

Wonders of Co-creation:

# Catholic Theology and Spirituality through African Art





# Wonders of Co-creation: Catholic Spirituality through African Art

## Introduction

Art is a story. Art is a living experience. Art is an impression of inner inspirations expressed outwardly through pieces of exquisiteness and masterly works of creation. Because art is a story, it needs to be shared. When art is a living experience, it deserves a special space in our everyday life. Because art is an impression, it beckons for intuitive and boundless creativity and innovative thinking. Where art dwells, the sky has no limit. Art is richly endowed with a silent voice. Art speaks and art can sing. Art is a great teacher as well as a tough master. It can also provoke sensibilities but quench them with underlying peace and tranquillity. Art never stops to be daring!

In a world of 'us and them' art is a bridge builder. Where people are building walls to barricade liberated movement of humanity and its endowment, art is capable of penetrating the walls with ghostly force. It has the limitless capacity to fathom unity in diversity without fear or favour. The masterly embedded in art can create a convergence zone of diverse humanities, cultures and traditions marching together towards a common goal. Art is an indisputable and immense dialogue.

The exhibition is an expression of artistic works ingénue in wood by our renowned artists, Sydney Siansango and Gordon Shamulenge. The concept was originated by a Jesuit Priest who is also the president of the Jesuits in Africa and Madagascar, Fr. Orobator Emmanuel, Abonkianmeghe, SJ. On their group visit as Jesuit Educationists, in March 2018, Fr. Bator, as he is fondly called, experienced the 'Zeela vibe' through the art collection that is housed and displayed at Zeela Art Gallery. The encounter did not only marvel him but most importantly it inspired what he later came to refer to as 'the Co-creation'. The concept of Co-creation was progressively embraced by everyone who was involved in this journey of faith, unity and charity. It is worth mentioning that the artists who happen to be non, Catholics, so ably interpreted the Catholic spirituality through art. The convergence of ideas that ignited the works were conceived from 3 different African humanities of the West, based in the East and inspired by the South. This

# Foreword

(input from Fr. Bator)

Suggested content for your consideration

- In the beginning - The Encounter: How it all started
- Communication and interconnectedness/networking
- Dialogue (meetings/ emails/ sketches) and eventual consensus leading to the dawn of the co-creation process
- Convergence ideas different cultures and religions (Artists are non-Catholic, Fr. Bator from West Africa, based in East Africa and art pieces from Zambia)
- Acknowledgments



## The Co-creation convergence

- Map of Africa- highlight Zambia, Kenya, Nigeria (South, East, West –SEW)
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## Teamwork

### Original Inspiration

Fr. Orobator Emmanuel Agbonkhianmeghe, SJ

### Exhibition Storyline and Supervision

Bedah S. Salasini

Charity M.N. Salasini

### Artists

Sydney Siansangu and Gordon Shamulenge

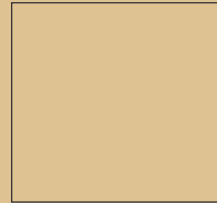
### Exhibition Designer

Jonathan Leya

## The Artists



**Gordon Shamulenge**



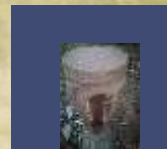
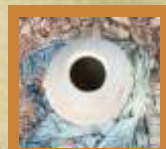
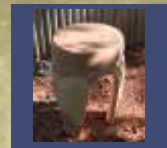
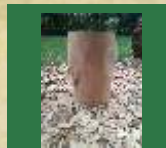
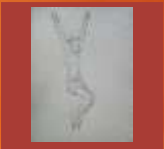
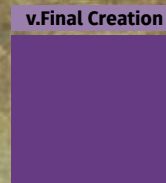
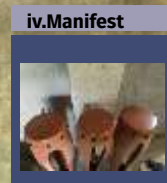
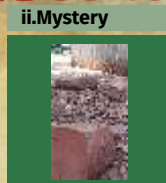
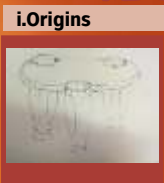
**Sydney Siansangu**

# The Co-creation

Genesis and the five stages of Co-creation



From raw wood emerged form, life and beauty.



