

# Indigenous Wall Ornamentation in Yoruba Domestic Buildings, Osogbo As an Archetype

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## Abstract

*The origin of enrichment of walls among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria is ambiguous, while the forms in the ornamentation of walls of the domestic building during the pre-colonial era remain inexplicit. Studies of Okediji (1989) and Campbell (2008) yielded insights into forms of ornamentation in some Yoruba shrines, but embellishment on walls of domestic buildings were common practices that were initially not seen as important, despite the richness of the forms. The indigenous practices are fading out fast, without adequate records of their existence, as old buildings are constantly lost to dilapidations and demolitions to accommodate modern developments. Forms in the ornamentation of the domestic buildings are also constantly changing in the modern world, as a result of cross-cultural influences occasioned by globalization. This result to being unknown to many youths of nowadays necessitating digging into cultural roots of the practice, to unveil the origin of the practice and documenting the forms at the inception. The study uses Osogbo, an antique Yoruba town renowned for her rich artistic culture, as an archetype for investigating the cultural roots of the practice in Yorubaland. Data generated from the field were analytically studied. This includes oral interviews with custodians of history to elicit information on the origin of embellishment on buildings; owners of antique buildings were also interviewed to generate information on the forms on their buildings. The study will serve as a reference point to future generations on the creative ingenuity of the past while keeping cultural heritage intact for future generations. It will also promote cultural consciousness, leading to the strengthening of the sense of cultural identity in the people.*

**Keywords:** Yoruba, Ornamentation, Heritage, Indigenous domestic buildings, Osogbo.

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## 1. Introduction

The word heritage refers to traditional ways and accepted inherited valuable legacy of society, hence culture which is peculiar to a particular society. Artistic accompaniments and the use of ornamentation in buildings are important aspects of the Yoruba cultural heritage which had been since time immemorial. Yoruba pre-colonial ornamentation is the unaltered ornate forms which had been since the far off times (*igbà iwásè*), till the coming of the Europeans and imposition of British colonization in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The decorations on buildings, which predate the European advent, are mostly found in the indigenous quarters in the traditional core areas of Osogbo such as Gbalegbómi, Ìgbònà, Ojà-Oba, Ìsàlè-Òsun, Ìsàlè-Àró, Balógun-Àgòrò, Òkè-Baálè, Asúbíaró, and Ìta-Olóókan. These are early settlements at the center of the city, which came into being from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to about 1935 (Egúnjobí, 1995, Okpako and Àmòlé 2012).

## 2. Progression in Ornamentation of Domestic Buildings

The beginning of ornamentation of domestic buildings in Yorubaland is difficult to determine, as no one can say

precisely or authoritatively when it started. Likewise, early houses were built with earth, which gives way easily to dilapidation. Johnson (1921:99) affirms that “mud does not allow the execution of some designs, nor the preservation of the available forms”. During the pre-colonial period, buildings were also roofed with thatch or leaves, which were sensitive to fire, while termites and weathering destroyed wood, thus preventing ornamental designs on buildings from staying for a long time. Furthermore, there was the culture of demolishing old houses to build modern ones, as well as the changing of building styles and ornamentation to new styles to show affluence.

However, the progression in the decoration of Yoruba buildings in the early times can be inferred from the records of oral history and reports of early researchers who witnessed some of the pre-colonial and typical Yoruba ornamentations, before they were out of circulation. Bemoaning the clarity of the origin of mural decoration in Yorubaland, Lawal (1974:213), notes that in ancient times, decorations only occurred at points of potential social stress, such as the *ilé òrìsà* (temples or shrine) and *ààfin* (palaces), which he asserts were usually the largest and most richly decorated buildings in Yoruba towns. The claim that ornamental forms in Yoruba buildings were the prerogatives of the gods and a status symbol bestowed on the kings before the coming of the Europeans, is further sustained by Lander (1830:199); Johnson (1921:99); Ojo (1966:156); Lawal (1974:314); Bowen (1977:42-44) and Aradeon (1984:5).

