

Cultural Uniqueness and Architecture of Owo Palace in South-West, Nigeria

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Abstract - The architectural style depends heavily on culture and tradition. Owo people's language, songs, festivals, folktales, lore, chants, history, and literature are all influenced by their vibrant cultural activities. Cultural diversity is important because it brings members of a given culture together and fosters cultural awareness and avenues. The traditional architecture of the Owo people in the Yoruba south-western region of Nigeria is fully integrated with the notion of art and culture. Using the Olowo palace in Owo, Ondo state as a case study. This study examined how cultural variation and morphology impact palace building in Nigeria. Data was sourced from field work, through oral interviews and relevant scoped literature. Purposively selected photographs of palaces 'Agbofen' are used in discussing the state of the architecture and sculpture objects, therefore raises the enquiry of their connotation for upcoming generations. Findings, showed that the courtyards ('ugha') and other structures within the old palace ('Agbofen'), were built when the city was created. It ends with characteristics of the owo palace's adornment, providing clear guidance on the major functions of particular elements in the palace's cultural beliefs and customs. There were as many as 100 courtyards in the Olowo castle (Ugha). Each courtyard served a special purpose and was devoted to a distinct deity. For public gatherings and festivals, the largest, which is believed to have been twice the size of an American football field, was used. This study concluded on how cultural distinctiveness, which was reflected in the vernacular design of Olowo's palace in Owo, one of Africa's largest palaces, affected the urban form as well as people's sense of self-worth, interpersonal relationships, and self-identity in Owo town, Ondo state.

Keywords: traditional architecture, cultural values, artistic elements, artifacts.

I. INTRODUCTION

The interpretation and adaption of cultural symbols that are specific to the communities in which they are located are included in African vernacular architecture. Generally speaking, talking about African architecture refers to art and culture that should be viewed as a totality. The majority of

these aesthetic and cultural characteristics are vividly expressed in the kings' and chiefs' palaces, which are the main subject of this study. These conventional buildings, which are progressively degrading into ruins, are best described as galleries of inventiveness. The palace is in charge of keeping the relics, which could potentially serve as tourist attractions and be utilized to establish and convey the cultural past of the populace (Aderemi, 1966). The confluence of Yoruba culture, tradition, and religion is depicted visually in Yoruba art. African vernacular architecture incorporates the interpretation and adaptation of cultural symbols that are unique to the communities in which they are located. Speaking of African architecture typically alludes to art and culture that should be appreciated as a whole. The kings' and chiefs' palaces, the main focus of this study, are a striking example of how most of these aesthetic and cultural traits are expressed. These conventional structures, which are turning into ruins one by one, are best thought of as exhibition spaces for creativity. The relics are kept by the palace and could potentially be used as tourist attractions and as a way to establish and communicate the population's cultural history (Aderemi, 1966).

Visual representations of Yoruba culture, tradition, and religion are used. These involve the Yoruba ornamental designs, and architecture carvings, costumes, and marks. Its Yoruba mysticism is reflected in the traditional Yoruba designs. The palace's architectural layout reflects the people's spiritual practices and Yoruba beliefs. Yoruba cultural art is defined by their religion, traditional designs, culture, architecture, cuisine, and language (Akintoye, 2010). According to Amole (2000), vernacular architecture is the "brand" of architecture that results from the traditional form, morphology, and material technology evolving through a process of careful borrowing from external sources. The "core" of the original traditional dwelling is likely to endure because the process of modification is gradual and communally generated. The courtyards were considered the most significant components of the traditional Yoruba town, according to Gugler and Flanagan (1978). The Yoruba palace architecture features thicker walls, more intricate patterns, and larger areas to suggest a more permanent construction. The palaces' various architectural features, such as verandahs, courtyards, and other spaces, serve to further distinguish them. The term "elements" refers to the numerous decorative

designs, patterns, motifs, symbols, and colors that are used, while the term "form" refers to the actual structure. Without a doubt, Owo is one of Yorubaland's historic kingdoms. There are various accounts of the early Owo people's history. The most well-known of these theories place Ile-Ife as the origin of the initial Owo settlers. Ojugbelu, who Aruna referred to as "the youngest and most faithful of the sixteen sons of Oduduwa the paramount monarch of Ile-Ife," is said to have led the migration of the progenitors of the Owo people from Ile-Ife in the 11th century (Beeley, 1934). According to this story, Oduduwa had made the decision in his old age to give all of his personal belongings to his sons. Ojugbelu, who was away on a hunting expedition, was unintentionally left out during the sharing process.

