

Characteristics of Early Ecclesiastical Architecture in Lagos State in Nigeria

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Abstract

Considering the fact that the period between 1854 and 1929AD has been identified as the first phase of emergence and development of ecclesiastical architecture in Nigeria, this, therefore, became the earliest period and this study examined the characteristics of the church buildings during this period. Among the churches that were built during this period, five were significantly prominent and still exist. This study examined two because those buildings shared similar characteristics. As the study was an explorative one and historical in nature it adopted qualitative method of non-participant observation, historical and unstructured interview methods of gathering data using descriptive method of analysis. This study found that Churches were dominated by foreign established missions as indigenous ones were yet to evolve. Gothic style dominated the period characterised by its usual strong focus on verticality, pointed arches, rib vaults, flying buttresses, large stained glass windows, ornaments and pinnacles. Construction works and financing relied heavily on foreign input. It also noted that construction materials were imported and the church buildings were more of foreign monuments rather than industrial or make-shift. Nigerian cultural, geographical, geological, climatic, existing religious and social factors were not major considerations. The study concluded that the characteristics of the early church buildings were significantly at variance with the current trends.

Keywords: Characteristics, Early Ecclesiastical Architecture, Lagos State in Nigeria

1.0. Introduction

In the course of reviewing the evolutionary and developmental trends in ecclesiastical architecture in Nigeria from its emergence in 1845 and 2005AD, three phases were identified (Adeboye, 2009). The study classified the first phase to span between 1845 and 1929AD; 1930-1980 was the second phase and the third phase spanned between 1981 and 2005. Since this study was concerned with consideration of the characteristics of the earliest period, the first phase is the most appropriate.

Ecclesiastical architecture could not have logically evolved without the establishment of Christianity. Before the emergence of Christianity in Nigeria, a score or more of new missionary societies sprang up between 1792 and 1835 during the years of the anti-slave campaigns in England, Scotland and on the general continents of Europe and North America, having intension to start some missionary work in Africa (Hillarbrandt, 1990). Many of these groups eventually succeeded in establishing missionary work in Nigeria and the Anglicans were the first to arrive in 1845 through Badagry near Lagos. Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1809 – 31 December 1891) from Osoogun in the present Oyo State was one of the first missionaries. He was a Nigerian.

Subsequent development led to many other denominations that abound in contemporary Nigerian religious church spread and they owed their roots to a number of sources. Some emerged from foreign societies and many to African Independent bases. Anderson (2001) noted that Pentecostal which began in the second phase of ecclesiastical architecture development in Nigeria is the fastest growing denomination not only among the Nigerians but in the world and Lagos is identified as the most Pentecostal city in the world.

This study explored the form, content and meaning of the early phase of ecclesiastical architecture development in Nigeria with a view to identifying the characteristics of the church buildings that existed during the period under study. As it is a qualitative research, non-participant observation, unstructured interview and historical document were employed to gather the data for descriptive method for analysis.

Adeboye (2013) observed that five (5) church buildings were identified as outstanding and are still existing without major restructuring among the early ecclesiastical buildings that can be classified to have risen to the level of architecture that were worth studying. Since these early church buildings shared basic common characteristics as they were all foreign mission established Churches, two (2) of them were critically examined

for analysis. The consideration factor for selecting these two was that The First Baptist Church, No. 24 Breadfruit Street was the oldest among them while The Cathedral Church of Christ, No. 29 Marina, Lagos (1925-1946) was the last during that first phase (construction began in the first phase and completed in the second phase).

2.0. Study Area

No other place could have been best for this type of study in Nigeria than Lagos State and its environ for many reasons. Lagos State has been identified as the cradle of Christian evolution and development in Nigeria. It was from this location that the foreign groups proceeded to other parts of the country (Hildebrandt, 1981). It is a place that pioneered ecclesiastical architecture in Nigeria because the first church building was erected in Badagry in 1845. Lagos State is perhaps argueably most Christian religious city in the world having a long history of Independent African Churches that emphasize spiritual gifts, dating back to the time of the great influenza epidemic of 1918 (Anderson, 2002).

Lagos State is identified as the custodian of the highest number of the Church buildings built during the period under study. The nature of Lagos, being one of the metropolitan mega cities, gives an impetus to the flourishing of the spread of religious activities because Christianity development has become an urban phenomenon (Anderson, 2003). Lagos' cosmopolitan structure accommodates the influence of every Nigerian tribe (Census 2006). It was also the first capital of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Lagos State is located in the southwest part of Nigeria with a population of 9,019,534 (2006 census) and an area of 3,577 square kilometres including twenty two per cent (22%) of lagoons and creeks.



