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ARCHITECTURE AND IKWERRE CULTURE: HIDDEN DIMENSIONS

The culture of a people determines their architecture. However many circumstances obliterate some vital aspects of their culture and invariably their architecture. This situation leads less critical historians to an erroneous conclusion that some people, particularly Africans, south of the Sahara, do not have a history. The reasons for these risible conclusions represent the absence of visual information about the concrete records of achievements. Visual absence is often confused with virtual presence on the premise that seeing alone confirms believing. Generally, people measure the history of world science, technology, and the arts in artefacts and architecture; hence, they regard any culture lacking documented physical and visual evidence as primitive. Happily, historians are now becoming more informed as science and information technology now reveal what was invisible. Our attention focuses on Ikwerre people generally, but particularly on those who are resident in Evo/Apara, Rebisi/Port Harcourt, and Obio/Akpor kingdoms, whom the unbridled expansion eroding the building culture of the Ikwerre people, mostly challenges. Since the Ikwerre people, according to Woke et al. (1993:20), Prof. Echeruo (1993), and Chief Ichegbo (1992:14) respectively, have several versions about their origins and times of arrival at their present abode, there are bound to be marginal variations in their customs according to communities. According to Ogwutum, S. (1996), these variations do not change the fact that "iwhuruoha bu otu" or "Ikwerre bu otu" which means that the Ikwerre people are always together as one indivisible people.

Keywords: Ikwerre people, folk architecture, cultural heritage, community, custom and tradition

Introduction

The history of Ikwerre people, which predated the advent of the white men and the Nigerian nation (1914), has namely *Elele* group (Ishimbam), *Esila* group (Ishiali), Reo group *Risimini* and OPA group (Obio / Port Harcourt /

/ Akpor) – (Achinewhu 1994:4-5). The Ikwerre people, who were in the old Port Harcourt province of the former Eastern Region of Nigeria, live in the South Eastern part of Nigeria¹. The Ikwerre people now live in four local Government Areas of Emohua, Ikwerre, Obio/Akpor and Port Harcourt City of Rivers State. The Ikwerre culture is visible and audible in the following towns and villages: *Ndele, Emohua, Odegu, Ogbakiri, Akpor, Obio, Igwuruta, Omagwa, Isiokpo, Aluu, Ibaa-Obele, Elele, Omerelu, Apani, Egbeda, Omademe, Ozuaha, Ipo, Omuanwa, Omudioga, Akpabu, Ubima, Ubimini, and Rumuekpe*, etc. The Ikwerre people with a population of 800.000 (Provisional Census figures 1991) live within 4°, 50'N, 5°, 15'N, 6°, 30'E and 7°, 15'E (Achinewhu 1994:4-5) in the tropical rain forest where: annual rainfall is 2000-2800 mm in two seasons, temperature, on the average, is around 20-32°C centigrade and the relative humidity is more than 65%. The Ikwerre people, who own more than 20% of the arable lands of Rivers State, are traditionally, farmers, fishermen and traders (Kinako *et al.* 1989:31-39).

¹ Geographically, the Ikwerre people are a homogeneous ethnic group who inhabit a substantial part of the northern half of Rivers State. The Ikwerre people share common boundaries with other ethnic groups, namely: *Ogba-Egbema, Ekpeye*, and *Abua* to the north and west, to the south with *Ijaw (Ijo)*, to the Southwest and east with *Tai-Elеме*, and *Etche* groups and to the Northeast with the *Ibo* of *Imo* State. Crucially, from time immemorial and despite the vicissitudes of political fortunes, the Ikwerre have always regarded themselves as a group distinct and different from other groups from their immediate neighbours; thus they refer to themselves as *Ruwhu-Eli* (Nduka 1993). Interestingly, none of the other ethnic groups surrounding the Ikwerre people has tried to assimilate them except the *Ibo*.

