

Houseform Characteristics of the Yoruba Culture

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Abstract

Culture defines group and leads to varied needs, wants and interpretation of requirements. There are rural and urban cultures. However, arising from rapid urbanization and historic transformation of human social roots on a global scale, the predominantly rural cultures are being replaced by urban culture day by day. This article provides an explanation on the effects of the Yoruba culture on a houseform that dominated the traditional rural culture of a typical Yoruba settlement, using a Yoruba city of Ogbomoso on the south west zone of Nigeria, as a case study.

Multi-habitation which is a concept and form of housing whereby residents live with multiple families and share living space together was common in the rural culture of the Yoruba people and has been transposed into urban culture in cities of developing countries, Nigeria inclusive. As a result of multi-habitation, rental accommodations are being provided for the large population in the rapidly expanding cities in the developing countries.

A study of multi-habitation in Ogbomoso, Nigeria revealed that majority of multihabited houses in Ogbomoso (60.8%) were rooming houses. It also revealed that three (3) households living together under the same roof across the residential area (44.2%) was a common scene. The study further revealed that multihabited house is a type of single or multiple room occupancy where most washing, kitchen and toilet facilities are shared among residents. The study concluded therefore that multi-habitation is a way of living among the Yoruba, as enshrined in their culture.

Keywords: The Yoruba, multi-habitation, multihabited, house form, culture and characteristics.

Introduction

The culture of a people exercises an over-riding influence on the type and form of the house evolved by the people (Olotuah, 1997), as such a house symbolises the socio-cultural heritage of a people.

Culture can be described as rural or urban. Rural culture is a village or traditional culture which is characterised by human blood lines, intimate relationships and human behavior; whereas, urban culture is characterised by distant blood lines, unfamiliar relatives and competitive behaviors. Culture is an all-encompassing feature which includes knowledge, belief and all capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society, and it is transmitted from one generation to the another. Gardi (1973) asserted that housing is shaped by the lifestyle of a people, alongside their needs and technical possibilities open to them. Housing can then be said to be the portrait of the lifestyle of a people reflecting their needs and the realities of their lives, This is the traditional architecture of the people designed by the people for themselves in the context of their community. Architecture is a cultural phenomenon and culture is dynamic; as such it follows that architecture in response to man ever changing socio-economic and cultural situation is dynamic as well, hence the transformation from traditional architecture to contemporary architecture.

Traditional architecture which was based on rural culture was created by expedient decision which depended on a number of factors such as social, economic, climatic, and so forth. The factor of culture in traditional architecture 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.

In traditional Yoruba settlements, land use types were restricted mainly to residential, markets, Oba's palaces (palaces of traditional rulers), farmland and shrines, Oluremi (2002). Denyer (1978) asserted that the dominant location in the settlements was the palace of the Oba and the principal market situated next to each other in the centre of the town. Others included the main temple and two wide roads crossing at the centre. The morphology of the traditional Yoruba settlements is often characterized by an amorphous layout with a high concentration of houses. This is so because the Yoruba are an urban people who have lived in large urban communities for several centuries (Ogunba, 2002).

The Yoruba traditional house is of two types. The first is the traditional compound built around one or more courtyards. Dawson (2002) asserted that the spatial configuration of a dwelling or settlement presented a fair map of the economics, social and ideological relation of its inhabitants. It can then be inferred, that the form of a house is influenced by the kind of relationships that exist among the occupants. He concluded that where the family exhibited a nuclear system, the house form was often enclosed in a villa type, while an extended family system tended to have an open plan. The traditional Yoruba compound houseform was borne out of the culture of the Yoruba people and the need to take care of the extended family structure which had survived in Yoruba land. The compound usually has an open plan, rectangular in design with a single entrance gate, with rooms in the compound facing one or more courtyards. There is a covered verandah or portico in front of the rooms surrounding

the courtyard. The verandah is covered by lean-to roofs which are an extension of the saddleback roof into shallow, sunken cisterns in the centre of the courtyard usually referred to as the impluvium. Kinship organization in Yorubaland influences their living pattern and the houseform. This encourages close personal contacts, a factor that has contributed to the unity of the people's traditional social structure.

In all compounds, rooms around one courtyard may be occupied by a segment of a lineage and a household in some cases may include several other related and unrelated persons, the size of a compound varies greatly and it is usually determined by the social status of the family progenitor.

Multi-habitation is influenced significantly in the rural areas of West African countries by central issues such as kinship and inheritance. The traditional Africans encourage Multi-habitation, by encouraging their sons to marry and bring their wives into the family compound to perpetuate the family traditions. Traditional housing in Ghana and some other West Africa countries is multihabited. Multihabited houses have been shown to provide significant security against crime and a sense of community among the people living in them, since they have only one entrance and the occupants become each other's keeper (Schlyter, 2003).

