

# The artistic heritage in the Deji of Akure's Palace

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## Abstract

Traditional African society was replete with art in the living environment. This was widely manifested in the architecture of the people of South-western Nigeria. The art practice traverses generations with the influence of each generation reflected in the Deji of Akure's Palace, which culminated in its being declared a National Monument in 1989, by the Nigerian Government. The thrust of this paper is to highlight the socio-cultural, economic as well as the aesthetic values of the artistic elements on the Palace building, as it reflects on the whole community. The Palace is a complex of multiple structures that reflect the cultural orientation of the Yoruba, who, though they guarded their culture and tradition jealously yet, were able to accommodate positive influence from other cultures and modern civilization. The purpose of this study is to x-ray the intrinsic and extrinsic values of art to the socio-cultural development of the community, as manifested in their architecture. It is discovered that different factors influenced the development of art in the architecture of Deji's Palace; these include traditional symbols and foreign influences (particularly Christianity, industrial revolution, Afro-Brazilian freed slaves and modern developments). It concludes that the Deji's Palace is a mirror the realities the community has been exposed to; hence, its declaration as a National Monument.

*Keywords: symbols, socio-cultural, traditional, motifs, decoration, indigenous, icons, linear, courtyard, house posts.*

## 1 Introduction

There is a symbiotic relationship between art and architecture which dates back to Prehistoric man who expressed himself in paintings, drawings and engravings



on the walls of caves that served as his place of abode. Even though these art works served other purposes, they equally added aesthetic value to the cave walls. This relationship spanned many civilizations when art and architecture were completely fused. The symbiotic relationship between art and architecture was vividly expressed in the traditional period in Africa when art-in-architecture was an integral part of life. It was a period when religious and cultural symbols were elaborately displayed in architecture in the form of carvings, mouldings, paintings, drawings and engravings. Carved wooden house posts and door panels, for example, though serving functional purposes, yet, could also be a representation of ancestral figures or historic documentation of events; these include the wooden statuettes in palaces (Ojo [1], Izomoh [2] and Olaleye [3]).

The Yoruba of South-western Nigeria are fond of rendering decorative motifs on objects and materials which they consider of value to them. Symbols and icons are copiously manifested in their residential buildings. It is however, very important to have a proper grasp of why Yoruba decorate their houses so as to be able to identify and understand the symbols. The social life of a Yoruba community is homogeneous, where the family is the focal point of life. Everything about life revolves around the family. A family settles in a compound with the house being a unifying factor, where women and children stay to carry out household chores and men retire after a hard day's job. Therefore, it must be soothing and pleasing to the senses (sight and feelings); hence, decorations are made on houses. Denyer [4] submits that if architecture is the public face of a society, decorations provide the opportunity not only for impressing outsiders, but also for promoting the morale, pride and solidarity of the people.

The palace, on the other hand, is the focal point of the whole community where the ruler and members of royalty reside. It is the place where decisions of life and death are taken and also the place where major socio-cultural festivities take place; therefore, it is considered sacred to the people. In pursuance of this, the palace buildings were usually more grandiose and better decorated. It is the most significant compound both in magnitude and in artistic splendor (Ojo [5], Demochowski [6], Olaleye [7]). Therefore, the elements of the social environment include cultural and socio-economic activities, beliefs and religious activities (Ighalo [8]).

The architectural decorations in Nigeria of the pre-colonial era were laden with forms, symbols, motifs and lines that spoke of the peculiarities of each community. These forms and motifs have been subjected to constantly changing representations and appearances in the modern world, due to influences from Europe and other parts of the world. Art in Nigeria is a true reflector and magnifier of the social as well as the spiritual essence of man, which is embedded in traditional Yoruba architecture.

The early twentieth century witnessed revolutionary changes in every aspect of Yoruba life (especially in architecture) due to many factors, some of which are the advanced economic development occasioned by the Industrial Revolution in the West, and the return of the freed slaves from Brazil and some parts of Europe. The Christian encroachment and colonization also played prominent roles. The combination of all these had both devastating and beneficial effects on

the architecture of the Yoruba. This architecture is usually conceived as a sculptural piece; hence, the extensive embellishments that go with it.

