

# Influences on Artistic Expression in Traditional Domestic Architecture of South West Nigeria

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## Abstract

Over the years, art in its various forms has played a vital role in the lives of African people. It served as a major form of communicative expression of religious beliefs and socio-cultural norms of the people. Its form, presentation and significance however, varied from one cultural setting to another. This paper examines art in the context of domestic architecture of indigenous people of South West Nigeria and factors that have influenced its transformation. The paper notes the disappearance of the rich meaning-laden traditional motifs and symbols from contemporary housing and their replacement with more contemporary art forms influenced by several forces including colonialism, expatriation of slaves and more recent forces of globalisation and industrial mass production. It concludes that the current trend presents an architecture that is devoid of cultural architectural uniqueness and identity. One of the implications identified is for architectural curricula to incorporate indigenous themes that will help architects produce domestic architecture that have contextual relevance. Data for the paper was collected through literature review and the qualitative research method using interviews and observations of houses in the study area. Those interviewed included professional architects and residents in the study area. Data was content analysed to highlight emerging common themes.

**Keywords:** Art, Domestic architecture, Architectural education, Modern housing, Southwest Nigeria

## Introduction

African creative tradition as noted by [1] is both various and particular, reflecting the cultural setting of its origin. What is common, however, is that art played a very important role in the everyday life of traditional African people including the Yoruba people of South West Nigeria. Many of what is known of Africa's rich heritage today can be attributed to information gathered from archaeological findings traceable to art. One major medium of such artistic expressions is the

dwelling which housed the people. Unlike other media of expression which have received wide publicity, buildings are fixed to location and therefore not very mobile. Due to their construction materials and level of maintenance over the years, many of these buildings have deteriorated and been destroyed. Today, it is very rare to see authentic traditional buildings in Africa. Thus a rich component of the African rich creative tradition and cultural heritage is at the brink of extinction as the people's identity is seriously threatened. In addition, several studies have identified as a major flaw in contemporary housing delivery, the continued neglect of the peoples' values and cultures [2]. This is because such housing cannot be considered as culturally sustainable. According to [3] the concept of cultural continuity or sustainability, demands that a social identity changes and adapts to present-day conditions without necessarily losing touch with its essence and origins. Disappearance of traditional domestic architecture and artistic expressions contained therein can be attributed to various forces at work. This paper attempts to identify the factors responsible for changes observed in artistic expression in traditional domestic buildings of the Yoruba people of South West Nigeria. Though a well researched ethnic group, very little documentation exists on evolution of art in traditional domestic architecture of the area as well as factors that are responsible. This paper will contribute to the scanty literature in this area.

Qualitative research method was adopted for this paper. In addition to the authors' recollections of traditional domestic buildings in the area, study visits were made to the study area in order to identify and study existing traditional domestic buildings. The near extinction of such buildings limited the use of observation. Additional data were thus obtained by interviewing twenty-five people including architects, elders and community leaders considered knowledgeable in the history of architectural evolution in the area. Also secondary data sources, though limited were consulted. Data was content analysed to highlight emerging common themes.

## The Study Area and its People

The South West zone of Nigeria comprises of six states namely: Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo. It is home to most Yoruba speaking people of Nigeria and occupies a landmass of about 76,852 square kilometres. The origin of the Yorubas of South West Nigeria is legendarily traced to a common progenitor called Oduduwa in Ile-Ife [4]. Although mainly engaged in agriculture, people of this zone were also acclaimed as merchants, artists and craftsmen. According to [2], the people have enjoyed a long history of social, cultural and political organization and cohesion, attributes of which are also evident in their house-form. [5] found that as far back as 600 AD chiefs and kings ruled the Yorubas.