II. THE CONTENT OF THE STUDY

Owo is located in south-west Nigeria near the southernmost point of the Yoruba Hills and at the junction of highways leading from Siluko, Akure, Kabba, and Benin City. Owo is about midway between Ile Ife and Benin City. The site in Owo exhibits both artistic traditions as a result of its proximity to the renowned art centers of Ife and Benin. The town of Owo, which is part of the Owo local government area, is located at latitude 7°11' from the equator and longitude 500' 35' from the Greenwich meridian. Owo is bordered on the east by the Ose local government area, on the west by the Akure South local government area, and the south by Edo state. Owo is located in Nigeria 400 kilometers north of Osun state and 48 kilometers east of Akure, the state's capital. The research

region is located in a belt of a tropical environment. Throughout the entire year, the temperature is rather high (between around 27.50°C and 32°C). The amount of rainfall is constant throughout the year (about 1600mm - 2000mm). In the research area, two rainfall maxima (double maxima) have been noted. July is the first, and October is the second. Between August break and the end of the month, the relative humidity is relatively high (about 80%). Two dominant winds, including the southwest monsoon wind that originates from the Atlantic Ocean, also have an impact on the research region. It is humid and warm. Additionally, the Sahara Desert is blown across by the North East Trade Wind. Due to its location within the rainforest zone, Owo Town is known for its economic trees due to its abundant rainfall and high temperatures throughout the year. It is abundant in many types of wood and other forest products. Cocoa and cola nut trees can flourish in the area. Owo's population expanded from 80, 413 in the 1963 population census to 157, 181 in 1991 as a result of more government and private offices and institutions of higher learning being established. In the 2006 population census, 218,886 people were living in the study area, a significant rise. Farmers make up the majority of the population in the Owo local government area because agriculture is the region's economic backbone. They mostly grow food crops including yams, cocoyams, maize, cassava, and vegetables, as well as cash commodities like cocoa and cashews. Medium and small-scale agro-manufacturing operations and businesses like sawmilling industries make up the majority of Owo's secondary productive sector.

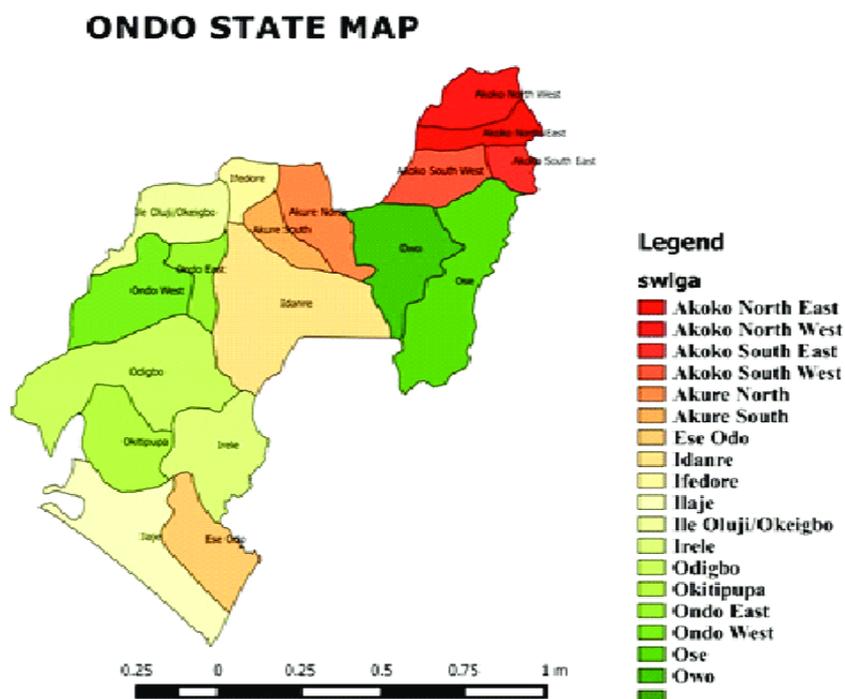


Figure 1: Using Ondo state map to show, Owo town (source online)

III. METHODOLOGY

Interviews with experts, including chiefs and court staff, were done in-depth. To support the oral data gathered from the custodian leaders, existing knowledge was also gathered from books and journals. Additionally, the oral history method was used to assist in gathering historical information from the interviewees.

