A study of Ikorodu vernacular architecture and its decorative motifs

Kehinde ADEPEGBA

Department of Art and Industrial Design, Lagos State Polytechnic, Ikorodu
adepe200us@yahoo.com

Received May 2014; accepted September 2014

Abstract
Ikorodu, for its nearness to Lagos, increasing developments and growing population, is experiencing a lot of transformation which in recent times has led to selling of old houses for the construction of banks, eateries, and shopping complexes, and demolition due to reconstruction of old roads. In the face of this problem, this study was carried out on the existing Ikorodu vernacular architecture and its decorative motifs before some of them will be sold or demolished. Domestic Afro-Brazilian houses with unique decorative motifs across the town were selected randomly and classified into two: a) houses belonging to the rich and noble and b) houses belonging to the middle and low classes. Decorative motifs found on the façade of the houses were analyzed against the culture and lifestyles of the people. Five categories of motifs were analyzed and discussed, namely: Animal motifs, Plant motifs, Linear motifs, Geometric motifs, Metaphorical motifs and Colonial-influenced motifs. The study found that Ikorodu architecture is highly decorative with meaningful motifs that communicate the beliefs of the people, and some motifs are used on more than one house. The study concluded that Ikorodu vernacular architecture is a means of understanding the lifestyle and beliefs of the owners. It was recommended that efforts should be geared towards the preservation of the houses by the government through legal means, so that the owners will not be tempted to sell them for huge money often offered by owners of private commercial enterprises.

Keywords: Decorative motifs, Folk architecture, Vernacular architecture

Introduction
In July 2013, the Lagos State Government marked the Afro-Brazilian house shown in Figures 1 and 2 for demolition. The house, popularly referred to as Alabukun house, was built over sixty years ago. It was marked for demolition due to the fact that it was obstructing the expansion works on Lagos-Ikorodu road that started in December 2012. By end of August 2013, the proposed demolition was carried out. Figure 3 is the present look of the site where the house was formerly located. Such is the likely fate of some beautiful Afro-Brazilian houses in Ikorodu town.

Ikorodu town is experiencing a lot of transformation in recent times due to the influx of people because of its proximity to and increasing cost of living in Lagos metropolis, such as Ikeja, Mainland and Island areas of the State. This has not only led to increase in its population, but the Lagos State Government has also considered it for several developmental projects, one of which is the road expansion and reconstruction.

The pace of physical and commercial developments as a result of this growing population is the reason why many new banks are springing up in the town and older ones are expanding by building new branches. For example, by December 2013, the First Bank branches in Ikorodu had grown to seven in number. Eateries and shopping complexes are not left out in the rush to establish their branches and businesses all over the place. Figures 4 and 5 show a bank and an eatery that are now built on sites formerly occupied by beautiful Afro-Brazilian houses respectively. This is due to the rewarding sales of land with old vernacular buildings to these prospective business owners for the construction of these new business structures.
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Figure 1: An Afro-Brazilian building (Alabukun house) owned by Odulate marked for demolition at Garage area, Ikorodu in July, 2013.
Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).

Figure 2: Alabukun house (from another view) undergoing demolition.
Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).

Figure 3: The look of the site where the house was formerly located in April 2014 showing ongoing road project.
Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014).

Figure 4: A bank (sandwiched between two AfroBrazilian houses) occupying a site on which a vernacular building was formerly built, Ayangburen Road, Ikorodu.
Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014).

Figure 5: An eatery (sandwiched between two AfroBrazilian houses) occupying a site on which a vernacular building was formerly built, Ayangburen Road, Ikorodu.
Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014)
As long as it is difficult to stop these ongoing replacements of old houses that should be left for posterity, with banks, eateries and shopping complexes, it becomes necessary to document some of them for future references, especially those in the higbrow areas which may suffer the same fate and also to analyze their decorative motifs so that the socio-cultural beliefs of the people can be understood. This paper is therefore a study of Ikorodu vernacular architecture and its decorative motifs.

