

VISUALIZING DIVINITY: ANALYZING THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGIOUS ICONOGRAPHY AND GRAPHIC DESIGN IN MODERN AFRICAN ART

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of religious iconography within modern African art, emphasizing the intersections between art history, graphic design, and spirituality. Through a neocolonial lens, the research explores how contemporary African artists and designers reinterpret sacred symbols and imagery rooted in indigenous and introduced religious traditions. The analysis investigates the stylistic and thematic transformations of religious motifs as they adapt to modern graphic design techniques, including abstraction, minimalism, and multimedia approaches. By focusing on selected works that merge ancestral beliefs with modern aesthetics, this study highlights how graphic design serves as a visual language to express complex narratives of faith, cultural identity, and postcolonial perspectives. The findings aim to provide insights into the role of graphic design in bridging traditional and contemporary expressions of divinity, demonstrating how religious iconography evolves to resonate with present-day audiences. This research contributes to the discourse on religious and cultural identity in African art, emphasizing how graphic design mediates and reimagines spirituality in the postcolonial context.

Keywords: Decolonization, Graphic Design, Iconography, Modern African Art, Spirituality.

Introduction

Religious iconography in African art has long served as a conduit for spiritual beliefs, cultural identity, and social values. Traditional African societies, each with unique spiritual systems, have used various symbols and artistic expressions to communicate religious ideas and ancestral reverence. According to Sunday et al. (2024), indigenous art forms—through their

materials, motifs, and functions—were central in articulating communal beliefs and sustaining social cohesion. However, the introduction of Christianity and Islam during the colonial era profoundly altered African religious practices, often replacing indigenous symbols with those rooted in Western and Middle Eastern traditions (Okeke-Agulu, 2015). This shift not only influenced African spirituality but also redefined the purpose and aesthetics of African art.

In the postcolonial context, African artists have increasingly sought to reclaim traditional religious imagery, integrating it with contemporary styles that reflect both modernity and indigenous spirituality. As decolonial thought gains traction, artists turn to graphic design as a medium to re-envision sacred motifs, effectively bridging the historical with the modern. This process reveals a complex narrative of spiritual identity, where graphic design techniques—such as abstraction, minimalism, and multimedia—allow artists to reinterpret and redefine spiritual themes in ways that resonate with current cultural contexts (Sytsma, 2024). These contemporary transformations reflect a broader trend in modern African art, which merges past traditions with present-day expressions of faith, cultural heritage, and identity.

This study aims to examine the evolution of religious iconography within modern African art, focusing on how contemporary graphic design reinterprets these symbols in light of neocolonial perspectives. Specifically, it will explore how graphic design has enabled African artists to reclaim traditional religious themes, transforming them into expressions of both personal and collective identity. The analysis of selected works will underscore the role of graphic design as a mediator, facilitating a dialogue between the ancestral and the contemporary, while emphasizing the significance of spirituality in postcolonial African art.

Historical Context of Religious Iconography in African Art

Religious iconography has long been a fundamental element of African art, with spiritual symbols and motifs serving as powerful means of communicating beliefs, values, and social identity (Ottuh et al., 2023). In precolonial African societies, art was deeply embedded in religious practices, ranging from the depiction of ancestral spirits to representations of deities and sacred symbols. As noted by Asamoah et al. (2024), many African communities traditionally used art as a tool to honour spiritual entities and to foster connections with ancestors. These religious artworks often relied on specific materials, such as wood, bronze, and clay, which were chosen not only for their aesthetic qualities but for their symbolic significance (Sunday et al., 2024). The arrival of Christianity and Islam in Africa during the colonial period, however, led to profound changes in indigenous religious iconography. According to Okeke-Agulu (2015), colonial missionary efforts sought to replace local belief systems with monotheistic religions, leading to the gradual erosion of traditional spiritual practices. As a result, many

indigenous symbols were suppressed or reinterpreted to align with Christian or Islamic values. This transition was marked by a complex interplay between preservation and adaptation, as certain African artists began to blend indigenous and foreign motifs in ways that reflected both cultural resilience and the realities of religious transformation (Onibere & Ottuh, 2024).

In the 20th century, African artists embraced modernism as a means to assert their cultural identities within a postcolonial landscape. Modernism provided a framework through which they could recontextualize traditional iconography and reclaim indigenous spiritual symbols, blending them with contemporary styles. As argued by Sytsma (2024), African modernism allowed artists to critique colonial narratives and revisit precolonial religious themes with renewed purpose. This period marked a revival of traditional iconography, albeit through new forms and expressions that reflected the artists' shifting identities and aspirations in a globalizing world.