Ojo (1966:156) emphasizes that ornamentation of houses by commoners was seen as rivalry and an insult to the rulers, stating how a particular artist who had his house decorated in Oyo, was made to clean off the adornment and instead repeated it on the palace wall. It could be deduced from Johnson (1921:99) that domestic buildings owned by high chiefs used to be ornamented in the past, though not as elaborately as the Oba’s palace, an act which was not extended to common citizens.

### 3. The Beginning of Ornamentation of Yoruba Domestic Buildings

Interviews with custodians of Yorùbá oral history and culture reveal that ornamentation of domestic buildings (*ilé ìgbé*) in Yorùbáland, started with the plastering of floors with herbal concoctions (*ìgbolé* or *ìpalé*). According to Chief Àkànní Yàkùbù Ifásanmí<sup>1</sup>, Chief Fáládé Awófísán<sup>2</sup>, and Chief Ifáyemí Elébuìbon<sup>3</sup>, the origin of floor plastering was in response to an *Ifá* directive as a solution to a problem exemplified in the *Odú òtúrà ààrà* (*òtúrà l’ótún* and *Ògúdá l’òsì*). Here *Ifá*, the repository of Yoruba history which sheds light on its origin holds that:

In the time past, the way (*Ònà*), the market (*Ojà*), the farm (*Oko*), and the house (*Ilé*), were asked to make a sacrifice for prosperity, but only the house complied. The aftermath was that the house thrived, was inhabited and loved more than the other three, who in contrast was isolated, sad, and envious. They sought to pollute and destroy the house, making it to lose peoples’ affection, which agitated *Ònà*, leading to divination to procure solutions. On consultation, *Ifá* gave a direction, which led to ornamentation, as stated in the *Ifá* verse below:

“*Ìbàjé ilé ní wón fé ta ní ìgbà iwásè,*  
*Wón n su’ùlé,*  
*Wón ‘n wó ilé,*  
*Wón fé ba ilé je,*  
*Ilé wá dide pé nígbà aiyé oun,*  
*Òun ò ri bi òun se wà yí rí.*

“People were spiteful to the house in the time past,  
They defecated in the house,  
And destroyed its structures,  
Trying to destroy its image,  
This problem made the house to consult *Ifá*,  
And complain about its deplorable state.

*Ifá ni kí ó rú'bo igbolé àti adiye,  
Ó jí ní òdòrò kùtù,  
O fi igbolé pa'lé  
Ó fi igbálè ìrú'bo gbon igbolé kúrò,  
Ni gbogbo ìdòtí inú ilé bá jáde.*

*Ifá asked ilé to make a sacrifice of igbole and a fowl,  
Ilé woke up very early in the morning,  
And plastered the floor with the specified concoctions  
After which he swept the floor with prescribed broom,  
Which made all dirt to leave the house.*

*Gbogbo àwon tó 'nlo ojà 'nfowó bomú,  
Nítorí òdòrùn igbolé.  
Sùgbon ní àbò ojà,  
Ojò 'nlá ró,  
Àwon èyàn 'nsá wo inú ilé,  
Nítorí kò sí ibomíràn láti sá sí, ju inú ilé lo.*

*Passersby were covering their noses,  
Because of the foul odour from the concoctions  
But on their way back from the market,  
There was a heavy down pour,  
Which made people to seek refuge inside the house,  
As there was no other refuge than inside the house*

*Ilé ilé náà wá dúdú,  
Ilé wá r'ewà ló'jú won,  
Àwon èyàn wá fèrán ilé sù,  
Wón wá ndúrò nínú ilé ju ti àtèhínwá lo,  
Nítorí ewà rè."*

*They saw that the floor of the house was black,  
And that the house was more beautiful and alluring,  
People loved the house more  
And started staying longer in the house than before  
Because of its beauty."*

This was said to be the beginning of the plastering of both the interior and exterior floors of buildings and by extension the lower walls<sup>4</sup>. This story is reflected in a Yoruba song that goes thus:

*Eni á parù a para eni o,  
Eni á parù a para eni,  
Àwon tó fé ba ilé jé, tí wón se ilé ní ìdòtí, ewà ló dà,  
Eni a parù a para eni,  
Eni palé ewà lo'da,  
Eni á parù á para eni.*

Meaning that: "Enemies and destroyers are only troubling themselves, as a similar attempt to destroy the house (ilé) in the time past only resulted in beauty". (That is, the application of paste concoctions to buildings ended in adding to their beauty).

