

Indigenous art and Nigerian contemporary residential architecture

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Abstract

Decoration in the building process of traditional African cultures is spontaneous, and the practice institutionalized. With “vernacular” practices, architectural decoration becomes even more observable. However, the previous spontaneity has given way to considerations of status-related factors. The paper discusses the traditional/vernacular architecture of various ethnic groupings in Nigeria, and the decoration associated with each, in the light of the socio-cultural context of their motifs. The cumulative, positive environmental impact of the practice is also discussed. It is submitted that though there is a decline in architectural decoration, not only is a revival possible, but it is actually ongoing, featuring contemporary expressions of traditional themes, harnessed to modern architecture. This trend may well help in evolving a contemporary, truly Nigerian, residential typology, fine-tuned along specific ethnic socio-cultural lines.

Keywords: indigenous Nigerian art, vernacular Nigerian architecture, spontaneous ornamentation, complementary art, celebrated entrance gates, architectural decoration, Afro-Brazilian, earth murals, gwani, fence design.

1 Introduction

All over the African continent, before the advent of colonialism, indigenous building practices and forms were largely the product of environmental impositions and socio-cultural considerations. The latter ranged from occupational requirements, through religious and social value systems, to pragmatic issues like family size. Inherent in many of these routine building processes, was spontaneous decoration.



Before the building process generated specialization and produced professionals, it was a community craft, featuring men, women and children, each group having their peculiar area of intervention. Over time, certain individuals became recognized as being extra-skillful in various aspects of building construction – resulting in the formation of guilds, and the birth of the apprenticeship culture. In a similar way, architectural decoration became a specialized craft, though still a routine complement of traditional building. Its spontaneity was more a function of the *process* of the application, and the *decorative motif*. (Both of these, usually, had been perfected over time in a given cultural setting, and all the craftsmen did was to, almost mechanically, reproduce them. This invariably tended to dull initiative and stifle creativity (Denyer [1]).

Traditionally, it was not uncommon for architectural ornamentation to have various connotations, and in topical application, have favoured locations. Hence, in the light of the former, a motif could be used purely for its aesthetic value; it could also be used either as a social or structural expedient, or it could serve as a cultural sign-post (Osasona [2]). It goes without saying, that a motif that carries socio-cultural content, can only be correctly interpreted within the context of the culture generating it. With respect to areas of application, it has been observed that the traditionally-favoured locations are door- and window-openings, roof junctions (i.e. areas of “structural stress” – Denyer [3]), outer and inner walls, and “public” buildings (e.g. rulers’ houses, shrines and club-houses).

With “vernacular architecture” being defined as traditional building processes and forms that have undergone transformation as a result of borrowing from a “superior” stylistic culture (Osasona [4]), it has been observed that the scope for architectural decoration has become phenomenally enlarged. This is particularly true of the Nigerian situation, where part of the transforming influence can be traced to Afro-Brazilian architecture (which has its stylistic roots in earlier, Portuguese practices), famed for its elaborate ornamentation and painstaking craftsmanship. As such, with vernacular architectural forms in Nigeria, it is possible to find decoration on roofs, columns, stairs, balusters and walls, as well as on accessories such as doors, screens and goat-gates, to mention some.

As mentioned earlier, socio-cultural factors played a significant role in determining the overall character of houseform, in traditional societies. Initially, in the process of “vernacular-ising”, one such factor assumed prominence over and above the others: this was the factor of social standing (or prestige), often allied to wealth. (In purely traditional builtform, prestige attached to the residences of political and other leaders, as well as to community buildings like assembly halls and club-houses; hence, their being singled out for ornamentation. With the ornate Afro-Brazilian typology – the forebear of much of the vernacular stock – anyone who was relatively wealthy and could afford to, engaged the services of the *Agudas*, the returnee-slave craftsmen, who were skilled in the techniques producing the style. (Akinsemoyin and Vaughan-Richards [5]). With the now widespread vernacular, the socio-economic dimension has become greatly down-played.)



To highlight the art in Nigerian architecture, various house-types – traditional or vernacular, depending on which is applicable – from different parts of the country, are spotlighted. The characteristics of such decorative work, and the social context (where it exists), are also discussed.

2 Building types

Buildings that are examined here are mostly residential. However, some examples of community buildings are also featured.

2.1 Hausa architecture

The Hausa are world-famous for the sculptural treatment of their building exteriors. Specifically, the artistic intervention consists of earth mouldings around door- and window-openings, and on the approach façade. (In its usage here, decoration can be said to be not only an aesthetic enterprise, but also a structural expedient, as the moulding framing openings, serves to reinforce these apertures, and the earth mural forms a relatively hard, protective cover for the sun-dried local adobe – *tubali* – core). The intricacy and general extent of the artwork is a direct indicator of social prominence. See Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: Sculpted and painted mural on the Emir's Palace, Zaria.

