

Manifestations of *Ori* (Head) in Traditional Yorùbá Architecture

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Abstract

Yorùbá traditional architecture is not spontaneous. It is a product of a well-structured cultural and religious system. Every aspect from the choice of material, to the style of building, and even its construction system was designed with primary considerations for family, community and belief. Because architecture is an effective organ for the reflection of both cultural and religious thoughts, this study sought to query an inconspicuous but possible use of traditional Yorùbá architecture as a medium for the expression of *ori* ideology and worship in the early times. Relying principally on secondary data and new insights from the juxtaposing of information gathered from religious practises and local art and architecture, the study attempted to answer the question, “How is traditional Yorùbá architecture used as a medium to propagate the centrality of *ori*?” The study noted that there appears to be a metaphysical similarity in the presentation and meaning of *ori* (head) in traditional Yorùbá sculpture and *òrùlé* (roof) in Yorùbá architecture in a manner that ties them together. The conclusion is that the roof in Yorùbá architecture is indeed a metaphorical object for the assertion of the pre-eminence of *ori* among the Yorùbá.

Keywords: architecture, head, Ori, religion, roof, Yoruba

Introduction

In Yorùbá, *orí* means head. It is the central focus for the existential energy of Yorùbá life. *Orí* is also an *òrìsà* (deity) and it is the primal deity for the Yorùbá socio-spiritual compass. So central is the idea of *orí* to the Yorùbá that it is presented as a pivotal element in the creation of man, as stated in the Yorùbá myth of creation. Abimbola (1977), Idowu (1996) and Akande (2017) already recounted this myth, therefore, a repeat here will be unnecessary. It is important to note, however, that irrespective of an individual's devotional allegiance in early Yorùbá times, the veneration and reverence of *orí* transcends all cult worship and it is essential to life among the Yorùbá. But of what relevance is this knowledge to the study of architecture? How does this alleged centrality of the *orí* cult and worship influence the nature and character of Yorùbá traditional architecture?

Perhaps it is expedient to start by stating that in many traditional societies, architecture is a profound and tangible platform for the embodiment of the spiritual and cultural ideals of such a society. Seeing that Yorùbá indigenous architecture is more than spontaneous, and that certain aspects of its form visually proclaim key religious ideologies, scholarship – even if on a whim of curiosity alone – is obligated to query the dynamics and possible role of traditional Yorùbá architecture in the institutionalization of religion. While at a basic level, architecture is a conscious effort at creating functional as well as psychological spaces, certain signs point to the notion that in traditional Yorùbá setup, architecture does much more. This study will explore this notion by querying aspects of ratio and scale in Yorùbá architecture and how these modestly manifest *orí* ideology. The study will attempt to answer the question, “is traditional Yorùbá architecture used as a medium to propagate the centrality of *orí*?” The findings here will help shed further light on several unresolved questions that continue to impede a fuller understanding of the depth of traditional Yorùbá architecture.

Methodology

This study is exploratory in nature and has employed qualitative research methods for data gathering, interpretation and analysis. Data collection is focused mainly on desk research, visual observations and analysis of archival documents – mainly photographs. The study relied on online research resources and image banks, alongside physical library searches for the desk, and archival photographs research. This study had the assistance of a local culture custodian who provided contact with a sculptor and cult devotee for unstructured interview. Interactions with the individual was done in Yorùbá language. Some archive photographs from the Frobenius collection and the British National Archives online resource were used during the interviews as a mnemonic device.

Orí in Yorùbá Belief

To the Yorùbá people who inhabit a large portion of south-western Nigeria and the eastern part of the Republic of Benin (formerly Dahomey), *orí* is supreme. It is an embodiment and a repository of all the supernatural energy from where the essence of Yorùbá spirituality and existence emanate. In Yorùbá belief, *orí* subsists both in the physical and ethereal worlds owning a principal place in both realms. It is an *òrìsà* (deity) and at the same time the house of *àse* (life force). Abiodun (1994) already dealt with the concept of *àse* at length. He explored the framework of Yorùbá aesthetics and set it in context of form, through which *àse* can be projected. In that light, Abiodun surmises that *orí* is the major and most pervasive symbol of *àse* in both human and spirit realms. Hence, *orí* is given utmost reverence. Ademuyela (2007)

notes that *orí* serves as the “umbilical cord” connecting man with God. According to the Yorùbá, no man exists without his *orí* and as will become clear later on in this paper, *orí*, just like the art of representing it, is in the very centre of the Yorùbá being – material and ethereal. The spiritual and metaphysical importance of *orí* is summed up in an *Ifa*¹ verse (*Odu Irete ofun*)

