

Inculturation in Catholic Christian Religion: Reimagining Marian Iconography Nigerian Cultural Context

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Abstract

This study explores the concept of Inculturation within the Catholic Christian tradition in Nigeria, with a specific focus on Marian iconography. Rooted in the framework of inculturation theology, the research interrogates how indigenous cultural aesthetics, symbols, and spiritual expressions can be integrated into Catholic representations of the Virgin Mary. The study employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing semi-structured, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with three Catholic bishops and a selection of Catholic faithful across Nigeria. Through their lived experiences and theological reflections, the study examines how traditional Marian images, often based on Western iconographic standards, may be reimagined to reflect Nigerian cultural identity without compromising doctrinal integrity. A visual model of a proposed Nigerian Marian iconography is developed, reflecting elements of local dress, symbols, and spirituality, thereby bridging the gap between faith and culture. Findings reveal a strong desire among participants for contextualized religious symbols that affirm their cultural heritage while deepening devotion. This study contributes to ongoing scholarly and ecclesial discourse on African Christianity by offering a theological and artistic paradigm for Marian representation that resonates with Nigerian cultural sensibilities and enhances religious expression in contemporary Catholic worship.

Introduction

The relationship between Christianity and culture has long been a subject of theological reflection, particularly within the context of African Christianity. As the Catholic Church continues to expand its reach in sub-Saharan Africa, it faces the critical challenge of contextualizing its liturgical expressions and religious iconography to reflect the lived realities of its followers. One of the most enduring images within Catholic devotion is that of the Virgin Mary—an icon often rendered through a Western cultural lens, detached from the aesthetic, spiritual, and symbolic universe of African societies. This study investigates the concept of inculturation in Catholic Christianity, with specific attention to the development of a Nigerian Marian iconography.

Inculturation, understood as the cultural modification of a religious system through the adoption or adaptation of local elements, offers a meaningful pathway for making the gospel message both accessible and authentically African. Marian devotion remains a vital component of Catholic spirituality in Nigeria, yet the current iconographic representations often fail to capture indigenous identity, thereby creating a visual dissonance between faith and culture. The objective is to develop a representative model of what a Nigerian Marian icon might look like, incorporating local aesthetics, symbols, and narratives while remaining faithful to Catholic doctrinal teachings.

The research builds upon the foundational principles of *inculturation theology*, which advocates for the integration of Christian faith with local cultures to produce more meaningful and resonant expressions of worship. As the Church in Africa matures, reimagining sacred images like that of the Virgin Mary becomes not only a theological necessity but also an affirmation of African dignity, identity, and spiritual agency. This study, therefore, contributes to both academic and ecclesiastical conversations on contextual theology, offering a visual and theological reimagination of Marian iconography that speaks to the heart of Nigerian Catholicism.

The Concept of Marian Iconography

The depiction of the Virgin Mary has undergone significant evolution over the centuries, reflecting theological, cultural, and artistic developments. In her article “*Describing the Virgin*” published in *Art History* (2002), Jessica Winston explores how Marian imagery transformed in Italian devotional literature and theological texts from the 15th to the 16th century. This period marked a shift from imaginative representations to more concrete visual portrayals, partly in response to the Protestant Reformation. The emphasis on the visual likeness of sacred images became a way to justify their use in Catholic devotion.

The origin of Marian iconography can be traced to early Christian art, where representations of Mary—especially those found in the Roman catacombs—were initially symbolic and abstract. Over time, particularly during the Byzantine period, these images developed into more defined and standardized portrayals, often serving to convey key doctrinal beliefs. According to Sarah Jane

Boss (2007), Christian tradition attributes the first Marian icon to the evangelist Luke, who is said to have painted the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child—an image that became the prototype for later Marian representations (Boss, pp. 106–107).

As Christian art progressed through the medieval period, Marian imagery became increasingly humanized. Frescoes and mosaics began to reflect regional artistic styles and local cultural sensibilities. Both the Orthodox and Catholic traditions have preserved a deep reverence for Marian icons, which serve not only as sacred devotional objects but also as cultural and historical symbols. These images—whether inspired directly by scriptural texts or by legend—continue to embody profound theological meanings and reflect the enduring presence of Mary in Christian consciousness.

