

African Traditional Arts and Ornamentation in the Architecture of the Cultural Centre Ibadan

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Art and architecture have been intertwined throughout history. Art in its various forms has played a vital role in the lives of African people as evident in their architecture. The paper reviewed the African visual culture with respect to ornamentation in the built environment as well as the variations of cultural heritage in the anthropogenic sense. The study adopted a qualitative approach using the case study method with the selection of the Cultural Centre Ibadan. The 1977 Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77) held in Lagos, Nigeria inspired the architecture of the National Theatre in Lagos, and other cultural centres in other cities in Nigeria including the Cultural Centre, Ibadan which exemplified African arts and ornamentation in its façade and spaces. The Cultural Centre Ibadan is a significant masterpiece adorned with African traditional arts and ornamentation. It embodies a bold fusion of art and architecture evident in the intricate sculptural reliefs that beautify its walls, the wooden and metal ornamentation embellishing its halls and lobbies, the luscious blend of geometrical forms and shapes in its façade, its harmony with the undulating landscape and the concrete anthropomorphic sculptural pieces that welcome guests into the entrance quadrangle. The themes of the arts and ornamentation of the Cultural Centre Ibadan reflect traditional Yoruba cultural festivals, philosophical and religious motifs that has transformed the building into a cultural heritage. Artfully embellished architecture with symbolic meanings like the Cultural Centre Ibadan affords the dividends of cultural emancipation, cultural renaissance and cultural preservation. The interweaving of art and architecture in public buildings should be promoted.

Keywords: Art, culture, heritage, ornamentation, sculpture

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, humans have cultivated a deep-seated yearning for beautification and ornamentation. This is visible in various artistic expressions ranging from paintings, markings, and piercings on the body; the use of jewellery to adorn the body; craftsmanship of objects, artefacts, carvings and sculpture; to the decorations and artistic expressions on buildings, temples and other physical structures. The context of ornamentation is invariably expansive and can be constrained only to the limits of human imagination (Adegoke, 2016). Aside ornamentation, art is one of the most potent tools for the promotion of cultural heritage and the preservation of family values especially in traditional African societies (Okoye & Ukanwa, 2019). Art and architecture have been intertwined through the various epochs of architectural history as an age long phenomenon transcending beyond the earliest human civilizations to the pre-historic period as evident in the paintings of walls and roofs of the caves that provided shelter to the cave dwellers (Adegoke, 2016). The aesthetic ambience of architecture can be perceived in its artistic expressions and visual forms which transcend beyond the structural envelope and utilitarian reflections. The articulation of artfully embellished architecture with symbolic meanings, and the adornment of cityscapes with monumental structures drive cultural

emancipation and promote cultural heritage (Igbaro *et al.*, 2010; Antonova *et al.*, 2017).

Over the years, the application of art in its various forms in architecture has played a vital role in the lives of African people (Awoniyi, 2015; Okoye & Ukanwa, 2019). It served as a media of communicative expression of religious beliefs and socio-cultural norms. However, its form, presentation and significance vary from one cultural setting to another (Opoko *et al.*, 2016). In many cultures, public buildings such as palaces and town halls provide a facade for art and ornamentation (Sogbesan & Awonusi, 2022). In recent times, the traditional town halls have evolved into cultural and civic centres like the Cultural Centre Ibadan which provide a rich canvass for the exhibition of traditional arts and ornamentations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture is a concept that is acknowledged universally, although its phenomenal relevance varies across societies, it can be expressed as a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Awoniyi, 2015). Culture is dynamic and cultural phenomena are susceptible to transformation and diffusion. An aspect of culture peculiar to buildings and artifacts is material culture. Material culture is an offshoot of culture evident in

artwork, visual arts, sculpture and buildings. The built environment encompassing buildings and spaces represents a microcosm of culture with great amplitude. As buildings provide a shell for daily interactions (person-to-person and often, person-to-deity), and serves as the locus of the dissemination of social norms and values, it is invariably one of the most potent manifestations of cultural heritage (Osasona, 2012).

Heritage is the repository of the values, traditions, and achievements of a people that typically represents a phenomenon within a traditional historical discourse but also encompasses the appearance of peripheral influences (Monteiro *et al.*, 2015). Heritage is a compendium of historical facts run through mythology, ideology, nationalism, local pride, romantic ideas or mere plain marketing (Nilson & Thorell, 2018). It lends itself to usage in diverse forms from existential, ideological, and cultural to the egalitarian or utilitarian ideals (Thurley, 2005).