With advancement in skills, some people were specially commissioned to provide architectural embellishments to buildings. Since Yoruba people generally do not want objects simply plain, functional objects such as house posts, lintels and the door panels and frames were intricately carved or moulded with either figurative or geometric motifs (sometimes both were used) while the walls were decorated in linear designs. These embellishments are a reflection of the highly sophisticated artistic style and high standard of ancient Yoruba civilization which developed at Ile-Ife (Ogunmosin [9], Osasona *et al.* [10]). Akure being an indigenous Yoruba community, exhibits artistic embellishments on its architecture which vary from one generation to the other. The art-in-architecture tradition in Akure of the pre-colonial era in Nigeria was laden with forms, symbols, motifs and lines that spoke of the community's contribution to human development (Figures 1–8). These forms and motifs have been subjected to constantly changing representations and appearances in modern times (Figures 9 and 10).

The aim of this research is to study the development of artistic decorations on the *Deji* of Akure palace as a reflection of realities of life in the community. It identifies and examines artistic elements such as forms, symbols, icons and lines on the walls and house posts, metal works and other decorative elements in the palace, with a view to documenting their salient peculiarities as resource material for posterity.

## 2 Historical overview of Akure

Akure is a prominent indigenous Yoruba community of Ondo State. It is the socio-political and economic nerve-centre of the State. It is located between latitude 8.17 and longitude 5.27, and is bounded in the North by Ita-Ogbolu, Aponmu in the West, Ogbese in the East and Idanre in the South. It is accessible through a network of roads from Ondo, Ilesa, Owo, Idanre and Ikere Ekiti. Akure is a Yoruba town founded by a scion of the Oduduwa family from Ile-Ife, Asodeboyede in 1150 AD (Olu-Aderounmu [11, p. 19]). The town came under Ijesa influence from the sixteenth century when Owa Atakumosa planted a prince on the Akure throne with the name Olufadeji from whence the title '*Deji*' borne by subsequent rulers, is derived. The Prince who founded Akure was said to have arrived at a spot where his royal beads got broken, with the beads running down off his neck. He then concluded that that was the place where Olorun (God) wanted him to settle; hence, the name "Akun re" (beads broke) which later became Akure.

However, another version claims that Akure is a derivative of *A-kun-re: Oku kii ba ni se ore. Nigba ti enikan ti ku o ni lati di ore ilu*. When one dies, he cannot be a friend to a living individual but that of the community (Olu-Aderounmu). The King in this story was supported by other chiefs, one of whom caught a tiger alive, bringing about the appellation "Oloyemekun" ('the Chief caught a tiger') or Oyemekun.



The majority of indigenous Akure people are farmers, who cultivate cocoa, palm products, kola nuts and engage in subsistence farming. They are also traders and some are bricklayers, carpenters, saw-millers, blacksmiths, carvers, potters, drivers, etc. They are involved in one form of body decoration or the other, especially during festivals and ceremonies (which include naming and marriage ceremonies, puberty rites, the new yam festival and the worship of various deities). These decorations equally found expression in buildings, for the purpose of beautification. In traditional times, a period before the European incursion, door panels, house posts and lintels were carved with symbolic meanings and walls were decorated elaborately according to the social ranking of individuals (i.e. the ruler, the chiefs and the nobles, and then the commoners) as it also applies in other Yoruba towns.

Christianity came to Akure in 1897 through Rev (later Archdeacon) T.A.J. Adebisi (a Yoruba man who had been thoroughly westernized), of the Church Missionary Society, accompanied by Mr I.I. Cudjoe (Olu-Aderounmu [11, p. 23]). Colonialism got rooted in Akure through the appointment of Captain Roupel, as the first European Resident Commissioner in 1897, and he became friendly with the *Deji*; this marked the beginning of European influence and civilization in Akure (Olu-Aderounmu [11, p. 23]). Akure, under colonial administration, was a divisional headquarters of Akure Division, the position it maintained until 1976 when Ondo State was created out of the old Western State. It enjoyed this position probably because of its central location among the other major towns in Ondo State.