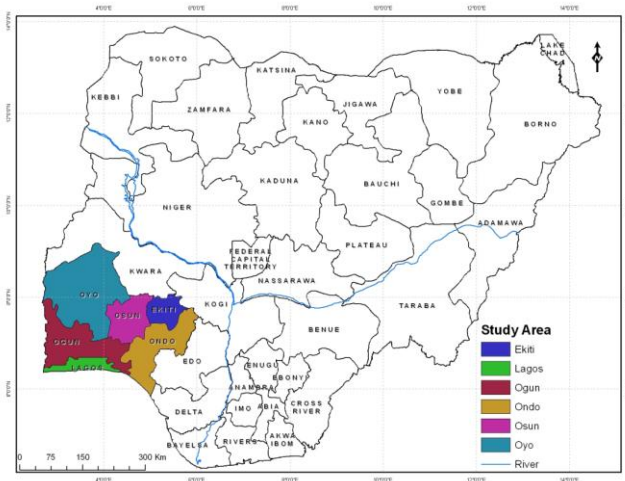


Figure 1: Map of Nigeria Highlighting the Study Area

## African Art

Several literature like [6] have posited that art is the product of creative human activity. In many cultures, art and craft are vital means of human perception of their world view. It was initially believed that Africa had no art. Thus, whatever was considered African art was termed 'primitive' [7]. Despite reference to African art as primitive and fetish, archaeological discoveries and existing traditional communities prove such assumptions untrue. Today, many museums all over the world are enriched with art works of African origin. Even in Nigeria, evidence abounds to the rich artistic heritage of the country [8]. These include the Nok culture terra-cotta sculptures traced back to between 500 BC and AD 200, the Benin ivory carvings, bronze plaques and statues dating from the 11th century and the Ife bronze heads dating from the 13th century. Also worthy of note are numerous creative expressions in media ranging from wood and clay to leather, beads and textile [9]. Ample evidence suggests that the life of the traditional African is intrinsically interwoven with art. It played a vital role in the political, social, economic and religious life of the people [1]. Aside from its aesthetic value, art was also a medium of communication of values, events, status, aspirations and allegiance to tribal roots. African art is highly symbolic and the meanings were tenaciously passed from generation to generation. [6] noted that the meanings conveyed by these objects often extended far beyond their

practical functions. Consequently, it is possible to garner information about the artists that produced the objects and the attitude of the public for which they were produced from the art works. It could be said that each artwork had a story. Media of artistic expression included the human body, textiles, artifacts and buildings.

## Traditional Domestic Architecture

The Chambers' Twentieth Century Dictionary simply defines domestic architecture as "the architecture of mansions, dwelling-houses, cottages..." Essentially domestic architecture refers to building types that relate to residential use. It is a dwelling place, which serves as a home for one or more persons, providing them privacy from outsiders and protection from inclement weather and adversaries [2]. In traditional African communities, it also provides the setting for interaction and communication not only between family members but also with guests and spiritual beings like the ancestors and gods. Traditional architecture on the other hand is the house building styles of an indigenous people. [10] posited that the roots of traditional architecture are established in rural culture although it evolved by expedient decision. Although factors such as social, economic and climatic may influence traditional architecture, [10] argued that "culture is the most important since it embodies what is acceptable to the community. In traditional architecture, the decisions involved in the activity of building are pre-determined by the tradition and the customs of the people." Differentiating vernacular from traditional architecture [11] opined that "vernacular architecture" emanates from the traditional though conditioned by external forces that may include socio-political and socio-economic forces. Unlike traditional architecture, which is culture that is more spontaneous, induced vernacular architecture, which is more selective and individualistic, occurs when traditional architecture is exposed to other stylistic influences often considered superior. Comparing true architecture to poetry which cannot be copied from foreign patterns, but must grow out of its own root and expressed in its own language, [12] posited that African indigenous architecture was more than instinctive having "developed from conscious efforts at creating functional as well as psychological space, both coming to terms and creating an aesthetically satisfying three-dimensional form."

However, less reported, traditional domestic houses were rich examples of traditional African art. The interiors were often richly adorned with elaborately finished furnishings, fittings and artifacts. These included furniture, mats, fabrics, decorations, cooking utensils and cutlery. Aside from meeting their functional requirements, these items were aesthetically formed and decorated in pleasing colours. The walls (both external and internal) perhaps provided more elaborate media for artistic expression in traditional homes. The elaborateness however varied depending on the socio-economic class of the house owner. Elements of decorative designs found in traditional African homes include form, colour, lines, texture, shape and space. These constitute the motifs, which were repeated to produce rhythm and flow. In many traditional African societies, women did house decoration.