Today, religious iconography in African art continues to evolve, shaped by a blend of historical influences and contemporary innovation. African artists have increasingly turned to graphic design and multimedia as tools to reinterpret sacred motifs, creating works that resonate with both local and global audiences. This historical context provides a foundation for understanding how modern African art reimagines spirituality, allowing traditional religious symbols to adapt to contemporary expressions of cultural and spiritual identity (Onibere & Ottuh, 2024)

The Role of Graphic Design in Modern African Art

Graphic design has emerged as a pivotal medium in modern African art, allowing artists to reinterpret traditional iconography through contemporary visual language. As a result, graphic design serves as both a creative and a cultural tool, enabling African artists to merge ancestral symbols with modern aesthetics, creating works that reflect both continuity and innovation. According to Ofosu-Asare, (2024), African artists have increasingly integrated graphic design techniques—such as abstraction, minimalism, and digital manipulation—to revitalize indigenous spiritual symbols, making them accessible and relevant to diverse, global audiences. This blending of traditional iconography with graphic design also underscores a broader postcolonial narrative, where African artists reclaim and redefine their cultural identities through visual expression.

One of the primary contributions of graphic design to modern African art is its ability to simplify and stylize complex religious motifs, rendering them in ways that resonate with contemporary sensibilities. For instance, digital media allows artists to experiment with colours, forms, and layouts, reinterpreting sacred symbols through a modernist lens. This is particularly significant in the context of urban African societies, where rapid modernization has fostered a desire for art that bridges the historical with the

modern (Fontein, & Smith, 2023). By employing graphic design techniques, artists are able to evoke traditional spiritual narratives while also engaging with themes of cultural hybridism and decolonization.

Moreover, graphic design has allowed African artists to explore multimedia as a means of storytelling, adding new layers to their work through the use of photography, collage, and digital illustration. These media expand the possibilities for expressing spiritual and cultural identity, as they enable artists to create dynamic visual narratives that draw from both indigenous and global influences. As Asamoah et al. (2024) points out, graphic design in modern African art is not merely about aesthetics but also serves as a platform for cultural commentary, where artists can address social issues and challenge dominant narratives. This versatility has made graphic design an indispensable tool in African art, providing a flexible medium through which artists can reinterpret and celebrate their heritage while engaging with contemporary discourses.

In summary, graphic design plays an essential role in modern African art by facilitating the reimagining of traditional religious motifs within a globalized, postcolonial context. Through techniques that blend old and new, African artists use graphic design to convey spiritual themes and cultural identity in ways that resonate with both local and international audiences, positioning graphic design as a bridge between tradition and modernity.

Decolonization and the Reinterpretation of Religious Symbols

Decolonization has profoundly influenced the reinterpretation of religious symbols in modern African art, empowering artists to reclaim and recontextualize traditional spiritual motifs. This process has been instrumental in countering colonial narratives that once suppressed or misrepresented indigenous African religions and their visual expressions. According to Okeke-Agulu (2015), colonial authorities often imposed Western religious and cultural values on African societies, leading to the marginalization of native spiritual symbols and practices. In response, postcolonial African artists have utilized neocolonial strategies to revive and transform these symbols, infusing them with contemporary relevance and reflecting a renewed cultural pride (Onibere, 2023)

This reinterpretation of religious iconography is seen across various media, particularly in graphic design, which allows for a dynamic reimagining of sacred motifs. Graphic design has become a means of decolonial expression, enabling artists to infuse traditional symbols with modern aesthetics and address complex themes of identity and resistance. Artists like El Anatsui and Yinka Shonibare, for instance, employ these symbols to challenge colonial histories while creating new narratives around African spirituality and heritage (Allen, 2023). By using techniques such as abstraction and stylization, they present indigenous symbols in ways that confront colonial

legacies, signaling a reassertion of African identity in the global art scene (Sytsma, 2024).

Furthermore, the neocolonial reinterpretation of religious symbols often serves as a means of reclaiming African epistemologies and cosmologies that were once overshadowed by Western religious doctrines. This reclaiming aligns with broader neocolonial goals, as it represents a movement away from Eurocentric frameworks toward a celebration of African knowledge systems. In many cases, these reinterpreted symbols reflect the syncretism that characterizes postcolonial African societies, where indigenous beliefs coexist with global religions like Christianity and Islam (Marimbe, 2024). This blending of influences highlights the resilience of African spirituality and the ongoing importance of cultural adaptation in African art. In summary, decolonization has reshaped the representation of religious symbols in African art, as artists reclaim and reinterpret traditional motifs to reflect a postcolonial consciousness. By employing graphic design and other contemporary media, these artists challenge colonial legacies and celebrate African spiritual and cultural heritage, thus creating a space for African identity to flourish within the modern global art landscape.