You who prints chalk on the back of the crocodile
 Ifa divination of was cast for
 When *orí* set on a journey to *Apere*
 All the *orisa* (*deities*) were advised to offer sacrifice
orí alone yielded and offered sacrifice
orí sacrifice was good and well honoured
 Is *orí* not wiser than other deities?
 Only *orí* made it to *Apere*,
 No other *orisa* can save a man
 Other than one's *orí*
orí is superior to all other *orisa*.

Another verse from the *Ifá* poetry further affirms the significance of *orí* to the Yorùbá.
Orí, cause and creator
orí -*Apere*, the great companion who never deserts one
orí the master of all
 It is *orí* we should praise
 The rest of the body comes to naught
 When *orí* is missing from the body
 What remains is incapable of carrying any load
 It is the *orí* which bears the load
Orí, I pray you
 Do not desert me
 You *orí* are the lord of all things (Abiodun, 1994)

The above *Ifa* verse indicates the dominion of *orí* over all other deities in Yorùbá cosmology. No other deity can render the assistance needed by an individual in “life’s perilous journey” without consensus of the individual’s *orí*. As Adeleke (2011) states, all other *òrìsà* are themselves subject to their own *orí*. This means that the power of overlord given to *orí* by *Olodumare* (The Supreme God) is total. The *orí* is worshiped by a special group of priests, called the *Aw’orí* (The mystery of the head). Throughout Yorùbá land, the *Aw’orí* is known and enjoys the patronage of all. The worship of one’s inner head (*orí inu*), which is essentially directed by the *Aw’orí* priests, is conducted through an altarpiece that contains the symbol of the inner (spiritual) head. This piece is called the *Ibori* or *Ile orí*. It is a conical object, usually made from leather and lavishly decorated with cowries (figure 1). It is believed that after divination and spiritual preparations, the *orí* deity of an individual who has commissioned the *Ibori* will reside in the object, hence the name *Ibori* (cover for the head) or *Ile orí* (house of the *orí*).

¹ Ifa is a divination system and religion among the Yoruba people which uses a literary corpus called *odu ifa* to decipher, diagnose and proffer solutions to situations.



Figure 1: *Ile ori (Ibori)*. Source: Hamill Gallery of Tribal Art.
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As earlier suggested, the Yorùbá accord *ori* full reverence in all things; in ritual worship, as well as in mundane activities. While this veneration and the related practices are originally based on traditional religious doctrine, certain aspects of the practise have found its way into other modern religious practices, like in Christianity. An example of this can be seen in the placing of both hands on the (outer) head when saying prayers; a practise rather alien to the Christian culture. The Yorùbá Christian finds it necessary to hold his/her physical (outer) head with both hands during Christian worship or supplication, to make pronouncements or declarations, seeing the head as a touch point or conduit of destiny. The declarations are mainly for protection, good fortune, and favour in the day's endeavour. This act is an extract from traditional practise. Despite the disregard many now have for these old practises, this author notes that some aspects of these traditions like the one mentioned above continue to be carried on by many. Further, head covering as practised in Yorùbá culture, must have a mention here. Lawal (2002) has discussed the issues of head styles for both genders, and the religious importance assigned to covering one's head. For a male Yoruba adult to be fully dressed, the cap (*Filà*) is a very vital part of the daily attire. The equivalent for the female is the head tie/dress (*Gèlè*). To be at a formal gathering without *filà* can be likened to being at a formal dinner in western society without a jacket or the traditional bow tie.