It is quite common within Hausa residences with large, roofed spaces, for such roofing to be achieved by vaulting and/or doming. These vaults and domes are facilitated by the use of “ribs” – a structural framework of timber members from the male palm, encased in swash-puddled earth. Apart from the beauty inherent in the ribbed vaulting and doming, such structural elements are, oftentimes, the recipients of applied decoration. (In the traditional past, such vaulting was a structural feat, and was the work of *gwanis* – local master-builders – who were almost revered in Hausa society as being geniuses who possessed spiritual capabilities; Saad [6]).

The subject-matter of such artwork in the Hausa socio-cultural milieu, is invariably geometric. A popular motif is the “arabesque”, featuring intertwining

loops and arcs. Where specific geometric shapes are not easily discernible, the subject-matter is, at worst abstract. This position has been informed by the fact of Islam being the predominant religion in the north of the country, and by its dictates, among the Hausa, the use of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic graphic themes is taboo.

2.2 Nupe architecture

The Nupe are prolific decorators, indeed! Not only does the scope of what engages their creative attention include structures not normally classified as “architecture” (e.g. granaries), it also encompasses wall openings, structural posts, and accessories like doors and windows.

As with the Hausa, door- and window-openings are reinforced with earth mouldings. These are further embellished with terracotta platelets – *giana tetengi* (Dmochowski [7]). The elaborate, generally unpainted, relief mural (both geometric and zoomorphic in motif, despite Islam being the predominant religion here, too) is hardened by the use of an infusion from locust-bean pods. (Denyer [8]). This sculptural treatment of walls is not limited to exteriors, alone: interiors – particularly wives’ rooms and inner walls of encircling verandas – are similarly treated. In fact, rooms invariably have the added dimension of enamel and porcelain plates and dishes being embedded in them. According to Denyer [8], a particular house at Zanchita, near Bida, sports such embedded crockery around the entrance to its *katamba* (the reception-hut).

Apart from the aspect of masonry sporting artwork, Nupe houses on a circular floor-plan could also display artistic ingenuity, within their formal configuration: the roof junction – an area of potential structural stress – in the process of being secured against structural failure, is usually also imbued with some form of ornamentation. Where a wooden plug is used to stabilize the junction, it could be carved – and used in conjunction with interesting weave-patterns of the thatch brought together at that point; alternatively, a terracotta pot – with surface incisions and other beautifying engravings – could be placed upside-down over the junction, to prevent rain-water seepage.

Complementing all other artistic endeavours already discussed, the Nupe also have recourse to the use of colour, the prevalent ones being black, red and, more lately, white (Dmochowski [9]). These pigments are traditionally sourced from various plant extracts and earth and animal deposits.

2.3 Yoruba architecture

Apart from palaces and the residences of chiefs, Yoruba traditional architecture did not have much applied decoration. (Even with the residences of the *oba* and other prominent people in the society, what artwork there was, was usually on ancillary elements – not the main building structure. As such, columns – in timber and masonry – doors and external floors, were invested with artistic creativity).

With vernacular models, the Yoruba essentially came into their own vis-à-vis architectural decoration. The greatly-proliferated “face-me-I-face-you” typology



(which is a greatly simplified version of the Portuguese style that came via the Afro-Brazilian culture, featuring living spaces deployed on both sides of an exaggerated corridor or *passagio*), is rich in applied decoration. This is commonly expressed as moulding, painting and carving. The most popular medium for much of this creative endeavour is stucco, which lends itself readily to moulding as relief (on architraves, dadoes and plinths), sculpting in-the-round on column capitals and bases, and also on quoins and window hoods.

From an artistic view-point, Yoruba vernacular architecture greatly celebrates the roof. This is borne out by the use of carved fascia boards. Here, art is employed purely as an aesthetic expedient. From a survey undertaken of various Yoruba towns, by the author, it was observed that though there are a myriad expressions, it is possible to broadly categorize motifs into scallops (normal or reverse), saw-tooth, open-work, stylized figures (human or animal), with attachments, and irregular (or abstract); Osasona [10]. See Figure 2.



Figure 2: Perforated-scallop fascia-board on a vernacular house in Ile-Ife.

