

Urbanism in Culture: A Case for Well-being in Yorùbá Geo-political Cities Southwest Nigeria

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Abstract

With one of the fastest urbanization rates in the Global-South, many Nigerian cities are experiencing an analogous rate of concretization. Cultural studies since the 1800s revealed that towns and villages are known to have tradition-based planning system with incorporated hierarchy of open spaces rooted in vernacular Yoruba urbanism. However, it appears that due to precolonial and postcolonial influences, this rural or urban model of town planning was abandoned for Western archetypes. This study examines the use of cultural philosophies in contemporary urban planning for health and physical well-being of communities. Qualitative exploration of literature on social understanding, physical observation and mapping of selected district-streets in Ado-Ekiti. Results show that there exists an institutional bias against the partial or full adoption of the cultural hierarchical planning for inclusive open spaces in contemporary urban centres. Contrary to popular perception, the study discovered that in the Yorùbá public realm, the salutogenic notions for citizens' well-being are already integrated into city plans with inclusion of multipurpose open spaces like market, village squares and home courtyard systems. Notable in the radial, elliptical, circular or grid-iron pattern of city design widely used then. The "Oba's Palace" epitomized the sacredness of the center of power and the hierarchical order of accessible open spaces constituted the Kings' central-business-district (Qjà-Qba). City-wedge "oko etilé" served as the green container or quarter open spaces that ensured food security. The cultivation of larger agro-forestry open spaces known as "oko egàn" doubled as natural reserves for community economic sustenance. The cultural integration ensured a green and healthy landscape for peoples' physical well-being. The study advocates the preservation of this heritage for the planning of contemporary urban landscapes to enhance people-centred, culture-based, resilient and inclusive physical planning concepts for the well-being of vulnerable urban populations.

Keywords

K culture, philosophies, urbanism, well-being, Yorùbá

1. Introduction: 1960-2020

Urbanism is the learning of the geographical, economic, political, social and cultural dimensions of urban places and its implication for the general wellbeing and way of life of a people. The urbanism of the Yoruba local realm have been strongly modified by forces of colonization, industrialization, slavery, independence, oil boom, world wars, technology and the jettisoning of indigenous tenets for poorly

assimilated foreign urban templates for the sixty years of post-independent Nigeria. The influence of Portuguese and British explorers have been significant on the residential architecture, town planning and culture of the Yoruba people since the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth era (Akintoye, 2010). The effect of the contact grew stronger via Christian Missionaries, abolition of slavery and later through the forceful colonial rule (1861-1960) against established local cosmopolitan urbanism. William H. Clarke (1854-1858) an American Baptist Missionary affirmed this in his research travels that covered a large part of the Yoruba country (Atanda, 1972). External stimuli on the urbanization rate of Yoruba Geo-cultural cities are phenomenal since 1960 national independence from colonial rule. Housing in concept and practicality in Yorùbá architecture and urbanism is an earth-bound, culture-centred and pragmatic endeavour. Also, in a cultural but utilitarian fashion, every aspect must be functional, practical and available for use, not just for display. Indigenous town planning practice in Nigeria attained its highest point in the building of Lagos in private residential provision, public realm development and by extension to other outlying towns and villages in post-independent era. At this juncture Regional Administration (1965) and the States, and many notable urban planning schemes ensued. (Mabogunje, 2002); Akinsemoyin and Van Richards, 2009). During the decade after independence, the euphoria of the oil-boom of the 1970s heralded a gradual shift for urban architecture and its expressions across Nigeria. The stark reality which ensued is quite jolting. This is evident in the all-comers and foreign influenced urban manifestations leading up to 2020 decade. The scale of the Doxiadis designed Festac Town and Lagos Regional Masterplan have not been able to repeat itself in the annals of Nigeria. The town planners of the period were privileged to witness the design, building and occupation of a whole town within a few years. These projects challenged urban planning of possibilities to blend unique imported occurrence to their local experience. This in itself is not a product of any enduring, but advantageous outcome from an effort not characteristically their own. From the cultural perspective, there is a general knowledge that urban developments in Nigeria hardly served the purpose for which they are built- to provide towns and cities in essence for a people who will otherwise never preferred a permanent living, working and playing in urban environment. (Godwin and Hopwood, 2012). The problem of indecent urban environment is not new, with 1928 plague in Lagos and chaotic urban growth in Ibadan examples, issues that was largely limited to cities in the 1960s and 70s, with acute urbanization challenges. These associated problems did not spread fast to rural capitals such as Ado-Ekiti. The pertinent questions are; what are the factors responsible for chaotic urban environment? Is it entirely the making of those who insist on building new cities after Eurocentric, Middle-Eastern templates in Nigeria? Or those indigenes with alien taste for anything 'foreign' in place of ancestral tenets of everyone as their neighbour's keeper and proverbial native value-placing on culture. In these cases, communal identity and heritage preservation are missing.

