

BOOK REVIEWS**Ornamentation in Yoruba Folk Architecture**

by C.O. Osasona

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Salvaging Folk Architecture from Imminent Collapse

Review by R.O. Rom Kalilu

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In 1824 when Captain Hugh Clapperton and Richard Lander visited Old Oyo metropolis, the capital city of the Old Oyo Empire, in the course of their expeditions to the interior of Africa, they observed that houses, particularly those of the chiefs, were ornamented and that a certain shrine in the metropolis was the "most fancifully ornamented of any of a similar kind in the interior of Africa" (Lander, 1830: 199). Ornamentation in architecture is a widespread phenomenon among the Yoruba. This practice is well articulated in the folk architecture that developed through the influence of the Afro-Brazilian building convention, and is the subject of *Ornamentation in Yoruba Folk Architecture* by C. O. Osasona.

The Yoruba, the producers of the architecture under study and whose homeland covers the southwestern part of Nigeria and parts of the Republics of Benin and Togo, constitute one of the largest single ethnic groups in Africa. In Nigeria, their homeland constitutes the present Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, Kwara and part of Kogi states (Kalilu, 1995: 11; Kalilu, Ayodele and Akintonde, 2006: 38). Studying their architecture across the spatio-temporal boundaries of their homeland would be ambitious indeed. This book, therefore, concentrates on the architecture of the Yoruba of Nigeria.

The people are regarded as the producers of the largest arts in Africa (Fagg, 1968: xviii) and are certainly the most prolific artists of the continent (Bascom, 1973: 64-66). Their artistic and architectural traditions are one of the few forming a continuum from a legendary past to the present. This cannot be otherwise because of the people's penchant for creativity and dynamism, which feature in every aspect of their lives, hence the characteristic resilience of their culture, *asa*, selective choices, that provide appropriate responses to a myriad of complex influences. This accounts for the organic morphological growth and diversity of their architecture that manifests as many as four traditions within the same artistic landscape.

The Yoruba have been studied extensively. Research on Yoruba culture is the richest on any African group both in extent and depth. An intriguing dimension to this also is that, unlike the case of other groups in Africa, scholarship on Yoruba art was largely pioneered by indigenous art scholars. J.R.O. Ojo, credited by Osasona with sowing the the seed that "has

produced this harvest", i.e., her book, was in fact the first Yoruba art scholar to be published in 1973, preceded only by the Geographer G.J.A. Ojo in 1966 (Kalilu, 1995: 9). Almost every genre of Yoruba art has been studied but, in relative terms, architecture has received less attention.

Yoruba architecture has been looked at as both art and shelter. Its form, style, typology, iconography, iconology, material and technology as well as technical, ecological and economic significance have been studied. There has been, however, a persistent omission of the study of ornamentation in Yoruba architecture. This lacuna is illustrated by the content of the national conference in 1977 on the "House in Nigeria" and the resultant publication of the same title (Amole, 1997). The conference and the book featured seventy one papers by eighty two scholars. None of the seventy one papers directly studies ornamentation in Yoruba architecture. Only one paper (Kalilu, 1997: 47) cursorily mentions ornamentation in architecture and another one (Oladeji, 1997: 131) merely acknowledges, in passing, decoration around architecture. This is characteristic of scholastic reticence on ornamentation in architecture.

There are however a few studies on decorations applied to Yoruba architecture (Beier, 1955; Beier, 1959; Beier, 1960; Dmochowski, 1990). This dearth of comprehensive studies is in spite of the insiders' commitment and their understanding of the nuances and aesthetic sensitivity of the people and their architecture. It is against the foregoing background that *Ornamentation in Yoruba Folk Architecture* should be appreciated. It is a bold step in addressing a scholastic problem.

The book, with a foreword by J.R.O. Ojo, studies ornamentation in Yoruba architecture, focusing particularly on ornamentation in folk architecture. The book is a harvest of research endeavours that first started in 1989. The author has drawn on her experience as an architect, an art historian and an academic as well as the advantage of about sixteen years' interpretation and re-interpretation of the data at her disposal. The data have been collected mostly from western Yorubaland—Ekiti, Ondo and Osun States—which the author has taken to be characteristic of Yorubaland as a whole.

Casting a historical dragnet over about two centuries, the book in one comprehensive attempt explores the history and typology of Yoruba architecture. It examines the traditional, through vernacular to modern architecture. It highlights the forms, the decorative elements and the nature of Yoruba domestic folk architecture. In doing this, it looks at the morphology of typical Yoruba houses and their groupings into compounds in both urban and semi-urban settings. Based largely on qualitative data from critical appraisals of buildings constructed mostly between 1930 and 1950, the book identifies nine decorative elements and classifies them into eleven different types. Nineteen different motif types applied to these elements were also identified. The tools as well as the techniques of ornamentation are also discussed. Data from other parts of Yorubaland in Nigeria not

covered by the author's field research, particularly those at the fringes, might have revealed other morphological and thematic tendencies that may reflect other possible inspirations and influences beyond the Afro-Brazilian.