IV. DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

The ancient city of Ile-Ife, the birthplace of Yoruba culture, is where Owo gets its start, claims Prof. Nelson O. Fashina. Additionally, according to oral tradition, Ile-first Ife's king, Oduduwa, a Yoruba divinity, was the father of the founders. These significant connections to Ife culture are further supported by early art historical and archaeological evidence. Owo was able to maintain an appearance of independence from the nearby kingdom of Benin, although occasionally being obliged to pay homage. Between Benin and the Owo kingdoms, courtly culture has been transmitted both ways. The Benin court also valued the skill of Owo's ivory carvers. Benin's rulers imported Owo's and used more and more ivory symbols during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Other notable works of art also have clear evidence to support them. In 1893, Owo was placed under the British administration. Following its independence in 1960, Nigeria joined the Western Region before joining the Western State in 1967. In Nigeria's first Republic, Owo and its residents were heavily involved in politics. It joined the recently formed Ondo State in 1976.

Several institutions, including First Bank Plc, Wema Bank Plc, Polaris Bank Plc, Enterprise Bank Ltd. (previously Omega Bank Plc), Access Bank Plc, etc., have branches around the town. The city is currently undergoing a significant transformation as a result of the extension of its road network, particularly the dualization of the major road from the Emure junction up to the Iyere exit. Owo presently has a brand-new, ultra-modern market open. Terracotta sculptures from the 15th century are among the significant finds. Olateru Olagbegi II, Sir (1941–1968 and 1993–1998). In 1968, he lost his throne, and in 1993, he was restored. Oba Ajibade Gbadegesin Ogunoye III, Folagbade Olateru Olagbegi III and Adekola Ogunoye II were all rulers between February 1968 and November 1992. (Since 12 July 2019). The Yoruba local historian Chief M.B. Ashara claims that the Owo people moved to their current site from the metropolis of Ile-Ife around 1100 AD. In Olowo's palace, in Owo town, sits the Owo Museum. The museum was established in 1968 to house the artifacts that were formerly housed in the Olowo palace. Important archeological relics and ethnographic items found in and around Owo are housed in the museum. Ekpo Eyo

conducted the initial excavations at the Owo site between 1969 and 1971 with the assistance of the Nigerian government's Department of Antiquities.



Figure 2: Showing Owo Museum (Source, 2022)



Figure 3: Showing Owo Museum Interior and some antiquities (Source, 2022)

Igogo Festival is an annual event that draws people to Owo from all across Nigeria whenever it is held. While the majority of the event is aimed toward amusement, the ceremonial performances of Igogo are intended to sanctify the soul. Igogo is a 17-day yearly festival held in Owo that includes a variety of events, including the blessing and release of new yams. Drumming is not permitted in Owo town during the festive period; instead, metal gongs (Agogo) are utilized. The term "Igogo" was first used in this context. The Olowo

plaits his hair like a woman, wearing a coral beaded crown throughout the event. The chief priest and male youths from the Iloro quarters are among Olowo's followers who dance with him. The Ero Festival the Owo Ero Festival is a special event for older people. Simple retirement from active duty is all that is meant by it. However, it is only intended for Owo's male youth who have acquired the title of "Ighare" inside the neighborhood. Sons of Owo who have attained age 60 and up are eligible for Ighare status. When the king, or the Olowo, is invited to join in the ritual, an additional two years must be added to honor the king, according to an oral interview with some of the participants. As the Oba blessed the attendees and gave them various presents, the celebration goes jubilated in his presence.

a) Morphology of Owo Town

Owo formation was influenced by several factors:

Architecture: Like the Beninians, the Owo people have fluted walls in their homes.

Door panels: Designs on door panels can be anything from relief carvings of faces or figures illustrating day-to-day activities in the Owo village to abstract geometric shapes. Also considered a prestige signal in Yoruba country, carved door panels are frequently seen in mainly homes and royal settings. Broken pottery or quartz pebbles were used to pave several courtyards. King statues riding on horses or depicted with his elder wife were carved into the pillars supporting the veranda roofing.



Figure 4: Showing the biggest Ugha (courtyard) in Owo palace (source, 2022)



Figure 5: Showing the biggest entrance of Olowo's palace (source, 2022)

Religion: The religious practices of the Owo and the Benin people are similar. The Owo people, for instance, carry out the same "Igwue" rite as Benin. Politically, the Owo people use mainly titles similar to the Benin people.

Regalia: Both cities have a lot of royal regalia.

Traditional Leaders: The Olowo of Owo and the Oba of Benin both use ceremonial swords with looped handles.

