

The Burden of Cultural Rebirth: A Hermeneutic Reading of Violence and Resilience in Adejimi's Painting

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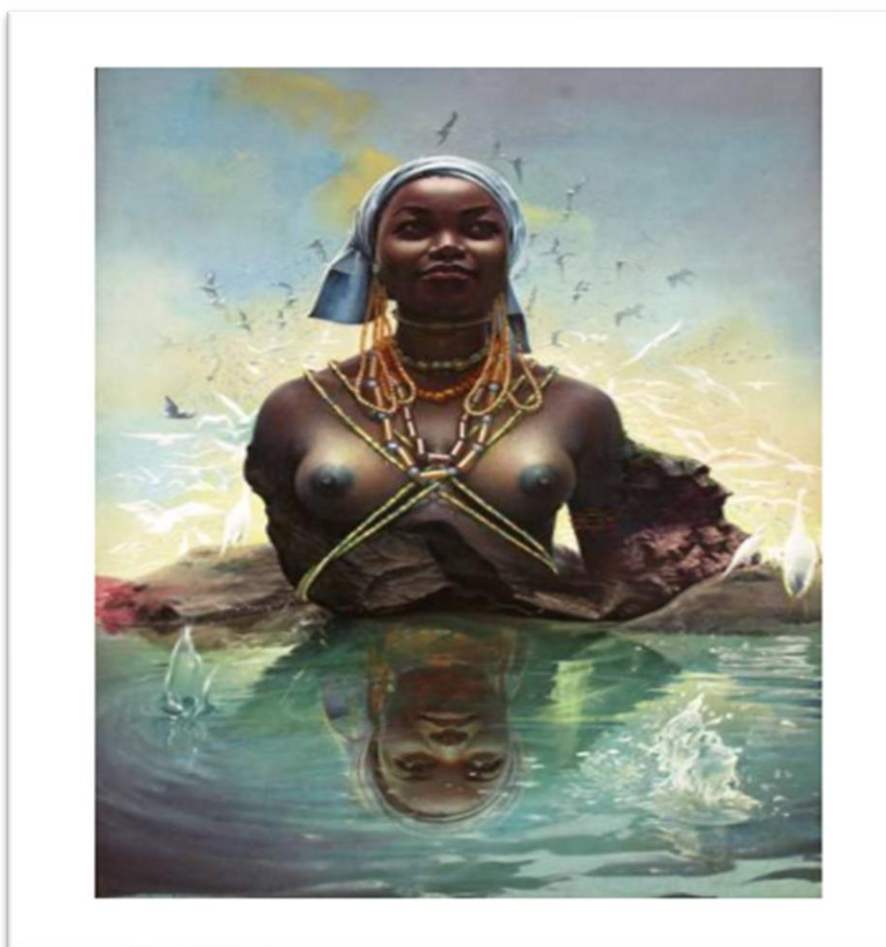
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ABSTRACT

Muri Adejimi's painting, *Baptism*, presents a visually unsettling encounter between Christian symbolism, colonial memory, and African cultural endurance. Although the title evokes the theological language of purification, renewal, and spiritual rebirth, the painting complicates these interpretations by depicting a young African woman whose body appears simultaneously transformed and damaged. Emerging from the water with indigenous adornments, preserved bodily dignity, and an unwavering posture, the figure embodies the contradiction of colonial conversion: a process that promised salvation yet often operated within broader structures of cultural transformation and identity reconfiguration. Drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of historically situated interpretation and Paul Ricoeur's understanding of symbolic surplus, this article examines the painting as a visual discourse on the colonial politics of identity. It argues that the fractured anatomy of the maiden represents the psychological and cultural injuries produced through colonial systems that sought to reorder African consciousness through religious conversion, naming practices, language hierarchies, and Western ideals of civilisation. The substitution of indigenous names with European Christian names is examined as a symbolic practice of identity displacement, while Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's concept of "colomentality" provides an African vernacular framework for understanding the persistence of colonial mental structures after political independence. However, Adejimi's painting does not present African identity as defeated by colonial intervention. Through the survival of beads, hairstyle, bodily confidence, and monumental presence, the figure becomes a symbol of cultural resilience. The wounded body is not merely an archive of colonial injury but also a site of resistance, demonstrating that external systems of domination could transform African appearance and social expression without destroying indigenous consciousness. The article therefore proposes that *Baptism* functions as a counter-image of colonial conversion: an artwork in which the African subject emerges from the waters of imposed transformation, carrying historical scars but retaining cultural agency.