Mother tongue	Creation	Creator	Inspirational note	Co-creators
<b>Mambwe</b>	<b>Ifilengwe</b>	<b>Mulengi</b>	God is full of awe. Let us glorify Him by taking care of His creation he made for us; and art is one way of expressive way of glorifying God	<b>Yongo Salasini</b>
<b>Kalanga</b>	<b>Bumbiwa</b>	<b>Ndzimu</b>	Inherent in all of us is the God given gift of imagination and ability to realise our visions.	<b>Jonathan Leya</b>
<b>Edo</b>	<b>Ayi</b>	<b>Osanobua</b>	When God created the world, God exclaimed with joy and delight "it is very good!" We are co-creators called to restore our common home to its original beauty and dignity, so that God can once again sing and dance for joy.	<b>Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, SJ</b>
<b>Bemba</b>	<b>Ifilengwa na Lesa</b>	<b>Mulenga</b>	Education is in two ways, to be wisely educated or to be foolishly educated. When you are wisely educated you endeavour to foster the core values of humanity and God's creation. When you are foolishly educated you hasten to destroy them	<b>Charity M.N. Salasini</b>

# Wonders of Co-creation: Catholic Spirituality through African Art

## Creation: Mary and Jesus

### African wisdom:

An African mother straps her child to her back. The practice always assures the little baby of its safety and security in its infancy and secures its vulnerability. It promotes wellbeing of the baby through the transfer of body rhythms from the mother to the child. The mother also receives good massage, muscle fortification and above all enchantment from her child. It is amazing how the child would stand on the mother's back and be 'on top of things' to scan the immediate surroundings and prepare for the next action, to hide, scream or cackle. An emotionally disturbed child would be strapped on the mother's back for soothing and eventually sent to sleep. A cantankerous baby would be put on the back to moderate bad behaviour and preserve the mother's embarrassment in front of audiences. Intense body communication between the mother and the child happens here before the child even starts verbal communication. It is a body of two people in one, united in mind, soul and strength. All in all, the practice creates an inseparable bond between the mother and the child throughout their life time.

### Theological reflections:

In the Gospels and from early Christian traditions, Mary plays an important role in salvation history. Religious art represents her role in a variety of Madonna figures with her child and theological traditions confer on her titles, such as “Mother of God” (Theotokos), “Mother of the Redeemer” (Redemptoris Mater), and honour her with feasts, such as Assumption and Immaculate Conception. In modern times, St. Pope John Paul II wrote that “Mary's mediation is intimately linked with her motherhood. It possesses a specifically maternal character...” This motif combines the Marcan gospel theme of Jesus as “hidden Messiah” with the devotional and theological traditions of Mary as Mediatrix and intercessor. As we pray in Salve Regina, “show unto us the blessed fruit of your womb, Jesus.” Through the medium of intense maternal and natal bond, Mater Misericordia shows us the child-Messiah “hidden” on her back and places us with her son.





Photo of Mary and Jesus



# Wonders of Co-creation: Catholic Spirituality through African Art

## Creation: Crucified Christ

### African wisdom:

The crucified Christ can be likened to a 'forked branch'. In our traditions a forked branch or pole performs a very significant role of being an anchorage or support system. It is mainly employed in construction. The hut or house or shelter must have the specific number of forked poles, mainly to sustain the structure of the roof. Depending on the size, quality and positioning of the poles, the roof structure would either be fortified or compromised.

### Theological reflections:

The “forked branch” motif has a deep theological and symbolic resonance with the central mystery of Christianity. With outstretched arms the Crucified Christ embraces the crucified people of the world. The combination of torso/upper body and outstretched arms vividly represents this interpretation. The Preface of Eucharistic Prayer II reminds us that Jesus “stretched out his hands as he endured his Passion, so as to break the bonds of death and manifest the resurrection.” Jesus is our anchor, sanctuary and Redeemer.