The need for large number of rooms to accommodate the extended families kinship organization and inheritance both in the Yoruba culture and in some West Africa cultures like Ghana is a major determinant of this traditional houseform. However, in the urban areas, where multi-habitation has evolved, people with similar level of income, social status and cultural inclination live together and form a "microcosm" of the community itself, since each house is composed of unrelated individuals from many ethnic communities who live together in a confined area (Schildkront, 1978). The second house type in Yoruba traditional architecture consists of a double row of rooms which open into a common corridor which is a common place for working, sitting and storage. The corridor is also an additional sleeping area for overnight callers. This second type is a new type of family house and it became prominent during the 1930s when earnings from cocoa, palm oil and so forth allowed a relatively young man who inherited a share in the family compound to establish his own house, into which some of the family members could move with him. (Amole et al, 1993) The need for enough number of rooms for the owner's immediate family members and some members of the extended family, and a cultural mix as a result of the influence of the Brazilian style from freed slaves (Maraffato, 1983) played an important role in multi-habitation. This non-compound houseform with rooms aligned along a central corridor has been adapted in all the urban centres and villages of developing countries to provide rental accommodation for individual tenants (Okeyinka, 2007). Each house is therefore composed of unrelated individuals from various ethnic communities who live together and provide daily help for each other (Valsiner, 2000). Such interactions form the basis of social organization in the West African village setting and even for urban families. The reason for the preponderance of this house type is that, it is a form of housing which provides rental accommodation at reasonable costs for the large immigrant population in the rapidly expanding cities. Multi-habitation has now been transposed into the urban areas because this form of the house allows inexpensive accommodation and many of the advantages of collectivist life for the residents.

2.0 The House form and its characteristics

Culture is dynamic, architecture as a cultural phenomenon changes as culture does, and so there has been transformation from traditional architecture to contemporary architecture the world over. Housing as a material culture therefore has taken many forms in the world. These forms have engendered physical, social and psychological characteristics. The house form ranges from single family house on one plot to large complexes with many apartments, housing different families.

The Yoruba house form is a rooming house where by definition; the building is divided into separate rooms. This house form represents the more traditional lifestyle in West Africa in general and Yoruba cities of Nigeria in particular. The room is the unit of accommodation in a rooming house of Yoruba culture and it is multihabited by several families. It has an open plan and this is why it is referred to as an open apartment whereby residents live in full view of one another; however, this does not mean that they do not have some privacy. Although to live in multi-habitation is to live quite differently from the idealized official view of the happy single family house, the issue of affordability and the extended family occupancy which is common in many African countries encourage multi-habitation a lot. Several literatures on housing in the Third World or developing countries have concluded that housing for the urban poor in sub-saharan Africa has been made largely possible through multi-habitation (Amole et al, 1993). Schlyter (2003) described multi-habitation as a way of coping with poverty and that by means of this concept many more people benefit from urban services than was planned, and that by sharing water, toilets and roads, services become affordable for the poor in cities of developing countries. A study of the characteristics of multihabited houses was conducted in Ogbomoso, a city in South West Nigeria. Ogbomoso is a typical Yoruba town which conforms to the general morphology of traditional Yoruba cities. The findings are as follows. A survey of nine hundred and forty six (946) multihabited houses was conducted in the high and medium residential density of the town. The target population were residents of the multihabited houses. The method of data collection involved the use of structured questionnaire. Given the differences in population

size of multihabited houses and their spatial extent, the distribution of questionnaire conformed to the generally believed pattern of population distribution within residential areas, a ratio of 3:2 was employed respectively for the high and medium residential areas.

Several architectural attributes were used to describe the houses and their immediate environment. Of the total of 946 multihabited housing units sampled, 60.7% were rooming house/face – me – I – face you and 38.6% were courtyard/impluvium house. Others constituted 0.6%. The category indicated as others in the questionnaire is a type of multihabited house which combined both the compound and rooming housetypes, usually referred to as Ghana style in Ogbomoso. This result shows that majority of the multihabited houses in Ogbomoso were rooming houses. Table 2.1 shows the analysis.

Table 2.1: Housing Typology

House type	High	%	Medium	%	Total	%
Courtyard/Impluvium	209	36.67	156	41.49	365	38.58
Rooming House	358	62.81	217	57.71	575	60.78
Others	3	0.53	3	0.80	6	0.63
Total	570	100.00	376	100.00	946	100.00

Similarly, the distribution of the number of rooms in the housing unit sampled (Table 2.2) shows that majority of the multihabited houses (21.1%) have 12 rooms, while (20.7%) have 8 rooms, (18.9%) have 11 rooms and (17.4%) have 4 rooms. This is not surprising because rooms in multihabited houses represent the unit of accommodation. Generally speaking, the result shows that multihabited houses of 12 rooms either in the rooming or courtyard houses are common followed by houses with 8 rooms and 11 rooms respectively.