It is important first, to understand some definitions that relate with the subject matter of this paper, namely: vernacular, decorative motifs, and folk architecture. The term 'vernacular' refers to domestic buildings that evolved from traditional architecture, due to the influences of external forces or modifiers. According to the New Oxford American Dictionary (2005), vernacular architecture is concerned with domestic and functional rather than monumental buildings. Historically, this category of buildings falls between the traditional and modern architecture. According to Osasona (2005), a major point of departure between the two brands of architecture is that the traditional was essentially spontaneous (with designs and construction techniques "inherited" i.e. carried over from one generation to the next), and the actual building process a community enterprise devoid of specialists whereas with vernacular, there is greater individuality, more conscious decision-making, and specialization resulting in division of labour (Okpako and Amole, 2005). In this study attention will be focused on Afro-Brazilian built forms, as they represent the best example of houses in that category, since they came as a modification of traditional building due to external contacts and the effects of abolition of slavery. In addition, they are heavily decorated as shall be revealed in the background history of domestic architecture in Ikorodu. Decorative motifs refer to all the aspects of artistic ornamentation found on the surfaces of the vernacular houses. These motifs are the forms of decoration on the houses to give them aesthetic value or communicate a message about the lifestyle or beliefs of the owners. Therefore, decorative motifs shall include every form of ornamentation on the façade of the houses, such as on the fascia board, walls, windows and doors, portals, parapets, and balustrades.

Reference shall also be made to folk architecture, which refer to built forms that relate and promotes the tradition of a people as passed down from generation to generation. Afro-Brazilian architecture and its decorative motifs constitute the scope of this study. Simple random sampling was used for the selection of the houses discussed and data were collected through interviews and observations.

**Ikorodu in Yoruba history**

Ikorodu is a large settlement covering an area of about 100 square kilometers and lying 35km North-East of Lagos, bounded by Ogun State in the North and by the Lagos lagoon in the South. It started off as a small settlement of Ijebu-Remo hunters and farmers who left Sagamu in pursuit of adventures under the leadership of Oga Lasunwon a Remo Prince of the Akarigbo Remo’s lineage (Uthman, date not indicated). Hence, the Ikorodu people are referred to as ‘Ikorodu Oga’. According to Uthman, Ikorodu is a corruption of and a derivation from ‘Okokodu’ meaning an ‘odu farm’. Odu is a popular edible vegetable widely grown in the area. The common story is that Ikorodu has a link with Ijebu Remo. Ikorodu became important in the mid-19th century as a trading post of the Remo (Ijebu-Remo) kingdom on the trade route from Lagos to Ibadan (www.britanica.com). It is one of the five divisions of Lagos State: Badagry, Epe, Ikeja, Ikorodu, and Lagos Island (Eko) (Figure 6).

![Figure 6: Lagos State map showing the five divisions of the state including Ikorodu.](Image 107x102 to 490x195)

*Source: Lagos State Life and Culture Volume 1, 1987.*
Today, Ijebu-Remo people are the ones largely occupying Ikorodu town (also called Koodu). Other minor groups of settlers are the Ilaje, Awori and Eko (Lagos Awori). Ikorodu is a largely Ijebu speaking Yoruba people. Ikorodu local government is made up of five towns with its own recognized traditional rulers, namely: Ayangburen of Ikorodu; Alajede of Ijede; Ranodu of Imota; Oloja of Igbobgo; and Sekumade of Ipakodo.

By the 2006 Census, Ikorodu had a population of 535,619. Now, as a result of economic and business developments, and availability of land for prospective landowners and builders, there is an increase in the influx of people and this would have increased its population considerably. Ikorodu is a beehive of activities and it is no longer a sleeping town.

Ikorodu vernacular architecture in history

A brief review of the history of Yoruba Vernacular Architecture would reveal the place of Ikorodu vernacular architecture. Before contacts with external factors like Western education, European traders, colonialists, and missionaries, the Yoruba had their traditional architectural forms. The community men using local technology built these traditional forms with the materials found in their environment. These were essentially constructed with laterite, wood and fibres derived from plant-life, and usually without decoration (Denyer, 1978). According to Godwin (1966) the traditional architecture were built to meet functional requirements and constructed with materials virtually available on site such as mud, palm fronds and grass. Over the years, expected experience and skill have developed forms of construction suited to these materials and the climatic surroundings.

