



THE CULTURAL MEANING OF THE FAMILY HOUSE IN AKURE, NIGERIA

Hezekiah A. Ayoola¹, Olumuyiwa B. Adegun², & Olufunto Ijatuyi³

^{1, 2, 3}Department of Architecture, Federal University of Technology, Akure, Nigeria

email: ayooladayo@yahoo.com

Abstract

Akure is a prominent Yoruba city in South-western part of Nigeria with rich cultural and traditional value. The family house is a symbol of identity, and point of reference for the family. This study examined the cultural meaning of the family house in Akure, Nigeria. Data were collected from a focus group discussion and in-depth interviews with 20 indigenous family heads that still lived in their family house and 5 indigenous social groups in Akure. The data were subjected to thematic analysis and content analysis which revealed the various meanings attached to different aspects of the family house in Akure. The study concluded that the family house is a symbol of pride and it also communicates family identity.

Keywords: cultural meaning, family house, housing, housing preference, Akure Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Housing is very essential to national development and socio cultural growth in any human society. Globally, housing is viewed to be the second essential need after food and it is considered as a major economic asset in every nation (Jiboye, 2013). Its quality, cost, and availability are crucial to individual quality of life (Jiboye & Ogunshakin, 2010). Housing is more than a shelter; it has been proved in many studies that the habitability of a house does not only depend on the physical characteristics of the dwelling, but also on the social, cultural, and behavioural characteristics of users (Oladapo, 2006; Jiboye, 2010). It is a permanent structure for human habitation, and has become a critical component in the social, economic and health fabric of every nation (Jiboye & Ogunshakin, 2010). The concepts of housing have sets of meanings attached to it, and the idea of a house merely as a physical structure without meanings ascribed to it is artificial (Hauge, 2009). These buildings and structures have personal, social and cultural meanings attached to them.

Several kinds of research have looked into the meaning or the symbolic aspects of housing: Housing as a personal symbol has been investigated based on cultural value (Rapoport, 1959; Sadalla, Synder, & Stea, 1976; Colleen, 2004), social space and its meaning (Saunders, 1989) self-presentational theory (Sadalla, Vershure, & Burroughs, 1987), housing element (Wiesenfeld, 2007). In spite of extensive research on this topic, the majority of the studies have been conducted in Western countries, considering their culture and lifestyle with no inputs on the African culture (Perkins, Thorns, Winstanley & Newton, 2002). The meaning of housing has most times been viewed on the individual level (Doyle, 1992). One important level which has not been well explored is the family level. The meaning of housing at the family level is important because interpretations at this level will be more complex and robust than on the individual level because families involves the interrelationship between two or

more individuals. The family house is a space within which generations of families express their existence and preserve the history and identities of lineage. Families discover themselves based on their lifestyle and cultural values to which they belong (Jiboye, 2014). The construction and development of house is thus the reflection of civilization and function to suit a peculiar culture and class needs (Jiboye & Ogunshakin, 2010). The family house is therefore a symbol of social identity and community recognition. A house without the members of the family lineage living in it loses respect in the community (Awotona et al., 1994).

Houses are affected from one ethnic group to one another, since the social and cultural value of people differs. The traditional houses in Nigeria vary in pattern and form from a particular ethnic group (Yoruba, Ibo or Hausa) to another, owing to their different socio-cultural backgrounds. The Yoruba are a West African people and most of them live in Nigeria. They occupy the south-western part of the country including Lagos state, Ekiti state, Osun state, Oyo state, and Ondo state. The Yoruba exhibit the same characteristics of traditional architecture since their traditions, culture and natural environment are almost similar.

In Nigeria, as elsewhere, traditional architectural attributes vary from one area to another in terms of materials, construction, shape and style. However, given a family house concept in the form of typical Yoruba architecture, Adedokun, (1999) defines it as "partially or exclusively occupied by individuals whose residence rights are obtained exclusively from direct ancestors." According to Jiboye and Ogunshakin (2012), this is the house that the family belongs to, and there are four different types of this. The first group is the oldest, and has been known as the original family house, where everyone belongs over time and extended association. The second type is that which is turned into a family home after the death of the original owner and head of a nuclear family. After the owner's death, the home passes as an inheritance to the extended family's other relatives. The third type is the one built by a rich member of a specific extended family and afterwards opted to assign other parts of the house out of good will to their family members. The fourth typology is the house produced from collective inputs from members of an extended or nuclear family. These houses are of basic forms usually cubical with rectangular courtyard for different purposes at the centre. The spaces are arranged rectilinearly around a central courtyard which acts as the focal point and a place of interaction among family members (Osasona, 1998).