Organized into six chapters and presented in hard cover, the book, published simultaneously in Ibadan and Calabar by Bookbuilders – Editions Africa, is well produced, with 140 pages of fanciful but readable fonts. The visual support to the text is copious. There are 154 illustrations made up of one map, forty six drawings, sixty eight black and white photographs and thirty nine coloured photographs.

Osasona's effort is laudable. It is a significant contribution to the history of Yoruba art, particularly architecture, both in scholarship and pedagogy. The study is long overdue and the book is a timely intervention. Unbridled 'modernism' and westernization as well as shifts in taste have greatly affected folk architecture, which is fast being discontinued. The majority of the extant examples are old and may not last for too long. An in-depth and detailed study such as this is therefore more than filling a gap in Yoruba art scholarship: it is also a typological chronicle and a catalogue of architectural feats of the Yoruba of Nigeria. The significance of the study is further underscored by its timeliness. This is because the masons, the craftsmen and the artists who produced the architecture have largely disappeared. Those remaining and their torch bearers are no longer actively in practice, partly for lack of commensurate income for their painstaking efforts, but mainly for the lack of opportunity to divert their skills to new avenues which contemporary builders and architects have not provided. This problem is further compounded by the current get-rich-quick syndrome that has turned virtually every able-bodied youth into a commuter motorcyclist (*Okada* rider) or a daily paid labourer. This unsavoury development has put almost every apprentice and craftsman out of practice. They prefer an immediate financial income through daily gains to the discipline of apprenticeship or artisanship. This situation not only makes the future of folk architecture very bleak but also portends danger for the nation. If this trend is not checked, in about five years' time, artisans may have to be imported to meet local demands. A more serious danger is that, if the nation's transportation system improves and commuter cycling is no longer required, Nigeria will be left with a multitude of unskilled and unemployed youths, which may increase the crime rate in the country.

Beyond scholasticism, Osasona's effort is an invitation to architects to consider the merits of folk architecture. It is also a challenge to develop this phenomenon to 21st century standard as well as to provide opportunities to local masons and craftsmen to further enhance their economic status and consequently, Yoruba culture. The book provides good resource material for architects, designers, artists, planners, historians, social scientists, scholars in the built environment disciplines and policy makers as well as students of African culture and those of environmental sciences and design.

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Colonial Architecture in Ile-Ife, Nigeria
by Cordella Osasona and Anthony Hyland
Published by Book Builders-Editions Africa, 2006

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In the field of conservation all buildings are considered to be potential monuments in terms of what they have to tell us about the past. In Dmochowski's study, of Traditional Nigerian Architecture we have a comprehensive record of indigenous designs and construction methods of the buildings which support traditional life and culture throughout the country, much of which continues to be built to this day in the rural areas. The records of imported influences however, although available, are fragmented, perhaps reflecting the uncertainty of their appropriateness and like much of our traditional building, they are rapidly disappearing mainly due to commercial pressures. The Brazilian Quarter in Lagos is a case in point where a number of fine houses have been destroyed to make way for new and more profitable developments.

The authors set out to trace the commencement of that period in our history when foreign trade and political dominance infiltrated our psyche and not only took us over but took us out of our isolation and made us part of their world. This process came about by colonisation in the same way that the Roman empire expanded to maintain its power and augment its resources. However, after a relatively short period, in fact a little over a century, colonial dominance gave way to indigenisation leaving the foreign legacy of government, religions and commercial institutions. The buildings which were created for them are the physical evidence of their presence and their influence persists today having become a part of the pedigree architecture which we accept today in our towns.

It is however to be remembered that, somewhat perversely, our culture demands that the achievements of our forebears are allowed to die with them to allow fresh roots and branches to grow. Similarly with the buildings they create. In making the case for conservation the authors are stressing the importance of buildings adding to our knowledge about the way our society developed. LEGACY, a society of which one of the authors is an active member, believes we need to engender a pride in the buildings of the past in an effort to salvage and conserve something for future generations.

By its title the book uncompromisingly establishes the typology of significant buildings within a period of some 300 years from the 15 century in Ghana to the end of colonial rule on the West Coast of Africa in the 1960s as "Colonial" and posits that through its general acceptance it has continued. This is true and indeed I believe has been further continued to the present day but there remains an ambivalence over our approach to design which is endangering the development of a regional expression.