As time passed by, there was introduction of ornamentation especially in wood but it was restricted to certain areas such as doors, and windows (Osasona, 2005). At this stage the only area of specialisation in building practice of the people was wood carving which served as decorative embellishments to building projects in forms of door carvings, house-posts, etc. especially in the homes of nobles and traditional rulers. Then, the palaces received more architectural decoration as they served often as the museum of the community. However, the reduction in the power of traditional rulers much later resulted in a corresponding reduction in the architectural superiority of their palaces (Aradeon, 1984).

The first external influence on Nigerian architecture came in the middle 19th century, especially in the construction of schools, hospitals, and residences by the colonialists in order to underpin their administration. This period marked the importation of cement, roofing slate, corrugated metal roofing sheets, processed timber and synthetic paints among others from Britain. Local builders acquired new building skills in the course of building with the foreign skilled professionals, especially the returnee Cubans, Brazilians and other people from the Latino cultures. They likewise extended their skills to their apprentices. This new building tradition led to storey-building among the Yoruba and other parts of Nigeria (Osasona and Hyland, 2006).

The major characteristics of these built-forms was rich decoration especially on their façade in forms of portals, fascia board ornamentation, arch and arcade designs, introduction of pillars and pilasters, frizes, and porches (see Figure 7) and multi-storey structures (Figure 8). This marked the beginning of Yoruba vernacular architecture (Osasona, 2005). Apart from their physical presence in built-forms, there is evidence of the returnees in the foreign names (such as Coker, Smith, da Silva, Williams, da Costa, Wright, Hughes, Vaughan, Cole, etc.) that some of their family members bear today. This influence also spread to Ikorodu as early as the mid-19th century. Ikorodu family names (such as Benson, Kamson, Allison, etc.) are also a pointer to their relationship to the returnees. The aesthetic preference of the Lagosians was reflected in their selection of the Brazilian style rather than the more austere colonial style (Aradeon, 1984). The same trend spread to other Yoruba city-states including Ikorodu where a number of these Afro-Brazilian houses are still standing though some of them have been affected by time and change.
After this period especially since the mid-sixties, the Afro-Brazilian style, which is the major toast of Yoruba vernacular architecture, gave way to modern architecture (with very limited ornamentation and sometimes without any). The fact that modern materials and technologies mark this present-day architecture and is fashioned almost entirely after foreign models across the globe has removed the element of vernacular. The folk characteristics found in traditional and vernacular architecture seem to have disappeared. Afro-Brazilian appears to be a major style between the traditional and the modern built forms.

**Classification and characteristics of Ikorodu vernacular architecture**

**i. Vernacular houses of the rich and noble**

This class Afro-Brazilian houses are mainly multi-storey and often located along the main roads of the town. They are heavily embellished with different architectural elements that exhibit diverse decorative motifs on their parapets, balustrades, columns with capitals on plinths, windows with cement hoods, porches, attics, balconies, arcades, pediments, colonnades and finials (Figure 9). Ikorodu vernacular architecture is in two distinct categories: those by the nobles and the rich in the town and those by the middle and low class members of the town.
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The use of the combination of some of these makes the houses aesthetically attractive. The multi-storey buildings are richly decorated because of the affluence of their owners who were able to pay the best workmen and buy the best materials available then. The façades of the houses are lavishly ornamented with decorative motifs of the owners’ choices. Sometimes the dates the houses were completed, the names or nomenclatures of the owners or other messages the owners wished to communicate to the people were inscribed on the houses in relief cement lettering. An example is Olorunosebi (God does not do evil) house (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Richly ornamented ‘Olorunosebi’ multi-storey house at Ojude-oba, Ikorodu.
Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014).

Though the arrangements of the design elements vary, some similarities are noticed in the designs and paraphernalia of their façades. This is perhaps due to the healthy competition between the owners while building the houses. The use of parapets on balconies, semi-circular verandas, and elaborate use of pillars were common features. Arcades of beautiful arches and parapets of similar design with the ones on the buildings were also used as low fences of the houses (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Built in 1950, richly ornamented Karonwi house at Isikalu Street Itusokun area showing similar ornament on both parapets and its low fence, Ikorodu.
Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014).

ii. Vernacular houses of the middle and low-classes

These sets of buildings usually bungalows were mostly off the main roads and formed clusters in different locations in the town, sometimes without definite cut-out plot areas. The façades of the houses have entrance portals that lead into a corridor of multi-rooms. Stucco and relief moulding were usually done around the windows. The houses had elaborate dado designs, porches with pediment design, and pilasters at the corners of the houses (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Bungalow with rich portal, relief stucco design, and pilaster, rectangular grooved wooden windows and wedded metal design goat gate.
Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014).
Motif usage is apparent on the portals, pilasters and on the spaces between the windows and the ceiling ranging from linear designs to shapes including floral elements. The use of friezes above the windows is a common sight. Some of them showcase relief decoration inside recessed shapes beneath the window frame. The use of horizontal cornice is usually done above the lintel (Figure 13). There is no carving on the fascia board; while window and door designs in both classifications of vernacular building were minimal most of the time without any design.