Spirituality and Identity in Contemporary African Art

Contemporary African art reflects a complex interplay between spirituality and identity, as artists draw upon traditional religious symbols and themes to express both personal and collective narratives. This artistic exploration serves as a means for African artists to reassert cultural identities that have been shaped by historical, social, and political forces, particularly those stemming from colonialism. According to Bernard (2023), spirituality remains a cornerstone of African cultural identity, and its representation in modern art provides a visual language for addressing themes of faith, ancestry, and existential purpose. These works are often imbued with spiritual meanings that resonate with audiences within Africa and throughout the diaspora, bridging past and present in an affirmation of African heritage.

Graphic design has become an essential tool in this process, allowing artists to experiment with forms, colors, and techniques that highlight spiritual themes while adapting to contemporary aesthetics. Artists like Wangechi Mutu and Kehinde Wiley, for example, employ graphic design to create layered compositions that explore identity and spirituality through African and diasporic perspectives (Asamoah et al., 2024). These artists often blend indigenous and global religious symbols, reflecting the syncretism that characterizes much of contemporary African spirituality. Such artworks not only convey spiritual messages but also provoke discussions on identity, belonging, and the ongoing effects of colonization on African cultural consciousness (Okeke-Agulu, 2015).

The exploration of spirituality in contemporary African art also challenges traditional Western notions of religion and secularism, highlighting the holistic nature of African spiritual practices. As Nettleton (2011) suggests, African spirituality often intertwines with everyday life and social structures, making its representation in art an expression of both cultural and spiritual identity. By reclaiming and reinterpreting spiritual motifs, contemporary African artists are able to craft narratives that speak to their unique experiences and histories, engaging with audiences on issues of heritage, resilience, and the transformative power of spirituality. In this sense, the representation of spirituality in contemporary African art serves as a profound exploration of identity, bridging historical traditions with modern expressions of faith and culture. Through graphic design and other media, African artists use their work to celebrate and reassert their spiritual heritage, positioning spirituality as an enduring aspect of African identity that adapts and thrives within a rapidly changing world.

Case Studies of Artists and Works

Examining specific artists and their works offers valuable insights into how contemporary African art uses religious symbols to reflect on identity, spirituality, and cultural heritage. By analyzing the practices of artists such as El Anatsui (b. 1944), Wangechi Mutu (b. 1972), and Yinka Shonibare (b. 1962), we can observe how these creators use graphic design and mixed media to reinterpret spiritual motifs in ways that challenge colonial histories and celebrate African identity. El Anatsui is renowned for his large-scale installations made from discarded materials like bottle caps and aluminum. His work frequently explores themes of transformation, spirituality, and resilience, echoing the importance of cyclical life and rebirth in African cosmology (Allen, 2023). In his piece *Man's Cloth* (2002) (Figure 1), Anatsui reimagines traditional Ghanaian kente cloth through a contemporary lens, crafting it from industrial waste to symbolize resilience and continuity in African spiritual and cultural practices. Through his technique, he employs decolonial aesthetics, merging indigenous symbolism with materials that reflect global consumerism, thus creating a dialogue between African heritage and modern identity (Sytsma, 2024).

Wangechi Mutu uses collage and digital media to create works that combine elements of African mythology, global pop culture, and environmental themes. In *The New Ones, Will Free Us* (2019) (Figure 2), Mutu presents hybrid figures that blend human and otherworldly features, challenging traditional notions of African spirituality and identity. Her use of graphic design techniques to blend human and symbolic elements represents an evolving African identity, one that resists monolithic portrayals and instead embraces complexity (Nettleton, 2011). Mutu's work highlights how African spirituality is adaptable, depicting it as a powerful force that both shapes and is shaped by the modern world.



Figure 1. [El Anatsui](#) (2002) *Man's Cloth*, liquor bottle tops, 297 x 374 cm, October Gallery



Figure 2. Wangechi Mutu (2019) *The New Ones Will Free Us*, Bronze, 79 1/8 in x 33 1/2 in x 44 1/2 in, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Yinka Shonibare is well known for his installations and sculptures that incorporate Dutch wax fabrics, a textile commonly associated with African identity yet rooted in colonial trade. In works like *Scramble for Africa* (2003)(Figure 3), Shonibare uses Victorian-style mannequins dressed in brightly patterned fabric to critique colonial histories and the complexities of African identity in a globalized world (Bernard, 2023). By juxtaposing African and Western symbols, Shonibare explores themes of syncretism, identity, and the lingering effects of colonialism on African spirituality. His works underscore how African religious iconography is constantly evolving, reinterpreted through contemporary experiences and postcolonial perspectives.

