

## TRADITIONAL DOMESTIC INTERIORS IN THE PRE-COLONIAL, COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL PERIODS: THE NIGERIAN CASE

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### Abstract

The culture of a people is defined by their social environment, which leads to different needs and wants, and the interpretation of these requirements. This paper discusses the domestic interior scene in Nigeria during the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial eras, taking Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba cultures as cases, which reflect the country's diversity. There are several studies carried out by researchers in the field of interior design. However, the study of the Nigerian interior is an area not widely covered; thus, this paper examines the traditional interior design practices in order to establish the influences of the domestic interior and highlight important aspects of the country's culture in a bid to preserve its rich heritage which is gradually fading away. The study reveals that traditional architecture is a product of the physical environment and cultural needs in creating a fusion between the traditional interiors and the contemporary.

**Keywords:** Colonial traditional architecture, Domestic interior, Nigeria.

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### INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the Nigerian architectural style has evolved, from the pre-colonial to the colonial periods respectively, which have become a driving tool for the development of the post-colonial architectural era of today. The conquerors in the past have had major influences on architectural development (Opoko, Adekun, & Oluwatayo, 2015). Culture is said to be the beliefs, habits and lifestyle of a people, which is passed on from one generation to the other. As culture is a reflection of a people's way of life, architecture also is a reflection of culture. Culture in traditional architecture plays a vital role as it encapsulates the norms in a community. In traditional architecture, the tradition and the customs of the people determine the building practices, and as such, designs in traditional architecture are a reflection of the cultural lifestyle of the people and represent the heritage of the residents (Nsude, 1987).

Many foreign cultural heritages that existed in the colonial period had left significant influences on the country's cultural development and visibly in its architecture, which remain until today. Nigerian interior design is such that it has not been properly documented due to poor architectural journalism (Opoko, Adekun, & Oluwatayo, 2015). This paper focuses on Nigeria's pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial domestic interiors to highlight its development. The interior design styles of three major ethnic groups in Nigeria; Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba were selected as cases in order to create a framework for indigenous influences and changes to the Nigerian-built environment as a result of Western influences. The question then lies; why are traditional architectural practices becoming obsolete? How has interior design evolved from the pre-colonial era to the post-colonial? Why is there minimal emphasis on fusing cultural heritage in Nigeria (traditional architecture) with our modern environment?

### OVERVIEW OF NIGERIAN HISTORY

According to Elleh, (1997), the arrival of the Europeans to Africa in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century was when the Atlantic slave trade began. Cooper (2002) noted that, for the next 400 years, the slave trade continued, which had great impact in Nigeria and the entire African continent at large. The effect of the Atlantic slave trade on the built environment was brought by the Portuguese, who were the first colonialists in Africa. The architecture of the Portuguese was known as medieval European fortress architecture, where forts located mainly along the West and South West African coast were built. These forts were to withstand attacks from rival slave hunters, Africans, and European pirates (Elleh, 1997).

After the Portuguese arrived in Africa, other colonialists from Europe; Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, and Spain, arrived also. However, the British Parliament put an end to slave trade in 1807, but Europeans still continued to dominate Africa politically. Historians refer to that period as the

partitioning of Africa (Cooper, 2002). In 1914, after the amalgamation of Nigeria by Lord Lugard, his wife derived the name *Nigeria*; *Niger* which is from the *River Niger* and *area*. After 400 years of slavery, many African countries gained their independence from colonial rule between the 1950s to the 1980s (Ilfie, 2007). In 1960, Nigeria gained its independence from the British.

Nigeria is a country located in the West of the African continent with an area of 4470 sq km. Bordering Nigeria are Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin. Nigeria is considered the most populous country in Africa. This large population in Nigeria is comprised of about 250 ethnic groups, with Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba constituting the majority with about 40% of the total population (Embassy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2009).

## METHODOLOGY

The study obtained data using the historical research approach. This method attempts to put together past events and ideas, which have influences on the present, where data is obtained from both primary and secondary material (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 305). Secondary materials were consulted for data collection in this study, which involved information found in related literature such as articles and journals. This approach enables the gathering of evidence from the past with the ability to evaluate the evidence within the scope of the period under study and its contributions to that period. For this study, a topic was identified, and a background literature review was conducted, thereafter, the research idea was defined, and an analysis of the data was carried out in order to develop a narrative of the findings. This method was deemed appropriate for this study as its purpose is to reach insights between the old and the new. To understanding the cultural era of Nigerian domestic interiors, traditional interiors of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba architecture were selected for analysis because these constitute the major ethnic groups in Nigeria.