This account is also narrated in Bèwàjí (2008:237). Studies have provided pieces of evidence of the suitability and validity of *Ifá* corpus (*ese Ifá*), as authentic records of Yoruba oral history and as accounts of happenings of the past, which guide the present (Abímbólá, 1976:32; Ajíbádé 2002:66; and Àjàyí, 2008:312). It could be deduced from the above metaphorical excerpt from the *Ifá* literary corpus (*Odù Ifá*), that there is no art for art-sake among the Yorùbá, even as the ornamentation practice had been a functional art since its inception, aimed at solving problems. It had the dual function of performing a sacrifice and making the house cleaner, beautiful and inviting. Adéjùmò (1998:5) pointed out that ornamentation in the traditional societies was originally not meant to be just displayed for aesthetic contemplation, asserting that many of them were made out of stimulus for religious and cosmological ideas with inspirational and inherent meanings. The floor plastering

was later found to harden the floor, thus reducing dust and making the floor easy to sweep. It also smoothens the floor, making it pleasurable to walk on, while repelling jiggers (*Tunga penetrans*) and other pests.

The earlier mentioned *Ifá* verse also highlights the Yoruba philosophical belief that neatness is required for radiating beauty, as the sacrifice was not complete until both the physical and spiritual dirt in the house were swept. It made people to like the house despite the odour from the cow dung. Consequently the Yoruba, including the people of Òsogbo, always sweep their floors early in the morning, with brooms (either ritualistically or ordinarily). It is logical that the beginning of ornamentation of the domestic building as a prescribed spiritual rite at the onset could have made it impossible to be vetoed and denied by the higher hierarchies. Once floor adornment was allowed in one instance, the spread must have become inevitable. Its permissive occurrence paved the way for its becoming widespread, leading to the take-off of painting or plastering of the floor of domestic buildings with weeds concoction (*ìgbolé*) in the pre-colonial era.

According to Mrs Náfísátù Gbàdàmósí<sup>5</sup>, floor plastering and decoration in Òsogbo was at the inception the exclusive of women. It was said to be done with extracts from plants such as *yunyun* (*aspilia latifolia*), *èlú* (*indigo ferra* trees), comprising of *indigo ferra arrecta*, *indigo ferra suffricotosa*, *indigo ferra tinctoria* and *lonchocarpus* or *ìjòkùn* leaves (*mucuna solanei*). The leaves were pounded with charcoal and cow or sheep dung (*bóto* or *elébóto*). The plastering of buildings with a mixture of mud, leaves and cow dung is explained by Denyer (1978:115); Òṣáṣọ̀nà (1990:105); Aleru (2000:169) and Òṣáṣọ̀nà (2005:14), although the observations of this study differ slightly from theirs.

Rather than plastering with the mixture of mud and the concoction in Òsogbo, Madam Sàdíátù Oríajé<sup>6</sup> explained that the dusty floors used to be first made wet with water and beaten with clubs till it hardens, which also pushes in the pebbles, leaving the floor smooth before it is left to dry. This process is corroborated by Osasona (1995:13) asserting that the process used to be repeated for several days after which a smooth, glossy and dust-proof floor is achieved. When dry, the already hardened floor would then be plastered with the prepared plant dung mixture. In the case of walls, they were said to be first plastered with yellow ochre clay, giving it a smooth plastered finish in light colour before the decoration. This process is said to be referred to as *ògiri bíbó* (Nafisatu Gbadamosi, op-cited). The prepared dark mixture was then used to embellish the wall after drying, (a process they called *ògiri fífín*, meaning wall embellishment) or *ilé pípa*, which means to plaster the floor).