2. Effects of urbanization on city layout.

Most Yoruba cities are thriving municipalities before colonialist influences tinkered with cultural identities and traditional values of indigenous places. Yoruba urbanism and indeed global south city benefits was not included in the 1933 Athens Charter, even though, the city was defined as only a part of the economic, social and political entity which constitutes a state. Athens Charter (1933). Early contact with the Christian religion impacted the town through the building of churches, mission houses, schools and hospitals. Other administrative buildings came during the colonial era. There exist in language a rich repertoire of metaphors and dictums which supported the architectural preservation, communal arrangement and overall town layout. This is backed by the transmission of ancestral values through oral tradition and self-preservation mechanisms which are individual and collective responsibilities for Yoruba urbanism and worldview. Prior to its designation as the capital city, through a military fiat in 1995, Ado Ekiti was a provincial capital in status behind cities like Lagos, Ibadan, Akure in commercial, political, demographic and infrastructural terms as well. Ado-Ekiti is culture-based city established on street structure that are laid out on relational neighbourhood pattern determined by deity hierarchy arranged around Èwí's Ààfin as the centre of traditional and political power. (Onajide, 1988; Olotua, 2002; Mabogunje, 2002):

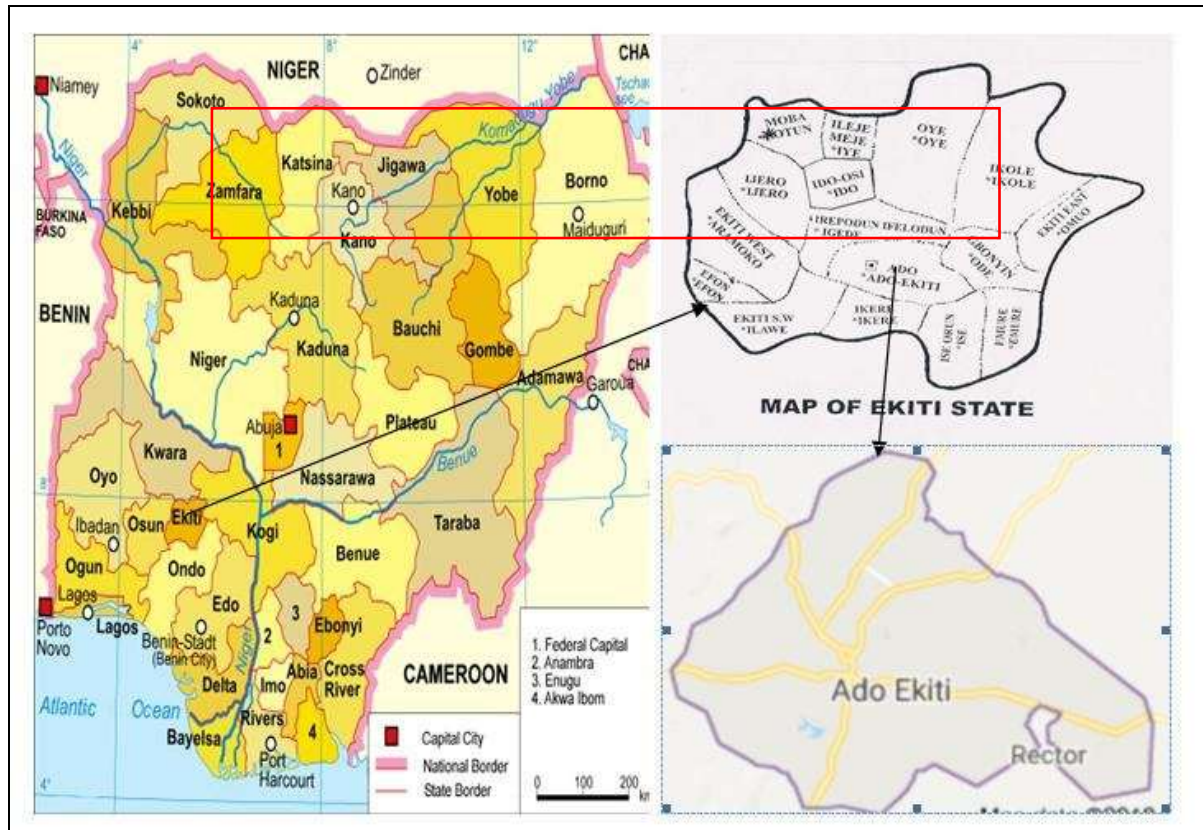


Figure 1. Map of Nigeria showing Ekiti State in relation to neighboring States-source: Ekiti State Ministry of Information-2019.



Figure 2. Map of Ado-Ekiti showing adjacent settlements-source: Ekiti State Ministry of Information-2019

Methodology

This study examines the effect of new urban physical appearance (physiognomy) on traditional cultural practices and its bearing on contemporary urban identity and physical well-being of communities in Ado-Ekiti, Southwest Nigeria. Using a desktop study and focused-group interview of Òjìdò Òrìṣà priestesses in a qualitative evaluation approach.



Traditional cultural practices and bearing on contemporary urban planning.

