forms to reflect local cultural and aesthetic sensibilities. This process of adaptation can be seen in several ways, namely: (a) Africanization of Christian imagery into contemporary Nigerian churches, where religious artwork often depicts Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints with African features. This adaptation helps to contextualize Christianity within Nigerian culture, making the faith more accessible to local worshippers while maintaining the stylistic influences of Byzantine art. (b) Use of local materials by Nigerian artists challenges local craftsmen to source materials such as wood, metal, and clay in the creation of religious art and furniture, adding an indigenous element to the Byzantine-inspired designs. For example, wooden altars carved with African patterns may stand in place of the stone or marble altars commonly found in Byzantine churches. (c) It informs a fusion of global and local traditions; this, therefore, influences the development of early Christian and Byzantine art on contemporary Christian architecture and art in Nigeria, reflecting a broader trend of cultural exchange and adaptation. While the domes, arches, mosaics, and iconography of Byzantine art are clearly evident in many Nigerian churches, these elements are often blended with local artistic and architectural traditions. The result is a dynamic and evolving expression of Christian faith that draws from both global Christian heritage and the rich cultural diversity of Nigeria.

Byzantine art primarily focuses on religious expression, particularly in the precise portrayal of church dogma through artistic means. The forms of architecture and painting that emerged from this concern are characterized by uniformity and anonymity, honed through strict personal discipline. The outcome is a refined style and a profound expression of spirituality, which is seldom matched in Western art. These artistic forms and styles have also influenced religious architectural structures in Nigeria, as outlined below:

Also important are the early Christian costumes and images found in Nigerian Christian churches today. Justinian's legislation encompassed various aspects of the Christian life, including the process of conversion and baptism, the administration of sacraments at different stages, guidelines for the laity to avoid divine punishment, and regulations for those leading a devout life as secular or monastic clergy. Therefore, the implementation of a formal demeanor, attire, and clothing for the secular clergy while within the church was emphasized. The priest and monks were expected to embody angelic qualities, which involved wearing white garments and conducting themselves as if in the presence of God or as God's earthly representatives. The church was considered a sacred space, symbolizing the direct presence of God. Consequently, the clergy were expected to constantly exude an aura of being enveloped by the Holy Spirit. The prominence and ubiquity of popular Christian culture were most evident in the widespread reverence given to the icon, a simplified and symbolic representation of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or the saints [24]. The belief was based on the examination of visible phenomena, specifically the image of Christ. Based on the idea that what is visible implies the existence of what is invisible, it is easy to conclude that what is visible actually contains what is invisible. Therefore, the image of something deserves respect because it is believed to possess divine power. This belief stems from the notion that the emperor, as God's representative on earth, and his empire were a reflection of the heavenly realm. Consequently, Christians are obligated to show reverence towards Christ and His saints to an equal or greater extent. Consequently, the second commandment ultimately diminished in its effectiveness. Icons emerged in both private and public spheres throughout the latter part of the 6th century. They served as a conduit for divine connection for individuals and as a protective charm to ensure victory in combat. In the bleak period that ensued after the rule of Justinian I, no other aspect of the Christian faith served as a more effective catalyst for maintaining the morale necessary for the survival of the Byzantine Empire [25]. This phenomenon is found to be prevalent in Nigerian Christian spiritual and ritual practices.

The Early Christian Chant, Liturgy, and Music found in Nigerian Christian churches today are completely evidence of continuity from the Byzantine era. Monophonic, or unison, liturgical chant of the Greek Orthodox Church throughout the Byzantine Empire (330-1453) and continuing until the 16th century. In Modern Greek, the term refers to religious music from any period. Byzantine music, while associated with the expansion of Christianity in Greek-speaking regions of the Eastern Roman Empire, is primarily believed to have originated from the liturgies of Hebrew and early Syrian Christian traditions. Several types of hymns were notable, including troparion, kontakion, and kanon. The music is not connected to the music of ancient Greece and Byzantium [26]. The musical notation seen in manuscripts from the 16th to the early 19th century is commonly referred to as Neo-Byzantine due to certain artistic characteristics present in the music of that era. In the 19th century, the conventional

notation was deemed excessively intricate, prompting Archbishop Chrysanthos of Madytos to propose a streamlined variant that gained popularity through printing and is now employed in all Greek Orthodox liturgical music books. The melodies were predictable and standardized. Typically, a composer would select a traditional melody and make modifications to suit the requirements of the text. Certain melodic patterns were only used at the beginning of a chant, while others were reserved for ends, and some may be used in either position. Additionally, there were transitional periods, consisting of both conventional and seemingly unique compositions employed by distinct composers. The foundation of a mode, or echo, consisted of a few melodic formulas centered around a single fundamental tone. Each echo had its unique formulas, while several formulas were repeated in multiple echoes [27].