## NIGERIA'S PRE-COLONIAL INTERIOR DESIGN

Spaces in the Nigerian culture are a reflection of the social and cultural environment. Take for example, pre-colonial palace interiors; ornamentation in this interior illustrated historical and religious features, used for storytelling and passing cultural and historical information from one generation to another (Asojo & Asojo, 2015). In cultures with a monarchy system, spaces were hierarchal in order. The dwellings of subjects were considered smaller versions of the king's palace, and the sizes of these dwellings were based on the owner's importance in the community. The three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria; the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba constitute more than 40% of Nigeria's total population (Asojo & Asojo, 2015).

### Hausa

The Hausa people are predominant in Northern Nigeria and majorly Islamic, because of their location which is close to North Africa and the Arab world (Asojo & Asojo, 2015). The Hausas are believed to have lived in small agricultural communities, before any form of urbanization took place. Elleh (1997) stated that Hausa settlement patterns were of two main types; the indigenous settlement pattern and the Islamic pattern, which was influenced by the emergence of Islam after Jihad. The Islamic pattern settlement was a modification of the indigenous.



Figure 1: Interior of a Hausa traditional house (Agboola and Zango, 2014).

The word "*Graffito*" in Hausa traditional architecture usually refers to decoration in which different colour wall plasters are laid in layers, and the design is made by scratching away the upper layers. Denyer, (1978), pointed out that this decoration may imbue some magical or religious

significance. The art of “*Graffito*” was achieved with decorative patterns, which were scratched on smooth walls, creating patterns by roughing it with a piece of metal. Hausa traditional interiors consist of walls with murals and geometric patterns sculpted on the walls. The patterns are mainly geometric among the Islamic Hausa because Islam forbids figurative images (Asojo & Asojo, 2015). The Hausas employed a technique of inserting plates on their ceilings (Nsude, 1987) as illustrated in Figure 1.

### Igbo

Another large ethnic group in Nigeria is the Igbo found in South-Eastern Nigeria. Most of the building materials which were locally obtained were clay, raffia palm, and bamboo. The Igbo people placed great value to their homes which they reflect by elaborately decorating them. Women were mainly found to be engaged in interior decoration; however men occasionally got involved also. Nsude (1987) narrated, in the pre-colonial era, domestic interior spaces in traditional Igbo architecture consisted of walls that were painted in cow dung or rotten banana stems. This was done to also prevent rain water erosion on the walls, in addition to its aesthetic value. Murals and carved geometric patterns on walls, and carved doors and columns, were also commonly adopted. Each of the carvings (Figure 2) was symbolic and cultural to the indigenous Igbo people, representing their lifestyle. Broken bottle pieces, cowries and plates were also used to adorn the interior.

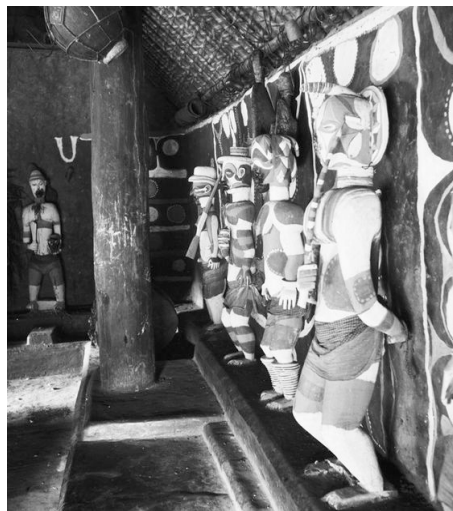


Figure 2: “Ukpuru”. Interior of an Obu (meeting house)  
(<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/africanarchitecturehistory/igbo-architecture/>)

Most of the colour used were earthy tones; browns, reds, oranges, with addition of blacks and whites. These colours were used as paint to create designs on walls, which usually told a story. Following the line of storytelling, the Igbos adopted an interior décor technique of hanging skulls and tails of dead animals (Nsude, 1987). Motifs were used on walls also which were adopted from *uli* and *nsidibi* patterns. Traditionally, *uli* is an art form made up of designs and symbols that are painted onto the bodies of women for beautification, and woven into textiles. *Nsidibi* is a written and performed language belonging to a male secret society called *Ekpe* (leopard) (Ikebude, 2009). The *uli* motifs are derived from shapes, dots, circles and lines. Various objects were also used for motifs, such as animals, sun, stars, musical instruments, utensils and the human body. The adoption of these motifs in the Igboland were said to have supernatural significance (Nsude, 1987).