Plate 2.1 Map of Nigeria showing Lagos at left bottom side

Source:

<https://www.google.com.ng/search?q=map+of+lago+nigeria&newwindow=1&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=oHIWU9vRKsyI7AaPkYGyCQ>

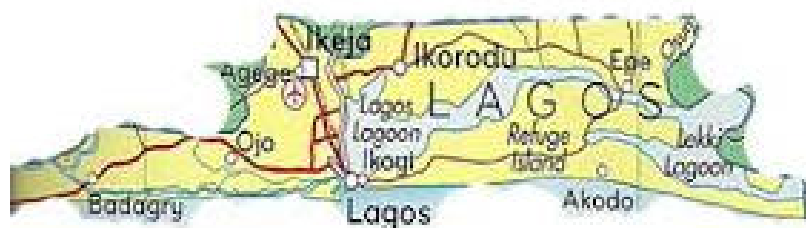


Plate 2.2 Map of Lagos State

3.0. Early Ecclesiastical Architecture in Nigeria

As there was no precedence to borrow from, the process of ecclesiastical architecture emergence and development in Nigeria must have owed its source to a lot of happenings after the end of the famous transatlantic slave trade when the coming of the early missionaries from Europe to Badagry in the mid-19th century (Hildebrandt, 1981; Freeman, 2006). Some missionaries that agitated for the end of slave trade felt slave trade was not in consonant with the concept of Christianity and they desired to expand their mission work to Africa. In order to achieve this, ecclesiastical architecture evolved as a result of the need for sacred space to start the missionary work. Aesthetics, symbolism or theology was not an initial consideration in the choice of a habitation. Therefore, an 'Agia' tree in Badagry was readily available and initially provided this need. This first attempt could be said to have birthed what may be referred to as organic ecclesiastical architecture in Nigeria. The environment was created for the Church formation before the site was moved to another location where the first traditional church structure was erected adopting indigenous style of labour and materials like bamboo walls and thatched roof. They borrowed heavily from the established traditional domestic and religious architecture. The quest for development later produced the St. Thomas Anglican Church, Badagry which was built in 1845 in Gothic style and it became the first church building in Nigeria thereby pioneering ecclesiastical architecture (Adekunle, 2007).

At that same time, there was the need to provide a decent living apartment for the clergy. The mentality of the master and servant relationship between the indigenes and the missionaries was yet to fade off. So, existing domestic buildings could not be used for their residence. Previous experiences during the slave trade period helped these Anglican Missionaries to bring with them a two storey prefabricated timber house from Sierra Leone in 1852 for their accommodation. Field survey confirmed that the building has been preserved as a monument because it was the first storey building in Nigeria. A similar house was built in Lagos and another one in Ibadan two years later. This form of house and construction pioneered high rise residential buildings in Nigeria. The missionaries tried to create a status for themselves because the alternative could have been mud/

thatch since the brick construction was comparatively expensive. The model became a prototype for the first set of colonial buildings described by Mary Kingsley as “abominations” because of their noisy roofs and open verandas (Godwin, 2005).

With time the Church began to expand its mission work to Lagos. A stable environment for construction to flourish began in 1863 encouraged the construction of monumental church buildings. Afro-Brazilians contributed immensely at that time and in fact became the backbone of the building industry in Nigeria (Godwin, 2005). All the early churches that were built were foreign mission established and managed Churches as Pentecostalism was still unknown in Nigeria neither was there Africa Indigenous Churches established.

These early established Churches attached liturgical and theological meanings to the architecture of their church buildings. They introduced the ornamentation around the entrance porch to announce the holiness of the interior sacred space. The aisle tried to draw the congregation to the altar and the pews on either side became the gangway of a ship carrying worshippers to God. The altar, the holy heart of the building, was contained in a separated and sacred space (Hoh Jr., 2006).

Godwin (2005) noted that 1861 became a significant date in the urban development of Lagos because the status of the territory changed from the so called “anomalous government” of the previous ten years to a British colony which by 1863 had achieved a stable environment where development flourished. There was the introduction of a degree of planning on the Lagos Island and allocated land to traders and the mission churches on which substantial church buildings were constructed. At that time the backbone of the building industry were the Afro-Brazilians. Obviously it took a little time for the indigenes to adapt to the new style of building and to attain the affluence which marked the possession of such solid buildings (Godwin, 2005). So, the design and construction of church buildings rested heavily on foreign input.

In contemporary church architecture, it is observed that some Catholic and Orthodox/ Protestant Churches in Nigeria still subscribe to monumental structures that last long time while some Pentecostals and African Indigenous Churches prefer temporary and industrial structures with the notion that no matter how new a church building is, it will soon become orthodox (meaning usual). While the early Churches believed in preservation of structures to edify their God, the contemporary Churches, also, consider erecting these temporary structures with the notion that the world is a temporary abode and heaven is the permanent home.