### 3 Symbols and motifs in the Palace

The palace buildings were painstakingly embellished with artistic elements that provided both functional and aesthetic satisfaction. This age-long practice was sustained with the materials relevant to their time by different generations, until the arrival of foreign influences. These foreign factors include Christianity, colonization, the Afro-Brazilian freed slaves and modern civilization. The *Deji's* Palace, as the symbol of socio-political, economic and spiritual development of Akure, was built with grandeur and was exquisitely decorated with traditional artistic elements; the palace was thus declared a National Monument by the Federal Government on 15th February, 1989.

A traditional concept in art is the application of artistic elements that are associated with the traditional belief system of the Yoruba. These elements are motifs that connote one religious or cultural meaning, or the other. The line for example is commonly used in Yoruba ornamentation, either as body tattoo, on farm or domestic implements or on other objects of utilitarian value which may include clothes, house posts, walls, door panels/portals and door hinges. Lines are found in all aspects of human endeavor; it is therefore seen as representing continuity of life in human relationships (Figures 5 and 6). It also represents the bond of family ties and relationships. The lines on the palm are considered to connote the life that individuals have chosen to live; that is, their destiny.

Therefore, the lines on the walls of the palace suggest the bond of unity that existed between the King and his subjects.



Figure 1: Wall decoration, Deji's Palace, Akure.



Figure 2: The King blessing his subject with the legendary tiger beside him.



Figure 3: Statue of Asodeboyede, the founder of Akure.



Figure 4: Mud sculptures. Weird animals that portray the weird power of the King.



Figure 5: Wall decorations in Uwa Agbeto.



Figure 6: Mud house post.



Figure 7: Hand crafted door with decorations and hinges.



Figure 8: House post in the Afro-Brazilian.

Traditional art also manifests in deliberate distortion of human and animal figures in carvings, mouldings and drawings (Figure 4). The mud sculptures on the outer wall and the wall reliefs in the courtyards were made prior to the colonial period (Figures 4–6); however, the relief on the outer wall was of the post-colonial era (Figures 1 and 2), while the statue of Asodeboyede is a recent development (Figure 3).

### 3.1 The Palace gate

The entrance, as the central point of the façade, is the focal point of any house (as the point of entry is considered to be the life-giving force, be it for positive or negative purposes). A Yoruba proverb says, *ile ti ko n' ilekun ni asiwin n wo* ('a house without a door gives free access to a lunatic'). The gate/door usually

receives the highest level of decoration as it is meant to be the most attractive point. Leieris [12] observes that the door protects the entrance, the most important part of the house, where communication is made with the “within” and the “without” and it is particularly exposed to the eyes of the masses. This perhaps could be the reason why the gate received so much attention in the palace complex.



Figure 9: Door/door porters.



Figure 10: Metal railings.

There are two major types of sculptural representations in Akure, the free-standing and the relief; both of these can be found in *Deji's* palace. The wall at the main entrance of *Deji's* palace is massively decorated in high relief compositions of various traditional activities. A masquerade is located at the extreme left angle, followed by a kneeling figure of a woman who is dressed simply in beads: the beads deck her neck, waist and wrists while her breasts are bare. Her hair is well plaited and she holds a calabash. This outfit and gesture can be considered to be that of an *Olori* paying homage to the *oba* (Figure 1). The *oba* is located on the right side, blessing a chief while his subjects cheer him on (Figure 2). He is seated on the throne, dressed in his full regalia (flowing *agbada* with neck and wrist beads, beaded crown and a flywhisk). The chief, who is in a tight fitting wrapper decked with a beaded necklace, is receiving a royal blessing. Behind the *oba* are courtiers who are ministering to him, while the legendary tiger that was ‘caught alive’ is placed beside the throne (Figure 2). This is symbolic of the weird power and authority of the *oba*. The entire background of the composition is covered with traditional motifs from one end to the other.

There are three free-standing objects on the wall to complement the mural design at the gate. These include two lions on both sides and a tiger placed on the entrance; the lion on the left has its head turned to the left; the one on the right is watching the right side, while the tiger in the middle is facing the viewer. The positions of these animals are considered to guarantee the safety of the *oba*, his

household and the entire community. They are representational sculptures made of mud but plastered in cement-mortar, which also portray the power and authority of the *oba*. Below the tiger are two lizards facing each other in relief. It is a cautionary message to the *oba* about the counsel he receives as there is a Yoruba saying that *gbogbo alangba lo d'akun d'ele, a o mo eyi t'inu nrun* (all lizards prostrate but we don't know which is suffering from belly ache), which this depicts. Folaranmi [13], in his analysis of the meaning and symbolic interpretation of the murals in the *Oyo* palace, that 'animals, both wild and domestic have been very important to the whole human race'.

