

The Vernacular Architectural Heritage of Abeokuta: History, Forms and Decorative Motifs

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Abstract

One of the prominent attributes of Abeokuta, an ancient town in southwestern Nigeria, is its imposing architecture, with physical structures that have been standing for decades and reflecting a rich cultural history. Notably, many of these buildings exhibit Afro-Brazilian influences, showcasing a blend of traditional Yoruba and colonial architectural forms. This paper aims to classify the diverse architectural typology in Abeokuta and analyse their decorative motifs. Primary and secondary data were sourced using interviews and photographic-recording instruments. The study employed historical and formal analyses of the data. In the end, the history of Abeokuta and the factors that influenced its architectural evolution were explored, highlighting the cultural and historical significance of the forms and decorative motifs of the building structures. The study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of Abeokuta's architectural heritage typology, forms and decorative motifs, offering valuable insights into how historical and cultural dynamics are embedded in the city's-built environment.

Keywords: Abeokuta, Afro-Brazilian Architecture, Decorative Motifs, External Modifier Forms

Introduction

Abeokuta, an ancient town in southwestern Nigeria, is prominent for its imposing architecture, with physical structures that have been standing for decades and reflecting a rich cultural history. Thus, the paper outlines Abeokuta's cultural heritage through its vernacular architecture, which exhibits Afro-Brazilian influences, showcasing a blend of traditional Yoruba and colonial architectural forms. Subsequently, readers would have a broader understanding of Abeokuta's architectural typology, forms and decorative motifs, through historical insights and cultural dynamics that sum up to form Abeokuta's unique built environment.

The specific objectives of this study are to classify the diverse vernacular architectural styles found in Abeokuta and analyse their forms and decorative motifs. In the course of doing this, the paper explores Abeokuta's historical background and underscores the factors that have influenced its architectural evolution, including the migration of Sierra Leone, South American returnees; identified the factors that influenced Abeokuta's architecture; classifies the Abeokuta architecture and analyse the forms and decorative motifs in some selected architecture in Abeokuta. Data for the study were sourced from interview house dwellers, residents in the built environments and cultural enthusiasts, and photographic images taken with the aid of camera. These data were analysed using historical and formal analytical techniques.

Abeokuta, which currently occupies two local governments (Abeokuta North and Abeokuta South), is an ancient city and the capital of Ogun State in southwestern Nigeria (see Fig. 1). It is a city with a rich historical and cultural heritage. It was founded around 1830 by four sub-groups: Ake, Oke-Ona, Gbagura, and Owu (which came much later in 1843), generally referred to as Egba people, who sought refuge from the Yoruba civil wars under the natural fortification and provided by Olumo Rock (Adebayo, 2019). This strategic location offered protection and became a rallying point for various sub-ethnic groups including the Ibara, who are an offshoot of the Yewa, enhancing the city's cultural diversity.

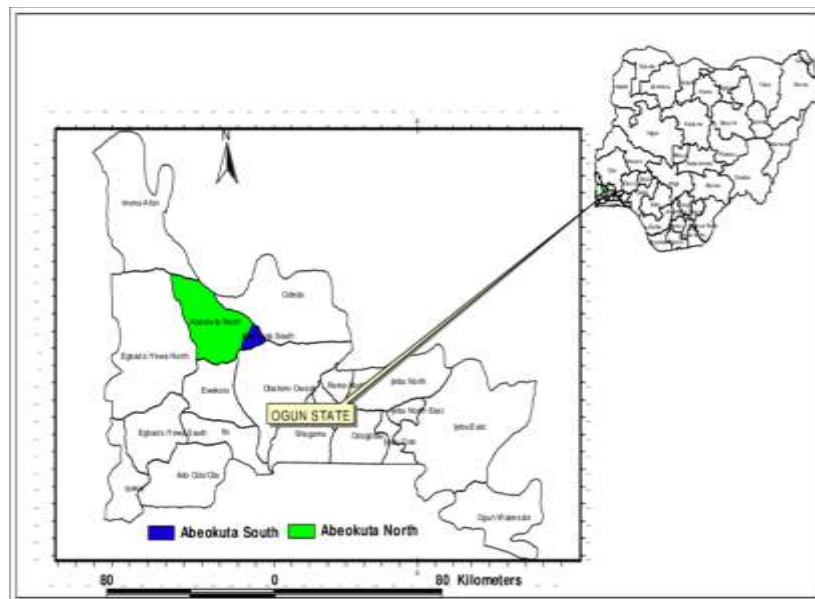


Figure 1 Map of Ogun State within Nigeria and Abeokuta, the study area within Ogun State.

Source : <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276920570/figure/fig1/AS:669444862910469@1536619501611/Map-of-Ogun-State-Showing-the-Study-Area.png>



Figure 2: Map of Abeokuta showing the five main groups of people within the Abeokuta North and South Local Government Areas. Adapted by Kehinde Adepegba, 2021

At a time in history, the Egba took refuge from their enemies under the popular Olumo rock for months (See Plate 2). To the amazement of their enemies, the Egba were nowhere to be found. After the war, they recounted that they were sheltered ‘under the rock’ (Abe-okuta). Hence, the place was named and called Abeokuta. The name Abeokuta symbolises the city’s historical origins and significance as a haven (Abati & Adepegba, 2021).