### Yoruba

The Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria is considered to be one of the largest in Africa. This group is predominantly found in the South-West of Nigeria, with minorities also in Benin, Togo, and Sierra Leone (Asojo & Asojo, 2015).

Domestic Yoruba architecture can be divided into three major categories. First, the palaces (*afins*) that served as residences for the kings (*obas*), and other political, administrative and social functions; second, the residences of chiefs and titled men and lastly, the ordinary dwellings of the 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 Dmochowski, (1990) documented, ‘the royal palaces (*afins*) had rich interior decorations and furnishings, which were considered the most impressive buildings for the Yoruba people. Design of interior spaces was usually in art form found on internal walls, posts, beams, lintels, and ceilings. Furnishings, furniture,

decorations and artefacts used for domestic activities were also present within the houses. Mud plaster was used as a finish on mud walls, which was then polished with juice extracted from locust bean pods or oil seed leaves. To achieve a more elaborate design, paintings or mouldings were employed. Some of these were not mainly for aesthetic reasons; wall polishing was done to protect the walls from erosion. Wooden posts (caryatid) that were elaborately carved to depict the human form, mythological, and animal figurines, served as supports for the veranda roofs.

The houses of the more affluent in the community such as chiefs consisted of caryatids carved in an elaborate manner. Experienced carvers also gave detailed treatment to beams, lintels, ceiling boards and doors with the use of carefully selected wood. On the other hand, houses of the ordinary people, who could not afford elaborate designs, made use of less expensive wood or posts made of mud. Among the Yoruba ethnic group, painting was not considered as an independent medium, but rather, an extension of architecture (Balogun, 1979).

Interiors of traditional Yoruba domestic architecture were often richly adorned with elaborate furnishings such as furniture, mats, fabrics, decorations, cooking utensils and cutleries. These items were aesthetically formed in pleasing colours. The internal walls provided a more elaborate media for the expression of decoration in traditional homes. The elaborateness of these wall decorations however, would depend on the socio-economic class of the house owner. Decorative design elements in traditional African homes include form, colour, lines, texture and space. These constitute the patterns that were repeated to create rhythm. In many traditional African societies, interior decoration was done by the women (Opoko, Adekun & Oluwatayo, 2016).

The traditional buildings in the South West of Nigeria were said to have carvings, which was a testimony of the culture and prowess of the Yoruba people. The presence of artistic expression found in domestic houses had a deep cultural meaning to its people. Art was not only for decoration. It was functional and often a means of communication as stories were told through these pieces. In domestic buildings, the application of interior design forms prominently carried out by the women in the community (Opoko, Adekun & Oluwatayo, 2016).

The architectural setting in the family compound was often with one courtyard. This compound was usually plain, and void of any form of decoration. Among the Yoruba ethnic group, painting was not considered as an independent medium, but rather, an extension of architecture (Balogun, 1979). Yoruba traditional interiors consisted of walls with murals, carved doors and columns, and geometric patterns sculpted on the walls (Asojo & Asojo, 2015), which may include representations that are graphical or symbols of religions or cultural relevance. These decorations give distinctive identity and character to the space (Adeyemi, 2008).

### **IMPACT OF COLONIALISM ON INTERIOR SPACES IN NIGERIA**

Modernization in the society was as a result of the impact of colonization by the colonial masters. In 1960, Nigeria gained Independence from colonial rule (Nsude, 1987) and generally, life changed after this period. Building practices that were indigenous to the Nigerian people were gradually being phased out and replaced with practices of our colonizers. The effect brought about by colonialism in Nigeria changed the overall traditional life and culture of the people, thereby creating a weak connection between both traditional architecture and contemporary architecture in Nigeria.

For the Hausas, there was a change in traditional way of life and culture once adopted by the people. Traditional building practices were no longer commonly in use, as they had been influenced by modern technology. Agboola and Zango (2014) opined that notable chiefs, kings and other important residents in the society who would want to show off their affluence, preferred modern architecture over the traditional. A variety of ways in which colonialism brought about changes in Hausa traditional interiors include the rejection of traditionally moulded decorations on clay walls for modern paints, the abandonment of rigid pieces of furniture, and adoption of more variation in colour usage. Wall finishes were made of cement plaster. Previous research indicated that wall/floor finishes were either of cobs or cement screed on Adobe walls and floors. However, currently decorations are made with specialized cement mortar, designed and engraved in wall painting, in form of a range of colours. In the early 1990s for specialized purposes, smooth materials were used as surface wall finishes, floors, and artistic decoration painted in white ash (Dmowchosky, 1990).