After the Introduction the authors make reference to some impressive Colonial Buildings many of which still stand today. These include government offices, churches and commercial buildings. The city engineer of Ibadan, Taffy Jones, is given due recognition for the design and construction of the neo-classical Mapo Hall as well as the brick columns and arches of the Ile-Nla at Ile-Ife. Also discussed is the influence of the climatic conditions on the design which led to the inclusion of verandahs, the overhanging roofs and large openings which characterised the overall style. Basically they were designed for Europeans used to working and living in a cooler climate. Lugard laid down the preferred construction of houses for the first settlements in Zungeru and Lokoja and the later houses in Kaduna became known as the "Lugard type". It would have been interesting to know from the authors whether in taking over those houses designed for Europeans, their African counterparts adopted the designs as their preferred living environment.

In addition to the analysis of the designs, reference is made to the construction materials including adobe and cob, traditional materials, which were plastered and painted usually in green and cream which became the ubiquitous decoration for Government buildings throughout the Federation. Even up to the time of independence it was usually left to the Public Works Department's engineers to design and build small structures in the outstations of which Ile-Ife would have been one, and I can remember touring with the District Officer at Kabba to inspect small rest houses in the province which he had designed himself and executed with local contractors on very minimal budgets.

The characters in Tim Aluko's amusing 1966 novel *Kinsman and Foreman* act out the day to day work of the District Engineer and how he coped with the myriad of maintenance problems, execution of new works and dealing with the misdemeanours of his foremen in the field. In recording and appreciating the Government works in Ile-Ife, the authors are paying tribute to a group of official employees who in their own way added something to the town which in retrospect was unique.

Until the construction of the University of Ibadan in 1948 it should be remembered that there were no large buildings in Nigeria apart from the churches of which Christ Church and Holy Cross Cathedrals in Lagos were considered large. Perhaps the largest house was Government House finished in 1894.

Cordelia Osasona has devoted a considerable part of her academic life to recording historic buildings of the recent past, and she and Anthony Harding are to be commended for this study which I am sure will be the first of many more to be written about the Colonial era and the architecture it produced.

Master of Masters: Yusuf Grillo, his life and works

Edited by Paul Chike Dike* and Patricia Oyelola

Published by The National Gallery of Art, Nigeria, 2006

Pages xiv + 269, illustrated in colour and black and white.

Soft cover: ₦2,500

In pursuit of its policy to publish books on the history of modern Nigerian art for the benefit of the student of African art history as well as the cultured reader, the National Gallery, under the dedicated leadership of Dr. Paul Chike Dike, has produced a substantial work on Yusuf Grillo (b. 1934), titled *Master of Masters*. This work contains critical essays and personal reminiscences in honour of a man who belongs to the pioneering generation of modern Nigerian artists who received their initial training in the Department of Fine Art, Nigercol, Zaria, in the late 1950's.

Specialising originally in painting (which remains his favourite medium), Grillo manifests in his use of colour and composition those qualities of coolness and restraint which are the hall-mark of the Yoruba culture which moulded his character when he was growing up in the Brazilian Quarters in Lagos in the late 1930's.

Profusely illustrated with colour and black and white photographs of Grillo's works and personalities who played key rôles in the development of modern art in Nigeria, this book supplies much detailed information about the growth and development of the Art Department of the Yaba College of Technology, popularly known as Yabatech. Established in 1947, Yaba Higher College, as it was then known, was the oldest tertiary institution in Nigeria.

Grillo's skills as a teacher and administrator at the Yaba College of Technology are legendary. The auditorium of the Art Complex now bears his name, a permanent reminder of Yusuf Grillo's contribution to art education in Nigeria.

As a result of Grillo's influence, Yaba art graduates are distinguished for their painterly skills. It is to Grillo's credit also that programmes in printing, graphic design, textile design, fashion design and photography were introduced. He also made a substantial contribution to the design of the Yaba Art Complex which incorporates a courtyard for the interaction of staff and students, a characteristic feature of "traditional" Yoruba architecture.

Although the illustrations in *Master of Masters* cover Gillo's sculptures (in low-relief and in-the-round), mosaics, stained glass windows and paintings, the critical analyses do not pay much attention to the stained glass works. These merit a detailed examination of Grillo's use of form, line, colour, iconography and text in both secular settings (for example, the National Theatre) and religious contexts (for example, churches and chapels).