Keywords: Muri Adejimi; Baptism; African Christianity; Colonial identity; Fela Anikulapo-Kuti; Colomentality; Postcolonial art; Visual hermeneutics; Cultural resilience.



INTRODUCTION

The history of colonialism in Africa is not just a record of territorial occupation, economic exploitation, and political domination; it is also a tale of subjugation and struggles over identity. Colonial power operated not only through the control of land and labour, but equally through attempts to reorganise how Africans understood themselves, their cultures, and their relationship to the world. Religious conversion, education, language, names, and bodily discipline became important instruments through which colonial authority tried to shape new forms of African subjectivity. Within this historical context, Western religious doctrines such as baptism occupy a particularly complex position. In Christian theology, baptism represents cleansing, spiritual death, and rebirth. The baptised individual is understood to leave behind an old existence and enter into a new relationship with God and the Christian community. Yet within colonial African encounters, baptism frequently coexisted with unequal systems of power where conversion became deeply tied to broader projects of cultural transformation. Consequently, a critical question emerges: when a sacrament of rebirth enters a colonial space, does it signify spiritual liberation, or does it function as a mechanism of identity displacement?

Muri Adejimi's painting *Baptism* provides a profound visual exploration of this contradiction. At first glance, the painting appears to depict a woman emerging from water, suggesting ritual purification or spiritual transition. However, the visual evidence complicates this interpretation. The figure does not emerge restored and untouched. Her body appears fragmented; parts of her anatomy seem damaged or transformed into a stone-like material. The water surrounding her does not erase signs of struggle but instead reveals them. The maiden's body becomes the central site where competing histories meet, embodying baptism as both transformation and trauma, renewal and rupture. Her fractured arms suggest interruption and injury, while her preserved beads, African hairstyle, and composed posture communicate cultural resilience. This article argues that Adejimi constructs *Baptism* as a visual meditation on the limits of colonial conversion, illustrating that while the damaged body symbolises the psychological wounds of identity reconstruction—such as the displacement of indigenous names—the persistent cultural markers anchor the work in a subtle, resistant ambivalence.

This argument finds a strong conceptual resonance in Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's notion of colomentality, a term through which the Afrobeat musician criticised the persistence of colonial psychological structures after political

independence. For Fela, political liberation did not automatically produce mental liberation; colonialism could end as a political system while surviving as a way of thinking wherein Western cultures and values are continually internalised as superior. In dialogue with Adejimi's painting, this framework helps illuminate the distinction between external subjugation and internal surrender: colonial systems could alter African names and institutional affiliations, yet the maiden's unwavering gaze demonstrates that such interventions failed to eliminate indigenous selfhood. By tracing a coherent progression through the painting's formal elements—from the visual evidence of the fractured body to the interpretive inferences of the water, reflection, and posture—this article places Adejimi's work in dialogue with previous readings by Ayo Elebute (2014) and Damola Awoyokun (2006). It extends their insights into a unified postcolonial critique, asserting that *Baptism* is ultimately an archive of cultural resilience that records historical violence without surrendering African agency.

COLONIAL MEMORY AND THE NEED FOR A POSTCOLONIAL READING IN ADEJIMI'S *BAPTISM*

Adejimi's *Baptism* has attracted interpretations that recognise its complexity but approach it from different conceptual directions. In Ayo Elebute's (2014) interpretation, *Baptism* is situated within questions of feminism, artistic nudity, initiation, and cultural encounter. Elebute (2014) identifies the female figure as central to the painting's meaning and interprets the work through the relationship between traditional African practices and biblical baptism. His reading is important because it establishes the painting as a dialogue between African cultural forms and Christian symbolism rather than merely a religious illustration. However, Elebute's focus on ritual transition overlooks the colonial power dynamics embedded within that transition, where baptism functioned less as a neutral spiritual choice and more as an institutional mechanism carrying assumptions about racial and cultural hierarchy.