This process correlates with the wall ornamentation witnessed by Burton in Abeokuta around 1860 as noted by Dmochowski (1990:373). Here, walls were reported to be polished with a solution of black or red earth, before the covering with the extract from locust tree or crushed leaves of the oilseed tree, *Moringa Pterygosperinia*. Dmochowski (1990:374), also made a similar observation of the use of concoction from the locust tree, which is further attested to by Abraham (1958:711 and 733) in identifying *Moringa Pterygosperinia* as *ewé ìpalé*. Abraham (ibid, 287 and 711) also identify *Starchytarpheta Angustifolia* as *ìgbolé* (meaning plant for house painting), while Òṣáṣọ̀nà (2005:14) documents the practice in Ile-Ife with plantain leaves and a tendril she identifies as *ìjìnrin eléja*. This implies that the composition of the pigment varies from one place to another. The floor plastering concoction later extended beyond the walls, to delineating portals, and windows, giving a dark decoration in contrast to the background. Examples can still be seen on the main entrances of domestic buildings at No. 1 Olúsi Street and No. 13 Àbàbù Street, both in Isale-Òsun, area of Òsogbo. Models of pre-colonial wall adornments were also noticed in some buildings at Oke-Baale and Gbomi areas of Osogbo.

#### 4. Early Forms of Painted Ornamentation

Adúlójú's building at No. 19 Aládiye Street, Òkè-Baálè, Òsogbo, is an old building embellished with the traditional floor plastering concoctions (a mixture of plants extracts, dung and charcoal), with wall designs reflecting the early period of the city (Figures 1a-f). The created images consist of a thick band with thin vertical lines at the base, and spaces filled with arrows dots, crosses, linear, curvilinear, and geometric shapes (Figures 1a, b, and e), as well as broad horizontal lines, topped with wavy lines or zig-zags. It also depicts animals in the environs such as snakes and rats (Figures 1c and 1d), and common objects mimesis of everyday life of the people.



Figures 1a



Figures 1b



Figures 1c



Figures 1d



Figures 1e



Figures 1f

Figures 1a-f: Close up of graffiti in weed concoction on lower walls of Adúlójú's building at No. 19 Aládiye Street, Ìsàlè-Òsun, Òsogbo (Photographed by F. M. Abéjídé, 2018).

Both Nàfísátù Gbàdàmósí and Sàdíátù Oríajé (op-cited) affirmed that fresh applications of weed concoction and new embellishments were done once in a while at ordinary times. They also claimed that fresh ones were executed to commemorate festivals, meetings, coronations, and to mark important occasions such as the rites of passage at different phase-life, such as birth, initiation, marriage, to death of an elder, which is regarded as a transition to another life. They further asserted that duty such as this mark out diligent, virtuous and fastidious women (*afínjú*) in the past, and the absence of which the women were regarded as lazy (*òle*) and dirty (*òbùn*). Lazy women who did not plaster their houses were publicly disgraced, with abusive corrective songs composed to ridicule them for being dirty. Buildings plastered with herbal concoction are still found in some domestic buildings in the traditional core areas of Òsogbo, such as Ìsàlè-Òsun, Òkè-Baálè and Gbómi; although the applications are not fresh, as the practice has almost completely faded out. The eradication of the practice is attributed to acculturation, as well as changes emanating from the universal global trends and availability of other new materials, which make more durable floor plastering and wall enrichment possible. Where they exist, people no longer add cow dung, because of its odour. Nàfísátù Gbàdàmósí (op-cited) reported a health campaign in the area, which created awareness on the possible linkage of cow dung with tetanus.

