

# [Article] Symbolic Meanings of Art Images in Catholic Churches in Òşun State, Nigeria



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## Introduction

To be symbolic is to represent or express an idea, emotion, or experience in visual form. Symbolic meaning, therefore, refers to the attribution of significance to objects, events, or relationships; it concerns what a particular phenomenon (such as an image, symbol, or icon) eventually signifies. Gilbert (1998, 28) describes a symbol as an image or sign that represents something else by convention, association, or resemblance. Langer (1953) posits that a symbol is used to articulate ideas of something we wish to think about, and until we have a relevant symbolism, we cannot think about it. According to Jelínková (2022), symbolism is “the use of symbols to indicate ideas and attributes by giving them symbolic meanings different from their literal sense” (606).

Meanwhile, Nilothpal (2022) refers to symbolism as “the practice of using symbols to express and represent ideas in fields as diverse as literature, art, and science” (4,151). Therefore, he simplifies the meaning of symbolism by defining it as the practice of assigning symbolic meanings to concrete objects (4,050). Art is communication encoded within images, symbols, signs, and icons. Symbolism is a nonverbal language, ideas and customs that have been expressed by symbols in documenting human endeavors. In this regard, art and symbolism are interconnected.

Art has always been primarily a means of communication, and early human beings used it effectively. Abadía and Morales (2013), Storey (2008), Poiana (2015), Itanyi (2014), and Wunn (2000), among others, have demonstrated that the earliest art and religious practices may be traced back to the activities of early man in the cave, where art was initially employed as a symbolic depiction of God.

However, the use of images differs from one religion to another. For example, Islamic art, according to Khawaja (2011, 228), is mainly calligraphy, architecture, textiles, painting, music, poetry, and decorative arts in general, while the prohibition of images in Islam applies strictly only to the image of the Divinity (Burckhardt 2009, 29). Traditional African religion also uses sculptures, images, and shrine paintings in its temples.

Catholic churches in Nigeria, particularly in Òşun State, are renowned for their rich artistic heritage. The churches are adorned with various art images, including sculptures, paintings, and murals, often imbued with symbolic meaning. These art images and icons represent the Catholic faith, conveying messages of spirituality and devotion to God, the Creator of the universe. McGuckin (2008, 355) observes that for liturgical churches (such as Catholicism), the icon is sacred, and when Catholics come before an icon of Christ and bow down before it, they can express their heartfelt devotion to the Lord himself. Musurillo (1957, 357) posits that the symbolic method illuminates some of the deepest levels of man’s conscious and unconscious experience in his attempt to grapple with

the problems of Christian revelation. So, in applying the theory of symbols, one must not make the mistake of reducing everything to mere symbols or the subjective. Symbols are parts of elements of service to God. McGuckin (2008, 19) reiterates that

Those in the Medieval Greek Church who argued that images, icons, and relics ought to be destroyed violently on the pretext that they separated believers from Christ, rather than drawing people nearer to the Lord in devotion and piety, were resisted by the Conciliar Fathers. Orthodox tradition is deeply aware of this sacredness and its power to train the heart and soul to begin to see God's presence in the fabric of holy creation.

So, with the expression above, it is understood that images and symbols are not worshipped by some Christians, especially Catholics, as some think. Instead, they are revered, calling worshippers' attention to God, who alone is to be worshipped through meditation, prayer, and devotion. Catholic churches worldwide are patrons of art, commissioning many artworks for church services. These artworks have specific symbolic meanings in the church services, connecting worshippers with the divine presence of God. Images further create a sense of religious presence in the churches in which they are installed.

As the cradle of Yorùbá civilization, Òṣun State boasts an unparalleled cultural heritage in Nigeria. It is a hub of traditional religion and artistic creation, with archaeological finds revealing a highly sophisticated, classical creative tradition in the ancient city of Ilé-Ifè. The classical art of Ilé-Ifè has been likened to that of Classical Greece, Rome, or Renaissance Europe (Willett 1960, 239), underscoring the State's significance as a center for artistic brilliance. The intersection of traditional Yorùbá culture and Christianity in Òṣun State presents a fascinating context for exploring the symbolic meanings of artistic images in Catholic churches.