Biobaku and Yemitan (2013) corroborate the story as follows:

Abeokuta was founded in 1830 after the intertribal wars ravaged refugees in the Egba forest from their original homes between 1817 and 1830. The town's name, "ABEOKUTA," was derived from the protection the fleeing settlers sought under the Olumo Rock.

There are still relics of this history as some of the descendants live and carry out their daily activities as followers and devotees of some Yoruba gods in the Olumo rock enclaves. It was obvious that the people of Abeokuta experienced a unique way of life, dwelling in caves of Olumo rock during the wars (although no rock engravings/paintings were created as a result). This was the beginning of their architecture (See Plate 1).



Plate 1: Olumo rock war hideout with inner rooms. Photography by Kehinde Adepegba (2013)

Much later, the city's development was greatly shaped by the arrival of Afro-Brazilian returnees, referred to as Agudas, who sought refuge from the harsh circumstances in Brazil and other parts of the Americas after the transatlantic slave trade was abolished (Igbaro & Akinbileje, 2013). The returnees brought their architectural styles and building techniques that were combined with traditional Yoruba designs, resulting in a fusion of Afro-Brazilian and indigenous architectural forms.

Abeokuta's architecture reflects its complex historical narratives and the cultural exchanges that have occurred over the centuries. The Afro-Brazilian influence is particularly notable in the city's architectural landscape, where many buildings exhibit intricate stucco work, arched doorways, and elaborate balconies, characteristic of Brazilian colonial architecture (Teriba, (2017). This fusion of styles is aesthetic and a marker of the city's socio-political history, artistic practice, people's resilience and dynamism in the face of modernity.

However, diverse art practices, which also extend to their awe-inspiring architecture, are very popular with the people. Such arts include pottery, textile or fabric designs popularly called *adire*¹, brass works, and wood carving. Unfortunately, while other art practices are still ongoing, though on a lower scale, modern architecture² and its new materials, which do not match the profound aesthetic, creativity, functionality and quality of the vernacular architecture, have now overwhelmed the vernacular architecture types, hundreds of which still exist today in Abeokuta.

Three scholars have defined vernacular architecture as follows: Oliver (1996) states that vernacular architecture as a building of people, making them by the people; Health (1981) opines that vernacular architecture is a craft whose value is not in style but its capacity as cultural messaging, while Brunskill (1981) avows that vernacular buildings are kinds of constructions that are consciously sustained instead of

¹ *Adire* is a derivation from 'tie and die' fabric.

² Architecture that comes with post-independence Nigeria and those prevalent in this contemporary time.

temporary, have traditional inspirations instead of being academic, and designed to feed the simple, day-to-day activities of the people. Drawing from these definitions and delimiting the focus, Yoruba vernacular architecture in the paper refers to domestic buildings that resulted from cultural inspiration of the people and the traditional materials available among the people but has the influences of external modifiers. This category of buildings falls between traditional and modern architecture (See Plate 2).



Plate 2: An arial view of Abeokuta vernacular architecture from the top of Olumo rock. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).

Significance of the Study

Appreciating the structure of Abeokuta goes beyond mere academic curiosity; it serves as a way to document the city's socio-cultural progress. Architecture, according to Teriba (2017), serves as a physical manifestation of historical and cultural narratives, offering a concrete connection to the past. Through the examination of architectural forms and motifs, one can uncover the profound influence of cultural exchanges and historical occurrences on the city's evolution. This highlights the importance of architectural study in documenting a part of our cultural heritage.

In addition, exploring the ornamental designs present in the buildings in Abeokuta can offer a valuable understanding of the symbolic and artistic principles of the Yoruba and Afro-Brazilian cultures (Adepegba & Sobowale. 2021). The motifs present on these buildings, including geometric patterns, floral designs, and metaphorical symbols, carry profound cultural meaning. They transcend mere ornamentation and instead communicate deep significances that mirror various aspects of human existence, cosmology, philosophy and individuality. For instance, the inclusion of animal figures and mythological symbols in architectural ornamentation provides valuable insights into the spiritual beliefs and cultural practices of the individuals (Akinola, 2018).

Furthermore, delving into the architecture of Abeokuta can add to the broader discussion on African urbanism and architectural heritage to gain insight into the historical processes that have shaped urban development in Africa. Through an appreciation for historical and cultural significance, contemporary architectural practice and urban planning can be shaped, resulting in new developments that honor and integrate these vital elements.

Abeokuta and Contacts with External Modifiers

In 1830, under the guidance of the Ifa Oracle, Sodeke, a prominent Egba leader, led his people to the present-day location of Abeokuta. The Egba people, originating from Orile-Itoko, undertook a demanding and expansive journey that brought them to the western side of the magnificent granite outcrop known as Olumo Rock. The name Olumo holds significant spiritual and cultural significance for the Egba people, representing the culmination of their journey and the end of their wandering. Olumo Rock served as both a physical stronghold and a valuable military asset for the Egba people. It provided them with a strategic position to observe and protect against potential adversaries. The caves and crevices of the rock offered a secure refuge during challenging times, solidifying its reputation as a potent emblem of safety and resilience (Ajisafe, 1964).