Apart from the established dark wash from the herbal concoction for the ornamentation of buildings, Johnson (1921: 99) establishes the use of colours such as black, red, white and ochre in the ornamentation of domestic buildings. Bascom (1971:66) also documents the decoration of house walls with paintings of animals and geometric design, when he first visited Ile-Ifè between 1937 and 1938. This is in affinity with the mural done with a combination of black concoction, kaolin and ochre, and brown clay, in the market shrine, at Ojà-Oba Òsogbo (Figure 2), which was affirmed to be the traditional style (Òsuníta Ifájoké<sup>7</sup>). The mural however, has been repainted with synthetic paints).



Figure 2: Mural with black concoction and clay in the market shrine, Ojà-Oba, Òsogbo  
(Photographed by F.M. Abéjidé, 2015).

Entrances (*enu ònà àbáwolé*) are gateways to buildings; this makes them areas of paramount importance that are always seen first at a close range, giving first impressions to outsiders. This justifies their being elaborately adorned with decorative borders that mark them out. Figure 3 is a close-up of a portal in No. 21, Aládiye Street, Òkè-Baálè; this is another building with a coat of the weed concoction on the wall, like the olden days. The inner portal of the building is marked with black synthetic paint, a pigment close to the natural plant concoction in cycloidal wavy border patterns outlined with red lines. The portal in plate 4 is No. 19 Òkè-Baálè, Street, Òsogbo; it is similar in style with Figure 3. The portal is also highlighted with blue synthetic paint, with cubic adornment at the top, reminiscent of the practice with the herbal concoction.



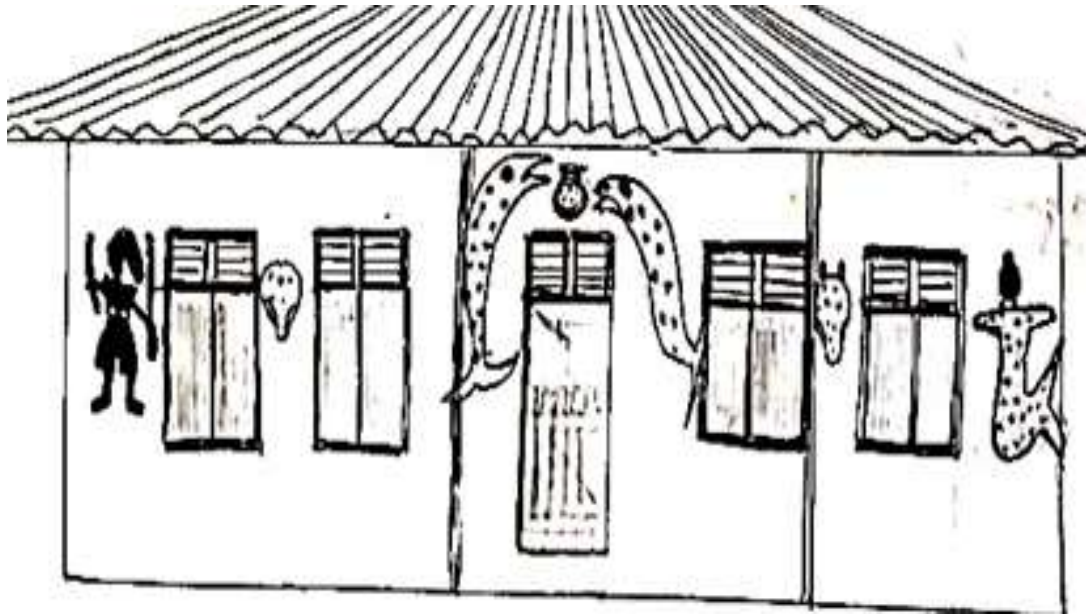
Figure 3: Inner portal of No. 21 Aládiye Street, Òsogbo decorated in synthetic paint (Photographed by F. M. Abéjidé, 2018).



Figure 4: A portal at No.19 Aládiye Street, Òsogbo, decorated in synthetic paint (Photographed by: F.M. Abéjidé, 2018).