The paucity of both primary and secondary evidence on Ikwerre history is largely traceable to the bland assumption on the part of earlier investigators and authors of "intelligence reports". They erroneously assert that the Ikwerre are merely a branch of the *Ibo* ethnic group with a cultural zone extending right from the northernmost reaches of *Nsukka* Division to the Bight of Biafra on the Atlantic seaboard. Such assertions are rampant worldwide; especially when the then World Powers callously dismembered Africa at the 1885 Berlin conference for political reasons regardless of the ties of consanguinity between kith and kin. Whereas majority of Ikwerre clans and scholars affirm that they migrated from the ancient Benin kingdom to the West, just like their *Ekpeye* and *Ogba* kith and kin, a controversial minority claims *Ibo* origins.

In the present dispensation, the Ikwerre people are in Rivers State in the South-South Geopolitical Zone while the *Ibo* people are in the Southeast Geopolitical Zone. This, decisively, confirms the autonomy of the Ikwerre from the hegemony of the *Ibo* legally, culturally, linguistically and politically.

The Ikwerre people speak Ikwerre language, while the *Ibo* people speak *Igbo* language. For example, in 1913 the Right Reverend Tugwell, the then Anglican Bishop on the Niger, discovered that although the Ikwerre were regarded as *Ibo*, the Union *Ibo* Bible translation, surprisingly, was not easily understood by the Ikwerre (Tasie 1976) who had had no contacts with *Ibo*. The eminent scholar, Professor Miss Kay Williamson (1973) succinctly asserts based on lexicostatistical analysis that *Ikwerre, Ekpeye, Ogba, Etche* and *Ibo* languages belong to the same language cluster or related languages, which she referred to as "the lower Niger group of languages". These languages may be *Igbo*id, but certainly not dialects of one another.

The Ikwerre people worship ancestors (*Ndichie*), traditional gods (*Ojukwu Diobu*, *Amadioha* etc.) and recently many have become Christians or Muslims, etc. They worship indoors (*Obiri*, *Rukani*), sacred groves, natural forms such as the *Owhor* trees (*Datariun microcarpum*), hills, etc, in village shrines (*Ruwu-Eli*), aquatic spirit bodies (*Owumini*) Churches, Mosques, etc.

The Ikwerre people practice democracy under the rule of kings (*Eze*) and gerontocracy, that is, leadership by the elders (*Nyenwe-Eli*), under the auspices of various traditional institutions: age groups, first married wives (*Ogbotu*), firstborn sons (*Epara*), firstborn daughters (*Ada*), and traditional priesthood (*Nyegi-Owhor* / *Nyerisi Owhor* / *Nye Vu Rukani*). These cultural and traditional institutions evolve in a continuous state of flux, but reflect fixedly in Ikwerre folk architecture. This paper discusses the relationships between these concepts and their consequent forms of architectural expressions in the course of Ikwerre culture.

Urban, rural and regional planning in the Ikwerre land

The conspicuous congestion that characterizes the defaced or effaced Ikwerre villages, especially those that the sprawling city of Port Harcourt or oil exploration is swallowing up, gives the misleading impressions that Ikwerre settlements are unorganized. A study of Ikwerre communities reveals that there is consistency in the settlement pattern of the Ikwerre people wherever they are in their traditional domain. These aspects of culture show in: the layout of their communities; spatial concept; special types of buildings and specificities of functional relationships in accordance with the unique traditions and customs typical of the Ikwerre people.

The settlement pattern in terms of spatial and formal expressions depicts the dictates of culture and traditions in various ways:

The Ikwerre people conceptualize their villages as groups of people rather than groups of buildings. Contextually, the prefix "*Rumu*" or "*Oro*," based on the social structure of those who live in them, usually expressed and distinguished the village, town or community. "*Rumu*" refers to the children of the founder of a village or community; for example *Rumuokoro* refers to the area occupied by the children of Okoro and *Rumuomasi* refers to the space occupied by the children of Omasi. In *Rebisi*, the prefix *Oro* refers to the space of land occupied by the household of a man or by the derived community thereof. This may include: direct descendants, children, adopted children (Anyagwu 1972:2-10), strangers who because of their desirable valour, virtue or value, voluntarily accept to serve and stay in the community in various capacities (Woke *et al* 1993:20), and slaves (Ogwutum 1996) who were procured or captured (Amadi 1982:64). The rule of an *Eze* (King) under common customs, harnesses these heterogeneous groups harmoniously. The prefix

Oro, particularly in Obio, may in addition mean the amalgamation of at least two autonomous communities administered as a kingdom such as *Oro Evo* under *Eze Oha Evo*; *Apara* under *Eze Apara*; *Oro-Opotoma*, under *Eze Orsuji (Opotoma)*; *Oro Esara* under *Eze Oro Esara* and *Rebisi* under *Eze Epara Rebisi* (Ogwutum 1996).