Later in the 19th century, the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria, particularly the Egba community, experienced notable transformations as they actively questioned the authority of the Oyo Empire. At the height of its power, the Oyo Empire demonstrated remarkable prowess in suppressing rebellions and asserting control over its subordinate regions. However, the Egba, under the leadership of the renowned warrior Lisabi Agbongbo-Akala, initiated a revolution that would alter the course of Yoruba history. Lisabi's strategic military campaigns led to the liberation of the Egba from Oyo's control, marking a significant moment of resistance against the empire (Oduntan, 2005). His achievements earned him the title of the "Father of the Egba" for his crucial role in ensuring their freedom.

Today, Abeokuta stands as the capital and largest city of Ogun State in southwestern Nigeria. Abeokuta is located on the eastern bank of the Ogun River, surrounded by towering rocky outcroppings that overlook the vibrant savanna. This creates a breathtaking and unique landscape (Britannica, 2013). The city is situated about 78 kilometres north of Lagos and 70 kilometres from Ibadan, making it a central hub with road connections to Ilaro, Sagamu, Iseyin, and Ketu in the Republic of Benin (Biobaku & Yemitan, 2013).

Geographically speaking, as earlier mentioned, the Egba people consist of different subgroups, including Ake, Gbagura, Oke Ona, and Owu. The Owu people joined the Egba confederacy in 1843 due to the necessity of leaving their original homeland, Orile-Owu, due to ongoing conflict. This collaboration led to the formation of a formidable Egba confederacy, which eventually emerged as an independent entity known as the Egba United Government in 1893. The Alake of Egba, the traditional ruler, played a crucial part in the formation of this alliance and in ensuring a degree of self-governance for the Egba people within the British colonial system. However, in 1914, the merging of the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria marked the end of a period of independence (Inside Watch Africa, 2012).

Abeokuta's proximity to Lagos, a vibrant coastal city, caught the interest of missionaries and Sierra Leonean Creoles in the 1840s. In 1833, slavery was abolished and Sierra Leone became a settlement for freed slaves. As a result, there was a notable influx of liberated Africans making their way back to their ancestral lands. Many Yoruba people started to settle in Abeokuta from 1839 onwards (Biobaku & Yemitan, 2013). These

individuals, including missionaries like Henry Townsend, who arrived in Abeokuta in 1843, had a profound influence on the spread of Christianity and Western education. Townsend conducted the first Christian service in Abeokuta and established St. Peter's Anglican Cathedral in Ake, which later became a significant religious and educational institution (Oduntan, 2005).

Abeokuta's economy thrives on agriculture, with the Egba people known for their expertise in cultivating a wide variety of crops, including yams, cassava, rice, corn, palm oil, poultry, cotton, and vegetables. The city has also been a centre for a diverse array of crafts, including pottery, textile production (especially the "adire" fabric), brass work, and wood carving. These crafts are thriving and making a noteworthy impact on the city's cultural and economic prosperity (Biobaku & Yemitan, 2013).

The Egba people experienced a profound transformation with the arrival of Western education, becoming one of the pioneering groups in present-day Nigeria to wholeheartedly adopt formal education. Embracing education at an early stage proved to be instrumental in blending European architectural styles with local building practices and nurturing the socio-cultural growth of the region.

Traditional Yoruba Architecture

Traditional Yoruba architecture used locally sourced materials and construction techniques refined over centuries to suit the local climate and cultural practices. The primary materials used in traditional Yoruba buildings included mud, timber, palm fronds, and laterite. Mud was often mixed with straw to create sturdy walls, while timber was used for structural support and roofing (Ogunba, 2018). (See Plate 3).



Plate 3, Traditional Yoruba buildings. Showing mud, woods, corrugated iron sheets and laterite.

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7b/Mud_House._The_Ancient_house_live_by_our_forefathers%2C_it_common_among_the_Yoruba_Land_Wester_Nigeria_than_the_other_part.jpg

The walls of traditional Yoruba buildings are typically thick, providing thermal mass that helps to regulate indoor temperatures in the hot and humid climate of southwestern Nigeria. The use of laterite, a locally available iron-rich soil, adds durability and resistance to erosion, which is essential for the longevity of these structures (Daramola et al., 2024). Additionally, the buildings often feature decorative elements such as carved wooden doors and windows, which not only enhance the aesthetic appeal but also reflect the artistic traditions of the Yoruba people (Okon et al., 2021).

Layout and Design of Yoruba Compounds

The layout of traditional Yoruba compounds, known as "Agbo Ile," is designed to foster communal living and social interaction. A typical compound consists of several rectangular rooms arranged around a central courtyard. This courtyard serves as the focal point of the compound, where daily activities such as cooking, socialising, and ceremonies occur (Adeokun et al., 2013). The rooms are usually interconnected by covered walkways, providing shade and protection from sun and rain (see Fig. 3).