Table 2.2 : Distribution of Rooms in Multihabited Houses

Room per floor	High	%	Medium	%	Total	%
2	3	0.53	0.00	0.00	3.00	0.32
3	5	0.88	5.00	1.33	10.00	1.06
4	90	15.79	75.00	19.95	165.00	17.44
5	6	1.05	5.00	1.33	11.00	1.16
6	86	15.09	43.00	11.44	129.00	13.64
7	2	0.35	2.00	0.53	4.00	0.42
8	134	23.51	62.00	16.49	196.00	20.72
9	6	1.05	3.00	0.80	9.00	0.95
10	19	3.33	21.00	5.59	40.00	4.23
11	93	16.32	86.00	22.87	179.00	18.92
12	126	22.11	74.00	19.68	200.00	21.14
Total	570	100.00	376.00	100.00	964.00	100.00

Comparing the residents' number of rooms, i.e. rooms available to the household heads and his/her family members in the house (Table 2.3) shows that a good proportion (47.5%) and the majority of the residents in multihabited houses in Ogbomoso occupied two (2) rooms as a family, followed by 16.8% households occupying just (1) room. However, 15.0% and 13.4% have access or occupy 6 and 4 rooms respectively. This category of household heads, was of the owner/occupier status who are using a wing and sometimes part of another wing in a rooming house. This result revealed that majority of households in the study area have 2 rooms to their family.

Table 2.3 : Residents number of rooms

Number of Rooms occupied by respondents	High	%	Medium	%	Total	
1 room	95	10.0	64	6.8	16.8	159
2 rooms	269	28.4	180	19.1	47.5	449
3 rooms	16	1.7%	10	1.1	2.8	26
4 rooms	76	8.0	51	5.4	13.4	127
5 rooms	4	0.4	1	0.1	0.5	5
6 rooms	80	8.5	62	6.6	15.1	142
7 rooms	3	0.3	-	-	0.3	3
8 rooms	16	1.7	15	1.6	3.3	31
9 rooms	1	0.1	-	-	0.1	1
10 rooms	3	0.3	-	-	0.3	3
Total	563	59.5	383	40.7	100	946

With regards to the number of households living in the respondents house, Table 2.4 shows that majority 44.2% of (3) households live together under the same roof across the residential area. Also 35.4% and 6.6% which comprise 4 and 2 households respectively are living together under the same roof. This is understandable since multi-habitation is about different households living together, sharing facilities together.

Table 2.4: Number of Households in Respondents House

Number of Households	High	%	medium	%	Total	%
1	14	2.46	11.00	2.93	25.00	2.64
2	41	7.19	21.00	5.59	62.00	6.55
3	256	44.91	162.00	43.09	418.00	44.19
4	200	35.09	135.00	35.90	335.00	35.41
5	26	4.56	20.00	5.32	46.00	4.86
6	16	2.81	7.00	1.86	23.00	2.43
7	6	1.05	6.00	1.60	12.00	1.27
8	3	0.53	5.00	1.33	8.00	0.85
9	3	0.53	3.00	0.80	6.00	0.63
10	5	0.88	6.00	1.60	11.00	1.16
Total	570	100.00	376.00	100.00	946.00	100.00

Multi-habitation is about sharing facilities and utilities among all residents. Specifically, Table 2.5 shows the summary of the result of the analysis of the residents' use of services. These are services /utilities such as the kitchen, bathroom and toilet. Majority of the residents shared these facilities with some other families. This result affirmed the fact that multihabited house is a type of single or multiple room occupancy where most washing, kitchen and toilet facilities are shared among residents.

Table 2.5 : Residents' use of Services

Services (Use)	Kitchen	Bathroom	Toilet
Exclusively by your family	70 (34.8)	97 (12.5)	97 (12.5)
Shared with other families	131 (65.4)	678 (87.5)	678 (87.5)
Total	201 (100)	844 (100)	775 (100)

3.0 Conclusion

The culture of a people exercises an overriding influence on the type and form of the house evolved by them. The traditional Yoruba compound house form was borne out of the culture of the people and it takes care of the extended family structure which had survived in Africa and in Yoruba land. This traditional compound house form was transposed to a non – traditional rooming house or what is termed face – me – I – face you.

The need for large number of rooms to accommodate the extended families, kinship organization and inheritance both in the Yoruba culture and in South West African cultures like Ghana was a major determinant of the traditional house form. Likewise, the need for large number of rooms to accommodate the nuclear or extended family of the owner of a rooming house and the opportunity of letting out individual room to generate income is also another reason for the preponderance of this house form in Ogbomoso.

In conclusion, the study found out that, multihabited houses was prevalent in Ogbomoso and was sustained as a result of the culture of Ogbomoso people. Residents of multihabited houses in the town view multi-habitation as a way of living among the Yoruba and that the house type promotes the idea of living together as enshrined in their culture.

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