Yorùbá Kings, who are regarded as spirit-men, are themselves under obligation to keep their heads covered at all times. The king must wear at least a “lesser” crown called *Orikògbófo* when not in state. The *Orikògbófo* are small crown-like caps that cover the king's *ori* for less formal situations. Beier (1982) records that the *Orikògbófo* are not sacred, and they are not

called *Adé* (crown). The royal crown maker, who is usually a devotee of the *orí* cult, is also responsible for the making of the *Oríkògbófo*. He is allowed to freely express his creativity in the making of *it*, as he is not bound to convention in this endeavour. The conical shape of the Yorùbá beaded crown further sheds light on the issue of head covering. The crowns are purposefully designed to serve as a dwelling for the king's head (see figure 2). In itself, the crown is a representation of the supremacy of the *orí* deity in abstraction. Thus, the traditionally preferred conical shape, for the Yorùbá beaded crown, is similar in physical form to the “shrine” or house of *orí*.



Figure 2: A Yorùbá beaded Crown. Note the conical shape which is most popular among Yoruba beaded crown. Source: Hamill Gallery of Tribal Art.
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Culturally, the Yorùbá believe that the well-being of the head is of great importance to one's success in life. In much earlier times, it was not uncommon to see a fully dressed adult with a head dress, but without footwear. Or, to see Yorùbá people covering only their heads in a downpour, not minding the rest of their bodies. For the Yorùbá, as already seen in the *Ifa* verse quoted earlier, if the head is well, then all is well. Ofuasia (2016) however disagrees. In his paper, he argues that the pre-natal existence of *orí* must not be taking for anything other than mythology. Using David Hume's epistemology, he asserts that the pre-eminence given to *orí* among the Yorùbá is flawed and *orí* should signify nothing other than the mere literary meaning of the word – a physical head. He concludes that any attempt to ascribe or link *orí* to any human

action or aspirations, inevitably leads to naïve optimism. It is unclear how Ofuasia (2016) reaches this conclusion about the idea of *orí* when he adjudges a purely Yorùbá thought within the construct of a western theory which he himself had evidently criticized in the early part of his work. The idea of Ajiboye, Folaranmi & Umou-Oke (2018) appears to be antithesis to that of Ofuasia (2016) as they insist that *orí* is a connection between the spiritual and physical, providing a locus for the expression of Yorùbá ideology which are practical and can be seen in everyday life. Ajiboye et al. (2018) conclude that *orí* remains central to the construction of aesthetics of daily life and the determination of destinies in Yoruba worldview. In a similar tone, Dias (2013) presents *orí* as a dual natured determinant of man's destiny. In one view, he argues that *orí* is responsible for predestination and this predestination is fixed and unchangeable, while in another, he alludes to the flexibility of destiny, calling it an open manuscript that may be subject to manipulations. Dias was however careful to note that Yorùbá thought on destiny is extraordinarily complex, resulting from a plurality of interpretations and influences.

The Art of Yorùbá Architecture

There exists the temptation to reduce the physical attributes of traditional African architecture to forms that primarily respond to and reflect the demands of the local environment only. Surely, a casual onlooker might find most aspects of the physicality of traditional African architecture rather simplistic and suggest that its philosophy for expression is seated in environmental determinism. This would amount to a colossal deflation of the real but often furtive value of traditional African architecture. Even when a functionalist assessment occasionally produces a reasonable appraisal of the architecture, from an Afrocentric standpoint, anything short of an inclusive assessment that reserves adequate considerations for the socio-sacred aspects of the host culture, is a deflation nonetheless. An understanding of African architecture requires a specific examination of the physical, technological, sociocultural, and economic contexts. It is also essential that one considers the process whereby a human, as a thinking, symbol-making animal, abstracts those realities into a meaningful and ultimately religious or symbolic schema of architectural philosophy (Prussin, 1974).