Furthermore, the fascinating images of the Catholic churches in Òṣun are what distinguish the State and establish its standing as the source of Yorùbá's artistic tradition. These images are often distinguished by intricate symbolism and hidden meanings derived from the wealth of knowledge, artistic skills, and cultural practices of Yorùbá artists. These images promote Catholicism while recognizing local religions and situate Christianity within the cultural and religious framework of Òṣun State. The rarity of these images in other regions of Nigeria underscores the significance of Òṣun State as a location for innovation and creativity. In light of these considerations, this article explores the symbolic meanings of art in Catholic churches in Òṣun State, Nigeria.

Despite the significance of images and icons in Catholic churches in Òṣun State, there is little study of how local worshippers engage with these images during worship and devotional practices. This article integrates empirical perspectives through interviews with the reverend fathers and worshippers to understand the practical significance of symbolic imagery. This ethnographic data strengthen the iconographic analysis, which provides a comprehensive understanding that considers artistic intention and congregational viewpoints.

A growing body of literature considers the symbolic meanings of Christian art and iconography, yet studies specifically focused on Catholic iconography within the Nigerian context remain relatively scarce, especially concerning the rich Yorùbá cultural area of Òṣun State.

Some foreign scholars have provided practical frameworks and comparative insights into Christian art symbolism (Nun 2018; Sharma 2016; Litovchenko et al. 2015; MacBean 2013; Ghartey 2011). However, these works do not sufficiently address the particularities of Catholic iconography as it has developed and been localized in Nigeria. More recent studies, such as Ndubuisi and Emodi (2014), investigate the State and role of indigenous sculpture in Nigerian Catholic parishes, highlighting the ongoing relevance of local artistic forms in Catholic worship.

Most Nigerian literature on art and religion, however, remains general or focuses on historical developments, lacking in-depth iconographic analysis. Adoh and Olufemi (2014, 466–473) appraise Christian art's historical patronage in Southwestern Nigeria but lack a detailed description or interpretation of artworks in Catholic churches, specifically within Òṣun State. Likewise, Igbaro (2010, 494–505) surveys art in African religions, including Christianity, but does not focus on the interaction of Yorùbá cultural symbolism with Catholic iconography in Òṣun State.

This article fills these gaps by focusing on the symbolic meanings of art images, icons, and symbols in Catholic churches in Òṣun State, offering an in-depth interpretation and iconographic analysis rooted in the indigenous cultural context and religious traditions.

## Theoretical Framework

This article employs Erwin Panofsky's theory of iconography and iconology. Panofsky was a German-born art historian whose work influenced art history and other disciplines. He pioneered how we interpret art's deeper meanings by breaking down art analysis into description, interpretation, and contextual understanding. He provided a systematic framework for interpreting artworks and connecting artistic images to historical and cultural contexts. Applying this theory to Renaissance art by uncovering hidden meanings, he emphasized context and symbolism, ideas that remain influential today.

Here we engage Panofsky's theory of iconography and iconology to unravel the symbolic meanings of the artistic images in Catholic churches in Òṣun State, Nigeria. Panofsky states that form cannot be divorced from the content or context of the artworks to be examined in a work of art. According to Panofsky, iconography, as a branch of the history of art, concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, rather than their form (Panofsky, 1955, 29, quoted in Probosiwi, 2018, 7). This kind of iconological analysis comprises three steps: a formal description focusing on the primary subject matter; an iconographic analysis looking at the conventional subject matter; and the classification of the work in its historical context, and the interpretation of the work and its intrinsic meaning. At the first step, the viewer or art historian describes the visual representations in the image without attaching them to cultural or symbolic interpretations. The second step moves beyond description of visual elements and identifies the conventional meaning of the image by determining what a subject represents within a particular religious or cultural setting. The last step concerns a broader historical, philosophical, social, and cultural interpretation of images, exploring the reasons for creating an image in a particular way and the worldview it reflects.

Panofsky's framework focuses on the representation and interpretation of images, symbols, and icons in a work of art, considering their symbolic role, the historical or mythological identities of figures, and other elements that may have visual significance (Panofsky 1972). The word *iconography* refers to the visual images or symbols used in a work of art with their embodied meaning: a pictorial illustration of a subject. In contrast, *iconology* refers to the study of icons, symbols, and images. Iconography is reflected primarily in art items and used as a symbol of communication and coded messages among the Yorùbá of Southwestern Nigeria, especially in Òṣun State.