In some cases, groups of compounds or families with common interests under a sole headman and traditional institutions made up a village. Ikwerre culture regards this type of arrangement as symbolic. The chief's or traditional ruler's house is normally distinguishable from the rest by its relatively great ornamentation or exaggerated proportions. This type of settlement pattern portrays the peculiar circumstances for their emergence. For example, the names of some communities within Port Harcourt have definitive meaning:

According to Professor Otonti Nduka, *Nkpogu*, translated, could mean a defensive wall *nkpo* (personal communication 2000). In another interview, Charles Chuku (personal communication 1997), ascertains that *Nkpogu*, laying emphasis on *Ogu* (charm or medicine), means a settlement of men in possession of potent charms or medicines. These formed the settlement for the War Lords sent from various Ikwerre communities as a token of brotherhood into *Rebisi* (Port Harcourt) to form a defence front at the *Nkpogu* frontier to ward off the incursion of enemies, which the recent recurrent conflicts between *Ikwerre* and *Okrika* peoples in the volatile *Nkpogu* sector certainly confirms. Whether we look at *Nkpogu* as a wall (Nduka personal communication 2000) or as a garrison of strong native medicine men (Chuku, personal communication); we can see that the Ikwerre people designated *Nkpogu* as a zone dedicated to the traditional defence of the common cultural heritage and territorial integrity of Ikwerre people. *Elekahia*, probably from the Ikwerre language *ahiamakara* (an Ikwerre market day called *Nmakara*), delineates the area devoted to the trade between Ikwerre traders and their neighbours (Ogwutum 1996:7). Similarly, *Nkpolu* from the Ikwerre language *olu/oru/erun* means a place of work or works generally, which to farmers invariably refers to farming or the area, meaning an area devoted to distant farmlands and farm settlements obviously on higher grounds. Thus, we can see that the layout or settlement pattern of Ikwerre communities shows a disciplined, orderly, cohesive, complex system of socio-cultural functional relationships and folk architectural planning.

The folk architecture of the Ikwerre people

Traditionally, every Ikwerre settlement pays particular attention to the village and compound layout as family units. According to Ogwutum (1996), the nuclear family (*Ezi n'Oro*) is the basic universal form of the family unit. It consists simply of father, wife and children, which is the critical minimum family unit needed for procreation. The population of

the nuclear or minimal family depends on the form of marriage adopted: monogamy or polygamy. All the members of the major family (*Ogba*) minor family (*Rime Ogba*) and the minimal family (*Ezi n'Oro*) live within a compound (Nduka 1993:72-74). The compounds were essentially similar, reflecting the simple agrarian culture of the people. Functionally, the buildings within a compound are divided into rooms for the living and for the dead, the latter being used during rites of passage preceding burials. Other types of buildings within the compound include barns, pens, sit-outs and roof-covered craftwork areas for thatch and basket weaving. The living rooms reflected the culture and traditional institutions of the people. Rooms were specifically assigned to the head of the family (*Nda*), room for the first married wife (*Ogbotu*), rooms for other wives (*Achama*), firstborn son (*Epara*), firstborn daughter (*Ada* or *Oroma*), and other children who share common rooms when they become of age enough to be independent of their respective mothers. The usual burial place for an Ikwerre man is beside or at the front of his house while they bury women and children beside or at the back of the house. Some exceptions to the rule occur when a man dies before completing his building. In this case, as a mark of respect, they personalized one of the uncompleted rooms in perpetuity to form a final resting place for the deceased would-be house owner; nobody else dwells in that room forever after. Furthermore, they may bury a man indoors to avoid enemies, who may otherwise, violate his grave for the purpose of invoking his spirit or using sand scooped from his fresh grave for diabolical voodoo practices. They may also bury a man indoors where land is insufficient due to indiscriminately sale or forced acquisition of land by Government through decrees such as the obnoxious land use act of 1978 (Ogwutum 1996:7). According to Ogwutum, to be buried or even to die outside his own village is an abomination for an Ikwerre man according to the customs of some Ikwerre communities such as *Rumuji*. The burial ceremony explains why the Ikwerre people attach high value to owning land and a residential house within a customized compound. This way, the Ikwerre person psychologically remains, in life and in death, in perpetual contact with his kith and kin. According to Nigerian traditions, an improper burial, especially outside one's community, excommunicates the deceased from the continuum of spiritual communion with other kindred spirits on equal basis. The soul of the dead person cannot have the assurance of resting in peace in death, because, according to Ikwerre traditional beliefs and cosmology, the deceased cannot reincarnate into their original family unless they get a befitting burial from their kith and kin. The deceased will continue to roam rejected, as it were in limbo, between the dead and living worlds; hence, nobody, including Ikwerre people, wants the reality of such an agonizing restless eternity. The fear is that the deceased may resort to tormenting the living relations in retaliation for their inability to have buried them properly. Therefore, a befitting burial in the proper place, organized by