The liturgical books consisted of various texts and musical compositions, such as the Heirmologion, which had melodic model stanzas of Kanon hymns. The sticherarion contained hymns specifically for each day of the church year. Additionally, the psaltikon and asmatikon contained solo and chorus parts respectively, for chants such as the Kontakion and other solo choral pieces. The Akolouthial, also known as the Anthologion, had regular chants for vespers, matins, funerals, and the three liturgies of St. John [28]. The Byzantine Greek language was an ancient form of Greek used for administrative purposes and written communication during the Byzantine, or Eastern Roman Empire, until Constantinople was conquered by the Turks in 1453. Throughout Byzantine times, the spoken language underwent further development, free from the archaic tendencies observed in the written language. Byzantine Greek remains the designated language used for religious ceremonies in the Greek Orthodox Church. Chrysostom, St. Basil, and the pre-consecrated offerings, as well as optional chants, some of which might be used as transitions at any moment in the liturgy, are typically sung to single syllables or meaningless syllables [29]. These patterns of liturgical music have also found their way into Nigerian Catholicism and other historic churches. Also of essence are the early Christian architecture and paintings found in Nigerian Christian churches today. The early Byzantine architecture, influenced by the longitudinal Pastophoria church plan from Italy, prominently featured the utilization of spacious domes and vaults. However, circular domes were not physically or artistically suitable for a longitudinal arrangement of supporting walls [27].

Therefore, by the 10th century, a radial layout was adopted in most places. This pattern consisted of four equal vaulted arms extending from a dome over their crossing. The central, radial layout of this scheme was highly compatible with the hierarchical perspective of the world that was emphasized by the Eastern Church. This perspective is clearly depicted in the iconographic design of church adornment, which is presented in frescoes or, more commonly, mosaics that adorned the interiors of domes, walls, and vaults of churches, seamlessly merging architectural and pictorial elements [28]. At the apex of the central dome resided the austere depiction of the Pantocrator, symbolising the omnipotent parent. Beneath him, typically encircling the foundation of the dome, were celestial beings such as angels and archangels. Additionally, the walls were adorned with depictions of the saints. The Virgin Mary was frequently depicted elevated within a semicircular structure that enveloped one of the four extending arms. The congregation occupied the lowest realm. The entire church functions as a microcosm of the universe. The iconographic scheme in this context was based on liturgy and depicted narrative scenes from the lives of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Unlike in Western churches, these scenes were not arranged in chronological order along the walls. Instead, they were selected based on their significance as feast days and placed around the church according to their style and theological importance [27]. This church scenario is prevailing in Nigerian churches today. The execution of these mosaics and frescoes reflects their purpose as stationary, symbolic representations of the divine and the Absolute. The mature Byzantine style, which developed from the stylization and standardization of late Classical forms of Early Christian art, relied on the interplay of lines and flat regions of colour rather than three-dimensional shape. Specific characteristics were repressed in favor of a uniform facial structure, proportions were made flatter, and clothing folds were simplified into swirling patterns. The overall impression was that of detachment, with the physical depiction of a human figure being substituted by a spiritual image that conveyed its power through strong lines and vibrant colours [30]. Minimal artistic output was observed throughout the Byzantine Empire. Sculpture was mostly employed in the creation of intricate relief carvings on small objects such as ivory, which were commonly utilised as book covers, reliquary boxes, and related items. The refined and affluent society of Constantinople fostered the development of several forms of miniature arts, including gold work and enamel work. Manuscript illumination, while not achieving the same grandeur as monumental art and mosaic, played a significant role in disseminating Byzantine style and iconography throughout Europe and Nigeria churches today [31].

Recommendations

1. The Christian Association/Council should establish training centers for Nigerian mosaicists, iconographers, and liturgical designers.
2. Christian Association/Council develops design guidelines for integrating Byzantine elements within the Nigerian Christian church context.
3. Christian Association/Council should promote pilot projects with funding for prototype churches demonstrating best practices.
4. The Christian Association/Council should encourage the academic promotion of cross-cultural ecclesiastical architecture research.
5. Christian Association/Council should facilitate inter-denominational collaboration to share resources and standardize theological symbolic language in architecture.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it is evident that Byzantine art played a significant role in the dissemination of Christianity and its associated culture. This cultural influence extended beyond the Byzantine Empire to other regions of Rome and Africa. As individuals adopted these cultures, they acquired religious symbols such as depictions of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and various saints. Today, these paintings continue to be present in Christian churches, serving to cultivate Christian spirituality and holiness. Furthermore, Byzantine art has bestowed upon clergy members, such as priests and reverend fathers, an exalted status by portraying them as embodying the traits of God's incarnate or representations. In addition, the translation of the Greek liturgical language into English has contributed to the improvement of religious rituals in the church today. Therefore, early Byzantine art deserves praise for its role in preserving the Christian legacy up to the present day.

Byzantine art and early Christian Church architecture remain powerful influences on the Christian architectural landscape in Nigeria. From domed churches to iconographic imagery in stained glass, these historical forms continue to inspire Nigerian artists and architects who blend these traditions with local aesthetics, creating a unique and vibrant expression of Christian faith. By integrating Byzantine elements into their churches, Nigerian architects and artists create spaces that not only honour the ancient traditions of the Christian Church but also resonate deeply with local congregations, making these sacred spaces a unique fusion of history, culture, and faith, fostering a rich dialogue between tradition and modernity.

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