**Analysis of decorative motifs of Ikorodu vernacular architecture**

The purpose of vernacular building in Ikorodu appeared to be beyond functionality. Although the built forms served the purpose of shelter from climatic conditions and as a protection against unwanted invaders, yet they are pieces of artwork whose configurations please the eye with attractive and symbolic decorative elements. The owners' choices of decorative motifs were based on their preferences, as prescribed by lifestyles, experiences in life, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds. The classifications of decorative patterns found on the selected houses were: animal motifs, plant motifs, linear motifs, geometric motifs, metaphorical motifs, and colonially-influenced motifs.

i. **Animal motifs**

There was a common use of animals as decorative motifs on Ikorodu vernacular architecture. Such animals may be related to the names and also to the praise poems of the owners or their family. For instance:

*Omo erin folo mi*/ The child of an elephant who breaths with honour
*Ajanaku koja morinkan firi*/ Ajanaku (elephant) is beyond saying one merely caught a glimpse of something.
*Biyarierinkaspearancein*/ When we see elephant, let us say we see elephant.

*Erin* in this praise poem might be an important animal in the particular family. Using the symbolic expressions could show the cultural affiliation of the animal to the owner of the house. Generally, the elephant denotes greatness. Animals depicted on Ikorodu vernacular buildings include lion, horse, and elephant among others. In Figure 14, the two roofs below the triangular pediment show cement cast of fish scales. This is symbolic because the fish is one of the sea products found in Ikorodu.

*Figure 13:* A bungalow with rich beautiful façade typical of Afro-Brazilian architecture at Ita-elewa.
*Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014).*

*Figure 14:* A close-up of the centre pediment of a House with lion image, Ayangburen Road, Ojogbe, Ikorodu, showing lion within a floral rosette and enclosed by ‘Ka to dade kiniun, kosehin Olorun’ inscription.
*Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014).*
ii. **Plant Motifs**
Plants commonly depicted on Ikorodu houses are palm tree (*ope*), *Araba* (*Oriodendronorientale*), and *Iroko* (*Chlorophora excels*). These and other important plants have connotative meanings. Farmers of popular crops like cocoa or colanuts may use the plant or its leaf to depict their profession or crop of choice, through motifs found on the pediments of the buildings. Figure 15 shows five palm-tree motifs (a tall one in the middle and two on either side). The owner was perhaps passing the message of being taller than others.

![Figure 15: A palm tree motif.](image)
*Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014).*

iii. **Linear Motifs**
Linear motif commonly featured especially on the walls of bungalows in the form of relief stucco and friezes, to enhance the beauty of the houses. This is a pointer to the notion that the owners employed every creative means to be different from their neighbours, meaning that each owner was conscious of his place in the society. As guided by the house owners, the builders used different types of lines, which sometimes culminated in interesting shapes (Figure 16).

![Figure 16: Elaborate use of linear motifs in form of relief stucco on portals, around the windows and as friezes around the ceilings.](image)
*Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014).*

iv. **Geometric Motifs**
The geometric motifs that result from diverse interactions of lines are conspicuous on the parapets, balustrades and pediments of some buildings. The use of symbolic shapes is a common feature on doors and windows, usually created by the builders to support the main motifs chosen by the house owners. Stars, circles, triangles, and squares are a few examples (Figures 17).

![Figure 17: Onakoyahouse with interactive geometric shapes forming the balcony parapets and pediments of the porches.](image)
*Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014).*
v. Metaphorical Motif

The use of metaphorical motifs is the height of the decorative motifs. Such motifs include: sunrays (itansan oorun), hair comb (iyari or ooya), bundle of sticks (idiigi), fountain (orisun) and the Arabesque, unity symbol (isokan) (Figure 18 – 20), among others. The following proverbs/prayers explain the meanings of these motifs respectively:

*Bi oorunba la a kari aye/* when the sun breaks, its rays get to all parts of the world. This implies the owner of the house like sun, shines to all parts of the world unhindered.