### The Domestic Architecture of South West Nigeria

South Western Nigeria is home to the Yoruba speaking people of Nigeria. This geographical zone consists of the states of Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Oyo and Osun. Legend has it that indigenes of this zone originated from a common ancestor, Oduduwa, who settled in Ile-Ife from where the Yoruba people expanded to other areas. Traditional domestic architecture of these people consists of buildings constructed from locally abundant materials. Such houses evolved to suit the socio-cultural and climatic demands of their locality. Walls were often made of mud or clay, roofs were thatched while doors, windows and supports were constructed of wood. Domestic Yoruba architecture can be divided into three major categories. These are the palaces (*afins*) which served as residences for the kings (*obas*) in addition to other political, administrative and social functions; the residences of chiefs and titled men and the more humble dwellings of the ordinary people. The various categories were easily distinguished by their scale. Another salient differentiating factor was the extent and quality of artistic expression found in the houses. As [13] documented, ‘the royal palaces (*afins*) in their size as well as their functional planning and rich interior decorations and furnishings were the most impressive buildings in Yoruba land’. Areas where art featured in these buildings include exterior and internal walls, posts, beams, lintels, ceiling boards, furnishings, furniture, decorations and artifacts used in domestic activities including traditional altars located within the houses.

The mud walls were often plastered with mud plaster and thereafter polished with juice extracts from either locust bean pods or oil seed leaves. More elaborate artistic treatments on walls were achieved via paintings or mouldings. Some of these were not mainly for aesthetic reasons. For instance, polishing of walls as described earlier was mainly to protect the walls from erosion, though it also provided a rich glossy finish to building facades. Expansive veranda roofs that characterised Yoruba architecture were supported by elaborately carved wooden posts often depicting the human body. Figures 2 a and b present examples of these caryatid veranda posts by renowned artist Olowe of Ise.

In houses of ordinary people, who could not afford sculptured posts, less expensive joinery was adopted or the posts were built of mud. However, in the house of the more affluent and highly placed citizens, like chiefs and kings, posts consisted of elaborately carved caryatids. Similarly, beams, lintels, ceiling boards and doors received detailed treatment by experienced carvers using carefully selected wood. The richness of carvings found in traditional buildings in South West, Nigeria is a testimony of the artistic traditions and prowess of the people. It was also found that artistic expression found in domestic houses was very symbolic in meaning. Art was not only for decoration. It was functional and often a means of communication as is common in other African societies. However, the finding that the application of art in domestic buildings was carried out by men is contrary to several African societies where women featured more prominently.



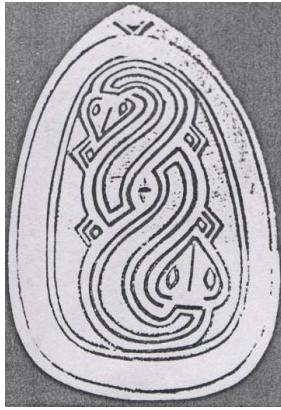
Figure 2a: Carved Wooden Post  
Source: [14]



Figure 2b: Carved Wooden Post  
Source: [14]



Figure 3: Caryatids at the end of a court hall  
Source: [13]