One of the major challenges of traditional African architecture has been the rigid and biased evaluation it received from the western world. Until quite recently, African architecture was not considered worthy of any form of recognition outside a detached description of its building techniques and material. Further, Prussin (1974) identified this illegitimate pedagogical approach employed by early western scholars as a key factor that handicapped the initial valuation of traditional African architecture. In her *Introduction to Indigenous African Architecture*, Prussin pointed out that, usually, the study of visual arts in the western world is traditionally divided into sculpture, drawing, painting and architecture. However, when the arts of Africa began to attract the world's attention at the turn of the 20th century, not only was the architecture of Africa divorced from the other visual arts, but was in turn robbed of its meaningful elements. While the visual arts of Africa gained prominence, the inverse was the case for African architecture. Despite this false start, African architecture has held its own, possibly because of its central role in the sociocultural milieu of the people and its indisputable status as a core platform for indigenous applied arts. Shah (2012) has suggested that in most traditional societies, architecture has persisted as one of the most profoundly important reflection of culture. This is true about traditional Yorùbá architecture. Not only does it respond to the local environmental dictates, it also, and perhaps most importantly, embodies the spiritual and cultural formation of the people's belief.

Art is an integral part of Yorùbá architecture. Contrary to popular opinion, the houses of royals or the elites are not the only ones that get special attention and ornamentation. A vast amount of structures belonging to people that can be classified as commoners also feature ample intricate ornamentation. Dmochowski (1990) confirms that the veranda posts, even in ordinary houses, were generally ornamented. In early Yorùbá society, the addition of ornamentation to a building was not a matter of affluence or elitism, it was considered to be culturally essential. Ornamentation and sculptural relief on available spaces was a responsibility and opportunity to use architecture as a platform for the continual visual rhetoric of mythology and traditional ideals. These actions must however not be mistaken for compulsion as this was far from the case. The culture encouraged ornamentation and the use of its spaces – wherever it is found, from textile to calabash surfaces – as a template for the enunciation of both personal and collective identity, but does not compel anyone. There was a general understanding that the use of symbolism, relief art on architecture, and ornamentation on woven clothing were an act of cultural assertion and self-discovery. However, in the Yorùbá country, one may find that plentiful and high-quality ornamentation are a function of affluence. In his pivotal work *Architecture without Architects*, Rudofsky (1964) asserts that great builders draw no lines between sculpture and architecture. With them, sculpture is not commissioned as an afterthought or budgetary dole. Neither is so-called landscaping. The three are inseparable. In line with this assertion, one may argue that early Yorùbá builders, and Yorùbá architectural sensibilities, can be ascribed to perceptiveness in craft and philosophy. Sculpture is primeval and has always been a key medium for the communication of certain ethics in ancient societies. It is also a major language and an integral element in traditional Yorùbá architecture. In some buildings, sculptural expressions were not limited to veranda posts alone, but are also to be seen on lintels, beams, ceiling boards, doors and even the large expanses of court walls were covered with geometric symbols, animal figures, human and mythological characters. Examples can be seen on the architectural surfaces of the palace and buildings of repute in Efon Alaye, Owo, Akure, Badagry and in common houses in Oyo.

The material of choice for early Yorùbá buildings was earth mixed with clay (where available) and straw. These were kneaded into balls with the aid of water and attached on wooden frames in layers. The kneaded balls were carried to site by boys and girls and then thrown into frame structures that define the walls and finally patted down by masons. In the northern parts of the Yorùbá country, walls were built from between 3 and 6 metres high in layers of about 30 centimetres high and 30 to 60 centimetres thick (Dmochowski, 1990). The popular indigenous style of building in the early days was often the called the Wattle and Daub. The construction of most houses in the early Yorùbá country was essentially done through *òwẹ̀* – a community help system where every available able-bodied in the village is beckoned to assist with everything from clearing the land to unearthing mud and daubing (Amole and Folaranmi, 2017). Typically, Yorùbá houses follow a well-organized *agbo ile* (Family Compound) pattern design. The houses are in some ways a collection of several units fitted together in a cyclical, square or rectangular shape so that a courtyard is defined in the centre of the system. According to Amole & Folaranmi (2017), they are designed along this pattern especially with focus of family life and apart from the living quarters within a compound, other forms of architecture like the palace and shrines are also designed and built considering the society's social order.