A pivotal moment in the history of Marian iconography was the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD (not the 15th century), where the Church formally affirmed Mary as *Theotokos*—“God-bearer” or “Mother of God.” This doctrinal declaration significantly elevated her status in Christian theology and inspired the proliferation of her visual representations across the Christian world (Boss, pp. 107–111).

Building on this rich historical and theological foundation, my paper seeks to reinterpret Marian iconography within a contemporary Nigerian context. Specifically, I propose to create a visual representation of the Virgin Mary that reflects the identity and cultural aesthetics of a typical Nigerian woman. This reimagined icon will incorporate traditional Nigerian elements such as indigenous textiles, hairstyles, body tone, and symbolic motifs. By doing so, the work aims to make Marian imagery more accessible and relatable to Nigerian Catholic communities, while also contributing to the broader discourse on inculturation and visual theology.

This research also draws inspiration from contemporary reinterpretations of Marian imagery within diverse cultural contexts. A prominent example is the depiction of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico, which effectively integrates indigenous motifs and symbols, creating a Marian icon that resonates deeply with local identity and devotion. Similarly, my project seeks to produce visual representations of the Virgin Mary that are rooted in Nigerian cultural aesthetics. The final works will be exhibited on a dedicated website, providing an immersive and accessible visual resource that respects both Nigerian traditions and Marian theological frameworks. Specifically, the icon will depict the Virgin Mary as a Nigerian woman—both generally and in culturally specific iterations as Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba—thereby localizing her image in ways that reflect and affirm Nigeria’s ethnic and religious diversity.

Problem Statement

Although considerable research has been conducted on the reinterpretation of Marian iconography, there remains a significant gap in literature regarding Nigerian perceptions of Mary’s

image—particularly among Catholic Christians. In most visual depictions available in Nigeria, the Virgin Mary is represented with distinctly European features, often appearing as a white, celestial figure. This portrayal, heavily influenced by Western artistic conventions, creates a cultural disconnect, rendering her image distant and somewhat alien to many Nigerian faithful. As a result, the Marian figure feels removed from the everyday cultural experiences of Nigerian Catholics, weakening the sense of personal and communal identification with her. This paper addresses this cultural gap by reimagining Marian iconography through a Nigerian lens, integrating traditional aesthetics to create a more locally resonant spiritual image. By presenting Mary as a Nigerian woman, the project aims to foster a stronger connection between faith and cultural heritage.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the intersection of culture, religion, and technology in reinterpreting Marian iconography through a Nigerian cultural lens. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of human experiences and social phenomena using non-numerical data such as interviews, observations, and content analysis (Creswell, 2014). As this study interrogates the Western portrayal of the Virgin Mary, qualitative methods are particularly suited to challenging established norms and offering alternative cultural narratives (Bansal & Corley; Gaddefors & Cunningham, 2024).

Data was collected through semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs), which allowed for rich, thematic insights (Agazu, Dejen, & Debel, 2022). A total of 18 in-depth interviews were conducted with Catholic bishops, Nigerian artists, traditional leaders, and Catholic faithful across Nigeria's three major regions—Igbo (East), Hausa (North), and Yoruba (West)—using purposive sampling to ensure regional representation. In addition, a focus group discussion involving eight participants—comprising traditionalists, theologians, and artists—provided broader cultural and theological perspectives. These methods, along with artistic creation and analysis, enabled the conceptualization and recreation of a Nigerian Marian iconography that integrates local textiles, hairstyles, and motifs while remaining faithful to Marian theology.

Efforts of the Catholic Church Towards Inculturation in Nigeria

The Catholic Church has played a significant role in the cultural and religious transformation of Nigerian society through various inculturation strategies. Inculturation, in the context of Catholic theology, refers to the dynamic interaction between the Christian message and local cultures, with the goal of making the Gospel relevant and authentic in different socio-cultural contexts

(Second Vatican Council, 1965). In Nigeria, a country rich in ethnic and cultural diversity, the Church's approach to inculturation has evolved over decades, particularly since the post-Vatican II era. One of the earliest and most significant efforts of inculturation in Nigeria was inspired by the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes*, which encouraged the Church to engage with contemporary cultures, rather than oppose or suppress them (Second Vatican Council, 1965). In response, Nigerian theologians and clergy began to explore ways to integrate indigenous values, symbols, and practices within the liturgical and theological framework of the Catholic Church. These efforts became evident in the adaptation of local music, attire, languages, and rituals into the liturgy, especially during Mass celebrations.