Cultural heritage is the bridge between culture and heritage. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization describes cultural heritage as the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations (Nilson & Thorell, 2018). As an inherent construct of human activity cultural heritage produces tangible representations of value systems, beliefs, traditions and lifestyles manifest in art and architecture with visible and tangible traces from antiquity to the most recent past. The cultural heritage credentials of iconic architecture and monuments embellished with traditional arts and ornamentation often transcends beyond the utilitarian considerations of architecture into the sublime aesthetic and symbolic attachments (Anifowose & Olatubosun, 2020).

Ample evidence suggests that the life of the traditional African is intrinsically interwoven with art wherein it played a vital role in the political, social, economic and religious life of the people (Osasona, 2012; Awoniyi, 2015). African art is highly symbolic, and its interpretations have been tenaciously passed on through generations. The media of artistic expression include the human body, textiles, artefacts, buildings and landscapes. As a key medium of expression, arts and ornamentation in buildings is an ancient practice that spreads across the continent from prehistoric times as cave paintings and carvings have revealed. Ornamental arts is manifest in the architecture of the dynastic empires of Nubi, Egypt, Abyssinia, Kush, Mali, Songhai, Carthage, Punt, Aksum, Swahili, Nok, Ashanti, Kanem-Bornu, Songhai, Wolof, Benin, Oyo and others (Adebaike *et al.*, 2020). Traditional African architecture erroneously referred to as primitive exudes a lucid inspiration for its aesthetic value hinged upon naturalism

distinctive from the modernist and post-modernist ideals pivoted upon geometrical fundamentalism. African art is a craft daintily poised upon sculptural similes with metaphorical ambience and a picturesque fabric emanating rhythms of sensuous symbolic interpretations and unique connotations.

Architecture afforded a rich fabric for African art. Door panels and frames were beautifully carved with great symbolic representations. The walls of buildings provided an elaborate canvass for artistic expressions in the form of paintings, carvings and embellishments with colourful motifs and animated inscriptions (Sogbesan & Awonusi, 2022). Interiors were richly adorned with elaborate artefacts such as brightly colored enamel and ceramic wares, mats, furniture, fabrics, utensils, and cutleries, which asides functional necessity were artfully crafted and decorated in vivid colours (Opoko *et al.*, 2016). In some cultures, the exterior of important buildings were decorated with low relief designs and adorned with a myriad of sculptural elements, relics and monuments (Igbaro, 2010; Anifowose & Olatubosun, 2020).

Ornamentation in architecture is the application of ornaments sometimes with iconographic and symbolic roles for the beautification and enhancement of the aesthetic appeal of buildings. Although ornamentation adds beauty to architecture by transforming the ordinary into the sublime through the weaving of interest and complexity into ordinary forms and spaces, it is beyond adding beauty to architecture (Anifowose & Olatubosun, 2020). Ornamentation may be symbolic of wealth, class, hierarchy, and power (Osasona, 2006). In traditional African society, it is reflective of a deeper meta-physical spiritual undertone as several of these arts and ornamentation are replicas of kings, gods, deities and ancestral icons. Typically, African cultures have evolved distinct repertoire of architectural ornaments which materialize in the form of plant or floral motifs, animals and birds, emblems and heraldry, geometric patterns, or human forms as reflected in architectural caryatids. The symbolism attached to these decorations is typically relative to their form and placement and reinforced by their sublime as well as formal qualities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is a cross-sectional survey adopting the case study approach. The Cultural Centre, Ibadan, Nigeria was purposively selected based on its cultural heritage credentials, its symbolic importance and its standing as one of the monumental structures that dot the urban landscape of the city of Ibadan. This study is purely qualitative and was conducted with the aid of direct physical observation as the major instrument of data collection wherein the traditional arts and ornamentation in the architecture of the Cultural Centre, Ibadan were examined.