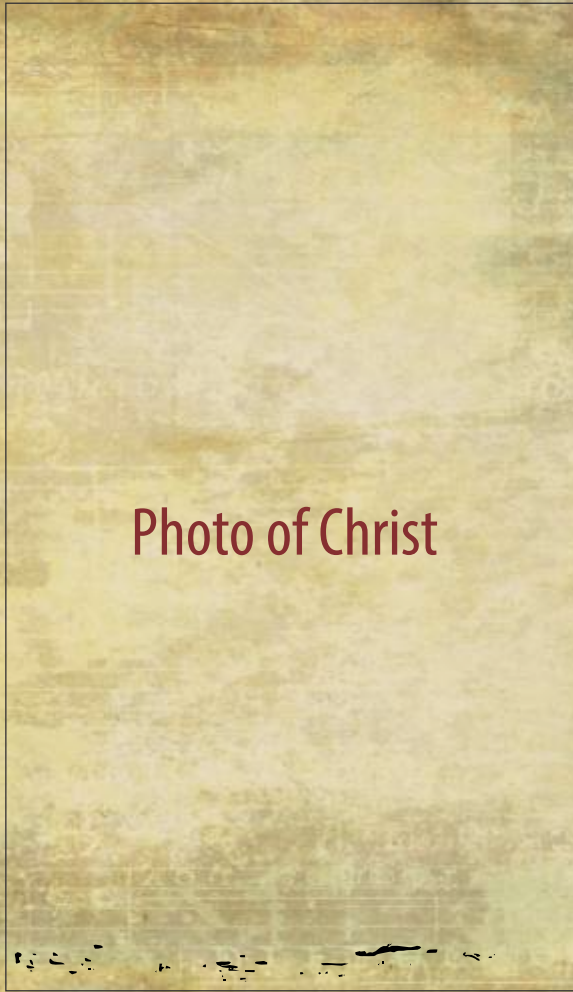




Photo of Christ



# Wonders of Co-creation: Catholic Spirituality through African Art

## Creation: The Alter

### African wisdom:

The underlying concept for this is inspired by the tradition and practice of insaka. To 'gather around the table' implies coming together in a circle and in unity. How then can a four cornered table be a centre of a round gathering! Insaka is a round shelter made out of a thatched roof and erected poles. It is open all round. Young men and the elderly gather around to share knowledge, stories, food and receive visitors to the village. Insaka in a village is like a living and interactive centre. It promotes innovative and creative thinking, knowledge, inquiry, preservation and continuity. The encircling nature of insaka is a symbol of unity, peace and inclusion. At insaka there is always room for another person! Mathematicians would say 'a circle has infinite lines.' In other words it is very accommodating!


### Theological reflections:

The oval shape of the altar is profoundly African and modelled on traditional architecture and design (huts, tukuls, etc.). It is a space of gathering for Insaka, Indaba, Palaver, Baraza, Harambee....Its oval shape communicates infinity. The three-legged motif recalls the traditional method of cooking, using a tripod made of three stones. A proverb says "the pot sits on three stones." On these three legs sits the "pot" for preparing the Eucharistic meal. This three-legged altar conjures a Trinitarian imagery. The three legs of the altar are proportionate, considering the central importance of equality and mutuality of the three persons of the Trinity, but each with its own unique identity. The three persons of the Trinity retain their identity in unity, thus creating a diversity in unity. Theology captures this reality as perichoresis – mutual indwelling and dynamic reciprocity. The three legs are cast as ngoma, recalling our identity as a living assembly convoked and summoned to worship by God. Also, ngoma recalls the celebratory dimension of the Eucharist as a ritual meal and performance redolent with joy and hope even in the midst of pain and anguish. At this altar, both presider and congregation become co-performers with Jesus Christ our Artiste-in-Chief.





Photo of the Alter



Detail of the Alter

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## Creation: The stool

### African wisdom:

Stools may not carry the same function in our contemporary life styles. Nevertheless what is significant is their representation as symbols of leadership and authority. In African traditions elders employed stools, gathered under a tree, around the fire, at insaka, palaver, Baraza homestead or some designated spaces and deliberated on issues. They discussed matters affecting them at family, community and intercommunity levels. Like trophies, traditionally crafted stools were also awarded to achievers, heroes, inventors/ innovators and trend setters. In addition, they were popularized as symbols of hospitality and clan wisdom.