In this study we are interested in another type of predefined order. One that can only be appreciated when we view the traditional Yorùbá building in section (see Figure 3). Here, we are confronted with the different elements of the structure and very clearly, certain aspects of the scale and ratio of the different elements becomes noticeable and peculiar. This peculiarity, however, is not entirely nouveau to those acquainted with the canons guiding traditional

Yorùbá sculpture. It is to this peculiarity that this research turns to for answers to the key hypothesis of this study.

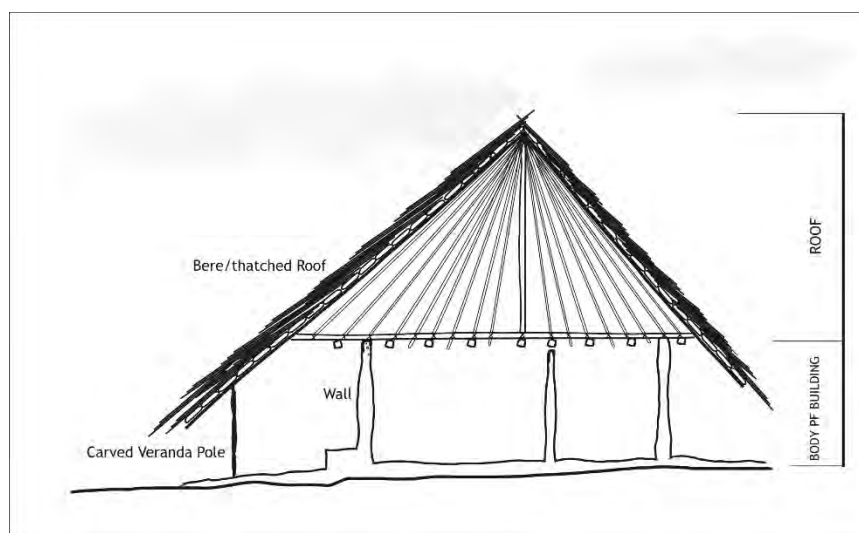


Figure 3: Section of a typical traditional Yoruba building. Note the scale of the roof compared to the rest of the building. The roof is almost two-third of the whole building. Sketch by author.

Discussion of Results

Physicality of *orí* ideology in Yorùbá architecture

It was William Buller Fagg, the British anthropologist, museum curator and African art historian, who first noticed the disproportionality in traditional Yorùbá sculpture and this significantly changed the way the works were seen and appraised. Fagg theorized that the ratio of the head to the rest of the body in Yorùbá sculpture is deliberately stylized in a manner that makes the head about a quarter – which is about 1:4 – of the whole size of an anthropomorphic piece. This fundamentally brought issues of African aesthetics in the appraisal of indigenous arts to the fore. Further to William Fagg's proclamation, another renowned anthropologist and expert on Nigerian arts, Frank Willett, later supported this theory of enlarged heads in Yorùbá sculpture. Willett (1967) stated that the Ife [Yorùbá] heads are really quite unlike the Greek/European traditional sculpture which is based on careful measurements and accurate proportion. The head [of the upper half figure of the *oni* (king) of Ife] was greatly exaggerated in size in relations to the rest of the body equalling about a quarter of the estimated over-all size as Fagg had earlier theorized from his analysis of the 1957 finds of Ita Yemoo. (See figure 4) This find is also known to have presented strong evidence to suggest local manufacture of the metal sculpture or, at best, its production by locals. Other Yorùbá arts researchers corroborated the theory of enlarged heads in Yorùbá figural sculpture. Lawal (1985) proposes that these head enlargements in Yorùbá sculpture were simply a manifestation of the religious ideology of the *orí* in Yorùbá ontology. Lawal notes that there are three modes of representation of the head in Yorùbá sculpture. These are: the naturalistic, which refers mainly to the physical/external head (*orí òde*), the stylized, which suggest the spiritual/inner head (*orí inú*), and the abstract, which symbolizes the primeval material (*òkè ìpòrí*) from which the inner head is made.