Pictorial media played a significant role in the study as pictures of artworks, embellishments, sculptural reliefs, and anthropomorphic structure in different media such as concrete, metal and wood were captured in images and elaborately examined. The arts and ornamentations adorning the Cultural Centre, Ibadan were selectively examined with an analysis of the styles, forms, placement, presentation media and inherent symbolic meanings. The authors of the sculptural and artistic themes were identified in order to provide a detailed backdrop of information adding to the body of knowledge.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Narrative of the Cultural Centre Ibadan

The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture held in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977 served as the

pedestal upon which the Cultural Centre Ibadan metamorphosized (Apter, 2021). The idea behind the Black Arts Festivals was endorsed at the Second Congress of Black Writers and Arts in Rome in 1959, to discuss the resurgence of the Black man's culture (Ojukwu & Enuka, 2020). Consequently, in April 1966, in Dakar, Senegal, the first festival titled the World Festival of Negro Arts (Mondial des Arts Nègres) was held. For the festival, two monumental buildings were constructed in Dakar – the Musée Dynamique (Figure 1) exhibiting African visual and plastic arts, and the National Theatre (Figure 2). The architecture of these buildings were reflective of the vision to promote African arts and culture which is visible in the intricacy of their ornamental arts and spatial forms.



Figure 1: Musée Dynamique
<https://www.photos/musee-dynamique>



Figure 2: National Theatre, Dakar, Senegal
<https://www.photos/national-theatre-in-dakar>

The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77) was a rare historic opportunity that significantly marked Africa's cultural renaissance and enhanced the appreciation and projection of African culture and civilization as it fostered global consciousness and visibility of African culture, with renewed interest in African studies, culture, science, history, literature, arts and architecture (Ojukwu & Enuka, 2020; Apter, 2021). FESTAC 77 held in Lagos, Nigeria birthed a cultural renaissance and resurgence of African arts. Architecture was also

invariably influenced by the effusive charm of African arts. The National Arts Theatre, Lagos (Figure 3), the Cultural Centre, Benin City (Figure 4), the Cultural Centre, Calabar (Figure 5), the Cultural Centre, Ibadan and several iconic buildings and monuments that dot the Nigerian urban landscape were inspired by the FESTAC 77. These buildings were designed with a fusion of African arts and ornamentation on the façade and interior spaces and were envisioned as the ideal canvass to promote and exhibit the beauty of African arts and ornamentation



Figure 3: National Arts Theatre, Lagos
<https://www.photos/national-theatre-in-lagos>



Figure 4: Cultural Centre Benin City
<https://www.photos/culturalcentre-in-benin>



Figure 5: Cultural Centre Calabar
<https://www.photos/culturalcentre-calabar>

The Cultural Centre Ibadan also referred to as the Oyo State Council for Art and Culture emerged within the ambience of the FESTAC 77 and was built same year. Ibadan is one of the most liberal and strategic cities in Yoruba land and at the beginning of colonial administration, it was made the administrative headquarters of the western region of Nigeria and currently the capital city of Oyo State. It has since metamorphosed into one of the largest urban agglomerations in Africa with immense administrative, economic and cultural significance.

Arts and Ornamentation in the Cultural Centre Ibadan

The Cultural Centre Ibadan is a magnificent piece of architecture designed by Professor Demas Nwoko and

constructed by Strabag Construction Company in 1977. The core vision of the design was to attract tourists and artistes to Ibadan to showcase the cultural landscape and heritage of the ancient city. The Cultural Centre Ibadan is a public building currently owned and maintained by the Oyo State Government of Nigeria (Figure 6). It embodies a bold fusion of art and architecture evident in the intricate sculptural designs that adorn its walls, wooden and metal ornamentation adorning its halls and lobbies, the luscious blend of geometrical forms and shapes in its façade, its integration and harmony with the undulating landscape. Indeed, the building is breathtaking presenting a cascade of mesmerizing views from different vantage points.



Figure 6: Approach view of the Cultural Centre Ibadan
<https://www.photos/culturalcentre-in-ibadan>

Art is interwoven into the Cultural Centre Ibadan from its approach. Two magnificent more than life sculptures produced by Adéyemí Victoria Ajéwólé-Àlàdè and Samson Kéhindé Adékòyà adorn the entrance quadrangle (Figure 7). These concrete anthropomorphic sculptural pieces strategically located at both sides of the main entrance project a metaphorical ambience of

welcoming guests to the building in an apparent reflection of Yoruba traditional culture. *Ayàn Agalú* holds a traditional Yoruba musical ensemble called *iyá ilú*, a traditional drum fabricated from wood and animal skin, while the other plays a Yoruba musical instrument known as *sèkèrè*, fabricated from a calabash and beads held together with small ropes.