### Theological reflections:

In Catholic theology of priestly ministry, the ordained minister exercises the triple function of teaching, sanctifying and governing. The African stool captures this idea but highlights the inclusive nature of leadership and authority, especially in ritual spaces and worship events. Following the example of Jesus of Nazareth, the service of leadership is neither introverted nor self-perpetuating (Mark 10:45); it fosters communion, reconciliation, conversation and human flourishing (John 10:10). The person who sits on this stool to preside at the Eucharist gathers people around the altar of sacrifice in the mode of the proto-President, Jesus Christ.






Photo of Stool




Photo of Stool

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## Creation: The Tabernacle

### African wisdom:

Ngoma (African Drum) is a rich and recognisable instrument and Symbol of communication and celebration. In a practical sense, across the continent of Africa and beyond, it is engaged to communicate different types of messages, ranging from personal to social media. Among the Lunda people of Mwata Kazembe and the Bembas of Chitimukulu, there is actually a ' talking drum' called umondo which communicates special messages among the royalty. It is played and interpreted by experts. It exists up to date.

A calabash is a symbol of life giving and sustenance. In our traditions a calabash is essentially used for storage and carrying of food stuffs. Like the maternal womb, the naturally regulated temperatures of the inside of the calabash, makes it the first choice in storing and carrying grain, water, brews, honey, medicines and churning of milk. A calabash would be placed outside a hut with water and covered with a gourd. Travellers could stop by and slake their throats without asking for permission from the owners. They would drink according to their needs bearing in mind that other wayfarers would be in need just like them.

Seeds for the next planting season are often times preserved in the calabash- a practice that makes the calabash a seed bank or Food Reserve Agency.

### Theological reflections:

The sound of the ngoma resonates loudly and reaches to faraway places and peoples. Judeo-Christian theological traditions define the church as the assembly of God. This assembly is convoked by God, through the medium of prophets and prophetesses, kings and queens, women and men of all estate, using all manner of instruments. Our choice of ngoma as pedestal on which sits the Blessed Sacrament continues this tradition of church as the assembly of God. The sound of the drum gathers the people of God around the source of life reposed in the Tabernacle.



## **Calabash**

Arguably one of the most versatile natural objects that one finds in an African agrarian environment. All of its uses find strong resonances with our choice to make it the repository and receptacle for the Body of Christ. The Eucharist is the “source and summit” of Christian life. It is the Bread of Life and Bread for the World. This Tabernacle represents God's life-giving womb – or what some theologians call “womb-love” – for all who thirst and hunger, not only for bread, but also for healing, harmony, wholeness, fulfilment and flourishing. “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!” (Isaiah 55:1).



Photo of The Tabernacle

# Wonders of Co-creation: Catholic Spirituality through African Art

Creation: **St. Ignatius**

## African wisdom:

In our traditions Ignatius would be the quintessential Warrior! Among the Bemba, a chita or a warrior is associated with a spear, axe and stabbing knife and thus depicts a very vicious image indeed! However, Warriors fought wars with an aim to conquer, spread their societal influence and values for continuity of generations and preservation of their identities. The Xaverian movement teaches that Ignatius was a close friend to St. Francis Xavier – or “friends in the Lord” as Ignatius would say – and that both travelled far and wide to proclaim the good news of Christ, in action. Ignatius' passion was to set the world ablaze with light and love of God. His influence is global and not confined to the church. One of the fruits of the strychnos species, that was studied by a Czech Jesuit brother, George Kamel working in the Philipines then, was named strychnos Ignatii or St. Ignatius Beans in honour of the 'warrior' founder of the Society of Jesus or the Jesuits!