kith and kin is a serious, awesome business in Ikwerre culture (Amadi 1982:64).

Public buildings and spaces in Ikwerre folk architecture

An empty space may not essentially be free; beneath the emptiness may be an assigned area, protected by taboos that serve special significant cultural events. An otherwise empty space may turn out to be an area reserved for the service of several seasonal communal religious ceremonies, the abode of Deities (shrines or sacred groves) or village periodic playgrounds (*Egelege*). The architecture of the public places favours openness of plans and fenestration due to the clement climatic condition such as warm temperatures within 25-32°C, predictable rains (2800-3000mm per annum) and high relative humidity (> 65% annually). The abundance of sacred ceremonies, embedded in community-based activities, generates the unique formal, spatial and functional relationships, which the folk architecture reveals through the culture of the Ikwerre.

Two typical public building types: the *Obiri* and *Obokoro*, epitomize the unique culture of the Ikwerre people. To non-indigenes and many casual observers of these structures, that are used for meetings, may appear the same; but to the Ikwerre people they are essentially different and of great significance in their daily socio-cultural activities.

There are two types of *Obiri*, namely *Obiri Oro*, which belongs to each original compound and *Obiri Oha*, which the entire village or community owns collectively. The *Obiri-oro* serve as the reception hall for important visitors to the compound and as a family meeting hall for men to converge on *Riagbo* (an Ikwerre sacred day for resting) over *manya riagbo* (free wine designated for consumption on *riagbo*). The main purpose of the *Obiri oro* is to house the *Rukani* (the reliquary) and serve as a place for religious ceremonies, traditional judicial palaver, as well as annual family reunions known as *Oranda* (Ogwutum 1996:25-26).

The *Obiri-oro* has special design features, which make it a prominent focal point in any Ikwerre compound or community. It is traditionally mandatory to locate the *Obiri-oro* at the centre of the compound, which is usually an atrium or courtyard; to emphasize its collective ownership, and equal accessibility rights to all male members of the compound. It is pertinent to note that Ikwerre tradition, in certain communities, strictly excludes women from entering into the *Obiri*, on the premise that they are congenitally unclean because of their menstrual periods, which is, they believe, traditionally, tantamount to a taboo capable of effacing the efficacy and sanctity of sacred places, including the *rukani* within the *Obiri-Oro*. Consequently, violation of this order is culpable and capable of making women who break the bounds barren; as well as causing miscarriages, accompanied by painful persistent or premature cessation of menstrual flow, followed frequently by instant death. Hence, women sit in

awe outside the *Obiri* during meetings, in their own interest, to avoid calamity.

The *Obiri-Oro* normally does not have windows but it is airy as their only enclosure it by means of dwarf walls and pillars or posts to support the traditional thatch, or contemporary corrugated iron roofing sheet. The *Obiri* has several entrances that facilitate unfettered access from the circumscribing buildings within the compound.