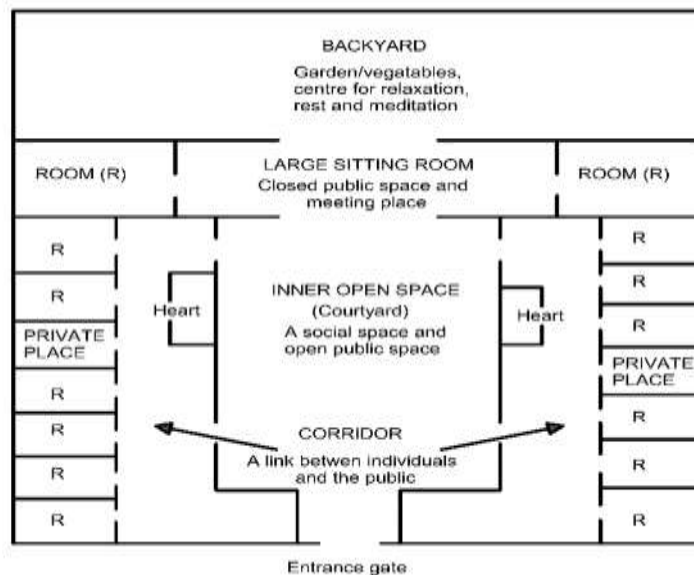


Figure 3: Traditional Yoruba house plan.

Source: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/EmusaHenry/publication/382076640/figure/fig9/AS:11431281259348689@1720461122606/Traditional-Yoruba-Compound-Layout-Source-Adapted-from-Chokor-2005_W640.jpg

The compound layout reflects the hierarchical structure of Yoruba society. The head of the household occupies the central room, which is often the largest and most elaborately decorated. The other rooms are allocated to family members based on their status and relationship to the head of the household (Adeyemo et al., 2021). This arrangement not only reinforces social bonds but also ensures privacy and security within the compound. The design of Yoruba compounds incorporates practical features that enhance their functionality. For instance, the roofs are often sloped to facilitate rainwater runoff, and the walls are plastered with smooth mud to minimise dust accumulation. Ventilation is achieved through strategically placed windows and openings, which allow for natural airflow and reduce indoor temperatures (Teriba, 2017).

Social and Cultural Functions

Traditional Yoruba architecture serves not only as shelter but also as a crucial component of social and cultural life. The architectural design of compounds and public buildings reflects the values, beliefs, and social organisation of the Yoruba people. For example, the central courtyard in a compound is not merely a physical space but also a symbol of unity and communal living. It is the venue for family gatherings, celebrations, and rituals, reinforcing the importance of kinship and social cohesion (Adeokun et al., 2013).

Religious and spiritual beliefs are also deeply embedded in Yoruba architecture. Many compounds feature shrines dedicated to various deities, reflecting the polytheistic nature of Yoruba religion. These shrines are typically located in secluded areas within the compound and are adorned with symbolic carvings and offerings (Ogunba, 2018). The presence of these shrines underscores the role of architecture in facilitating religious practices and maintaining spiritual connections. Additionally, traditional Yoruba architecture plays a significant role in the transmission of cultural knowledge and heritage. The decorative elements, such as carvings and motifs, often depict historical events, myths, and ancestral stories, serving as a visual narrative of Yoruba history and culture (Okon et al., 2021). This artistic expression not only enhances the aesthetic value of the buildings but also acts as an educational tool for younger generations.

The durability and adaptability of traditional Yoruba architecture have ensured its continued relevance in contemporary times. Despite the advent of modern building materials and techniques, many aspects of traditional design, such as the use of courtyards and natural ventilation, are still incorporated into modern constructions, highlighting the enduring legacy of Yoruba architectural principles (Adeyemo et al., S. (2021).

Abeokuta Traditional Architecture

Abeokuta's traditional architecture, like that of the wider Yoruba region, reflects the community-oriented and culturally rich practices that have been passed down through generations. The process of constructing a building in Abeokuta traditionally involved not just the individual homeowner but the entire community, embodying the Yoruba principle of communal cooperation, "*Ajose*," which underscores the importance of collective effort in the Yoruba ethos (Aina, & Adefarasin, 2023).

When a homeowner decided to build, they would acquire a plot of land and inform the local community, who would assist in clearing the site and sourcing materials. The primary building material, laterite, a reddish clay-rich soil, was locally sourced from nearby pits. This material was favoured for its availability, workability, and thermal properties, which made it suitable for the region's climate (Adeyemo et al., 2021). The men in the community would handle the physical construction, the women provided food for the workers, and the children would often be tasked with fetching water, a clear division of labour that reflects the gender roles and social organisation within traditional Yoruba society (Akintoye, 2010).

The construction process began with the preparation of the laterite, which was mixed with water and trampled by foot to form a durable building mud. This mixture was then allowed to ferment for a few days, which enhanced its binding properties, making it more suitable for constructing strong walls. The walls, typically built to a height of 450 to 600 centimetres, were erected in stages, allowing each layer to dry thoroughly before the next was added. This method ensured the longevity and stability of the structures, which were often expected to last for generations (Gbadamosi, 2013).

Roofing in traditional Abeokuta architecture was primarily constructed using timber from termite-resistant trees such as coconut palm and fan palm, materials chosen for their durability and resistance to the local climate's challenges. The roofs were thatched with large leaves, such as those from the *gbodogi* tree, and overlaid with a thick layer of dried grass, which provided excellent insulation against both heat and rain. The strategic placement of windows and doors was integral to the design, ensuring adequate ventilation and light while maintaining the building's structural integrity (Osasona, 2005).

One of the most distinctive features of Abeokuta's traditional architecture was the finishing of the walls. A mixture of pounded cattle dung, plantain leaves, and water was applied to the walls using a fibre sponge. This traditional plastering technique, known as "*eloboto*," produced a black, glossy finish that was aesthetically pleasing and protected the walls from erosion and weathering. The use of organic materials in this process highlights the Yoruba's deep understanding of and connection to their natural environment (Ibitoye et al., 2022).