Figure 4: Brass Statue of an Oni of Ife. An example of Ife ancient sculptural Art showing the “African proportion” of approximately ratio 1:4. Source: <https://jemolo.com/>
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Beyond the Ife heads, the general corpus of anthropomorphic images of the Yorùbá in terra cotta or wood like the *Ère Ìbejì* (ibeji/twin sculpture) or Lamide Fakeye’s works, follow the same proportion formula. In fact, in many cases, the head is much more prominent than the examples from Ife. Ratios of about 1:2 or 1:1 are plentiful. It is important to mention here, that a few scholars have expressed divergent views about the theory in question, however, none have in any way fully disagreed with Fagg’s theory of the enlargement of the head. Blier (2012) argued that the details of this proportion theory slightly vary in Yorùbá sculptural art with the ratio ranging from 1:4 to 1:6 depending on a variety of indices. She concludes however with the fact that the act of exaggerating the *orí* in Yorùbá traditional sculpture is agreed upon by all.

This study will focus on the theory of head enlargement as a basis for its hypothesis that traditional Yorùbá architecture has a compelling similarity to Yorùbá anthropomorphic sculptures. Yorùbá sculpture places primacy on the head, and as such the head gets the largest share of size and time in contrast to the body of the sculpture. Just as European medieval or Renaissance art is characterised by a hierarchy of size, so do the Yorùbá artists enlarge the heads on figural works to show importance. Accordingly, and in line with the socio-sacred canons of Yorùbá art, the other parts of the body must remain physically and metaphysically ancillary to the head. As noted earlier, they believe the head is the “house” of the highest deity. Beyond the primacy accorded the head, the enlargement of the head is also a symbolic statement which speaks to the protective cover the individual gets from his/her *orí*. Thus, here *orí* is a cover and protection for the body/carrier as the roof is for the house. Much has been said here about the symbolic and sacred function of *orí* to the body/carrier. We will now explore the parallel of this ideology in traditional Yorùbá architecture. Our focus will be on the roof.

The organic thatched roof of the Yorùbá has been discussed as an iconic and innovative response of native Yorùbá architecture to the environment. Some of the earliest texts extol the scale of this capping element in context of the remainder of the spatial structure. In Ife, Frobenius exclaimed “oh, how often did I look with longing across the space which kept me from the beautiful high roofs of the great Yorùbá houses which were thatched with leaves” (Frobenius Institute, 2014). The leaves Leo Frobenius refers to could be any of these popular options – *Bere* grass (*Anadelphia arrecta*), *Ariba* (phrynium plant) or *Gbodogi* leave (sacrophyrynium specie). Aradeon (1996) notes that any of the aforementioned can be used as roofing material which is tied to the closely spaced natural wood purlins. The pitch of the roof is usually very high and deep and as a consequence provides a fast run-off for impacting rains.

In Samuel Johnson’s seminal work, *The History of the Yorùbá*, we catch a glimpse of the socio-sacred importance of the roof (*Òrùlé*) in traditional Yorùbá architecture. Johnson (1921) presents *bere* in two major forms; as a building material and as a yearly royal ritual festival [in Oyo]. The festival – a multiple day event – sees different aspects of religious processes that include the worship of *Ogun* and a day of paying special tribute to the *bere* grass. Also, there is the “touching of the grass” which entails a procession by the king and the physical laying of hands on the *bere* grass with prayers said for the people and the Yorùbá nation for peace, protection and prosperity. In some ways, this is reminiscent of Yorùbá devotees laying hands on their heads to make supplications. Several court officials and foreign subordinates would customarily send bundles of the *bere* grass to their senior counterparts. Johnson writes “the whole of the Oyo Mesi (Oyo council of kingmakers) first send theirs to the king, the *Basorun* (War Chief) alone would send about 200 bundles, the subordinate chiefs send to the senior chiefs, everyone to his feudal lord, each man according to his rank.” Later, the *bere* would be used to refurbish roofs and house coverings around the villages. What is pertinent here is that this sharing of roof covering material and the consequent ritual of repairing roofs of the houses in the village is tied to a central national ritual festival. One of only three such important festivals where the people will have access to “seeing” the king – their protector, cover and overlord. This puts both the act of roof refurbishment and the symbolic importance of the *bere* grass into perspective.

