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TRADITIONAL IGBO

Architecture in Nigerian Fiction

NIGERIAN fiction reflects not only the social and cultural milieu of the society but also the interstices of human interactions as well as the portrayal of convincing settings.

It is through such convincing and realistic settings in identifiable environments and locations that Nigerian fiction appropriates and reflects traditional Igbo architecture. Although the novelists weave their descriptions of Igbo architecture into the subject matter of their stories, it is possible for the readers to identify the utilitarian and aesthetic perspectives from such descriptions.

The definition of architecture as the art of space is significant and Chike Aniakor adds that 'the built-up environment whether it is a village or town is a product of the skillful organization of space in order to express in one instance, people's social ideals, and in another, man's notions of reality' (Aniakor:7). Thus traditional Igbo architecture reflects that skill in the organization of space and the practical

dividends from that organization. The impression of a foreigner who came to Igboland towards the end of the last century reveals one of these practical dividends.

That visitor writes: "As we passed through the town we were struck with its clean, well-kept houses and roads... Each house stood in a compound surrounded by a high mud wall. There were small loop

holes in the walls at distances, through which a gun could be fired in the event of an enemy attacking the town. In each compound also there was generally at least one high tree with a platform in its branches from which a good look-out could be obtained" (Quoted in Isichei, *Igbo Worlds*: 206). This description confirms that the Igbo consider utilitarian objectives in their notion of architecture. That notion is not aberrant for in addition



Layout of an Igbo compound with thick wall in the background.

to the aesthetic qualities of any object, its utilitarian qualities add to its value, relevance and importance in the conduct of daily human affairs.

The concept of Igbo traditional architecture in this essay predates the colonial period although it still flourished within that period. This distinction is important because Igbo architecture underwent transformations soon after the colonial encounter. In addition it is well known that 'when the colonial masters set foot on their Third World colonies one of their major tasks was the provision of an accommodation suitable enough to their ways of living and work' (Bassey:29). That colonial intervention in Igbo traditional architecture has led, in several cases, to the creation of foreign architecture that does not take into consideration the climatic conditions of the people.

Nevertheless Nigerian fiction illustrates that Igbo traditional architecture before that colonial intervention takes such climatic conditions into consideration. In one of the earliest literary works by an African, indeed Igbo writer, published in 1739 and entitled *The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African there is a good description of Igbo traditional architecture.* In that description of a pristine environment Equiano affirms: 'In our buildings we study convenience rather than ornament. Each master of a family has a large square piece of ground, surrounded by a moat or fence or enclosed with a wall made of red earth tempered, which when dry is as hard brick. Within this are his houses to accommodate his family and slaves which if numerous frequently present the appearance of a village.' This eighteenth century Igbo novelist adds that 'in the middle (of that compound) stands the principal building, appropriated to the sole use of the master and consisting of two apartments, in one of which he sits in the day with his family. The other is left apart for the reception of his friends. He has besides these a distinct apartment in which he sleeps, together with his male children. On each side are the apartment of his wives, who have also their separate day and night houses'. Significantly, Equiano concludes that 'houses so constructed and furnished require but little skill to erect them. Every man is a sufficient

architect for the purpose. The whole neighbourhood afford their unanimous assistance in building them and in return receive and expect no other recompense than a feast' (Edwards, *Equiano's Travels* : 5-6).

The fact that neighbours and friends are expected to help the individual building a house implies that there is an opportunity for others to contribute to the architecture. Nevertheless the picture of Igbo architecture in a traditional environment in the olden days is emerging. It consists of a compound in which there are several houses for specific purposes. As we turn to that landmark novel, *Things Fall Apart*, the distinguished writer Chinua Achebe presents a description that brings the reader closer to Igbo traditional architecture. Achebe narrates thus:

'Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household. He had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. His own hut, or Obi, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. Each of his three wives had her own hut, which together formed a half moon behind the Obi. The barn was built against one end of the red walls, and long stacks of yam stood prosperously in it. At the opposite end of the compound was a shed for the goats, and each wife built a small attachment to her hut for the hens. Near the barn was a small house, the "medicine house" or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits.' (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*: 10)

Achebe's description imaginatively locates not just the main structures within the compound but also their utilitarian purpose. There is the fact that Okonkwo is a prosperous man as the 'long stacks of yam' show. Thus he is able to build adequate houses for his three wives. The huts of those wives possess attachments for hens. However the location of the Obi in the centre with the huts of the wives forming a half moon behind it is made because of the consideration for safety. The enemy needs to subdue the man of the compound since the entrance is directly into his Obi, before the women and children are attacked. This consideration obviously accounts for Equiano's statement that the man and all his male children sleep in the room attached to his Obi.

It is equally interesting that Achebe refers to the wall surrounding the compound as 'thick'. In addition the tops of that wall is made discouraging to those who may want to climb it by putting spikes there. A description of such walls is contained in Chukwuemeka Ike's novel *Toads for Supper* which is set in the middle of the twentieth century. From all indications, the compound described by Ike follows the concept in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* but there are indications of certain changes. Ike writes:

'The compound belonging to Amadi's father was quite large. It was walled round with mud, the top of which was covered with a special type of dry grass which was renewed as soon as it showed signs of decay. Part of the back wall had fallen in, and the fallen mud temporarily replaced by a fence.