Damola Awoyokun's (2006) interpretation moves closer to the painting's formal contradictions by emphasising the unusual relationship between human anatomy, stone-like materiality, and environmental space. His analysis recognises that Adejimi does not present the body through ordinary realism but transforms it into a symbolic structure where flesh, landscape, and memory intersect. While Awoyokun (2006) provides a significant formal foundation, a postcolonial reading must push past aesthetic strategy to interpret this fractured anatomy as a direct metaphor for the cultural and psychological disruptions produced through colonial encounters.

As maintained by Ikwuemesi (2011, 181), "the purpose of art critique is to enact a communion between the work of art and its audience by creating insight that can only be attained by the application of the principles of hermeneutics from a graphic and intellectual standpoint." Thus, a critical interpretation of Adejimi's *Baptism* requires more than the identification of objects represented within the image. To unveil meanings that exceed conventional religious iconography, this study utilises the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004), which posits that meaning emerges from the dialogical encounter between an artwork's historical horizon and the interpreter's situated understanding. *Baptism* exists within multiple overlapping horizons: Christian theology, postcolonial African art discourse, missionary history, and contemporary identity politics.

Paul Ricoeur's (1976) theory of symbolic interpretation further strengthens this approach by asserting that symbols possess a "surplus of meaning" that remains open to multiple, historically grounded interpretations. Through this hermeneutic lens, the visual elements function on two distinct levels: as immediate visual evidence and as interpretive inference. Formally, the canvas displays water, beads, an upright posture, and a fragmented torso. Interpretively, these elements open up historical metaphors. The water represents both Christian purification and the ideological currents of colonial assimilation; the fractured body records historical trauma while simultaneously archiving survival.

To systematically unfold these layers, this study adopts a tripartite hermeneutic framework. First, a formal analysis evaluates the composition and structural relationships on the canvas. Second, an historical interpretation contextualises these forms within the documented records of missionary cultural policies. Third, a postcolonial reflection investigates how the painting explicitly subverts narratives of African cultural erasure. This balanced approach avoids the limitations of a purely formalist reading or a reductive ideological tract, honouring Adejimi's capacity to hold historical injury and African agency in a productive dialectical tension.

BAPTISM AND THE COLONIAL POLITICS OF IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION

The historical complexity of baptism in Africa lies in its dual function as a religious sacrament and an instrument of colonial identity reconstruction. While many Africans actively embraced Christianity for its spiritual resources and avenues of social mobility, missionary institutions frequently operated hand-in-hand with colonial frameworks that framed European culture as the sole metric of civilisation. In many contexts, conversion involved not only acceptance of Christian doctrine but also the adoption of European values concerning dress, morality, family structure, language, and social organisation.

This dimension of conversion is central to Adejimi's *Baptism*. The painting does not depict baptism as a neutral spiritual moment detached from history; instead, it asks what happens when a ritual of rebirth becomes connected

to a process of identity reconstruction. Because indigenous religions were routinely classified by colonial authorities as primitive or irrational, the baptismal font often marked a site of cultural substitution. Adejimi's maiden embodies the profound friction of this encounter: her emergence from the water suggests a passage into a new condition, yet her visible indigenous markers contradict the notion of complete cultural erasure, demonstrating that the attempt to create a culturally empty subject has fundamentally failed.

BAPTISM, CULTURAL SUBSTITUTION, AND IDENTITY DISPLACEMENT

Names represent one of the deepest connections between individuals and their cultural worlds. Across many African societies, names carry histories, spiritual meanings, ancestral connections, and communal memory. The colonial encounter systematically disrupted these networks by introducing new naming practices through Christian baptism, where converts were routinely assigned biblical or European names—such as replacing an Igbo child's name, Chukwuebuka (“God is great”), with Peter, or a Yoruba child's name, Oluwatoyin (“God is worthy of praise”), with Mary.

Although many Africans adopted Christian names consciously and creatively integrated them into existing identities, within colonial contexts where Western Christianity was frequently associated with civilisation and African traditions with backwardness, renaming became part of a larger symbolic hierarchy. This practice institutionalised a form of identity displacement, implying that the indigenous self-required correction or erasure before the African subject could fully enter modernity.

This psychological alienation is precisely what Fela Anikulapo-Kuti criticised through his concept of *colomentality*, which describes the lingering internalisation of colonial hierarchies long after formal independence has been achieved. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's (1952) analysis of colonial psychology, which illustrates how dominated subjects measure their worth against the standards of the coloniser, *colomentality* explains how cultural values, languages, and aesthetics remain colonially conditioned. Adejimi's painting serves as a striking visual critique of this psychological struggle. By maintaining the visible visual evidence of her indigenous identity while entering the symbolic waters of baptism, the maiden establishes a sharp distinction between colonial influence and colonial possession, suggesting that while external structures can enforce a new name or appearance, they cannot conquer the deeper layers of African consciousness.