The use of African cultural symbols such as drums, native songs, and proverbs in liturgical celebrations became significant from the late 20th century. These practices allowed local Catholics to experience their faith in a manner that was spiritually profound and culturally familiar (Kanu & Kanu, 2022). Traditional attire, drumming, and indigenous languages are now widely accepted in many diocesan celebrations, especially in rural areas where indigenous culture remains strong. These symbolic adaptations have enhanced communal participation and increased a sense of belonging among parishioners.

Prominent Nigerian theologians and Church leaders such as Bishop Anthony Gbuji and Archbishop A.J.V. Obinna have been instrumental in promoting inculturation through theological discourses and organized efforts such as the Odenigbo Lectures. These lectures, held annually in the Archdiocese of Owerri, serve as a theological platform for addressing socio-cultural and ecclesiastical issues in ways that integrate Igbo cultural identity with Christian teachings (Obika, n.d.). By using the local language and focusing on relevant cultural themes, these lectures have contributed to building a theology that resonates with the lived experiences of Nigerian Catholics.

Furthermore, the celebration of traditional marriage rites alongside the Catholic sacrament of matrimony is another important area where inculturation is evident. Traditionally, Nigerian communities perform elaborate marriage rites that include the exchange of gifts, ancestral blessings, and communal feasts. The Church, recognizing the cultural and communal significance of these practices, has incorporated some of them into the Christian marriage ceremony, provided they do not contradict Catholic doctrine (Nnabugwu, 2018). This accommodation reflects a respect for cultural identity and has helped to reduce tensions between the Church and traditional communities.

The incorporation of indigenous knowledge systems, such as traditional healing practices, into Catholic pastoral care is also part of the Church's broader inculturation efforts. While the Church maintains its sacramental theology regarding healing and anointing, it also acknowledges the role of traditional healers in community life, especially in areas where access to formal healthcare is limited. This acknowledgment encourages dialogue between Christian and traditional

practitioners, fostering holistic approaches to healing (Anagwo & Umekwe, 2021). Despite these efforts, challenges persist. Some conservative factions within the Church view inculturation with suspicion, fearing that it may dilute orthodox Catholic teachings. There have also been debates about the legitimacy of certain practices—such as libations, ancestral veneration, and masquerade performances—within Catholic rituals. While some clergy advocate for their inclusion as expressions of African spirituality, others caution against their incorporation, citing the potential for syncretism and doctrinal confusion (Kanu & Kanu, 2022).

Nonetheless, the growing acceptance of local cultural practices has enhanced evangelization and pastoral outreach in Nigeria. The Church's willingness to engage culture has made Catholicism more accessible and relatable, especially among the youth and rural populations (Church Life Journal, 2021). According to Nche (2015), religious adherence among Nigerian youth remains high, partly due to the way Christianity, particularly Catholicism, aligns its teachings with communal values such as respect for elders, family cohesion, and communal responsibility. From a global perspective, scholars such as Horsfjord et al. (2022) have emphasized that African Catholicism represents one of the fastest-growing branches of the global Church, with its growth attributed to the dynamic and inculturated expressions of the faith. Nigerian Catholicism, in particular, stands out as a model for how the Church can thrive when it integrates the Gospel with local cultural realities.

The involvement of lay faithful in the inculturation process has also been notable. Through associations, prayer groups, and lay ministries, ordinary Catholics have participated in reimagining their faith in cultural terms. Lay movements often incorporate music, dance, and storytelling in their worship activities, further demonstrating how Catholicism in Nigeria has become a lived, embodied experience (Uwah, 2013). Moreover, Catholic educational institutions have contributed significantly to the theological discourse on inculturation. Seminaries and Catholic universities in Nigeria now offer courses that explore African theology, local ethics, and the interface between Christianity and culture. These institutions train future clergy and theologians to be culturally conscious and theologically grounded, thus institutionalizing the inculturation agenda.