Although Panofsky's approach is essential to understanding iconography's technical and historical components, the theory's universal meaning may limit awareness of localized symbol readings. Even though Panofsky's method is fundamental to iconographic analysis, some scholars contend that it ignores the variety of meanings that arise in everyday practice in favor of focusing on literary and historical contexts (Dagen 1990; Preziosi 1998). Panofsky's

framework prioritizes the viewpoint of art-history trained elites, which may overlook and marginalize local, non-textual, and indigenous ways of understanding images and icons.

To critically engage this approach, this research introduces contextual theology, which emphasizes the interpretation of symbols within community-specific spiritual meanings and practical religious experiences. Such a pluralistic approach addresses criticisms that iconology can overlook the changing nature of religious art in context by introducing new symbols, reinterpreting existing symbols, and influencing community-specific spiritual meanings.

Furthermore, this article offers a theological perspective by considering Jesus's use of the concept of "mysteries" in his parables (Matthew 13:10). Jesus's use of symbolic language and parables highlights the importance of interpreting symbolic messages within their cultural and historical contexts. This implies that the church's symbolic pictures function on several levels and are interpreted differently by different audiences according to their theological and spiritual knowledge.

The disciples' ability to decode Jesus's symbolic messages highlights the significance of biblical understanding in interpreting iconographic representations in Catholic churches. However, the strictness of the iconographic representation of art in Catholic churches requires a biblical understanding of Jesus's "mysteries" for proper interpretation. This viewpoint is essential to comprehending how Catholic icons function in the unique cultural context of Òşun State, where Christian iconography and indigenous Yorùbá symbolism collide.

This theoretical framework integrates contextual theology and Panofsky's iconography to offer a potent, culturally sensitive tool for decoding the symbolic meanings of artworks in Catholic churches in Òşun State—where iconography plays a significant role in communicating religious messages and themes—while acknowledging Panofsky's limitations. This combination is essential in providing a comprehensive understanding of the symbolic meanings of those artistic images.

## Interpretation of the Meaning of Art Images, Icons, and Symbols

My focus is the symbolism of art in select Catholic churches in Òşun State. Many artistic images are located in Catholic churches throughout Òşun State, especially those depicting biblical stories. My interest, however, is those that are peculiar to Òşun State, rather than generic images found in churches worldwide, to see how these artistic images intersect with the cultural context of Òşun State. Interpreting the meanings of these artworks highlights their relevance in the service of the church and in people's worship experiences. It also enhances the Catholic artistic tradition by relating more to the art in churches, having understood their meanings. The article employs a qualitative research approach. To enhance the interpretative framework with empirical understandings, this article combines the direct perspectives of worshippers and the reverend fathers, gathered through oral interviews, participant observation, and photographs taken in selected Catholic churches in Òşun State. This approach provides invaluable firsthand accounts of how symbolic images actively enhance religious experience and spiritual engagement.

### Doctrinal Symbols

A fascinating fusion of earthy tones, natural materials, and Catholic doctrinal symbolism makes up the mixed-media artwork in figure 1. On a wooden board, the piece features a white-beaded cross with two engraved wooden fish at its base, one on either side. Naturalism and organic oneness are evoked by the background, which blends brown and

green. This composition embodies rich symbolic meaning deeply rooted in Christian doctrine and contextualized within the cultural context of Òṣun State.

The cross is an essential symbol of Christian faith. In this artwork, the cross symbolizes the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. White beads that form the cross symbolize purity, holiness, and the character of Jesus as an innocent person, as well as the redemption he purchased for humanity through his blood. Beads also connote devotional significance, as they are often used in prayer and meditation in the Catholic tradition, inspiring a sense of emotional and spiritual practice among worshippers.

The wooden fish on both sides of the cross symbolize the ancient Christian symbol “Ichthys,” which translates to “Jesus Christ, the anointed One, Son of God, and the One who saves.” Historically, the fish was used as a secret symbol of solidarity in place of the cross, during the time early Christians were facing difficulty and persecution. Today, this symbol is widely used by theologians. According to Reverend Father Peter Adéyemí,

The fish in the Church icon today denotes selflessness (total self-giving) demonstrated by the Lord, Jesus Christ. There is nothing one can discard from fish, including the bones. Everything about a fish can be consumed, which is the selfless service of fish embodied in Christ. This selflessness, service, and total self-giving is what Christ demonstrates by giving himself to humankind.<sup>1</sup>

The use of wood and beads as natural materials may symbolize the Christian idea of God incarnate. The mixture of green and brown represents growth, harmony, and the relationship among the creatures. The brown color of the fish also symbolizes Christ’s humility, as he takes on human form to die for the sins of the entire world.