***Orí* and *Òrùlé*: A manifestation of the same ideology**

Having interrogated historical and religious materials and through the analysis of images of *orí* paraphernalia and traditional Yorùbá architecture, this study posits that, there is a strong physical and metaphysical similarity between *orí* (both as a supernatural member of a body system and as a deity of reverence) and *òrùlé* (roof) in the architecture of the Yorùbá people. Like the *orí*, the roof in Yorùbá architecture is defined by a significant size in relations to the rest of the building. The ratio of the roof to the “body” of the building in Yorùbá architecture may sometimes reach an inverse of 2:1 where the roof ratio is twice the height of the house walls. This study argues that this is not coincidence. There appears to be a subliminal effort to use the roof as an alternate medium for the expression of *orí*. The grandiosity and overbearing size of roofs in early Yorùbá architecture is not exclusively a matter of function but also of the enunciation of certain spiritual ideology however subconscious. Granted that function - in respect of precipitation run-off and sun shading efficiency – is pertinent and obvious in the roof design preference, this study still argues that this as important as the idea of “head” exaggeration required to subtly proclaim *orí* philosophy in the local architecture, particularly in buildings of repute such as the palaces. This study also found pronounced exaggerations in the roof of some other Nigerian cultures like the Igbo, and the Nupe, but none matches the sheer size and ratio of the Yorùbá roofs as seen in the early 20th century photos of Yoruba architecture by German ethnographer Leo Frobenius. Also, there is no evidence whatsoever of

the significance of the overstated roofs in these other cultures other than an environmental response (Nsude, (1987); Lodson et al., (2018)).

It is evident that the philosophy of enlarging aspects of a system as a means of giving prominence to the spiritual importance or symbolism of the system is prevalent among the Yorùbá. While it is unclear if the early Yorùbá consciously transferred their idea of a socio-sacred representation of *orí* to their architecture or if it was merely intuitive, what is clear is that the idea was brilliantly manifested nonetheless. The obviously excessive grandeur of the Yorùbá roof, the activities surrounding its creation, maintenance and veneration validates the hypothesis that the roof in Yorùbá architecture is in fact a medium for the articulation of *orí* ideology.

During field research in January 2020 in Abeokuta, the author inquired from the renowned sculptor and cult devotee Baba Gbadamosi Taofeek whether these suppositions make any sense to him. Baba Gbadamosi said,

We take two areas of the house system seriously, they are: the roof (both external and internal) and the doorways. If a major ‘medicine’ is to be made for a household for protection against a coming calamity, we will focus on preparing an assemblage that is to be placed on (*òrulé*) or in (*àjà* – rafters) the roof. The roof represents a covering for the people who live in the house and anyone who seeks refuge in the protected abode. The doorway to us mainly represents the virginal opening so it must also be well protected otherwise the house will be compromised. *Abo ni lé* – the house is female. As we put things with *àse* (life force) on our women to protect them and their unborn (if pregnant), so we can put things on the roof of the house to protect it and its people.

He concludes that the most sacred ritual items of the Yorùbá are abstracted to roughly look conical in form. “Many potent assemblages laced with *àse* are tied on top to give a type of stylised conical form. The roofs of many *ile agbara* (shrines) are usually conical in shape. So I agree with what you are suggesting, because it makes (resonates) sense to me”.

Thus, just like the care given to *Iborí* or *Ile orí* to worship one’s *orí*, the occasional restoration of the *bere* grass on the Yorùbá roof system appears to be an allegorical form of worship of the roof element. As noted earlier, in the early days, the *oba* (king) is only seen annually on three occasions. These occasions are: the [ritual] festivals of *Ifa* (god of divination), *Ogun* (god of war/iron) and then the *Bere*. In many ways, the *Bere* celebrations, unbeknown to the people, simulates the spiritual interaction of the people with their *orí* in a bid to continue to access its protection and direction in life. The *Bere* ceremonies symbolises this in the context of architecture. The roof, which is the *orí* of architecture, is constantly appeased through a dedicated ceremony of adoration, reverence and care. This suggests that just as the sculptural (ritual) pieces provides a physical medium for the interaction and communication of human and god, so does architecture through the roof changing ceremony. The house unit in this case then becomes the physical piece through which the people, however subliminally, collectively communicate scheduled contrition to *orí*. One can conclude therefore that among the early Yorùbá the meaning and purpose derived from one is the same as the other, for as it is with sculpture, so it is with architecture. This would mean that architecture was regarded as art and a cultural element of identity. In fact, more than just tangible art, architecture can be regarded as a euphemistic anthropomorphic mass with the roof being the head of the system; the topmost segment of the structure which covers, protects and preserves the other elements. The rooms