The *Obiri Oha* is the village or community version of the *Obiri-Oro*. However, the *Obiri Oha* is different in size and the interior, which they arrange into chambers from the *Obiri-Oro*. The first chamber is for *Owhor* holders, the second is for chiefs and the third is for the people (Ogwutum 1996:62-66). The first three eldest men, as of right, sit in the chambers. The chiefs may sit in the chambers with *Owhor* holders just as the oldest male from each of the villages that constitute the community, as of right, may sit in the chambers when space is sufficient.

The *Obokoro* is the second public building in Ikwerre folk architecture. It is an open meeting hall for all, including women, because it does not contain the restrictive sacrosanct reliquary called *Oro Rukani*. The *Oro Rukani*, which is always under lock and key, is accessible only to the *Nye Vu Rukani*, who is also the *Nyegi owhor* of every compound, since the *Rukani* is the excrescent of *Owhor*. Unlike the *Obiri*, the entitled person, the *Nyegi-owhor*, pours libations in the open in an *Obokoro*. While any family member in a particular compound may build any numbers of *Obokoro*, there cannot be more than one *Obiri* in the same compound since it is customarily built by the founder or by the head of a family.

Open spaces in Ikwerre folk architecture

A survey of Ikwerre communities, particularly within Rebisi, Evo, Apará, Obio and Akpor, respectively, reveals a progressive acute shortage of spaces for communal ceremonies such as marriages, burials and meetings. These inevitable occasions constantly clash with human and vehicular traffic. This problem poses fundamental questions about the Ikwerre concept of space and its orchestration in architecture. Our observations reveal several space concepts in time and space. These include intimate spaces within and around the compound, as well as communal social recreational and sacred spaces.

Earlier we have discussed the various space types within and around the home and compound. These are spaces for living, recreation, sleeping and laying in state before burial. We will now focus attention on the other types of communal spaces: the *Egelege*, the market square and the sacred grove or *Ruwhu-Eli*, which houses the village shrine for propitiating the Earth Deity (Ogwutum 1996:62-66). Because of clement climatic conditions, characterized by warm and predictable rainfalls, most activities take place outdoors.

Egelege (wrestling matches)

The *Egelege* refers to the wrestling matches, which serve as a determinate yardstick for admittance into the age group. Wrestling matches take place outdoors as a recreational activity in Ikwerre land for the entertainment of visitors and guests to the community during festivals, as a form of competition among the age groups of Ikwerre communities and as a mark of honour to heroes of the community at some stages in their installations, commemorations, and coronations. These sacred, ceremonial and communal activities take place at special significant spaces such as village playground, sacred groves, in a space at the palace of the *Eze* or chief's compound. Contemporary diminishing land-space coupled with consequent congested landscape robs the communities of freedom during cultural celebrations and of total communal experience. The view is that the current resurgence upsurge of destructive restive youth is traceable to claustrophobia that customarily emanates from the absence of traditional socio-cultural spaces for a holistic recreational experience.

The market place (Ahiamakara)

The market place forms the foundation of Ikwerre communities and constitutes a vital colourful component of socio-cultural life. The market affords the agrarian people a place for commercial exchange, notably initiated by the farmer and hunter Rebisi, the progenitor of the Ikwerre people in the present Port Harcourt area, and his neighbour, Opogulaya the fisherman from Okrika. Hence, on *Asaragbo*, the day preceding *Riagbo* the traditional Ikwerre holy day is the biggest market in Rebisi situated significantly at the symbolic point, where Rebisi originally met Opogulaya at ahiamakara ground. The concept of the Ikwerre market extends beyond buying and selling of services and goods. The market is the socio-cultural space that serves as the arena for the dissemination and assimilation of vital information on various aspects of life in the society. Market days provide opportunity for ancestral veneration and paying of homage to deities. In some cases, markets generate the architecture for political and administrative purposes in their respective community (*Omaruta Rebisi* Age Group 1989:45-47).