## 5. Combination of Mouldings and Paintings

Apart from adornment with concoctions, there are domestic buildings in the traditional zones of Òsogbo, with walls adorned with mouldings and paintings of specific anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms in the environs, although in synthetic colours. It is pertinent to note that these forms are found in residences of traditional religious worshippers and that the portrayed art objects are those associated with the history of the town and their associated cult. One of such is the Láàrò's building (Illus. 1), erected 1938 at No. 37 Àbùbù, Street, Ìsàlè-Òsun, Òsogbo. The façade is embellished with low relief clay mouldings in indigenous style (Figures 5a-d). The frontage is painted in light pink in contrast to the olive green windows and doors, while the main entrance is enclosed with two large images of the fishes that look like the mudfish (*Clariaslazera*, or *Clariusangolensis*; Illus. 1 and Figure 5a). There is an image of a traditional perforated clay pot (*ajere*) centralized in the middle of the entrance. It is also worthy of note that similar portrayal of traditional religious icons and depiction of forms associated with the myth of origin of the Òsogbo is common in the ornamentation of walls, fences, and gates in the post-modern period.



Illus. 1: Artistic impression of the forms in Láàrò's building, Òsogbo; built in 1938 (Illustration by E. T. Ijisakin, 2019).

On both sides of the fishes encircling the entrance are images identified as heads of *Òtòmpòrò* masquerades in equal distances from the door, both on the left and right, symmetrically balanced. The head of *Òtòmpòrò* with horns that is depicted on the left is identified as the masculine masquerade while the image on the left without horns (Figure 5b) is identified by Serifatu Akadiri<sup>8</sup> as the female masquerade. Next to the masquerade on the far left is a silhouetted image of a hunter, balanced with the relief moulding of a mermaid (*Yemoja*), on the extreme right side (Illus. 1; and, Figure 5d).



Figure 5a: - Fish (*eja*).

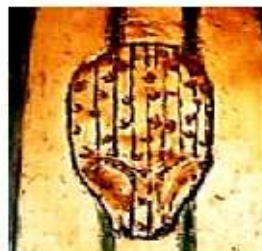


Figure 5b: masquerade



Figure 5c: Hunter.



Figure 5d: Mermaid

Figures 5a-c: Detail of painted relief on Láàrò's building Ìsàlè-Òsun, Òsogbo (Photographed by F. M. Abéjídé, 2018).

Images on Láàrò's building extend to the first passage, adorned with painted imagery from the culture of the town. These forms include the divination board (*opón-Ifá*) marked with a verse identified as *Òsé méjì* (a verse linked with the expansion of Òsogbo city, Figure 6a), Ifa divination tapper (*iróké Ifá*, Figure 6b), and the divination chain (*òpèlè*, Figure 6c). There was also the image of a fish (*eja*, Figure 6d), the sixteen points lamp of Òsun, (*fitílà* or *àtùpà olójú méréndínlógún*, Figure 6e), Òsun votary calabash carrier (*Arugbá Òsun*, Figure 6f),



sword (*idà*, Figure 6g), Òsun staff (*òpá òrèrè* Òsun, Figure 6h), bell (*àjà* or *aago olómo* Figure 6i), broom (*ìgbálè* or *owò*, Figure 6j), goat (*ewúré*, Figure 6k), and the long lidded calabash (*séré*, Figure 6 l).



Figure 6a: *Opón-Ifá*



Figure 6b: *Ìróké*



Figure 6c: *Òpèlè*



Figure 6d: *Eja*



Figure 6e: *Fitílà*



Figure 6f: *Arugbá*



Figure 6g: *Idà*



Figure 6h: *Òpá òrèrè*



Figure 6i: *Àjà*



Figure 6j: *Ìgbálè*



Figure 6k: *Ewúré*



Figure 6l: *Séré*

Figures 6a-l: Painted images adorning the first passage of Láàrò's building, Òsogbo  
 (Photographed by F. M. Abéjidé, 2019).