There is a conspicuously displayed giant free-standing statue of Asodeboyede, the founder of Akure. He is dressed in the regalia of a hunter (a loose blouse and trouser, a dane gun, head lamp, charms and a bag strapped across his shoulder). The insignia of royalty is equally worn by him (coral beads on the wrists and ankles). In addition, he ties a strapped belt around his waist, while he is bare footed. He is posed in a dynamic, bold and courageous stride. The statue is naturalistically treated; standing on a pedestal, with mural design in the background (Figure 3), a recent work, which depicts the foreign influence. The statue is symbolic of the spirit of the ancestral founder watching over his people.

#### 4 Uwa Agbeto courtyard and Palace courtroom

A courtyard is a rectangular open space within a building or buildings. It is a rallying point and centre of activity in the family or community; therefore, it must be spacious, attractive, soothing and relaxing. There are many courtyards in the palace but only *Uwa Agbeto* and the palace courtroom are lavishly decorated. The geometric decorations in *Uwa Agbeto*, (a courtyard in *Deji's* palace where special activities took place) are a combination of motifs which are arranged in overlapping manner. They are separated by two closely drawn parallel lines. These motifs are either of single or double vertical, horizontal or diagonal lines; they are also of double lines of triangles; icons such as lizards and arrows. Parrinder [14] portrays icons to be symbols used to illustrate proverbs, tales, folklores, myth and stories, which express the culture and the wisdom of the people. The impression of spoons and balls are imprinted on the walls. The lines and other objects must have been scratched or imprinted on the mud walls and pillars when they were still wet. (The walls were originally of earth, laid in courses, were smoothened, after which lines were scratched on the surface). The lines as earlier mentioned, represent the continuity of family ties, and the shapes represent the dynamism of human lives and endeavours.

The 'courtroom' is the open space where cases were heard and decided in the palace, as grievances were brought for adjudication by the 'Oba in Council'. There are four-house posts which carry embossed relief motifs of snakes with palm trees; snakes with birds and maize, a crown with creeping plant, an anchor and a creeping plant (in the shape of heart), and the last one has a crown below a flowery plant, with two birds on the crown, while three snakes seem to be sucking from the nectar of the flower. The snakes, according to chief Oluwatuyi



[15] (a High chief in Akure), are pythons identified with Olokun (god of wealth and the sea), which was meant to attract wealth and goodwill to the *oba* and the kingdom. The plants and leaves represent their inherent healing properties. The birds represent witchcraft that symbolizes wisdom and fore knowledge of issues and power for the *oba* to rule effectively.

## 5 Modern concepts and the economic boom

The Industrial Revolution of the West also brought new materials that required new techniques. The result of mass-production of goods necessitated new trade contacts to market the products. Gloss and emulsion paints are used for house-painting, while cement is used for plastering and sculptural works. Traditional architectural techniques were subjugated for modern engineering materials and approaches. Aluminum and metal materials are now used for railings and house posts, while carving tools make wood-works much easier, and wood joinery becomes the order of the day (Figure 10). These issues had a great impact on the art practices of Akure and subsequently, on the artistic embellishments on the palace. The roof cladding of the palace was of thatch until 1919, when it was gutted by fire and corrugated metal sheets were used as a replacement. The evidence of other influences is available in the palace (as it was subjected to modifications) as new design elements arrived. Prior to European presence, roofs were cladded with grass and *gbodogi* leaves, but houses have since been roofed with metal sheets. This necessitated the covering of exposed wooden rafters with boards which led to the emergence of decorated fascia boards in *Deji's* palace, and other residences. Other noticeable colonial influences include wooden louvers, and the usage of wood joinery as manifested in different layers of wood for door panels.