4.0. Findings and Discussion

In the course of recognisance survey, five (5) church buildings were identified as outstanding that could be studied as they showed some significant characteristics although they shared many common similarities with others. They were designed mainly in Gothic styles. Those churches were: The First Baptist Church, No. 24 Breadfruit Street, Lagos (1883-1887); Holy Trinity Church, Ebute Ero, Lagos (1912-1929); The Cathedral Church of Christ, No. 29 Marina, Lagos (1925-1946); African Church Cathedral (Bethel), Broad Street, Lagos (1928); St Jude’s Anglican Church, Ebute Meta, Lagos (1932). The First Baptist Church, No. 24 Breadfruit Street became most important because it was the oldest among them while The Cathedral Church of Christ, No. 29 Marina, Lagos (1925-1946) whose construction began in the first phase and the construction lapsed into the second phase of ecclesiastical architecture development in Nigeria (construction began in the first phase and completed in the second phase).

Only very few Christian denominations existed as only few Christian Missions succeeded in establishing mission stations because of oppositions from traditionalists and unfriendly climatic conditions. Catholic, Anglican and Baptist were mostly common but Anglican dominated the architectural landscape with their church planting drive than any other denomination. Although traditional religion existed with shrines in rural settlements, their impact was not felt in the urban areas and African Independent Churches were yet to evolve. The notion to keep the converts during this period motivated the construction of the church buildings and to establish the converts in the faith. The church buildings too served as landmark where the missionaries had treaded in other to report same to their parent bodied that funded them. The church administration was controlled by foreign missionaries and priests. Theology and liturgy dictated the sacred spaces arrangement. Church plans were mainly components of rectangles dictated by design hierarchy of sacred spaces which became their tradition for a long time. The congregation entered the building from the main entrance and seated at the general space leading to the Ministers with Choir and then to the Altar which terminated the holiest point as it was in the Old Testament tabernacles. Their liturgy was a major consideration and determinant of their church design plans arrangement.

Architectural design styles that were prominent during this period were mainly Gothic despite the fact that it was a period that there was global agitation for and practice of modern architecture in some other parts of the world. Nigerians regarded Gothic style at that time as the only synonym to church buildings as it was considered a true representation of ecclesiastical architecture. Any style outside Gothic was not easily identifiable except with bell tower carrying bell and clocks. There was heavy reliance on importation of major building materials like bricks, iron and timber which were imported from Europe and America. Construction funds too were mainly sourced from the parent Churches in Europe and America. The church buildings were usually small comparatively as

capacities of the Churches were usually small with a maximum sitting of 500 worshippers. The vocabulary of 'mega churches' associated with current American Churches was yet unknown on the landscape. Vehicular parking spaces were unnoticed because only few church members could afford to own them at that time. The construction of church buildings usually took a longer time say up to a minimum of ten years due to irregular supply of fund and long time to import building materials from abroad. The construction industry relied on foreign input.

This study discovered that the style of church building design was significantly different from the current style in many ways. New building materials and methods have evolved after the period. Liturgy of the Churches keep on changing to meet demands of the time and different denominations keep evolving

The two selected samples of churches studied are described below.

4.1. *The First Baptist Church, No. 24 Breadfruit Street, Lagos (1883-1887)*

In an attempt to further the expansion of the mission programme from Ogbomoso, the Baptist missionaries began mission work in Lagos in 1855. In order to achieve this, the construction of this First Baptist Church building commenced eight years later in 1883 and was completed on 1st January 1887. Bricks, other building materials and fund were sourced from the United States of America for its construction. The walls and columns were of bricks but reinforced with iron rods. The building was rectangular on plan, of a simple gable roof of high pitch and was approached by an imposing entrance tower.

Before the completion of this building self-determination began to arise among the leadership of the Church which led to reverting from their adopted English names to the traditional names because Christianity was being closely linked to cultural imperialism of the Western world. After the dedication of the church building, there arose another dispute which led to a breakaway. The breakaway group pulled out of the church without referring the matter to the home Mission in America and held its first service under a temporary shed in a yard along Wesley Street, Lagos. Before the end of that week, a bamboo shed was put up in that yard and it became their place of worship for many years before another site was acquired for the construction of their own building.