Shrines too, invariably display lavish artwork. Oftentimes, the decorative motif is symbolic, and the process of application, ritualistic. Two cases in point are the Orisa'kire and Oluorogbo Shrines, both in Ile-Ife. Again here, as among the Nupe, pigments for effecting the mural decorations are naturally-derived, while the artwork is executed by devotees (Osasona [11]).

2.4 Edo architecture

The Bini (or Edo) have a rich artistic heritage that is internationally-acclaimed, and which has affected virtually every facet of their corporate existence, including their architecture.

As is typical of developing cultures, worldwide, the residence of the traditional ruler is a veritable repository of art in various forms. (According to Dmochowski [12], it would appear that, traditionally, the *oba's* residence was greatly rivalled by those of his long retinue of chiefs!). Both exterior and interior walls were horizontally-fluted, and columns sculpted in high relief. (In fact,

some of the indentations on columns were so deep that they produced niches e.g. in the “palace” of Chief Alkorioji, in Benin – Dmochowski [13]). Customarily, every Bini household sheltered at least one shrine, and the use of traditional paints in murals was associated with such ritual alcoves and chambers.

Another prominent architectural feature that received decorative attention, was the lintel. It was traditionally of timber, and as wide as the doorway was celebrated. Such architraves were elaborately carved, using themes as diverse as human and/or animal subject-matter, geometry and others (e.g. braids).

Wall-construction was imbued with socio-cultural symbolism, in Edo culture. Commoners could not build higher than three courses, while specially-privileged chiefs could build five; the *oba* could build as many as he desired. The horizontal fluting was effected using snail shells and a curved knife.

2.5 Igbo architecture

There is no way art in the context of builtform can be discussed vis-à-vis Igbo culture, without mentioning the *mbari* house. This shrine (erected to *Ala*, the Earth Goddess) is a feature of traditional belief systems principally among the Igbo of Owerri area and Degema Division. In architectural terms, it is a skeletal earth structure, roofed but scantily-walled. Apart from the ritual significance of its construction, as outlined by Oparocha [14], the *mbari* is noted for its extravagant display of art in various forms: in-the-round, as sculpture on wide-ranging themes (invariably constituting a form of social commentary); in two dimensions, as wall (and column) painting, and in-between, as relief-moulding.

More widespread in Igboland, is the phenomenon of sculpted and grooved massive masonry columns, carved panel doors and door-way surrounds – in private residences, and in community club-houses. Also rampant, and with respect to the entrance porch into a typical traditional compound, was the use of relief work on the structure of such porches. Invariably, motifs used in these various creative efforts, were either abstract or geometricised.

Associated with club-house aesthetics, was the integrating of earth benches and couches with the masonry walls. These were almost always generously incised, grooved, moulded or otherwise artistically treated.

3 On-going architectural practices

On the contemporary architectural scene in Nigeria, there is a lot of activity. This ranges from adventures in Post-modern eclecticism to experiments in slick-tech and other aspects of productivism. In the former category, such work cuts across a wide spectrum of typologies, featuring residences for the elite, offices for corporate institutions, retail outlets, recreational facilities and buildings for civil administration. Apart from the government, corporate bodies are the sole sponsors of projects that have recourse to highly-sophisticated technology. The recently-completed National Stadium (in Abuja, the country’s capital), epitomizes this category of building: “a multi-purpose stadium for track-cycling, stage and sports events, exhibitions and congregations”, it was designed and

executed by Schlaich Bergerman and Partner of Stuttgart, Germany. The project was to provide a befitting venue for the 2003 All-Africa games, holding in Nigeria. The velodrome has a membrane roof (with load-bearing cable supports), 30 metres high, with the supporting masts 50 metres tall. It has a capacity of 3,000 – 6,000 spectators (Internet [15]).

As Post-modernism seeks to reject the culturally-anonymous approach of the Modern Movement to design, it seems to favour a re-introduction of ornamentation to architecture. This mood appears to have been seized upon by Nigerian architects, working in concert with artists, in handling commissions for banks, hotels and other institutional buildings. Many of such artistic expressions are quite modern, often leaning toward the abstract. In contrast, however, apart from a play on orders and other historicizing elements of architecture, designs of private residences seldom have recourse to the use of complementary art. That is to say, the Nigerian architect does not consciously integrate ornamentation with his design of the house. Oftentimes, ornamentation on a private residence is at the instance of the owner, and is usually an after-thought. Such artistic interventions are however, closer to the local art traditions – and therefore more socio-culturally representative – than the commissioned works of the more renowned artists patronized by corporate institutions. This “modern” trend is quite different from vernacular (folk) practices where, even if a motif was “borrowed”, over the years it has become indigenized through contextualizing, repeated use and general proliferation. This decline in spontaneity in integrating ornamentation into contemporary domestic architecture, is obviously for financial reasons.