William (2007) also observed that the physical characteristics of the family house depends on the surrounding environment, available building materials, technology know-how, and other social factors such as social status and financial status. The family house in Akure follows the Yoruba pattern of house which is either the traditional compound built around one or more courtyards or characterised by a double row of rooms which leads into a common corridor which is usually used for domestic purposes such as, sitting and storage (Okeyinka & Odetoeye, 2015).

Due to globalization, urbanization and modernization, new building forms have become more prevalent, which has thus improved the level of comfort both within and outside of built environment. It is evident that Nigerian architecture is characterized by the post-modern houses of the 1990's and a wide spread new design concept made with new building materials mainly imported from Asia and other developed countries of the world especially china (Ruqayya, 2011). Societal evolution has affected the types of building materials used as there was an improvement from, mud and sticks which characterized early traditional buildings to more durable materials such as clay, timber, glass, stone, etc.

Despite the cultural significance and value of the family house in Yoruba land in western Nigeria, little is known of the extent to which cultural meanings are attached to the family house in Akure, Nigeria. This research will therefore study the cultural significance of the family house of indigenous people of Akure with a view to a better understanding of the extent to which cultural meanings are attached to various dimensions of housing.

METHODOLOGY

Study Area

Akure is a traditional Nigerian city, similar to several other traditional Yoruba cities in the country. The city is situated in the south-western part of the country. It lies approximately on latitude 7°15'N and longitude 5°15'E and is situated about (1,214 ft, 370 m) above sea level. The rapidity of the city's development stemmed from the political status of the town. It was initially a provincial headquarters and later a State capital. It has also served as the seat of the local government since 1976. According to the 2006 census, the population of Akure was 360,268. With an annual growth rate of 2%, it was expected to be 486,300 by 2016 (National Population Commission of Nigeria (web)). The constant growth of the population has been tied to the administrative role of the city and its long-standing status as a centre of economic activity; two features that have attracted a large array of immigrants.

Data Collection

As part of a larger study which evaluated the meaning of housing in Akure, Nigeria. A survey of existing family house buildings was carried out within the core neighbourhoods of Akure, Nigeria. The study focused on the core area of Akure (Figure 1) because this is the area where traces of family houses are majorly found. This study purposively selected family houses within the core of the city. Out of the 50 family houses identified and selected, 20 family houses were chosen for the study. The 20 houses purposively selected was to narrow the study to only family houses with one or more family elders still living in the house rather than concentrating on the large population of family houses. This was done in order to target those that have lived in their dwellings long enough and to know more of the family histories, to enable them provide relevant information about their houses.