The artwork serves as a visual catechesis, educating the faithful about Catholic doctrine through symbolic imagery. The presence of the fish reinforces the idea of Christ as the source of salvation and nourishment for the faithful. The entire work represents the presence of Jesus, whose flesh (bread) and blood (wine) are to be received by the faithful and by those who want to make a new commitment to him and to holy living.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the evidence of an individual’s profession and commitment to Christ, the believers partake in the Holy Communion to remember Jesus Christ as they proclaim his death till he returns (1 Corinthians 11:26).

The natural materials and colors explored by the artist place the iconography within the local cultural context of Òṣun State, connecting universal Christian themes with indigenous artistic and worldview. Numerous informants state that earth tones or organic materials, which are artistic elements that reflect Yorùbá traditional aesthetics, have a profound resonance and establish continuity between their indigenous heritage and Christian faith. As shown in



Figure 1. Adeolu. 2010. *Doctrinal Symbol*, wood, beads, and paint, Saint James Catholic Church, Oke Ese Street, Ilésà. Photo credit: Isaiah Ògúnjimi, 2018.

<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with Reverend Father Peter Adéyemí (age 54), parish priest at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Òkè-Fíà, Òṣogbo, Òṣun State, Nigeria, May 11, 2018, on the church premises.

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with Reverend Father Cyril Òní (age 50), parish priest at St. James Catholic Church, Òkè Èsè Street, Ilésà, Òṣun State, Nigeria, May 7, 2018, on the church premises.

the art and its interpretation, this blending of traditions creates a distinctive religious identity that intersects Catholicism and Yorùbá spirituality.

Typically, the cross is depicted in wood, with a natural brown hue. In this instance, however, the cross is made of white beads, a deliberate choice to represent holiness and purity. This choice of material and color is especially noteworthy in the cultural context of Òṣun State, which is well known for its rich beadmaking tradition. Oral traditions have historically identified Ilé-Ifẹ̀ as the origin of this craft. The Catholic mission's intention to sanctify and bring spiritual renewal to Òṣun State, a region historically associated with 401 deities, the foundational deities of Yorùbá religious cults, is reflected in the use of white beads to form the cross. This artistic decision embodies the Catholic evangelistic mission to establish purity and holiness—that is, the “set-apart-ness” of Christ's followers, who worship the one triune God—in a land deeply rooted in indigenous religious traditions.

Critically engaging Panofsky's iconological interpretation, We see that the artwork reveals a deeper cultural synthesis between Christian doctrine and the Yoruba artistic traditions of Ife. The use of white beads in place of wood for the cross is significant within the Yoruba context of Osun State. Beads symbolize sacred authority, purity, and spiritual power within the royal and ritual contexts among the Yoruba people and culture. Thus, the use of beads transforms the cross into an object that aligns with indigenous sacred symbolism. Ultimately, the artwork reveals a process of religious translation through which Catholic doctrine is expressed through Yoruba material culture. Unlike merely reproducing Western Christian imagery, the artist reinterprets the symbol of redemption through local aesthetic values. The artist communicates the meaning of the artwork through icon, using a fish as an icon because of its resemblance to actual fish. The wood and the earthy tones index the natural environment and indigenous crafts traditions available in Osun State. Yet, the cross still functions as a symbolic sign because it derives its meaning from conventional Christian doctrine.

The artwork's materiality and texture may also reflect the artist's emphasis on the natural world and the interconnectedness of creation, as it is believed that the world evolved in Òṣun State in Ilé-Ifẹ̀. Beyond this, the artwork also emphasizes the unity and resilience of the Christian community, especially in a region historically characterized by a strong presence of traditional religions. By positioning the fish on both sides of the cross, the artist signals communal solidarity in faith and a collective embrace of Christ's selfless love in the face of persecution and humiliation that may arise from their faith.