These case studies underscore how contemporary African artists are utilizing graphic design and mixed media to reclaim and transform traditional religious symbols. By challenging colonial narratives and embracing a multiplicity of identities, artists like Anatsui, Mutu, and Shonibare redefine African spirituality for modern audiences, using art as a tool for cultural and spiritual reclamation.



Figure 3. Yinka Shonibare (2003)
Scramble for Africa, Fourteen life-size fiberglass mannequin, fourteen chairs, table, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, 132 × 488 × 280 cm, Collection of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi

Discussion

The reinterpretation of religious iconography in contemporary African art demonstrates a dynamic interaction between tradition, modernity, and the desire for cultural autonomy. Through case studies of artists like El Anatsui, Wangechi Mutu, and Yinka Shonibare, it becomes clear that graphic design and mixed media offer African artists a means to navigate and critique the legacies of colonialism, while affirming a distinct African identity in the global art landscape (Sytsma, 2024). By blending traditional spiritual symbols with contemporary forms, these artists construct narratives that both honor ancestral connections and confront the complexities of postcolonial identity.

One of the central themes in this exploration is the role of graphic design in facilitating a dialogue between past and present. For instance, El Anatsui's transformation of traditional kente cloth into a modern art form using recycled materials illustrates how graphic design and other artistic techniques can reinterpret traditional symbols for contemporary audiences (Allen, 2023). This approach not only celebrates African spiritual and material culture but also critiques global consumerism, suggesting that African spirituality remains resilient and relevant in a rapidly changing world.

The discussion of Wangechi Mutu's work highlights another layer of complexity: the representation of African spirituality as fluid and hybrid rather than fixed. Through her use of collage and digital media, Mutu reconfigures spiritual motifs, presenting African spirituality as a living,

evolving force that accommodates multiple identities and influences (Nettleton, 2011). This fluidity challenges static, essentialist depictions of African identity, instead presenting it as adaptive, inclusive, and responsive to both indigenous and global contexts (Okeke-Agulu, 2015).

In the context of postcolonialism, Yinka Shonibare's art critiques the colonial appropriation of African cultural symbols, reclaiming them in ways that acknowledge both their historical exploitation and their ongoing significance. His use of Dutch wax fabric, with its colonial origins yet association with African identity, complicates the boundaries between African and Western iconography, pointing to a shared yet fraught history (Bernard, 2023). Shonibare's work exemplifies how contemporary African art uses iconography to explore themes of hybridity, resistance, and self-definition, challenging audiences to reconsider the impacts of colonialism on African spirituality and culture.

Overall, the discussion reveals how contemporary African artists employ graphic design and mixed media not only to revive traditional religious symbols but to use them as instruments of social commentary and cultural resilience. Through these creative reinterpretations, artists reclaim their heritage and voice within the global art scene, presenting African spirituality as an essential and evolving facet of identity. This blending of tradition with modernity serves as both an assertion of cultural pride and a critique of ongoing cultural imperialism, underscoring the transformative potential of art in decolonizing African identity and spirituality.

Conclusion

The exploration of religious iconography in contemporary African art reveals a powerful synthesis of tradition and modernity, serving as a means for artists to engage with themes of spirituality, identity, and decolonization. Through case studies of artists like El Anatsui, Wangechi Mutu, and Yinka Shonibare, it becomes evident that African artists employ graphic design, mixed media, and innovative techniques to reinterpret sacred symbols in ways that resonate with current audiences while honoring ancestral roots. This approach not only revitalizes African spiritual motifs but also offers a critique of colonial legacies and the cultural erasure that African societies have historically faced.

The use of graphic design and multimedia in this context enables African artists to bridge historical and modern perspectives, positioning African spirituality as a living, evolving force within a globalized world. By reimagining traditional symbols, these artists communicate resilience and cultural pride, transforming their work into both an artistic and political statement. This intersection of art and decolonial discourse enriches the global art narrative, providing a platform for African voices and perspectives that have been marginalized within dominant cultural frameworks.

Ultimately, contemporary African art exemplifies how creativity and tradition can intersect to create powerful statements of identity and spirituality. Through their works, these artists not only reclaim their heritage but also challenge audiences to engage with African spirituality and culture on its own terms, advancing the ongoing journey of decolonization and cultural self-determination.

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