The sacred grove or Ruwhu-Eli

The Ikwerre people practice their traditional religions both indoors and outdoors. However, communal worship takes place outdoors and seldom under personal roof of an individual's home. This is due to the belief that the reliquary and particularly, the Owbor, causes obstreperous scenes if placed in an individual's home. In addition to the abhorrence of such a practice as connoting selfishness, the people see it as disrespectful to the ancestors who, they believe, need a separate sacrosanct meeting place in the

Obiri for holding their meetings like the living members of the family do. The sacred places reserved for religious ceremonies and burials are located in sacred groves (*Ruwhu-Eli*) or in a "bad bush" as a cemetery for the victim of an abominable death, generally believed to be a taboo to *Eli*, the earth deity; and at waterfronts for aquatic spirits (*Owumini*). These extant virgin environments, preserved in the content and context in these revered spaces, serve as rich reservoirs of resources that conserve the conduct and culture, as complementary parts to the folk architecture, typical of the Ikwerre people.

Conclusion

The study has presented the unique folk architecture that epitomizes the rich cultural heritage of the Ikwerre culture. Contrary to the contemporary pervasive notion of visual chaos, the study reveals the inherent hidden forms of order and harmony in the conceptualization of Ikwerre folk architecture. The cosmology and symbolism of Ikwerre culture show an uncommon holistic fusion of physical and metaphysical order in the home, compound, and community layout. The folk architecture of Ikwerreland conceptualizes form and space as an inseparable holistic hierarchical order, in perpetual harmony, between the living members on the visible physical side and the dead members living on the invisible metaphysical side of the community.

This study also noted the drastic inimical changes that ignore the established implicit and explicit socio-cultural harmony expressed in folk architecture between the various components of Ikwerre communities and the physical environment. The view is that diminishing territories lead to claustrophobia, which provokes youth restiveness, and the demeaning demise of an esteemed cultural heritage. The transformation of the concepts expressed in Ikwerre folk architecture can reverse the atrocious changes and revive the useful aspects cherished as the cultural heritage of the Ikwerre.

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Ikwerre compound



Tombstone in a compound: Eze Nyenke Tomb, Omuda, Ibaa



Obiri oro of Nyenke family, Omuda, Ibaa



Modern Obiri oro



Market scene: Ahia-otikpo, Omusunu, Ibaa



In the background the sacred grove: Ruwhe-Eli

ARHITEKTURA I IKWERRE KULTURA: SKRIVENE DIMENZIJE SAŽETAK

Unatoč tome što se neki vitalni aspekti kulture i arhitekture zaboravljaju, kultura naroda određuje njegovu arhitekturu. Takva situacija vodi neke nedovoljno kritične povjesničare ka krivome zaključku da neki narodi, osobito afrički narodi južno od Sahare, nemaju povijesti. Do takvih smiješnih zaključaka dolazi se zbog nedostatka vizualnih informacija o konkretnim postignućima. Ljudi uopće mjere povijest svjetske znanosti, tehnologije i umjetnosti pomoću artefakata i arhitekture te smatraju kulture kojima nedostaju fizički i vizualni dokumenti primitivnima. Srećom, povjesničari postaju sve informiraniji jer znanosti i informacijska tehnologija danas otkrivaju ono što je bilo nevidljivo. Proučavanje Ikwerre kulture i njezine arhitekture pokazuje da postoji mnogo više od onoga što se može vidjeti ispod ruina i ostataka i unatoč nepostojanju pisanih izvora. Muk o događajima nije jednak njihovom nepostojanju. Autor smatra da kultura naroda Ikwerre sadrži skrivene dimenzije te tu tezu dokumentira pomoću Ikwerre arhitekture. Njegova je pozornost usmjerena općenito na Ikwerre, a posebno na one pripadnike naroda koji žive u kraljevstvima Evo Evo/Apara, Rebisi/Port Harcourt i Obio/Akpor u Nigeriji. Uslijed nezaustavljive ekspanzije suvremene gradnje njihova građevinska kultura ponajviše je izložena izazovu. Budući da Ikwerre (prema Woke et al. 1993, Echeruo 1993, Ichebo 1992) posjeduju nekoliko verzija priča o svojem podrijetlu i vremenu dolaska na njihova današnja staništa, mogu se očekivati marginalne varijacije u njihovim lokalnim običajima. Prema Ogwutum (1996), te varijacije ne mijenjaju činjenicu da "Ruwhe-Eli" ili "Ikwerre bu otu" – tj. narod Ikwerre – čine nedjeljiv narod.

Ključne riječi: narod Ikwerre, narodna arhitektura, kulturna baština, zajednica, običaj i tradicija