### Symbol of Holy Communion

Holy Communion service is part of the Christian belief system. It is a ubiquitous sacred service among all Christians and is found across all churches. Some churches, however, symbolically venerate and represent these belief systems in visual forms. Because Holy Communion is a standard sacred service among the Catholic churches, symbolic representation of it is widespread among Catholic churches.

Figure 2 shows a wooden door panel artwork entitled *Eucharist*, carved by Sèsan Ajéwólé in 1994, located in the Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó Òşogbo. The work symbolically depicts the Holy Communion, a central sacrament in the Catholic Faith. The symbolic elements in the artwork are the chalice (a cup-like vessel), the host (a circle with a central cross), and the cross at the center.

The chalice positioned beneath the host (the circular bread) symbolizes the wine used in the Eucharist and represents the blood of Jesus Christ. The chalice is associated with the Last Supper, at which Jesus used a cup of wine to signify the covenant of his blood shed for the forgiveness of the world's sins. The host is the unleavened bread,<sup>3</sup> symbolizing the body of Christ. The cross at the center highlights Jesus's sacrifice through crucifixion and resurrection, while the circle binding the host and chalice symbolizes unity in the sacrament. The cross at the center symbolizes the Holy Trinity and continuity, drawing worshippers' attention to Christ's sacrificial love. It emphasizes the theological heart of the Eucharist: the offering of Jesus's body and blood for the salvation of the people. The cross depicts the Holy Trinity, which is present in the celebration of mass.<sup>4</sup>

The ideal symbols of the ordinance of the Holy Communion are "bread and cup," which signify the eating of Holy Communion. The bread and wine generally symbolize the body and blood of Jesus in Holy Communion, which are also symbols of the recipient's salvation (Ghartey 2011, 31). Jesus instituted this ordinance on the night that preceded his betrayal. Just before that, he ate supper with the twelve disciples in anticipation of his suffering, death, and resurrection.

Representing the Eucharist symbolically is significant to the Catholic faithful and other Christians who venerate art as a treasure of great value. The artwork serves as a rich visual catechesis, educating worshippers about the significance of the Eucharist and exploring familiar religious symbols deeply rooted in Catholic liturgy. Wood as the medium for this work conveys warmth and sensory experience to the devotional object, strengthening the link between materiality and spiritual meaning.

The arrangement draws the worshippers' attention toward the sacrament's essential theme: the sacrifice and presence of Christ in the bread and wine.<sup>5</sup> This sacrament gives believers the body and blood of Christ under the appearances of physical and symbolic bread and wine. The circular linking of chalice and host, crowned by the central cross, visually relates the Catholic belief in Jesus's actual presence and the special redemptive power of the Eucharist.

Iconographical analysis of the art reveals that these motifs correspond to the Eucharistic symbols of Catholic doctrine. According to Panofsky's iconological interpretation, the positioning of the Eucharistic symbols on the church door conveys thoughtful theological significance. As a threshold between the secular world and the sacred interior space, the door functions metaphorically, preparing worshippers for participation in the sacrament as they



Figure 2. Sèsan Ajéwólé. 1994. *Eucharist*. Wooden door panel, Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó Òşogbo. Photo credit: Isaiah Ògúnjímí, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Unleavened bread is made without yeast, sugar, or other leavening agents, resulting in a flat, solid bread. It is associated with and used in a specific historical, cultural, or religious context.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication with Reverend Father Emmanuel Débò Ìdòwú (age 43), priest at Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Popo Òşogbo, Òsun State, Nigeria, May 11, 2018, on the church premises.

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication with Reverend Father Emmanuel Débò Ìdòwú (age 43), priest at Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Popo Òşogbo, Òsun State, Nigeria, May 11, 2018, on the church premises.

encounter Eucharistic imagery at this architectural boundary. By using carved wood, Catholic liturgical symbolism is further integrated with Yorùbá carving traditions, which have historically appeared in shrine doors and palace architecture. In this context, the Eucharist is visually embedded within a local tradition of sacred architectural ornamentation.

The artist integrates Catholic doctrine with everyday liturgical experience by symbolizing the Eucharist on church doors, making the sacrament mystery physically accessible to the worshippers. This visual symbolism encourages and strengthens faith by conveying concepts that might otherwise remain abstract through verbal teaching alone. The artistic imagery presents a rich tapestry of iconographical symbols composed by the artist, each conveying distinct meanings within the Catholic tradition amid a diverse religious and cultural landscape of Òṣun State.