Sculpture: Their ivory carvings are all similar in design, making it impossible to tell which city home to them is. The wooden ram-heads, which are a typical cultural practice in both cities, are placed at the ancestral shrines in Owo. Additionally, sculptures of human heads with long ram horns that curl over the head can be found at some shrines. The flawless modeling on the ram-face heads and the rows of wood that resemble beads around its neck is reminiscent of the Benin bronze head. Similarly, Owo and Ife share similar traits in their artistic creations as a result of Ife's influence. The Ife and Owo heads have the same distinguishing characteristics: a molded face, slanted eyes, and vertical striations.

The following items are a part of the rich cultural heritage of the Owo people:

Man, with a round head, a prominent hairline that may be the edge of a cap, and folded, pupil less "oriental" eyes (15thC AD) depiction made of terra cotta showing a hand holding a lizard or rat. The terra-cotta image of a hand holding a snake or rat. The wrist is lavishly beaded (15thC AD; 16.1cm high), and the thumb is embellished with a ring.

Owo people are noted for having exceptional proficiency in a variety of craft manufacturing, which serves as a solid foundation for both technological growth and independence. Owo culture was significantly influenced by Ile-Ife and Benin, particularly in their sculpture, which has elements of both artistic movements. Despite this, Owo has particular artistic traditions that set it apart from its neighbors, such as the following:

Owo items are more associated with rituals and sacrifices; they frequently appear in shards and are made of fragile clay; their lips are larger, and they frequently have crowns on their heads.

The faces of Owo artifacts provide a very accurate depiction of the hustle and bustle of daily life. These may be seen on a terracotta human head of a bearded guy with a frowning face as well as an artifact depicting a man with a bare chest. His face is grinning.

However, Owo history documents a different potential origin for the similarity between Owo and Benin artifacts.

Oral history states that during the reign of Olowo Omaro, the king dispatched prince Oshogboye, his preferred son and likely heir to the throne, to Benin to study the military organization there and benefit from its rich culture and heritage. The crown prince eventually returned to Owo with many cultural artifacts and the necessary abilities. The connection between Ife, Benin, and Owo's artistic styles has been furthered by this hypothesis of contact and shared lineage, according to Umogbai (2008). For instance, Owo artifacts have Ife facial striations, while Igbo-Laja materials have an Owo terracotta head with Benin facial keloids. The Variations between Ife and Owo Objects. The following are only a few examples of the differences:

- The Owo head does not exhibit the same level of finesse and delicacy as the Ife counterpart, even though both contain striations.
- Owo heads have a wider, flatter nose.
- In contrast to Ife, the faces of Owo sculpture have wider striations and appear more ornate.
- The Ife head appears to be oval, but the Owo head is round.

V. CONCLUSION

The Owo head frequently wears a crown. How Culturally Important Owo objects are used extensively in rituals and also symbolize Olowo's terrified posture. One of them is Osanmasinimi. Osanmasinimi is a human figurehead with ram's horns that may be found on ancestor shrines and is a source of respect and veneration. Olowo Elewuokun embraced the ram's figurehead, a legendary item, as a royal insignia and as decor for his father's shrine. Only oba's descendants have the right to own this object in Owo. Head broadloom looms. In Owo, there is a prevalent belief that any guy who weaves on a vertical loom will transform into a woman. Traditional textiles are weaved in many different forms in Owo. Some are designed specifically for seniors who have reached the Ero age group, which is around (50). It stands for enduring life. Others, on the other hand, are worn during funerals, and individuals who wear them are not obliged to bow before or

prostrate an elder. It serves to set apart the deceased person's kin from all other participants. Another small item of clothing is designed especially for babies. Drums, rattles (shekere), agogos, and other musical instruments are frequently used to replicate all sorts of music, which are known by various names in Owo depending on their sounds. These instruments are an essential component of Owo's artistic expression. During festivals, it is used for amusement and relaxation.

Finally, Owo history has established itself as being extremely profound and recognized for its historical, cultural, and artistic heritage. Owo cultural art evolved into becoming delicate and wonderful as a result of the affinity between the Benin and Ife cultural arts. The cultural importance of Owo items cannot be overstated because they have served a variety of functions, including ceremonies and holy uses. Osanmasinimi, among many other things, is used to show respect for ancestral shrines. Owo's history, which dates back to the 12th century, demonstrates the town's ability to peacefully coexist with two historically significant and powerful towns. This uncommon coexistence helped to foster peace and harmony among the people and the nation as a whole.

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