There was one entrance into the compound - a gate let into the front wall and which at night was bolted from the inside for privacy. There were three houses inside the compound. The house that met the eye, as soon as a visitor passed through the front gate, was his father's Obi.

Like the other houses it had a mat roof and mud walls decorated very artistically with geometric patterns. His father's house was the biggest of the three. It was a large space in front - a kind of sitting room. It also had a parlour and two other rooms, in one of which his father slept, leaving the parlour empty except for a few old and abandoned clothes hanging from nails on the walls; the remaining room was used as a store' (Ike, *Toads for Supper* : 51).

It is obvious from Ike's description that the materials used for the construction of the houses have undergone changes. However, the basic format still remains. In this case Amadi's father has only one wife unlike Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* so he needed to construct only one house for his wife which 'too had a kind of sitting room where she received her own visitors, usually women. The kitchen was behind her house' (51 - 52). Nevertheless there is an innovation which is the fact that the third house in the compound 'belonged to Amadi, who enjoyed the privilege of being a first son' (52). A further sign of

innovation is the fact that 'the only other building in the compound was the latrine'. It is clear from that information that the Igbo architecture described in the novel is close to the present period, because at the time of Okonkwo the nearby bush provided ample space for such natural bodily functions.

That difference noted indicates that Igbo traditional architecture has been evolving and that the evolution is still influenced by utilitarian objectives. The fact that most Igbo men marry one wife is part of that influence in addition to the fact that space is no longer in great abundance. All the same in spite of the constraints of contemporary times the readers could still glimpse the specific utilitarian aspects of that architecture in Nigerian fiction. Some of the writers not only describe the general features of the compound but also the physical features of each house as well as

constructed while the hut is being erected. In another story 'Dilemma' Aniebo describes graphically that the home of Mgbeke is a 'small, round mud hut built on the outskirts of Awuke village' and it has 'two narrow mud platforms which served as beds' built against 'the side walls and took up most of the floor space', (Aniebo, *Of Wives, Talismans and the Dead*: 135)

The rooms are, therefore, presented as specifically constructed for relaxation. Such mud platforms also make it unnecessary for the individuals to construct traditional bamboo beds for utilization in them. However, there could be variations even in the construction of a well known hut like the Obi. In Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* he informs us that Ezeulu's 'Obi was built differently from other men's huts. There was the usual, long threshold in front but also a shorter one on the right

could follow the format of the traditional architecture, one could still make innovations. Ezeulu is a priest whose responsibility depends on the correct recording of the appearance of the moon so he had to make his hut convenient for detecting the appearance of the new moon. The shorter threshold on the right as one enters Ezeulu's Obi is therefore for convenience and not for aesthetic purpose.

It is clear that the traditional Igbo architecture depicted in Nigerian fiction illustrates that the people are concerned with aesthetic issues as well as utilitarian ones. The huts are constructed to reflect such things that the individual considers important and essential to his existence. In addition the shapes of the houses - either square or round - depend on the favourite form of hut construction in vogue in the community. The roof also depends on the type of material obtainable in the environment as well as the weather conditions. Nevertheless there are the male and female domains of the compound portrayed by the Obi for the man and the other huts for the women. Developments in family size and education and financial considerations have greatly affected this type of traditional Igbo architecture. Few people are willing to construct numerous houses and fewer still have need for them. Study of Igbo traditional architecture in Nigerian fiction shows that such architecture served the needs of the people and helped them in the organization of their leisure and safety in addition to the provision of privacy for each compound.

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Hakeem Kae Kazim as Oludah Equiano in the film, *A Son of Africa*, a new series produced for BBC Television late last year

the other houses in the environment. In I.N.C. Aniebo's short story entitled 'Maruma' which is in his collection of stories *Of Wives, Talismans and the Dead* there is an interesting description of a house. Aniebo writes: 'the round mud hut with its conically thatched roof is like the twenty three others in the village of Okoro. It sits in the centre of a walled in compound, and is dwarfed by the empty, clean spaces, and the tall coconut, orange, pawpaw, palm, and oha trees around it'. Aniebo adds that the hut was 'built in 1850, by the grandfather of the present occupant who is now the oldest man in the village' and that 'the hut, built of red clay polished to a high shine, has only two rooms, a bed-sitter with two narrow mud beds, and a kitchen-cum-storage-cum-chicken coop' (Aniebo:88). Aniebo has added through his description the shape of the roof of these huts but it is possible to find variations in the Igbo country because a visitor to that environment in the early twentieth century narrates that in Oburu 'the houses are no longer square, but round, with grass roofs' (Isichei, *Igbo Worlds*: 243). However Aniebo has also provided a picture of the internal features of the hut. There are mud beds which are

as you entered. The eaves of this additional entrance were cut back so that sitting on the floor Ezeulu could watch that part of the sky where the moon had its door' (Achebe, *Arrow of God*: 1). That information means that in as much as one

Footnotes

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