### Theological Symbols

The image in figure 3 is a visual representation of a wooden carved door panel by Sẹsan Ajéwólé, created in 1994 for Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó Òṣogbo, Òṣun State. The composition depicts a tree overlapping a stylized human heart with two interlocking rings carved at the heart's center, creating an illusion of depth.

The tree represents the Garden of Eden, a biblical place of creation, initially entrusted to the care of Adam and Eve. It represents the beginning of both humanity and sin. It specifically symbolizes the Tree of Life, a symbol of heavenly wisdom, everlasting life, and human redemption.

The heart, which serves as the tree's base, symbolizes God's compassion and love as well as the intimate connection between the divine and humans. The intricate carving and delicate curves emphasize the depth of emotion and the intimacy that exists between humanity and the divine.

The overlapping rings symbolize Adam and Eve, the first human couple, and their union. Positioned at the heart's center, they also represent the unity and unbreakable bond between God and humankind, as well as the connection between Heaven and Earth.

This artistic image visually relates Catholic doctrines of creation, sin, and redemption. The heart, as the tree's base, signifies that divine love is the foundation of life (Tree of Life) and the created order. Underpinning the Christian concepts of reconciliation and covenant, the interlocking rings at the center of the heart allude to the theme of communion, symbolizing the relationship between Adam and Eve as well as between God and humanity.

The depiction expresses the profound theme that God's love sustains creation despite human frailty and sinfulness. Although God's love remains steadfast, the narrative recalls God's regret and grief over humanity's fall, underscoring the seriousness of sin and the need for redemption.

At the iconological level of Panofsky's interpretation, the artwork aligns with Yoruba cosmology. Ilé-Ifẹ̀, the heart and source of Òṣun State's cultural myth, is venerated as the primordial source and origin of the world, a place from which light and life are believed to have emanated to the rest of creation. This belief stems from the Yorùbá cosmology narrative that the world, humanity, and all living things were created in Ilé-Ifẹ̀ when Olódùmarè, the Supreme Deity, commissioned Odùduwà, the Yorùbá people's mythological progenitor, to do so. Ilé-Ifẹ̀ could



Figure 3. Sẹsan Ajéwólé. 2018. *Doctrinal Symbol*. Wooden door panel, Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó Òṣogbo. Photo credit: Isaiah Ògúnjìmí, 2018.

therefore be compared to the Garden of Eden in the Bible, a place of origin that suggests a story of fundamental need for salvation. Hence, the artwork's symbolic meaning is highly relevant in Òşun State.

Positioned within the church context of Òşun State, the imagery combines biblical symbolism with the cultural and spiritual diversity of visual art, inviting viewers to meditate on themes of hope, love, and redemption. It communicates the Catholic teaching of restitution and reconciliation, which is central to Christian faith and practice. Therefore, Catholics of Òşun sought to present this message of reconciliation and redemption to the State, where traditional religions are deeply rooted.

Figure 4 shows a wooden carved door panel by Sèşan Ajéwólé, created in 1994 for Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó, Òşogbo. It depicts a bee between the Greek letters Alpha ( $\Delta$ ) and Omega ( $\Omega$ ), the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet.

The letters  $\Delta$  and  $\Omega$  stand for “the beginning and the end,” a biblical title for God and Jesus Christ as the Omnipresent, eternal Creator and ruler of the universe (Revelation 22:13). Their presence defines the composition and emphasizes divine eternity and sovereignty.

The bee, situated centrally between Alpha and Omega, holds multiple symbolic meanings. It represents wisdom, industriousness, and communal harmony due to bees' social structure and productivity. The bee's honey production symbolizes sweetness and nourishment. At the same time, its sting can represent discipline or divine retribution, reflecting the dual nature of God's interaction with humanity, which is love and justice, alluding to the biblical verse that “the Lord disciplines those whom he loves and chastises every child whom he accepts” (Hebrews 12:6, NRSVUE).

These symbols are combined in the artwork to convey deep theological and spiritual themes. Positioning the bee between Alpha and Omega could signify the human condition within divine eternity, the experience of life's fluctuating sweetness and bitterness under God's eternal watch. The interpretation is consistent with the Christian view of life as a journey filled with both joys and tribulations, guided by the love and wisdom of God. God chastises sin and punishes it like a bee's sting, yet he also loves and brings joy like honey.