**Figure 3:** Traditional snake motif  
*Source: [15]*



**Figure 4.** An example of carved palace door  
*Source: [16]*



**Figure 5:** Carved Door with traditional motifs.  
*Source: [17]*

### **Influences on Artistic Expression in Traditional Architecture of South West Nigeria**

Several scholars and studies have concluded that traditions and cultures are not static but continuously evolve as they interact with external influencing forces. Drawing from such viewpoint, [18] posited that traditional architecture has been under continuous evolution. Domestic African art including that found in domestic buildings in South West Nigeria has metamorphosed over the years under the influence of several forces. These forces were identified to include trade, colonialism, industrialization, religion, returning slaves and globalisation [19]. Urbanisation resulting from these forces created 'a distinct urban class of consumers whose tastes and aspirations are different from those in the rural areas and are often shaped by ideas and goods from the West' as observed by [20]. He argues that such situation has undermined local industry and made 'global consumers' of Africans. Contemporary buildings thus have very little regard to local context. Such architecture and resulting built environment have been described as 'bland', 'anonymous' and devoid of symbolism [21]. According to [22] the impact of colonialism transcended beyond the political and economic arena to the cultural milieu with severe consequences, one of which is loss of identity. [23] on the other hand posited that globalization appears to be scripting a future of homogenization and deterritorialization, a process which [12] has alerted would mark the extinction of not only local architectural cultures but the creative genius of the African. Unlike traditional dwellings, contemporary dwellings are defined by their new materials, designs and global trends in architecture. Initially there was little or no consideration for climate and socio-cultural context. These are however moderated by available skills, economy and the commodification of housing. Thus, in order to minimize cost and maximize gains, houses are built devoid of embellishments. Resulting domestic architecture has therefore been described as monotonous and uninspiring.

Religion, especially christianity and islam also played a significant role. Many of the art works were considered fetish and mystical. Consequently converts were expected to denounce them and dissociate themselves from such. Consequent upon the abolition of slave trade, Nigerian slaves were repatriated back to Nigeria via Lagos. These returnee slaves from Sierra-Leone and South America had a defining impact on the lifestyle of people of South west Nigeria which was very evident in the built environment's architectural style. The *Agudas* as returnee slaves from South America were called were skilled craftsmen. They introduced the ornate Afro-Brazilian domestic architectural style of Portuguese antecedents into the region, beginning from Lagos where they settled to other parts [24]. Typical of this Afro-Brazilian house style was its somewhat elaborate ornamentation or decoration on the external parts of the buildings. Such artistic expressions were in two main media. The first was the stucco-work expressed as mouldings around windows, portals, quoins, plinths, column capitals, shafts and bases. The second medium was wood used for relief murals as well as elaborately carved balusters and door panels. This type of ornamentation however differed from that found in traditional architecture in that it served purely aesthetic purpose and was mainly the choice of the patron without any recourse to the

community and devoid of spiritual or socio-cultural undertones [25].

### Implications of Trend in Artistic Expression in Domestic Architecture of South West Nigeria

That architectural expression in domestic buildings in south west Nigeria has been evolving is not in doubt. The focus of this paper has been to identify factors responsible for this change. These were found to include trade, colonialism, return of slaves, industrialisation and globalisation. It was also found that evolving contemporary artistic expression on domestic buildings has lost their spiritual and cultural flavour as they currently serve aesthetic purposes only. Consequent upon this is the dwindling opportunities for patronage of artisans and craftsmen responsible for creating art in traditional domestic buildings. These changes are taking place in the light of changing materials and media of expression, technology as well as changing tastes and lifestyles of the people. Men are increasingly replaced by machines. This has serious implications for the technological development of the sector and employment opportunities. Cultural revival and desire for architectural identity has continued to engage the attention of housing researchers since it first emerged as a theme in the 1970s though the desperation expressed by researchers then seems to have waned somewhat. Although some scholars romanticised about returning back to undiluted traditional values, the consensus appeared to be settling for a convenient marriage between the old and the new. This standpoint is in realisation of the fact that change is permanent even in architecture and the way it is expressed. Although it is not practicable to turn back the hand of the clock, as it were, there is need to rethink the way in which change is taking place. Architecture should reflect the culture of the people it serves. This is a sentiment shared by many scholars [12; 24]. In doing that however, there is the need to keep abreast of developments which introduce new materials, technology and house forms. Perhaps a good starting point is the pedagogical content and approach in training of architects that allows students more direct contact with cultural settings in order to understand their content and meaning. Training should also be extended to the craftsmen especially in the area of adapting their skills to contemporary materials and tools.

### Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the forces responsible for the evolution of arts in domestic architecture in south-west Nigeria. The results reveal that the artistic expression on domestic buildings over the years has been in a constant state of change. Colonialism, impact of returnee slaves and more recently globalisation are some of the factors identified for this phenomenon. The paper concludes that change is permanent. Nevertheless, artistic expression as a way of safeguarding the architectural identity of the people of South West Nigeria should be protected from adverse external influences.

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