4 Environmental impact

Art, in any society, has been known to be fundamentally important. Apart from the significant roles of assisting to define identity, enhancing communication, and providing a template for mass-production, art has other nuances. One such nuance is the subtle, psychological way in which *good* art (visual and audio) produces a benign society. This can be done – apart from a deliberate campaign using visual images – through a well-ordered, beautiful builtscapes.

With the deliberate harnessing of art to architecture, it is possible to produce a pleasant, highly livable physical environment, where the often-obtrusive and harsh effects of the hi-tech world we are creating are psychologically subdued and somewhat neutralized. The more the phenomenon is encouraged, the greater the prospects of our producing more humane living environments.

An interesting phenomenon on the contemporary Nigerian building scene, is the almost boundless creativity displayed by property-fencing designs. Designs and construction materials are highly varied. Despite fencing initially being a property-delineation issue on the one hand and a security expedient on the other, the phenomenon has metamorphosed into a social prestige symbol. As such, designs vie with each other for intricacy and corresponding expense. The environmental impact of such a creative ferment is, surprisingly, not negative: on the contrary, many a neighbourhood appreciates in visual value with the



generous dotting of these elaborately-fenced properties around. Also, very often, the complexity (and implied cost) of a fence, is an indicator to the opulence of the building behind it – and by extension, the financial right-standing of its owner – and an index to the social value of the particular urban setting. Closely associated with such prestigious fencing, are equally celebrated entrance gates. Figures 3-5 typify such fencing and affiliated gates.



Figure 3: Concrete-and-iron sculptured fencing, Ile-Ife.

5 Development perspectives

Inasmuch as culture is never static, it would be both unreasonable and futile to expect that motifs and contexts of architectural ornamentation will remain unchanged. The position of this work is not to advocate cultural stagnation, for the sake of clinging to tradition. Rather, realizing the dangers inherent in continuing to slavishly ape the building practices of other cultures, it seeks to establish a need for authentic Nigerian contemporary residential typologies.

Basically, as with conventional building worldwide, contemporary Nigerian residences must be able to stand up to the vagaries of tropical climate. Also, materials used should be readily-available and affordable, and such as guarantee a comfortable interior thermal environment. They should also be easy to maintain. That *good* design (predicated on building orientation, size and placement of openings, etc.) should be enforced, goes without saying.

The wide acceptability of the vernacular derives from its socio-cultural appropriateness which, in turn, is a function of the disposition and use of spaces. As earlier discussed, inherent in these archetypes is a spontaneous harnessing of ornamentation, be it ever so minimal. These various ethnically-generated

typologies, in their overall composition, thus exclude anomie; on the contrary, they exude livability that impacts on users to produce a sense of psychological well-being.



Figure 4: Planter-type ornamental fencing. Ibadan.



Figure 5: A "gate complex", featuring a pedestrian gate, flanked by a vehicular one. Ile-Ife.

Contemporary designers of the Nigerian house would do well to objectively study the traditional/vernacular antecedents. Such a critique should highlight the advantages that have seen the vernacular style entrenched for over 100 years now. In recognizing (and admitting) the signal role(s) that architectural ornamentation plays in enhancing the builtscapes, they would be moving towards producing humane cityscapes; in seeing indigenous art motifs as a source of inspiration for launching out into new, but contextual, complementary art interpretations, they would be poised for generating not only a currently appropriate architecture, but one that already has built-in potentials for sustainability, in response to the changing cultural scene.

It is speculated that contemporary architectural expressions harnessing ornamentation will revolve essentially around columns, fascia boards, cornices, quoins and wall surfaces. As recipients of decorative treatment, these features may be regarded as traditional. However, the innovation will be in the *art expressions*, themselves.

6 Conclusion

This work has attempted to highlight, in an ethnic, socio-cultural context, art, as used in vernacular Nigerian architecture. Various features of the builtscapes, sporting artwork, have been examined, and it has been seen that many of these creative endeavours, have gained international attention and acclaim. Most of the skill (and pride of cultural identity) that produced the works discussed, has waned; in fact, in most of the ethnic groups discussed, it has completely died.

In the light of the often-expressed need for a “Nigerian architecture,” it is submitted that a critical look into both the socio-cultural content and the physical articulation of the Nigerian architectural heritage, would be a right starting-point. Adding the advantages of the role of architectural decoration expounded above, it would not be far-fetched to suggest that the “Nigerian house” will be one in which cultural relevance will be all-important, and the integration of beautifying elements, once again become a spontaneous enterprise.

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