THE FRACTURED BODY AS AN ARCHIVE OF COLONIAL INJURY

The most striking formal feature of *Baptism* is the severely fractured condition of the maiden's body, where her limbs give way to a coarse, stone-like material. Through a hermeneutic lens, this visual evidence supports the interpretive inference that the body operates as an archive of colonial injury. The fractured arms can be understood as potent metaphors for interrupted cultural agency. Because the arm is the primary anatomical instrument for action—used to create, protect, perform rituals, and communicate—its structural rupture symbolises the historical fracturing of indigenous knowledge systems, the weakening of traditional authority, and the psychological alienation induced by colonial intervention.

Furthermore, the lower body's transformation into stone complicates this reading. On an interpretive level, stone evokes the immobilising gaze of colonial anthropology, which sought to freeze dynamic, living African cultures into static, timeless objects for museum classification. Yet, Adejimi subverts this objectification through the figure's monumental, living presence. The maiden is not a dead relic; she carries the heavy weight of history while remaining vividly alive. Rather than romanticising Africa as a space untouched by colonial violence, the painting depicts a culture that has experienced profound historical deformation but retains an unyielding capacity to survive, transform, and recreate itself.

BEADS, HAIR, AND THE PERSISTENCE OF AFRICAN IDENTITY

In sharp contrast to her fractured anatomy, the maiden continues to wear clear, undeniable signs of her indigenous cultural world. Prominent among this visual evidence are the intricate multi-stranded beads adorning her neck and torso. Across diverse African societies, beads are not merely decorative ornaments; they are active agents in social communication, encoding status, age, spirituality, and communal belonging. Within the Christian iconography of the baptismal scene, the survival of these beads creates a powerful visual contradiction.

If colonial baptism imagined rebirth as the creation of a *tabula rasa* detached from previous cultural heritages, Adejimi's composition directly refutes that premise. The maiden emerges from the water transformed but not emptied, demonstrating that identity persists through material traces. This visual insight aligns closely with historical scholarship on African Christianity by Lamin Sanneh (2009) and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (2022), which notes that Christian conversion in Africa was rarely a passive surrender to European cultural forms. Instead, African communities actively translated, negotiated, and reinterpreted the imported faith through their own indigenous vernaculars and cosmologies. Adejimi visualises this very process of hybridity: the maiden stands neither entirely outside Christianity nor entirely consumed by it, occupying the complex historical space of creative preservation.

THE POLITICS OF BODILY MEMORY

This theme of preservation is further articulated through the figure's hairstyle and bodily presentation. Historically, hair has served as an essential social text in African cultures, communicating lineage, marital status, and aesthetic values. Because colonial and missionary institutions heavily regulated the African body—imposing strict Western dress codes and moral standards that equated indigenous aesthetics with spiritual backwardness—the maiden's exposed, heavily adorned appearance carries deep political weight.

The painting explicitly demonstrates that conversion does not require the complete erasure of indigenous aesthetics. By bringing her cultural markers directly into the baptismal space, the figure transforms her body into a site of resistance. This directly reinforces Fela Kuti's critique of "colomentality". The core danger of *colonial mentality* was not the cross-cultural borrowing of ideas or faith, but the internalised psychological surrender that deemed African cultural expressions inherently inferior. Adejimi's maiden explicitly rejects this self-deprecation; her striking poise and visible reflection declare that she has passed through the waters of encounter without surrendering her ancestral selfhood.

AFRICAN GRIT AND THE RESISTANT POSTURE OF THE MAIDEN

The ultimate interpretive inference of cultural resilience is located in the maiden's defiant posture. Despite the explicit visual evidence of bodily trauma, she stands completely upright, occupying the absolute centre of the composition. Her composed gaze directly confronts the colonial imagination, which historically reduced African subjects to passive, silent objects waiting to be civilised or catalogued. Adejimi endows his subject with an undeniable historical authority, a quality that can be conceptualised as African grit.