Another building with the portrayal of traditional objects is the 1948 erected late Adigun's building, at No. 3 Àbàbù Street, Ìsàlè-Òsun (Figure 7). The façade of the building is embellished with traditional objects associated with the myth of the origin of the town and the religious belief of the owner. The entrance is framed with two dominant mud fishes (*Clariaslazera*, or *Clariusangolensis*), one on either side of the door, which are the most prominent of the images adorning the wall. Above the entrance are images of other objects starting with an Ifá divination board *Opón-Ifá*, with marks identified as the *Ìdínlèkè* verse (a verse affirmed to be connected with the establishment of Osogbo). Facing the Ifá divination board is a bird (*eye*), this is followed by a double-headed axe (symbol of *Sàngó*, the Yoruba God of thunder and lightning), and the form of *ajere*, the perforated ceramic pot receptacle. Besides it is a broom (*ìgbálè* or *owò*), and next to the broom is *òpá òrèrè*, an important instrument in

the cult of Òsun. Equally reflecting the indigenous and pre-colonial ornamentation features is the unique rectangular cement pillars embellished with forms of moving lizards, at No. 23 Asúbíaró Street, Osogbo (Illus. 2). The building was unfortunately demolished for road construction in August 2016.



Figure 7: Painted fishes as a portal embellishment in Ile Olókúta, at Isale Osun, Ósogbo, (Photographed by F. M. Abéjídé, 2018).



Illustration 2: No. 23, Asúbíaró Street, Osogbo,  
A building with unique forms demolished for road construction in 2016.  
(Illustration by E. T. Ijisakin, 2016).

## 6. Summary of Findings and Conclusion

Findings and images in this paper, give insight into the nature and forms of ornamentation in Yorùbáland in the

pre-colonial times, which constitute the cultural heritage of the people. The study reveals that Yoruba people had a very rich building ornamentation practice before the introduction of the foreign imported styles, which boost the traditional forms and improved the homegrown aesthetics. Modernization however ushered in portals and window moldings in replacement of embellishment with concoctions, while stucco wall plastering, which is permanent, replaced relief mud wall decoration. It also made possible floor concrete paving, polish terrazzo, and tiling which serve as a replacement for paste plastering, thus widening the scope of ornamentation. Inevitably, changes that were considered to be advancement at a time often become outdated later, hence yesterday's culture is today's heritage. The spaces and forms used for ornamentation in the prehistoric times were the foundation on which the present ornamentation is built, with modifications influenced by modernization. Landry (1977) is thus right in the assertion that cultural heritage often shows that mankind has come from somewhere and has a story to tell while providing people with confidence and security to face the future.

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## Endnotes

1. Personal communication with Chief Àkànní Yàkúbù Ifásanmí (Ifá priest), No.15 Ìlàré Street, Ilé-Ifè), 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2019.
2. Personal communication with Chief Fáládé Awófísán (Ifá priest) 14<sup>th</sup> June 2019.
3. Personal communication with Chief Ifáyemí Elébùìbon (the Àwíse of Òsogbo), No.1 Elébùìbon Street, off Ikirun road, Òsogbo, 15<sup>th</sup> November 2018.
4. Both Àkànní Yàkúbù Ifásanmí and Fáládé Awófísán (op-cited).
5. Personal communication with Nàfísátù Gbàdàmósí, (a house wife with experience in floor pasting and indigenous wall decoration), No. 19 Aládiye Street, Òkè-Baálè, Òsogbo, 22<sup>nd</sup> August, 2018.
6. Personal communication with Sàdífátù Oríajé, Bebe compound, (a house wife with experience in floor pasting and indigenous wall decoration), Ìsàlè-Òsun, Òsogbo, 22<sup>nd</sup> August, 2018.
7. Personal communication with Ifájoké Òsuníta, at Ilé Olókuta, (an Osun chieftain and custodian of culture), No. 37 Àbàbù, Street, Ìsàlè-Òsun, Òsogbo, 29<sup>th</sup> November, 2018.
8. Personal communication with Serifatu Akadiri, Laaro's compound, Osogbo, 22<sup>nd</sup> August, 2019.