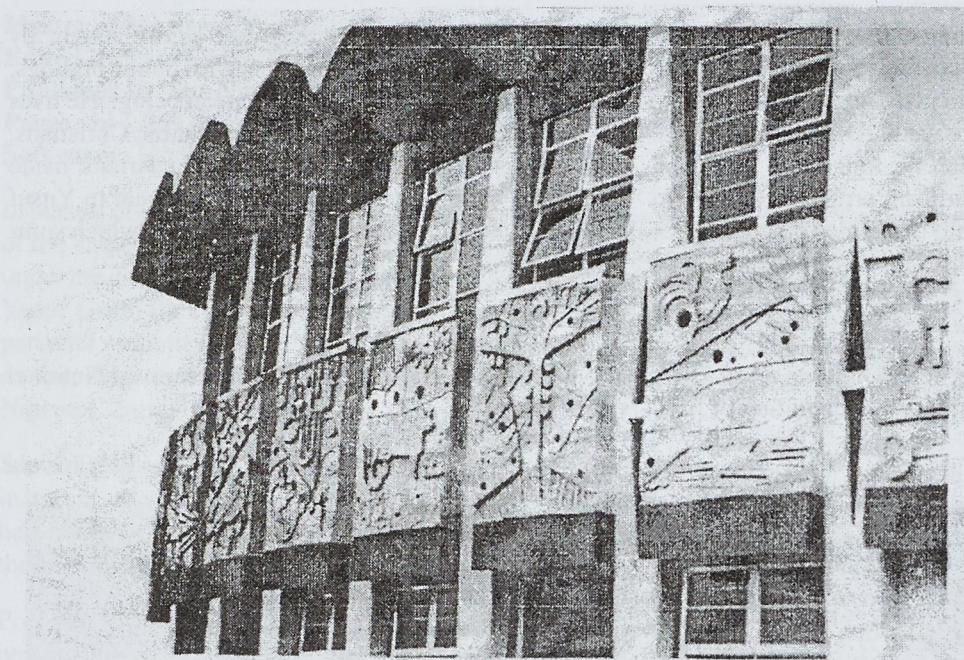
Admired for his consummate skill as an artist whose paintings are avidly sought by collectors and whose works in other media are frequently commissioned for public buildings, particularly in Lagos and Abuja, Grillo is also widely respected as a human being. He lives in peace and harmony with all, as exemplified in the Organisation of Islamic Christians, which he founded. Under his wise leadership, the Society of Nigerian Artists made significant progress. The word “gentleman” recurs in many of the tributes paid to Yusuf Grillo in this book, surely a translation of “omoluabi”, the Yoruba expression which sums up the qualities of the ideal character.

*Dr. P.C. Dike retired as Director of the National Gallery in 2006. He received National Honours in recognition of his services.

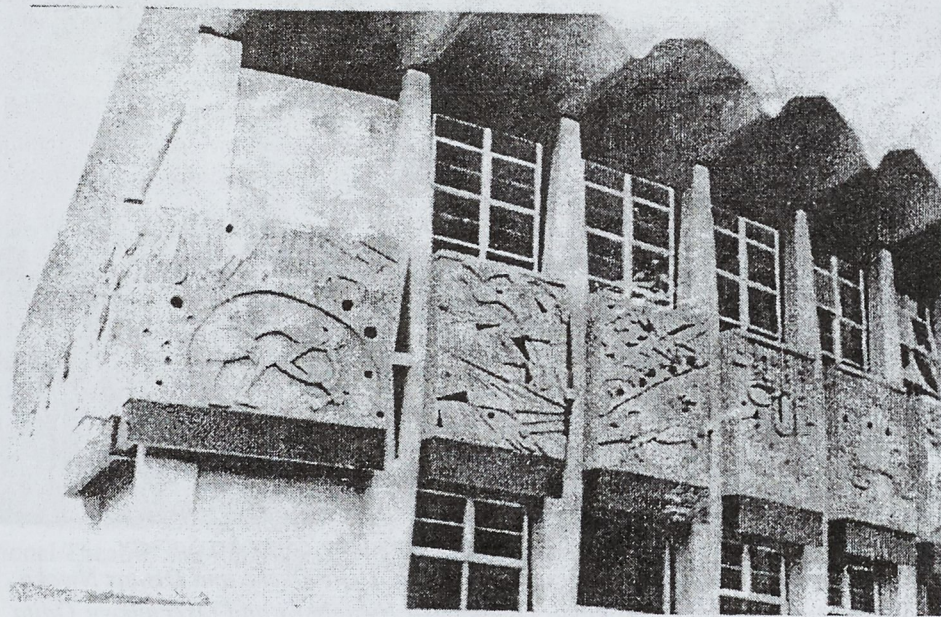
—Pat Oyelola



*Group photograph of some members of the Zaria Art Society
Sitting L-R Bruce Onabrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo, Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko
Standing L-R Osadebe Oseloka, Ogbonnaya Nwagbara and Okechukwu Odita*



Grillo's bas relief at the University of Ibadan



Relief mural, University of Ibadan, Faculty of Agriculture