The culture of plastering the walls of Igbo traditional buildings would appear to be an influence of the western culture under colonial rule in Igboland. But colonial residential quarters were beautifully plastered and sometimes painted. It is likely that close contacts with colonial officials exposed them to those and other influences of the white man. The Igbos thus embraced the culture of plastering the walls of their houses, and even painting and decorating them. The traditional tool for plastering walls of buildings among the Igbo in the colonial period was clay soil. Clay had the capacity of providing the

needed adhesion to the loose soil particles on the walls of a building. In addition to this, the act of plastering the wall with clay soil gave additional aesthetics to building (Chukwu, 2015).

In the Yoruba domestic interior space starting from Lagos, returnee slaves from South America (*Agudas*) were considered as very skilled craftsmen. They brought back and introduced a new domestic architectural style practiced by the Portuguese, known as Afro-Brazilian architecture (Osasona, 2007). Interior spaces of the Afro-Brazilian architectural style made use of newer materials, elaborate ornamentation on doorways, and mouldings from stucco, wooden door panels and murals on walls, and the use of bright colours. The decoration during the colonial period differed from that of the pre-colonial era in the sense that the former used decoration purely for aesthetics as opposed spiritual or cultural values of the latter (Opoko, Adeokun & Oluwatayo, 2016).

### POST-COLONIAL INTERIOR DESIGN

At the end of World War II, Nigeria began to take control of its own reign with independence taking place in 1960. Nigerian architects that received their architectural education in the UK and Australia, were given full responsibilities for the major building projects in the country. However, most of the main architectural firms were still under the control of foreigners. Eventually, commissions were obtained from the British Trading Houses. However, there was still a major influence from the existing British architectural practices by the local architects.

The competition towards striving for modernity in Nigerian Architecture was at a peak due to the oil boom in the late 1970s (Ikebude, 2009), which influenced development. At that time, the building industry depended a lot on 'the new'; imported building materials and finishes, discarding 'the old'; traditional practices. Interior design at this time took an entirely different form, embracing simplicity, functionality, creative open floor plans, and straight lines rather than curved and windows basically to admit natural light, as shown in Figure 3. The use of materials like marble, leather, terrazzo, ceramic etc. predominantly took over the domestic interior design scene. Interaction and relationship between household furniture became necessary and widely in vogue. Furniture is usually lighter in weight with some serving multiple purposes while others can be modular. Furniture materials are kept very simple and in unison in terms of colour and arrangement with other household furniture.



Figure 3: A living room interior in post-colonial Nigeria  
(<http://www.interiormatters.blogspot.com/2016/01/affordable-living-room-designs-in-html?m=1>)

Post-colonialism in Nigeria gave room for an exploration of ideas, in terms of interior wall colour and choice of materials and finishes. The focus of interior spaces is basically on simplicity, lack of ornamentation, clean lines and simple geometric forms. Uniformity in colour was also an essential part of design, as colour was used in interiors to create balance and evoke feelings to the perceived user.

### CONCLUSIONS

The study on the traditional interior design in Nigeria among the three major ethnic groups (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) has revealed an extent of dynamism in this particular area of architecture from the pre-colonial period through the post-colonial. Through this study, suggestions are made that

traditional interior decor should not be regarded as completely obsolete. Its continuity ensures that future generations are knowledgeable on how generations past survived with minimal technology. This paper was able to establish that prior to the colonization of Nigeria by the Europeans, the interiors of our traditional architecture, had certain underlying social and religious influences. Factors that contributed to the development of interior design in Nigeria were examined, which were from storytelling to simplicity of finishes/ornamentation. The colonial influence is commendable and cannot be underrated; however, this paper stresses the need and importance of creating a fusion between the modern concept and the traditional concept.

Interiors were a reflection of traditional life, customs and beliefs; a cultural heritage. Periods beyond colonization, depicted interior design had no cultural connotation, but solely for aesthetic purposes. The coming of the Europeans however, did not completely overwhelm interior design practices, as interior design in traditional buildings strived in many communities for certain categories of people. Availability and low cost of materials and conduciveness to the environment, account for reasons behind the survival of traditional interior design over time. However, in post-colonial periods of today, there is a phase-out of traditional interior design techniques, which is being abandoned for something more "trendy" in order to keep up with the ever-changing society. It will be a great tragedy and a colossal loss if our traditional building practices disappear completely. The benefits derived from our indigenous methods and materials need to be propagated, while any inadequacy associated with the traditional approach could be modified.

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