Discussion on Findings: Analysis of Interviews on Marian Iconography in Nigerian Cultural Contexts

This study engaged key religious and cultural figures in Nigeria to explore the theological, artistic, and sociocultural dimensions of reinterpreting Marian iconography through the lens of inculturation. Participants included three Catholic bishops from Nigeria's major ethnic regions (Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo), traditional rulers, artists, theologians, and a regional focus group. The

insights gathered illuminate divergent and converging views on the implications of localizing sacred imagery in Nigerian Catholicism.

Perspectives from Catholic Bishops on Enculturation

The bishops interviewed supported the concept of inculturation and affirmed its alignment with the Catholic Church's evolving praxis. One bishop defined inculturation as the Church's effort to integrate its teachings and rituals with indigenous cultural forms without diluting core doctrinal elements. He noted that Marian apparitions often reflect the local culture, citing the mestiza appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe as an example. In this light, he recommended portraying the Virgin Mary with a cappuccino complexion and adorned in distinctly Nigerian garments to affirm cultural relevance and reduce the psychological effects of Eurocentric beauty ideals.

Another bishop responded affirmatively upon viewing a painting of a Nigerian Mary, remarking, "You painted yourself." This comment underscored the successful contextualization of Marian imagery and its resonance with Nigerian identity. He emphasized the theological power of iconography, asserting that visible representations influence faith perception and deepen connection with sacred figures. He further acknowledged that while the presence of a halo confirmed the figure's Catholic sanctity, the absence of overt Western symbolism enabled cultural familiarity. A third bishop credited the post-Vatican II reforms for opening theological space for language, music, and artistic expression in Catholic worship. He expressed concern that prevailing Western depictions of Mary alienate African Catholics and fail to capture local spirituality. He pledged to support advocacy for the mainstreaming of Nigerian Marian iconography through ecclesiastical channels, including the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN).

Reflections from Traditional and Cultural Leaders

Traditional leaders offered divergent perspectives rooted in their regional values. The traditional ruler of Nnewi (Southeast Nigeria) likened the Marian reconceptualization to the local deity *Edo*, who appears as a beautiful Nnewi woman to establish cultural connection. He affirmed that sacred figures should embody local aesthetics to enhance spiritual accessibility. Conversely, the Catholic traditional ruler of Faskari (Northwest Nigeria) viewed the project with suspicion, expressing concern that incorporating Hausa traditional symbols into Marian imagery could dilute or misappropriate indigenous values. His position reflected a deep reverence for local cultural codes, even when interfaced with Christian narratives. In a notable interaction, a religious leader responded to the localized Marian images by stating, "She no longer looks like Mary." This response illustrates the deep imprint of Western Marian imagery on the collective Christian imagination in Nigeria. The comment reflected the internal conflict many believers may face when encountering Nigerian reinterpretations of sacred figures.

Focus Group Discussion on Perception and Reception

A focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with eight participants from various parts of Nigeria, including artists, educators, and religious practitioners. The participants, aged 35–55, provided a cross-section of opinions on the cultural and theological acceptability of Nigerian Marian iconography. A Catholic theologian and nun affirmed the project's alignment with the Church's inculturation mission. However, a primary school teacher expressed unease, labeling the image a "profane reinterpretation" and voicing concern over its authenticity. She worried that reimagining sacred figures might distort theological truths and mislead believers.

One visual artist countered this viewpoint by emphasizing that all Marian imagery is interpretive, shaped by context and artistic license. He argued that the project highlights the constructed nature of religious iconography and its role in cultural theology. Meanwhile, a Yoruba traditionalist rejected the fusion, calling it an exploitation of African heritage, while an Igbo traditionalist suggested abandoning Christianity altogether in favor of African traditional religion, citing visual sovereignty as a crucial cultural value.