As building practices evolved, certain individuals within the community became recognised for their expertise in specific aspects of construction. These skilled craftsmen, known as "*àgbébi*," were often called upon to perform specialised tasks such as woodcarving, blacksmithing, or thatching. While farming remained the primary occupation for most people, building gradually became a respected trade, leading to the development of specialised roles within the local building industry (Daramola et al., 2024).

The arrival of Europeans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries introduced new materials and building techniques to Abeokuta, marking a significant turning point in the region's architectural evolution. European influence brought about the use of cement, corrugated iron sheets, and new construction methods that began to integrate with traditional Yoruba techniques. The repatriation of formerly enslaved Africans from Brazil and Sierra Leone also had a profound impact on local architecture. These returnees, known as "*Saro*", "*Aguda*", or "*Afro-Brazilians*," brought with them architectural knowledge and skills acquired abroad, which they integrated into the local building practices. Their influence was evident in the introduction of Afro-Brazilian styles, characterised by the use of stucco, elaborate facades, and decorative motifs that blended African and European elements (Osasona & Hyland, 2006).

This fusion of traditional Yoruba and Afro-Brazilian architectural elements created a unique hybrid style that remains a hallmark of Abeokuta's built environment. The impact of these external influences on Abeokuta's traditional architecture cannot be overstated, as they not only introduced new aesthetic and functional elements but also contributed to the city's architectural diversity and cultural richness. This blend of indigenous and foreign architectural styles continues to define Abeokuta's urban landscape, reflecting the city's resilience, adaptation, and cultural exchange history.

Factors that Influenced Abeokuta's Architecture

Abeokuta's architectural evolution has been shaped by a confluence of historical, social, and environmental factors. Five key influences were particularly significant: the return of former slaves from Sierra Leone and other parts of the world, contact with Christian missionaries, exposure to Western education, the availability of local materials, and the social status of homeowners. Each of these factors contributed to the unique architectural landscape of Abeokuta.

The Return of Slaves

The return of former slaves from Sierra Leone, commonly referred to as *Saros*, and from South America, known as the *Aguda*, profoundly impacted Abeokuta's architectural development. These returnees were often skilled craftsmen who brought with them the Afro-Brazilian style, characterised by ornate designs and Portuguese-inspired aesthetics. Osasona (2005) noted that these returnees significantly influenced local architecture, introducing new styles that blended their foreign experiences with indigenous forms. Oduntan (2005) further emphasises that these new settlers not only introduced new construction techniques but also brought with them a wealth of ideas and inspirations that transformed the architectural landscape of Abeokuta.

Contact with Missionaries

The arrival of Christian missionaries and the British colonial administration introduced new architectural forms and construction techniques to Abeokuta. The British constructed various institutional and physical infrastructures for administrative convenience, including schools, hospitals, banks, and law courts (Osasona, 2006). These structures were markedly different from traditional Yoruba buildings, often employing timber-framed construction, masonry using fired brick or stone, and other composite materials. This exposure to different building techniques led to a diversification of architectural styles in Abeokuta as local builders began to incorporate these new methods into their practices.

Exposure to Western Education

The people of Abeokuta were among the earliest in Nigeria to embrace Western education, a factor that significantly influenced their architectural practices. Western education introduced new ways of thinking and living, leading to the adoption of certain Western lifestyles, including in the realm of architecture. This educational influence is evident in the adoption of new building designs and the use of imported materials. According to Osasona (2005), the importation of building materials, facilitated by increased access to Western education, had a substantial impact on construction activities in Abeokuta. This led to the gradual transition from purely traditional building methods to a hybrid architectural style that combined indigenous and Western elements.

Availability of Local Materials

Abeokuta's unique rocky terrain, characterised by numerous granite outcrops, has also played a crucial role in shaping its architecture. The abundance of granite in the region led to the establishment of numerous quarry industries, which in turn influenced local building practices. Granite became a common material in construction, contributing to the durability and visual aesthetics of Abeokuta's buildings. The use of locally sourced materials not only reflects the ingenuity of the builders but also the adaptation of architectural practices to the natural environment (Ibitoye et al., 2022).

The Status of House Owners

The social status of homeowners has historically influenced the design, structure, and ornamentation of buildings in Abeokuta. Individuals often built more elaborate homes featuring multiple rooms around large courtyards. These homes were often adorned with ornate mural decorations and sometimes included life-size sculptures of the owners, serving as a public display of wealth and status. The presence of multi-story

buildings in some regions of Abeokuta further highlights the correlation between social status and architectural expression (Ogunnaike, 2022). This trend reflects a broader cultural practice where architecture serves as a symbol of personal and familial prestige.

These factors collectively contributed to the development of Abeokuta's distinctive architectural identity, blending traditional Yoruba styles with influences from returning Afro-Brazilians, European missionaries, and the local environment. The resulting architectural landscape is a testament to Abeokuta's rich cultural heritage and ability to adapt and incorporate diverse influences over time.