This study view Adó-Èkìtì is an emerging Yoruba city situated in Ekiti State, Southwest geopolitical zone, Nigeria. Its geographical coordinates are 7° 38' 16" North, 5° 13' 17" East, falls within the predominantly hot-humid bioregion of the equatorial climatic zone. According to government estimates, the population grew from 20,000 in 1950 to 480,000 in 2020 and it is projected to double by year 2050. Currently, the geographical orientation is sited with its extensive North-South extent to approximately 16km and the longest East-West expanse about 20km. It can be described as a small or medium sized city when compared with other cities like Ibadan, Akure and Oshogbo -capitals of adjacent states in the same geopolitical zone in terms of demography and economy. (Obeng-Odom, 2009; Adeniji K, Ikpeze O, Ejidokun T and Alli K, 2017). As the 24th largest city by demography in Nigeria, Ado-Ekiti is currently regarded as the contemporary urban capital of the Ekiti stock of the Yorubas. (Akinlabi and Adeniyi, 2017).

In terms of geolocation, language and cultural connection, Ado Ekiti is a city with strong affinity and lineage to the Oduduwa- the ancestral father of the Yorubas as one of the settlements sited by one of the sons from Ile-Ife. (Akintoye, 2010). The Ekitis fall under the same dialect classification as different slightly from their kinsmen from Akure, Ife and Ijesa in the Central Yoruba divisional area. Ado-Ekiti is surrounded by over 20 towns and villages as the most homogenous in term of Yoruba dialects. The homogeneity in language is gradually changing as economic forces draws non-natives in search of prosperity from Edo, Hausa, Fulani and Igbos tribes from other states. Consequently, this phenomenon now affects ownership as high land prices drives original settlers (Ọmọ-Onílẹ̀) to city fringes. These situations is perceived to be largely responsible for encroachment or total cut-down of sacred landscapes and demolition of pre-colonial properties and neighbourhoods (such as the traditional Ọjà-Ọba demolished between 2015-2018 see plate 3&4). This uncontrolled urban gentrification forces currently serves as impetus for the ill-conceived urban physiognomy at Ado- Ekiti. (Akinlabi and Adeniyi, 2017).

Outcomes for new Yorùbá Urban realm-2020

The cultural town planning principles of Ado Ekiti as a Yoruba enclave was evident in nature-inspired landscapes characterized by the planting of sacred trees called Igi Ọdán and Ọdán-ko to mark street boundaries and denote chieftaincy residency and jurisdiction for each neighbourhood in traditional hierarchy informed by ancestral or deity worship. The Ọrìṣà Ọjido deity jurisdiction is still pronounced today in the urban plan of the Ijigbo district-street with an average road setback of approximately 20-25meters. This ambience created a multi-purpose and accessible open spaces for social activities like traditional ceremonies such as weddings, dance, and daily traditional vendors of native food. (Búkà,). These open spaces are also co-created and owned by citizens for communal affinity and place attachment. In terms of ownership, precolonial town planning system showed that the streets were predominantly pedestrian-oriented. Between 1965- 1995, such pre-automobile precincts of Odò Adó Quarter or district-street are narrow streets, later tarred for automobile access. New urban development lack the indigenous physical characteristics of old-town areas. Ado-Ekiti was a predominantly homogenous community of Yoruba settlers till 1996, but search for economic prospects increased the influx of Igbo natives from Eastern Nigeria geopolitical zone mainly for commercial reasons, this factor seem to be a major driver in the gentrification and urban transformation of the city from the picturesque Yoruba Township before 1995 to the bustling trading centre it is today. Urbanization forces of commercialization and globalization reduced cultural identity, character and value of the indigenous quarters to dilapidated-old-fashioned or abandoned relics waiting to be pulled down by heritage-destructive influences of urban regeneration and gentrification. Ijigbò street- a single-lane tarred road till 2012 is now a dual-carriage boulevard adjacent to the new government-financed Shopping market in International style architecture in place of the precolonial traditional Oja Oba. (See plate 4).



Figure 2 - Òjìdò District- one of the oldest streets showing Igi-Odan as prominent landscape features-source author-, 2020.



Figure 3: Ìmayò District Street with Igi-Odan as open space feature. Source-author, 2020.



Figure-4: The new shopping mall built to replace the traditional Qjà-Qba along Ijigbò Main Street with no single tree on the roadside.-source- author-2020.

Conclusion

It is clear that the emerging urban streets are going through unprecedented changes reflecting no semblance to traditional value of old-town streetscapes. These streets lack the comfort, identity and sense of place discernible in the old-style areas. Other public realm amenities such as street furniture, sidewalks, lighting and car parking are missing. Hence it is recommended that these eco-friendly and cultured-based configuration of old-town quarters be integrated into new developing areas to create peculiar urban identity, engender pedestrian and people-based open spaces beneficial for the cultural wellbeing of communities. By way of policy and heritage preservation initiatives, this paper advocates that that urban planning authorities should reconfigure new low-carbon cityscapes through the integration of traditional culture-inspired landscaping (Igì Qdán) template for the physical and social benefits of new town layouts and general wellbeing future urbanites.

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