Plate 4.1.1. Exterior view showing the Gothic window and the tower

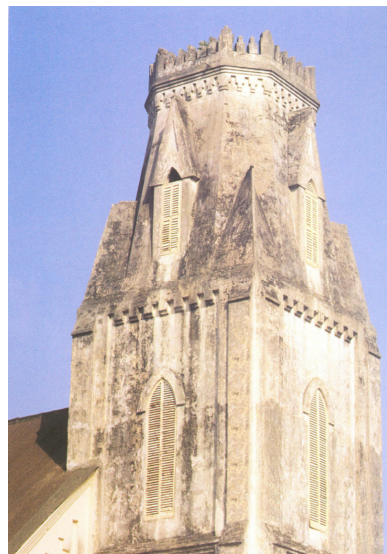


Plate 4.1.2. Detail of bell tower and Gothic windows

Details for First Baptist Church in Lagos. Source: *Development in Architecture in Lagos Commerce in Nigeria* by A.A. Egbor

4.2. *The Cathedral Church of Christ, No. 29 Marina, Lagos (1925-1946)*

Precursory to further development of ecclesiastical architecture in Nigeria, the Anglican Communion in Nigeria sought to spread further from Badagry to Lagos and other parts of Nigeria. Lagos was then the seat of power of colonial rule. The logical thing for them to do was to register their presence through architecture, hence the church building. The name of the initial church was Christ Church and the foundation was laid on 29 March 1867. However, in 1921, there was a proposal to raise the status of the Church to that of a Pro-Cathedral which led to the re-naming it "The Cathedral Church of Christ". This led to the design of a new church by a Brazilian/Sierra Leonean architect, Bagan Benjamin in 1925. The design capacity was for 500 worshippers although it was

later expanded to accommodate more. The construction was in three phases and lasted for 21 years with the first phase commencing on 21 April 1925 and the final phase being completed on 1st May 1946.



Plate 4.2.1. Exterior view of the church when it dominated its environment

The mission objectives of the Church were to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, build human community and help those in need. The second objective was pursued through architecture.

Although the design exhibited, to some extent, an eclecticism of many architectural traditions in Lagos at that time, the design reflected mainly the Gothic style which was the epochal vocabulary of ecclesiastical architecture in the Roman Empire during the Middle Ages (1100 – 1690AD). The architectural characteristics of this cathedral were not different from the old Gothic period which included the emphasis on strong vertical lines, high vaulted ceilings, minimal wall space, pointed window and door openings and buttressed walls. Airy and bright focus on verticality, pointed arches, rib vaults, buttresses, large stained glass windows, ornaments and pinnacles gave a fulfilling symbol to the religious aspiration of the building. This Cathedral Church of Christ pioneered a careful attention to symbolic ecclesiastical architecture in Nigeria during the British rule.



Plate 4.2.2 Entrance Porch



Plate 4.2.3. Exterior showing windows, columns and cross

The entrance porch celebrated the pointed arches of Gothic. The entrance tower where the bell was hung was celebrated too and clocks were hung on the four surfaces as wrist watches were uncommon. The tower symbolized a landmark as a compass for people to locate their bearings when it was difficult to do so because it was the tallest building around at the time it was constructed. The cathedral interior has three (3) aisles flanked on either side by an avenue of heavy columns which measure about nine (9) meters high each and massive volume of the interior had a domineering effect and consequently put the worshippers in awesome wonder. At the time of its completion, it dominated its environment but the subsequent development of modern high rise buildings around it created a blending continuity in sky space.

Later development around the building created an environment where the church building was approached by an avenue of public car parking lots unlike the contemporary usual church facilities that provide its own generous

parking lots. Land is expensive within Lagos Island and it will be a big luxury to have such generous parking spaces. The Bishop's Court was completed in September 1960. At one time, the Cathedral dominated the water front of Lagos and stood majestically above the neighbouring buildings but the modern world of physical development has crowded in on the church building. However, its being a landmark reassures a rock of stability and a symbol of community in a changing world of modern architecture.

The church building regularly undergoes renovations to blend with the contemporary modern city outlook although the old characteristics of Gothic style, depicting its time, are still preserved, The high demand for land spaces around the building which has given way to sprawling development of high rise buildings seems to be choking the church now within the landscape. Expansions on the building have not lost sight of the conceptual precedence of design and continuity in space has been maintained.

Except that the church building is of unique design of Gothic, it competes favourably well with neighbouring structures in terms of grandeur appearance. The imposing structure is not intimidated by the multi-storey skyscrapers surrounding it. In fact, it has earned itself a space in the list of buildings with special architectural and historical interests in Nigeria,



Plate 4.2.6. Columns and Cross Plate 4.2.7. & 8. Interior Views with ionic columns supporting beam details of the Cathedral Church of Christ, No. 29 Marina, Lagos (1925-1946). Source: Field work photographs.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

The study showed that the style of ecclesiastical architecture was characterised by Gothic with its usual strong focus on verticality, pointed arches, rib vaults, flying buttresses, large stained glass windows, ornaments and pinnacles. Cost of church building construction and supply of materials and labour relied heavily on foreign input as local work force was still at its infancy and major building materials were being imported. The administration of the mission stations were being controlled by foreign priests and ministers and the design and construction mainly depended on foreign input. It is recommended that further study could explore the transformation that took place after the intervention of many factors.

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