Classification of Architectural Forms in Abeokuta

Abeokuta's architectural landscape reflects its rich cultural heritage, historical encounters, and social evolution. A comprehensive survey reveals five primary classifications of buildings: Colonial buildings, Royal buildings, Social buildings (such as hospitals, schools, and museums), Religious buildings (including churches, mosques, and *ipebi*), and Residential/domestic buildings. Each category not only demonstrates the influences of external factors like colonisation and the return of Afro-Brazilian ex-slaves but also showcases the town's adaptation of indigenous techniques and materials to new architectural styles.

Colonial Buildings

Colonial buildings in Abeokuta stand as symbols of the town's interaction with British colonialists and European missionaries during the 19th and early 20th centuries. These buildings were constructed primarily for administrative and institutional purposes, using imported materials and reflecting European architectural styles. For instance, the building (Plate 4a), which once housed Nigeria's first newspaper, Iwe Irohin House, published by Rev. Henry Townsend in 1859, exemplifies early colonial architecture (Osasona, 2006). This structure, which now serves as the Ogun State Chapter House of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), combines imported European materials with local granite, showcasing a hybrid architectural style that reflects the town's colonial history.

Another example is the Ake Palace Museum, formerly the residence of the District Officer (Plate 4b). Built with high ceilings, spacious verandas, and masonry construction, this building is a testament to the colonial era's architectural influence, designed to accommodate the tropical climate with features like wide eaves and large windows for ventilation (Ibitoye et al., 2022).



Plate 4a The Colonial building used for the publications of the first newspaper “Iwe Iroyin” 1859, now used as the Chapter house of Nigerian Union of Journalist (NUJ, Ogun State, Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013)



Plate 4b: Aké Palace Museum. Photograph by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013)

Royal Buildings

Royal buildings in Abeokuta, such as the Ake Palace and the Olowu Palace, are distinguished by their grandeur and the intricate designs that reflect the socio-political authority of the Abeokuta monarchy. The Ake Palace, constructed in 1854 by Alake Okukenu 1st (Plate 5a), is a notable example of neo-traditional architecture that blends indigenous Yoruba elements with Afro-Brazilian influences. The palace features an L-shaped entrance, a long veranda supported by twelve pillars, and a heavily roofed space with scallop design fascia boards. The veranda, adorned with wooden posts and sculptures, separates the outer area from the inner courtyard, symbolising the blend of local and foreign architectural traditions (Osasona & Hyland, 2006).



Plate 5a: The Alake palace built by Alake Okukenu 1st in 1854. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013)

The Olowu Palace (Plate 5b), more modern in design, is a storey hexagonal structure representing the evolution of royal architecture in Abeokuta. Its open facade, decorative tiles, and use of contemporary materials illustrate the adaptation of traditional forms, such as a courtyard, to modern aesthetics with the gallery while still preserving the symbolic elements of royalty and prestige (Ogunnaike, 2022).



Plate 5b: The Olowu palace recently renovated into a theatrical hexagonal shape with arcades. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013)

Social Buildings

Social buildings in Abeokuta, including hospitals, schools, and museums, highlight the town's adaptation to modern needs while preserving its cultural identity. The Abeokuta Grammar School (Plate 6a), established in 1910 by the Governor of Southern Nigeria, Sir Walter Egerton KCMG and the then Alake, Oba Gbadebo I, is a prime example of colonial educational architecture (Agsoba, 2024). The building features a ground-floor arcade with low-relief architraves, stone rubble construction, and a roof with prominent eaves. These elements combine to create a functional and aesthetically pleasing structure, reflecting the influence of European architectural styles on local educational institutions (Osasona, 2005).

The Centenary Hall (Plate 6b), built in 1930 by Oba Ademola II to commemorate the Egba Centenary, is another significant social building. Its elaborate craftsmanship, artistic detailing, and use of local materials make it a symbol of Abeokuta's historical and cultural heritage. The hall's construction exemplifies the blending of traditional and modern architectural techniques, making it a unique cultural landmark (Ibitoye et al., A. (2022).



Plate 6a: Abeokuta Grammar School built in 1910. It was later used for subsequent takeoffs venue for Federal College of Education and University of Agriculture Abeokuta at different time. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013)



Place 6b: Centenary Hall built in 1930 by Oba Ademola II to mark the occasion of Egba Centenary Celebration. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).

Religious Buildings

Religious buildings in Abeokuta, including churches, mosques, and *ipebi* (See Plates 7a-7e), reflect the town's religious diversity and the influence of European missionaries and Afro-Brazilian returnees. St. Peter's Anglican Cathedral, built in 1898, is a striking example of Gothic-inspired architecture introduced by early missionaries. The cathedral's stone rubble construction, intricate facades, and pointed arches are characteristic of the European Gothic style, adapted to the local context (Osasona, 2006). The Holy Trinity Parish Church, constructed in 1936, is another notable religious building. It is distinguished by its three towers, which symbolise the Holy Trinity. The church's use of granite stones and centralised arches demonstrates the influence of European architectural styles while incorporating elements that resonate with local religious and cultural symbolism.

Afro-Brazilian architectural influences are also evident in some of Abeokuta's mosques, such as those in Ake and Itoko. These mosques feature decorative stucco, zigzag patterns, and iron balustrades, reflecting the architectural contributions of repatriated slaves from Brazil's heritage. The Afro-Brazilian style, characterised by ornate facades and detailed relief work, has been seamlessly integrated into the local architectural landscape, enriching the town's culture.



Plate 7a: Cathedral of Saint Peter, Ake Built in1898. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).