*Ooya koniyawa/* May we never be put apart by ooya (comb). Ooya is believed to be capable of parting things. It is so used to wish for a lasting relationship with good people.

*Ti arigisegi basegi, oriara re lo fi n gbe*/* when a wood insect gathers bundles of sticks, it carries it with its own head. This foretells to people the repercussion of doing evil.

*Odo to ba gbagbe orison yoogbeni/* when a stream forgets its source will dry off. This emphasizes the danger of not remembering one’s origin/background.

*Isokan lọ pe/* unity pays. This preaches the importance of unity among people.

All these have deep cultural symbolism and communicate cultural metaphors of the people.

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Figure 18: House with repeated sunrays (itansanoorun) motif at Ajina market area, Ikorodu owned by one of the Bensons. *Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014).*

Figure 19: House with repeated hair comb (iyari or ooya) motif. *Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014).*

Figure 20: House with repeated unity symbol (isokan) motif. *Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014).*
vi. Colonially-influenced Motif
This category of motifs was influenced by acculturation and the interaction that already existed between Africa and the West. These motifs include the anchor, ribbon, pondsterling, umbrella, blade, shield, and building block pattern. They revealed the receptiveness of the Yoruba to other cultures. The choice of these motifs was also based on preferences of owners, based on their past experiences (Figures 21-22).

Figure 21: Flower petals motif. [Above]
Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014).

Figure 22: Ereogbogbo house at Ojude-oba area, Ikorodu showing an umbrella motif. [Left]
Source: Kehinde Adepegba (2014).

General characteristics of Ikorodu vernacular architecture
From the foregoing the general characteristics of Ikorodu vernacular architecture could be explained as follows:

i. The vernacular architecture is highly decorative with meaningful motifs that communicate the beliefs of the people and minds of the ownersto passers-by.

ii. The motifs found on the houses include geometric, animal, plant, metaphorical and European-influenced in nature.

iii. The rich and noble in the society built in high brow areas usually with distinct plots and fencing while the middle and the low class usually built in clusters off the main roads.

iv. The rich and noble built multi-storey houses with lavish ornamentation, where as the middle and low class people built bungalows with motifs, portals and window frizes that vary in line with the purchasing power of the class. The low-class buildings are theless decorated.

v. The nearness of Ikorodu to Lagos influenced the emergence of its vernacular architecture.

vi. Pace of development in Ikorodu is negatively affecting the vernacular buildings in the town as some of them have been demolished for the constructions of banks, eateries and shopping complexes.

Present challenges facing Ikorodu vernacular architecture
The visual appeal of Ikorodu vernacular architecture is being affected by some present day challenges.

1. Age: some of these buildings are quite old and aging; some of their decorative elements have lost their appeal. Deterioration like removal of relief moulds and frills is affecting the once beautiful houses.

2. Lack of adequate maintenance: most of the owners are dead and as such the houses have not received adequate maintenance attention. Some windows are broken, portals destroyed, and they are not replaced (Figure 23).

3. Abandonment: younger generations who inherit the houses often abandon them since according to them the houses are now ‘old school’. This leads to abandonment and deterioration.

4. Abuse of use: There are cases of abusessuch as pasting of posters and full or part conversion for commercial purpose, which affect the appeal of the houses (Figure 24).

5. Sales and demolition of vernacular architecture for the construction of banks, eateries and shopping complexes. This is the height of the challenges as it affects the entire existence of the buildings.
**Conclusion**

Ikorodu vernacular architecture has been studied and its classification presented. The paper defined vernacular architecture by presenting a history of Yoruba architecture, and projected the peculiarity of Ikorodu vernacular architecture through its decorative motifs. It was observed that Ikorodu vernacular architecture is a means of understanding the lifestyle and beliefs of the people, and records their creative past. It is therefore recommended that efforts should be geared towards the preservation of the houses by the government through law, so that the owners will not be tempted to sell them off for huge monies often offered by eateries, banks and shopping complexes owners.
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