or chambers of the building are the internal elements of the body. It is not a mere functional structure, based mainly on pragmatism, but on a specific socio-sacral ideology that successfully finds a voice through figurative art and, indeed, the architecture of the people.

It appears that by some subconscious transference of certain spiritual ideologies into other aspects of culture, the Yorùbá, possibly unintentionally, have structurally grafted their belief of the supremacy of *orí* unto architecture and they have continued to validate this position through the ritual of frequently changing the vegetal mass of the roof. While it would appear that the maintenance of the roof's organic mass is the reasonable thing to do in order to keep it efficient in covering and protecting the lower elements and the inhabitants of the house from precipitation, insects and so forth, there also seems to be a non-physical aspect to almost all traditional Yorùbá practice. Curiously, the Yorùbá view all organic matter as possessing a vital force (*àse*) that can be manipulated to regulate the quality of people's lives (Drewal, 1977). The replacement of the *bere* grass, in many ways, can then translate to the re-energising of the vital force necessary to keep the potency of the interaction between the people and *orí* alive through architecture.

Semiotics and Meaning in Yorùbá Architecture

Oftentimes, meaning springs from a religious base or a context in which their experiences are moulded. This is also the case in the external forms of architecture with its features communicate belief, culture and collective consciousness (George 2005).

Like most aspects of Yorùbá existence, conformity to socio-sacral codes and the expression of aesthetics play a vital role in the arts and lives of the people. The ideas of Yorùbá aesthetics are transmitted through distinctive physical characteristics in form, material and surface finishing. The contextual combination of the above creates a detailed character which in turn presents meaning. The interpretation and meaning of traditional architecture becomes essential even as the Yorùbá aspire to a future where the intermix of art, knowledge and religion will forge the foundations of a modern Yorùbá spatial order.

This study recommends that further philosophical discussions must be encouraged to engage the fabric of traditional architecture with the task to better understanding the fundamental content that truly gives meaning to the structure. Also, scholars of African architectural history need to see the importance and centrality of certain ideas behind the traditional architecture of the Yorùbá, and attempts must be made to reintegrating the new findings into main stream discussion and thinking of the future of architectural identity even as we continue to interplay technological advances with fundamental traditional ideological values. Why is this integration necessary? Shah (2012) answers, architecture in its purest sense is tangible manifestation interwoven with our lives to an extent matched only by our own biology. Architecture, Shah adds, is not manifest apart from us, it is us manifest.

Conclusion

In this study, an attempt was made at discussing the inconspicuous but highly likely use of traditional Yorùbá architecture as a medium for the expression of *orí* ideology and worship in the early times. The significant similarities between the character of *orí* paraphernalia, representation and worship and roofing architecture are such that they cannot be overlooked. This study found that while its meaning may be subliminal, the roof in Yorùbá architecture is indeed a metaphorical object for *orí* and the fundamental reverence given to *orí* is also accorded

to it, however involuntarily this might have happened. But as the dialogue with Gbadamosi Taofeek made clear, there is a distinct relationship between the two. A limitation of the study is that it presents an argument only for traditional architecture and does not discuss the possibility of this study's findings in the context of modern architectural expressions.

Since the Yorùbá see architecture as not only art but in fact a physical representation of an anthropomorphic system, more attention needs to be paid to the intelligent conversion of the main ideas behind this philosophy into modern expressions of architecture for Yorùbá consumption. Also, the call for an intellectual transmission of the core essence of Yorùbá architecture is so that the principal elements that make the framework of meaningful Yorùbá architecture is not lost to oblivion. The consequence of this would be undesirable – a future of culturally insensitive architecture.

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