Plate 7b: Holy Trinity Parish Church, Ikereku built in 1936. The towers seem to signify God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).



Plate 7c: A mosque in Ake, spotting Afro-Brazilian characteristics. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).



Plate 7d: A mosque in Itoko, Abeokuta. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).



Plate 7e: Royal spiritual building for ritual and ceremonies that relates to the new Alake. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).

Residential/Domestic Buildings

Residential buildings in Abeokuta vary widely, reflecting social stratification and evolving architectural preferences over time. Wealthier residents often constructed multi-storey Afro-Brazilian houses, which are heavily embellished with decorative motifs, such as parapets, balustrades, and self-portrait sculptures. These buildings, like the twin house by Gbadebo Adekunle in Orile Ilugun (See Plate 8a), are symbols of affluence and cultural pride, showcasing the owners' ability to commission the best artisans and materials (Ibitoye et al., 2022).

Middle-class homes (Plate 8b) in Abeokuta are typically smaller but still incorporate elements of decorative architecture. They do have storey buildings but are usually smaller in size and with reduced decoration. Sometimes, they own very big bungalow buildings. These buildings share similar features with that of the lower class but on a fairly larger scale (See Plate 8).

These buildings might feature simple bungalows with modest ornamentation, balancing functionality with aesthetic appeal. The use of decorative motifs and architectural details, though less elaborate than in the homes of the wealthy, still reflects the town's rich cultural heritage and the influence of Afro-Brazilian styles (Osasona & Hyland, 2006).

Lower-class homes, often bungalows, are characterised by their simpler designs, with basic stucco decorations around windows and doors. The houses have dado designs, dado rails, porches with pediment designs, and pilasters at the corners of the houses (See Plate 8c). Some of them showcase relief decoration inside recessed shapes designed underneath the window frame. Despite their simplicity, these houses often include traditional motifs and cornices above the lintel, maintaining a connection to the local architectural heritage. The use of friezes, horizontal cornices, and recessed shapes under window frames adds a layer of cultural depth to these otherwise modest structures.

These classifications provide a detailed overview of the diverse architectural forms in Abeokuta, each representing different aspects of the town's history, culture, and social structure. The buildings serve not only as functional spaces but also as cultural artefacts that tell the story of the evolution of Abeokuta's built environment over time.



Figure 4 Plate 8a: A twin house with large premises by Gbadebo Adekunle in Orile Ilugun with a middle semi-circular terrace housing a life-size sculpture of the owner. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).



Plate 8b: Medium class building at Oke Aleji with its own uniqueness. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).



Plate 8c: A low-class bungalow at Ikija showing wall relief, dado and portals. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013)

Decorative Motifs in Abeokuta's Architecture

Abeokuta is known for its rich cultural heritage, which is vividly reflected in its architecture. The town's domestic buildings are adorned with a variety of decorative motifs that not only enhance their aesthetic appeal but also serve as cultural and social markers. These motifs can be classified into five categories: Self-sculpture motifs, Linear motifs, Geometric shapes motifs, Culture-oriented/Mythological symbols motifs, and Hybrid motifs. Each of these categories is deeply rooted in the history, beliefs, and artistic traditions of the people of Abeokuta, offering a glimpse into the community's values and identity which is presented as follows:

Self-Representation in 3D Sculpture

Self-sculpture motifs are a prominent feature in the architecture of Abeokuta, where life-sized sculptures of house owners are often integrated into the building's design. These motifs serve as a statement of affluence, social status, and personal legacy. According to Folarin (2001), such sculptures are more than just decorative elements; they are symbolic representations of the owner's identity and status within the community. The inclusion of these motifs reflects a cultural emphasis on individual legacy and the desire to be remembered within the societal fabric. An example of this can be seen in the twin house by Gbadebo Adekunle in Orile Ilugun (Plate 9a), where a semi-circular terrace features a life-size sculpture of the owner. This type of architectural element not only personalises the building but also immortalises the owner's image, highlighting the cultural significance of self-representation in Abeokuta's architectural traditions (Osasona, 2005).



Plate 9a: Self-sponsored sculpture by house owner on the upper terrace of the house. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013)



Plate 9b: Self-sponsored sculpture by house owner incorporated into his house in Abeokuta. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013)

Linear Motifs

Linear motifs are among the most commonly observed decorative features in Abeokuta's domestic architecture, particularly on bungalow facades. These motifs often take the form of stucco reliefs and friezes, which are used to embellish walls, windows, and doors. The use of linear motifs indicates a conscious effort by homeowners to distinguish their homes from others, emphasising their social position and individual creativity. Okon et al. (2021) noted that skilled artisans who interpret the owners' desires into visual forms, using lines to create intricate patterns that enhance the architectural form, often design these motifs.

For example, linear motifs are frequently applied around windows and doors (See Plate 10), creating a frame that highlights these architectural elements and contributes to the overall aesthetic of the building. The presence of these motifs underscores the importance placed on artistic expression in Abeokuta's residential architecture.

Geometric Motifs

Geometric shapes are another significant category of decorative motifs in Abeokuta's architecture. These shapes, which include stars, circles, triangles, and squares, are often derived from the interplay of lines and are used to add visual interest to building facades. According to Fajuyigbe, (2024), the use of geometric motifs in Abeokuta is not merely decorative but also symbolic, representing order, balance, and harmony principles that are highly valued in Yoruba culture.