Importantly, this concept of grit does not romanticise suffering or excuse colonial violence; rather, it refers to the historical capacity of African subjectivity to maintain continuity under conditions of extreme institutional disruption. Her strength is articulated not by the absence of trauma, but by the fact that the trauma failed to erase her. This visual formulation mirrors Achille Mbembe's (2001) postcolonial theory, which argues that postcolonial identity cannot be reduced to simple victimhood or pure, insulated resistance. Instead, it is forged through complex, ongoing negotiations of dominance, adaptation, and creative self-fashioning. The maiden is the visual embodiment of this historical complexity: a subject who bears the scars of colonial history but asserts her own interpretive authority over her destiny.

Beyond Victimhood: The Female Body as Historical Archive

The choice of a female figure is particularly significant because African women occupied complicated positions within colonial and missionary systems. Their bodies became important sites where competing ideas about morality, civilisation, sexuality, and cultural identity were negotiated. Missionary institutions focused heavily on regulating women's lives, making female education, marriage practices, domestic behaviour, and clothing central to the construction of a Christian social order. African women were frequently represented within colonial discourse as passive subjects requiring external reform, protection, or moral discipline.

Adejimi's maiden challenges such representations. Her exposed torso does not communicate shame or vulnerability; instead, the body is presented with dignity and composure. The figure does not appear as an object waiting for moral correction; instead, she possesses a sense of self-possession. By holding structural damage and poise in a single frame, Adejimi ensures the female body acts as a nuanced historical archive—simultaneously mapping the history of missionary regulation and the unyielding history of African endurance.

WATER, REFLECTION, AND THE FAILURE OF CULTURAL ERASURE

Water dominates the symbolic architecture of *Baptism*, but Adejimi complicates its orthodox theological meaning. While Christian tradition treats water as a medium of purification that washes away the old self, the painting shows that this water also functions as a mirror. The maiden's reflection remains clearly visible beneath the ripples, offering an uninterrupted counter-image of the self. This visual evidence yields the critical inference that her essential identity remains intact beneath external shifts.

The colonial encounter successfully altered names, languages, and laws, yet the water archives what the colonial apparatus tried to erase. This exemplifies Ricoeur's (1976) surplus of meaning: water serves as the site of transformation while simultaneously acting as the reservoir of historical continuity. The African subject does not emerge from the font as a Westernised caricature; she emerges bearing historical wounds but retaining full possession of her reflection.

From Colonial Baptism to African Counter-Sacrament

The ultimate achievement of Adejimi's *Baptism* is its radical redefinition of the baptismal sacrament itself. The painting does not offer a simplistic rejection of Christianity, which would dismiss the genuine agency of millions of African believers who historically embraced and transformed the faith. Rather, Adejimi dismantles the colonial monopoly over the meaning of rebirth, challenging the Eurocentric assumption that entering a Christian life required the total annihilation of an African identity.

By showing that the maiden enters and leaves the water carrying her indigenous markers, *Baptism* functions as a visual counter-sacrament. It reclaims the authority of self-definition, demonstrating a visual antidote to coloniality. It acknowledges the deep psychological and physical scars of colonial domination but refuses the claim that Western culture achieved absolute ownership over the African soul.

CONCLUSION

Muri Adejimi's *Baptism* remains a powerful visual meditation on the relationship between colonial intervention, cultural memory, and African resilience. By employing a rigorous hermeneutic framework, this study demonstrates how the painting moves beyond a simple record of colonial trauma to establish a monument of cultural resilience. The visual evidence of the maiden's fractured, stone-like body directly archives the structural and psychological wounds of identity reconstruction—specifically the systematic displacement of indigenous names, cosmologies, and values. Yet, by keeping her beads, hairstyle, posture, and reflection intact, Adejimi provides a definitive postcolonial critique: external systems could fracture African social life, but they could not erase indigenous consciousness.

The core contribution of this study to hermeneutic and postcolonial art criticism lies in uncovering how *Baptism* subverts the binary of passive victimhood versus untouched tradition. Viewed through Fela Kuti's framework of colomentality, the painting acknowledges the lingering psychological hazards of colonial education and religion while simultaneously offering a visual strategy of resistance. The maiden emerges as a complex historical subject who navigates the forces of global encounter without relinquishing her autonomy. Ultimately, Adejimi turns the wounded body into a site of historical authority; the water meant to wash away the African past becomes the very mirror that reflects its enduring survival.

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