## Theological reflections:

Ignatius admits in his autobiography that “Up to the age of twenty-six he was a man given to the follies of the world; and what he enjoyed most was exercise with arms, having a great and foolish desire to win fame.” His belligerent ambition and foolish desire were shattered on the battleground when both his legs were struck by a canon ball. The wounded warrior would later undergo excruciating convalescence and profound conversion. Upon recovery from his injuries, Ignatius laid his arms at the foot of Our Lady of Montserrat, donned a garb fabricated from “cloth from which sacks are usually made” and “bought a pilgrim's staff....” Thus “the Knight Errant is transformed into a true Pilgrim—a humble seeker after the fullness of truth.” Heeding the call of the Scripture, Ignatius beat his warrior's spear into a pilgrim's staff (Isaiah 2:4) and set out to spread the Good News for the salvation of souls.

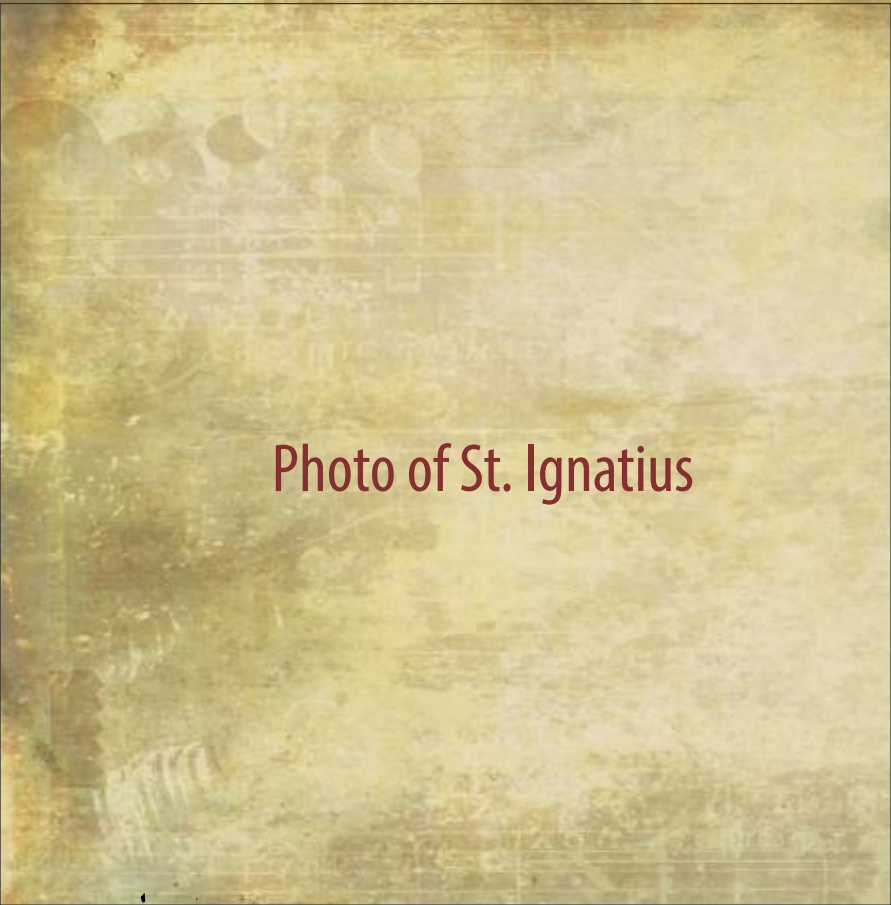
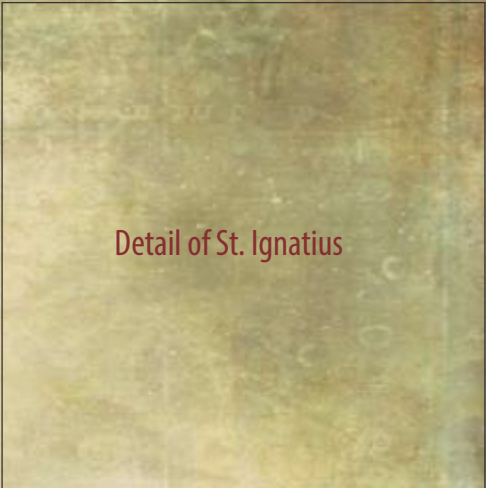


Photo of St. Ignatius



Detail of St. Ignatius