The bee serves as an icon that visually resembles the insect, while its habitual nature as a productive creature acts as an index of social cooperation. The alpha and omega letters function as symbols indicating divine eternity. The artwork is interpreted by linking natural observation, cultural ethics, and theological meaning.

Engaging Panofsky's iconological interpretation, we see that the compositional image is relevant to the cultural context of Òşun State, evoking Yoruba proverbs and emphasizing communal labor and productivity. It conveys the unity between human effort and divine providence. As a symbol of human industriousness, diligence, and social cooperation, the bee runs within God's eternal plan (alpha and omega), reflecting the belief in God's supremacy over human history and individual lives. The symbolism, therefore, combines Christian doctrine with local ethical values regarding diligence and teamwork, communicating a worldview in which human labor operates within divine eternity.

The Catholic artistic images in Òşun State churches link Christian doctrine with indigenous cultural expressions, inviting meditative reflection on the spiritual realities of the people in the State. The bee, symbolized by its dynamics



Figure 4. Sèşan Ajéwólé. 1994. *Doctrinal Symbol*. Wooden door panel, Saint Benedict Catholic Cathedral, Pópó Òşogbo. Photo credit: Isaiah Ògúnjimi, 2018.

and respected for its wisdom and productivity, bridges natural symbolism with Christian theology of divine love, judgment, and life's journey within God's eternal agenda.

## Findings and Conclusion

This article highlights parallels and distinctive characteristics with other locations while situating the artwork in Catholic churches in Òṣun State within a broader framework of Nigeria and the African Christian cultural scene. The interpretation derived from local culture, employing indigenous material, style, and form, sets Òṣun State apart, while many Christian art icons are globally recognized.

The findings show that the artworks have a strong cultural connection to Òṣun State, an intersection of rich indigenous Yorùbá artistic traditions and Catholic doctrine to provide a distinctive and significant expression of faith in the State. This background, historically rooted in traditional religions with numerous deities, creates an exceptional setting in which Catholic art adapts local materials, forms, and iconographies to communicate gospel truths in genuinely meaningful ways.

These images help share the gospel because they are simplified to reflect the cultural environments of the people with whom they are familiar, such as the tree of life in figure 3. Relating the biblical story to these cultural environments makes it easier for adherents of African traditional religions to convert. Religious belief is not abstract; rather, it is expressed through symbols, objects, and ritual images. For this reason, the artworks function as visual interpreters, communicating that the message is not restricted to Western cultural forms but can be embodied within African identities.

Biblical narratives are localized in the African context using indigenous and natural materials. This style connects these biblical stories to the African context and identity within the Catholic faith in Òṣun State. Because of this intersection and translation of the gospel into familiar languages, worshippers can relate to the sacred icons on a spiritual level and their lived cultural experience. Hence, these images and icons help local religions appreciate the Christian faith.

The symbolic images in Catholic churches in Òṣun State beautifully demonstrate a rich combination of doctrinal belief, indigenous Yorùbá cultural expressions, and personal faith experience. These images are essential as visual catechesis and spiritual mediators, sustaining devotional practices and fostering theological understanding among worshippers. A deeper appreciation for religious art as a dynamic, context-dependent expression is attained by combining in-depth iconographic analysis with empirical data and broader theoretical insights. This effectively educates viewers and faithful about Catholic doctrines and values and reinforces the Catholic doctrinal belief system for successful evangelism in the complex cultural and traditional landscape of Òṣun State.

The findings of this research demonstrate the ongoing conversation between Christianity and Nigeria's indigenous religious legacy and highlight the crucial importance of acknowledging and preserving these artistic expressions as living testimonies to the Catholic faith's integration into the Yorùbá cultural environment. By combining Panofsky's iconology with contextual theology and ethnographic perspectives, the article provides a multifaceted framework for understanding how universal Christian symbols are reinterpreted within local cultures. While Panofsky's theory shows the historical and theological stories embedded within the artworks, contextual theology and ethnographic perspective indicate how the visual elements function as signs that communicate meaning to the audience. These frameworks combined highlight how Christian, especially Catholic, iconography in

Ọsun State becomes a culturally mediated visual language interpreted through Yoruba artistic traditions and material culture. This approach could be applied to future studies of religious art in diverse cultural settings.

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