These motifs are prominently displayed on parapets, pediments, and around doors and windows, where they serve to reinforce the structural integrity of the building while also adding a decorative element (Plate 10 a and b). The symbolic meanings attached to these shapes, such as the star representing guidance or the circle symbolising completeness, reflect the deep cultural significance of geometric forms in Abeokuta's architectural design (Folarin, 2001).



Plate 10a: Linear motifs at the upper parts of windows and door. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013)



Plate 10b: Parapets with geometric shapes. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013)

Culture Markers/Metaphorical Symbols

The use of culture-oriented and metaphorical symbols as decorative motifs in Abeokuta's architecture is perhaps the most distinctive feature of the town's architectural identity. These motifs, which include symbols such as the bundle of sticks (*idi igi*), hair comb (*iyari*), sunrays (*itansan oorun*), and unity symbol (*isokan*), are deeply embedded in Yoruba cultural and spiritual practices. As Osasona (2005) notes, these symbols are not only decorative but also serve as visual narratives that convey the cultural beliefs, values, and histories of the house owners (Plate 11a- d).

For instance, the repeated use of the sunray motif on house facades is symbolic of life and vitality, while the unity symbol represents collective strength and cohesion within the community (Ibitoye et al., 2022). The incorporation of Yoruba proverbs and prayers into the architecture, such as the phrase "Ire Akari" (May good things go round) (Plate 11a), further illustrates the cultural importance of these motifs, linking the physical structure of the home to the spiritual and moral values of its inhabitants.



Plate 11a: House with repeated sunrays (itansan oorun) motif. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013)



Plate 11b: House with repeated bundle of sticks (idi igi) motif. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013)



Plate 11c: House with repeated unity symbol (isokan) motif on the parapets..Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013)



Plate 11d: House with “Ire Akari” motif on the parapets.Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).

Hybrid Motifs

Hybrid motifs in Abeokuta's architecture are indicative of the town's openness to external influences and its ability to integrate different cultural elements into a unified whole. These motifs, which include designs such as anchors, flower ribbons, ponds, umbrellas, blades, and shields, are a result of the cultural exchanges between Africa and the West (Plate 12a - d). According to Osasona & Hyland (2006), these motifs reflect the town's historical interactions with European colonizers and Afro-Brazilian returnees, who brought with them new architectural styles and decorative elements. For example, a storey building in Abeokuta features a parapet design with a stylised water fountain, a motif that symbolises wealth and abundance. This motif, along with others such as interlocking umbrella designs, demonstrates the blending of indigenous and foreign elements to create a distinctive architectural style that is unique to Abeokuta (Ibitoye et al., 2022)



Plate 12a: A storey building showing 750 Pounds as the verandah parapets. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).



Plate 12b: A story building showing stylised water fountain on parapets. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).



Plate12c: A storey building with interlocking umbrella motif. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).



Plate 12d: A storey building showing cross, floral and other hybrid motifs. Photography by: Kehinde Adepegba (2013).

Conclusions And Recommendations

This discussion centres on the architecture of Abeokuta, based on one of the field studies conducted in the city in 2013 as a part of a course titled: FNA 607- Typology of African Art taught by Dr Babasehinde Ademuleya during our Master of Arts degree in African Art Studies at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

Literature played a crucial role in capturing the vibrant history of the ethnic groups in Abeokuta. A fascinating discovery emerged from the study, showcasing the captivating blend of traditional Yoruba and Afro-Brazilian architectural elements that have given rise to a distinctive hybrid style, which continues to define the built environment in Abeokuta.

The external influences on Abeokuta's traditional architecture have had a significant impact as well. They have brought in new aesthetic and functional elements, adding to the city's architectural diversity and cultural richness. Abeokuta's urban landscape is a testament to the city's ability to adapt and embrace cultural exchange. The combination of indigenous and foreign architectural styles beautifully reflects the history of resilience that characterises the city.

The various factors that have shaped the architectural design have played a significant role in creating Abeokuta's unique architectural identity and typology. This identity is a fusion of traditional Yoruba styles, the influence of returning Afro-Brazilians, European missionaries, and the local environment. The architectural landscape that has emerged is a reflection of Abeokuta's vibrant cultural heritage and its capacity to embrace and integrate various influences at different stages of history.

The classifications of the motifs offer a comprehensive look into the various architectural forms found in Abeokuta. Each of these forms represents distinct elements of the town's rich history, vibrant culture, and intricate social structure. The buildings not only serve practical purposes, but also hold significant cultural value, reflecting the rich history and development of Abeokuta. By incorporating a diverse range of materials, utilizing environmentally-friendly construction methods, and implementing creative strategies, the city's architectural scene is able to maintain its dynamic, culturally significant, and future-oriented nature.

From the foregoing and based on the quality of the buildings, we recommend that some of the them should taken over by the government and dedicated as heritage centres as well as museums. UNESCO in Nigeria should manage some of them for the purpose and guaranteeing maintenance and sustainability and to fulfill one of cardinal functions of the organization.

It is also recommended that scholars who have interests in vernacular Yoruba architecture could advance the study by doing comparative studies of Abeokuta architectures with those of other cities to reveal similar and differential tendencies, towards historical documentations and development and management of Yoruba built environment.

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