Contributions from Artists and Fashion Scholars

A university fashion designer contributed valuable insights on integrating traditional Nigerian aesthetics into Marian iconography. She recommended using Ankara, Aso-oke, and George fabrics to affirm cultural dignity, and suggested accessorizing Mary with coral beads and beaded crowns—elements historically reserved for queens and priestesses in Yoruba and Edo traditions. She also advised incorporating traditional symbols such as *Uli* and *Nsibidi* motifs to express values like fertility, protection, and purity. She noted that Mary, as a maternal and spiritual figure, holds a "celebrity status" in Catholic devotion and should be depicted in regal attire that communicates divine reverence and cultural familiarity.

Filmic Approaches to Sacred Representation

A filmmaker and lecturer shared his 2007 experience adapting the Book of Genesis' story of Adam and Eve into an African setting using indigenous costumes, settings, and music. Despite limited resources, the film achieved widespread circulation and commercial success. He credited its popularity to the audience's ability to identify with the characters and aesthetics, which resonated with their lived experiences. He suggested documenting the creative process behind the Marian reinterpretations through audiovisual storytelling, including a soundtrack that reinforces the theological and cultural messages. This multimedia approach, he argued, would enhance audience reception and promote theological dialogue through the recreation of Marian Iconography.

Theological and Cultural Iconography of the Virgin Mary as a typical Nigerian woman

My research painting reimagines the Virgin Mary as a typical Nigerian woman, embodying theological depth and cultural blend. Through symbolism and color, the artwork seeks to bridge divinity with human connection, portraying Mary not only as a spiritual figure but as a mother who integrates with her children to foster belongingness and unity.



The recreation of Marian Iconography as a Nigerian woman

Painting the Virgin Mary as Mother of Nigeria (oil on a canvas 100 X 150 cm) was inspired by the evolution of Marian iconography and the profound symbolism of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Thus, through this conceptualization and artistic recreation, my paper reimagines the Virgin Mary as a typical Nigerian woman. Just as the Guadalupe image of the Virgin Mary depicts her as a Mestiza woman, integrating Indigenous Mexican elements to connect with local culture, my reinterpretation makes her a typical Nigerian, incorporating traditional Nigerian textiles, hairstyles, and motifs to reflect the cultural identity of Nigeria.

The researcher(artist), Mary-Lucy Okwuowulu reimagining and recreating Marian
Iconography



This painting using Afrocentric elements to make Mary relatable to Nigerians employs green, orange, and orange-red clothing to symbolizes life, growth, and vitality, while her light brown complexion reflects the natural beauty of Nigerian skin tones.

Conclusion

The interviews and focus group discussions reveal a complex interplay between faith, culture, and visual representation. While responses ranged from enthusiastic endorsement to cautious skepticism, the majority of participants acknowledged the importance of cultural relevance in religious expression. Theologians and artists alike supported the project's contribution to Catholic

inculturation, affirming its potential to foster spiritual belonging and identity within the Nigerian context. However, resistance from certain traditional leaders and laypersons indicates that widespread acceptance requires continued theological education and community dialogue. Ultimately, the reinterpretation of Marian iconography as a Nigerian woman represents more than an artistic shift—it is a theological and cultural gesture toward a truly African Catholicism.

In conclusion, the Catholic Church in Nigeria has made substantial progress in its efforts to integrate local culture into its religious practices. Through liturgical adaptations, theological reflections, and community engagement, the Church has created a model of faith that is both authentically Christian and genuinely African. While theological and pastoral tensions remain, the overall trajectory points toward a Church that is increasingly reflective of the cultural contexts in which it exists. These efforts not only enrich the spiritual lives of Nigerian Catholics but also contribute to the broader global conversation on the future of Christianity in diverse cultural landscapes.

This article on inculturation offers a timely and insightful exploration of the dynamic interplay between Christian liturgy and African cultural expression. Grounded in theological reflection and supported by relevant scholarly sources, it highlights how inculturation fosters deeper faith engagement and cultural authenticity within Nigerian Christianity. The analysis is especially valuable for scholars, clergy, and cultural theorists interested in liturgical adaptation and contextual theology. By examining both the promises and tensions of integrating indigenous practices into worship, the article contributes meaningfully to ongoing debates about identity, faith, and cultural continuity in postcolonial African religious life. I therefore recommend the Nigerian's churches (CBCN-Catholic Bishop's Conference)' consideration of my proposed Nigerian Marian Iconography.

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