Figure 7: Àyàn Àgalú and Onisèkèrè Sculptures
Fieldwork, 2022

On the approach view, eight segments of relief sculptures of two distinctive styles credited to Demas Nwoko made in concrete adorn the external walls depicting different themes of Yoruba traditional culture such as entertainment, dance, festival and religion. The first relief sculpture depicts two men with one beating the *iyá ilù* and the other playing the *sèkèrè* (Figure 8). The two semi-abstract cubic figures adorn typical Yoruba traditional attire with cap, engulfed in an ambience of celebration. Embellished motifs add lucidity to the whole composition. The relief sculpture, like the others produced in similar style on the building, is painted white with a brown background, creating a

sharp contrast against the brightly painted walls. The second relief sculpture (Figure 9) depicts four women dancers holding ceremonial horsetails known as *irùkèrè*, wearing ecstatic facial expressions seemingly responding to the rhythm of the drummers on the first sculpture. The third relief sculpture is a composition of *sàngó* festival celebrated by the Yoruba people (Figure 10). *Sàngó* is the Yoruba god of thunder and is depicted in his typical attire; a traditional Yoruba male sleeveless top and a skirt known as *làbà*. He holds an axe which is his most important insignia. The composition also includes a drummer and a dancer.



Figure 8: Relief Sculpture I
Fieldwork, 2022



Figure 9: Relief Sculpture II
Fieldwork, 2022



Figure 10: Relief Sculpture III
Fieldwork, 2022



Figure 11: Relief Sculpture IV
Fieldwork, 2022

The fourth relief sculpture comprises three anthropomorphic figures apparently dancing to a melody (Figure 11). The three figures adorn the

traditional Yoruba flowing gown *agbádá*, usually worn during important ceremonies and festivals. The fifth two-dimensional sculpture is a composition of three

cubic semi-abstract *bàtá* drummers dressed in Yoruba traditional attires (Figure 12). *Bàtá* is a traditional Yoruba drum ensemble in the membranophone family and is largely used as part of *sàngó* drum ensembles. The

sixth relief sculpture (Figure 13) is a replica of the *sàngó* festival depicted in relief sculpture III (Figure 10) in style and thematic composition with little variance in the type of axe held by *sàngó*, and the musical ensemble.



Figure 12: Relief Sculpture V
Fieldwork, 2022

The seventh and eighth relief sculptures have a different stylistic content from the first six. These two relief sculptures are placed at either side of the entrance into the main hall. The stylized sculptures depict anthropomorphic figures playing different types of



Figure 13: Relief Sculpture VI
Fieldwork, 2022

traditional musical instruments (Figures 14 and 15). Other figures on the ensemble seemingly dance to the rhythm of the melody. The frames of the sculptural pieces are designed with twisted ropelike motif.



Figure 14: Relief Sculpture VII
Fieldwork, 2022

In addition to the relief sculpture on the entrance walls and the magnificent sculptural pieces standing aloft the entrance quadrangle, the two entrance doors into the main hall of the Cultural Centre Ibadan bear ornate ornamentation. The doors were intricately fabricated with a delicate mix of metal and wood (Figure 16). Wooden frames enclose metal panels embellished with plastocast print motifs authored by Bruce Onabrakpeya,



Figure 15: Relief Sculpture VIII
Fieldwork, 2022

a renowned Nigerian contemporary artist. The doors are in two halves each with three panels. The upper and lower panels in each halves have figurative illustrations while the middle panels are non-representational with a blend of geometrical shapes and patterns. The theme is African, ranging from acrobatic displays to drumming and cultural dances. The stylized human figures are heavily decorated with motifs.



Figure 16: Entrance Doors
Fieldwork, 2022

The integration of African arts and ornamentation into the Architecture of the Cultural Centre is in tandem with the objectives of the FESTAC 77 to promote the uptake of African arts and culture in all facets of national life.

The Cultural Centre Ibadan represents a significant masterpiece that exhibit and promote African traditional art and architecture.

CONCLUSION

Art is one of the most potent tools for the promotion of cultural heritage and the preservation of traditional customary values as observed in the Yoruba cultural displays and festivals captured in the sculptural relief designs adorning the walls of the Cultural Centre, Ibadan and the monumental sculptures that welcome guests into the entrance quadrangle of the edifice. When the built environment witnesses artistically embellished architecture with symbolic meanings like the Cultural Centre Ibadan, society reaps the dividends of cultural emancipation, cultural renaissance and cultural preservation.

A symbolic building like the Cultural Centre Ibadan that embellishes art and ornamentation in its architecture

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