The introduction of cocoa into the economy of the people in the twentieth century brought about a change in the personal wealth of individuals thereby providing a general means through which individuals could express themselves in minimal or elaborate architectural embellishments. While the weight of the individual's purse or his social standing determined the level of artistic embellishment in traditional times, it is the collective wealth and strength of the people that determines the grandeur of the palace. This exemplified the Yoruba saying that *Ibi owo mo ni oogun mo* (you spend according to your purse). Olurode and Olusanya [16] observe that cocoa cultivation paved the way for new consumption patterns and new ways of thinking. Houses increasingly came to be roofed with zinc in place of grass.

A modern concept in art can be considered as the representation of motifs and symbols that are western in orientation (such as the use of cement blocks, zinc materials, sawn wood, metals, concrete pillars, industrial paints, plastics, ceramics, glass and other synthetic materials). This in effect, gave room for various artisans to emerge, which further enhanced the economic well-being of the people.

## 6 Afro-Brazilian designs

The Yoruba who were taken as slaves to Cuba, Brazil and Trinidad continued to maintain their separate identity as Yoruba (Trager [17]). Later, when some of those who were freed were able to return to Nigeria, they settled in Lagos and Abeokuta. In Lagos, they were especially noted in Igbosere, Breadfruit Street, Olowogbowo and Campus Square (Folarin [18]) where the extensive influence of Afro-Brazilian architectural designs was notably practiced, and the influence spread to other places. This is a phenomenon of applied decoration on the façade of buildings which combines the traditional African approach with the Brazilian building technique. Osasona [19] observes that it was more as a result of cultural diffusion between the returnee ex-slaves and their descendants, and the local populace, than as a result of direct British intervention.

Folarin [18] also explains that once in Nigeria and in the hands of the local Yoruba builders, it rapidly underwent a series of artistic transformation. Not long after the style was introduced in Lagos, it found its way into the hinterland. By the early 1920s, it had spread all over Yoruba land (Aradeon [20]). Perhaps, it was the activities of these Freed-Slave returnees which started manifesting in Akure from the 1920s, that boosted the Afro-Brazilian architectural designs in Akure. The houses were built in typical traditional African approach of layers of mud courses with decorations made in thin layers of cement plaster. Bricks, stones and sun-baked laterite blocks were added to the growing number of structural materials. This style of Afro-Brazilian houses in Akure (and all over Yoruba towns) were characterized by their balanced proportions and decorative low-relief mouldings on door posts, pilasters, veranda/balcony grilles and wrought iron gates of the mid-twentieth century (Folarin [18]) (Figure 9). The staircases were made with machine-crafted wood; the fascia boards were made with different hand-crafted motifs while linear decorations pervaded the facades.

The Afro-Brazilian style is named after freed-slave returnees who brought with them the various building styles from Bahia, which they blended with local styles. This style was prevalent and strongly expressed, perhaps as a response to the euphoria of the return of their kith and kin from slavery (Ademuleya [21]). The *Deji's* palace is not exempted from this new-found expression. The entrance door to *Deji's* bedroom is probably the oldest in the series, as it is customary for an Oba in Yoruba land to be the first recipient of any new development in the community (Figure 9). The door is made of wood, painted with blue-green enamel colours while the square and rectangular motifs are amplified with white. It is enclosed by an articulately defined arch which was incised with hand-crafted cross-hatchings. This is an example of Afro-Brazilian wooden door portals.

## 7 Conclusion

Art is a vital force in human regeneration; it is seen as playing significant roles in accentuating the emotional and intellectual growth of the Yoruba. It consolidates the socio-cultural and religious strength of the people; hence, the persistent manifestation of artistic embellishments in their buildings. The life of the Yoruba



is guided by idioms, proverbs and folklores; different objects have symbolized meanings attached to them. These objects may be wild animals, reptiles, plants, birds etc. The life of the Yoruba is surrounded in mythologies, which are coded in symbols. These symbols have eulogized their lives through generalized symbols which are copiously manifested in the architecture of Akure as exemplified in the Deji's palace. Different factors influenced the development of art in the architecture of the *Deji's* Palace (which include traditional symbols and foreign influences such as the Industrial Revolution, Afro Brazilian freed slaves and modern developments). It is customary for an Oba in Yoruba-land to be the first recipient of any new development in the community; therefore, the *Deji's* Palace rightly mirrors what the Akure community has experienced. It was the recognition of these eloquent artistic contributions that motivated the government to declare the palace as a National Monument.

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