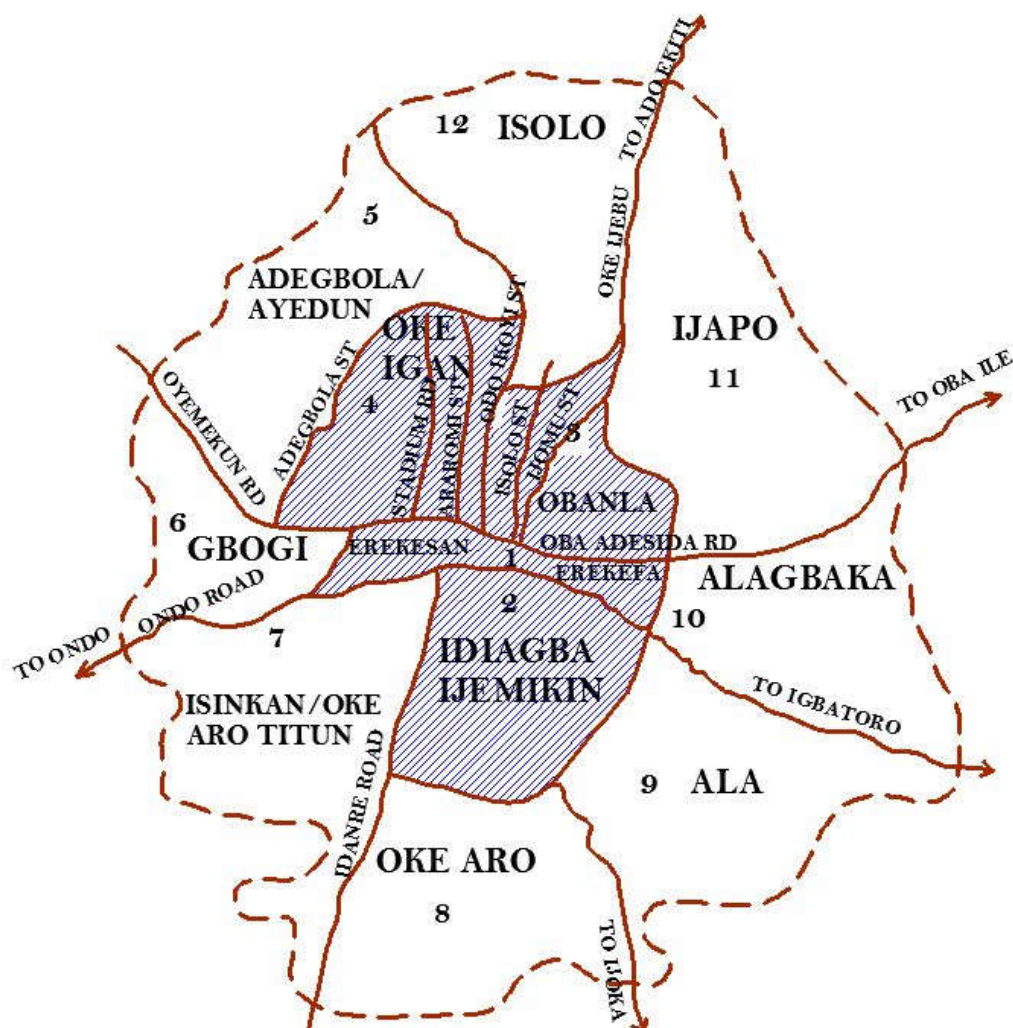


Figure 1: The 12 residential zones of Akure

Data were collected from a focus group discussion and in-depth interviews conducted in the local language (Yoruba language) of the respondents. The interviews were carried out from June to September 2019 among 20 families. All of the participants were natives of Akure and the family head of each family. These method allows the interviewer the opportunities for in-depth discussions and to get responses which provide a detailed and rich opinion of the respondents on the cultural significance of the different dimensions of meaning of the family house in Akure, Nigeria. The cultural meaning of the house, according to Clapham, (2005), needs to be investigated using qualitative methods to explain the cultural meaning that a material form has for individuals within a given social context and this can only be derived from the individuals themselves. The interview was conducted in Yoruba language in the respondents house, with a series of generic questions directed at the respondents lived experiences in the family house; their relationship with the neighbourhood and the city of Akure. The respondents were also interviewed on directed questions structured under three distinct themes: the location of the family house, the process of housing production, the meaning of the house and the function it serves. The participants were interviewed multiple times in Yoruba language to get a deeper understanding of the meaning housing communicates to their individual family identity. Each respondent gave a unique story about their family compound. The data derived from these interviews and focus-group discussions

were coded. The coding scheme is the set of all coding categories applied to a collection of texts, in which a ‘coding category’ identifies each characteristic of interest to an investigator. The main themes adopted from the literature on meaning are house type and size, house function, building materials and location.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data from the in-depth interview were transcribed into key themes which were identified from a coding scheme. The result presented here also comes from focus group discussion conducted at community association meetings in core residential neighbourhoods in Akure. The research is exploratory based on the small sample of participants selected. It laid emphasis on the textual narrative of the subject matter. The section begins on the clarification of what the family house means compared to other houses and the functions it performs in identity communication. It also looked at the process and the meaning attached to the built forms and its attributes.

Defining the family house

Respondents were asked what differentiates the family house from other houses. Their responses were comprehensive and elaborate on the concept of the family house. Majority of the respondents suggested the family house is one’s ancestral home, the house in their native village or one’s home town. The family house is also defined as one’s generational parents’ dwelling, which belongs to every member of the family and different from individual’s private house. The family house therefore is understood to be the house in one’s village where they had roots and family which they are connected to by birth and ancestral lineage. The family house is therefore expressed as the cradle, the source and the abode of one’s ancestors; to which every member of the family has equal right and jointly owns. The definitions of the family house find justification in the other researches (Okeyinka & Amole, 2012; Faggion & Furlan, 2018). For Okeyinka and Amole (2012), the family house is described as a single dwelling which is owned by the entire family. Following the work of Faggion and Furlan (2018) and Lucas and Purkayastha (2007) suggesting the home as multi-scalar (a town and a house), this research also confirms that the family house in Akure is also defined in terms of the native village and the dwelling.

Housing as a symbol of Identity

As explained by one of the respondents: *“Most of these family houses are known or called by different names. Basically the family houses were named after the father of the house, his occupation or status in the town. These identities when mentioned make people to easily know the family they belong to and also make people to actually know their source (orisun)”*. (Respondent A)

The respondents were asked if they were aware that the house communicates identity and what does the family house communicate about their identity? Most respondents were aware that housing communicates identity. Nevertheless, housing and identity were seen at different levels. The majority of the respondents agreed that one’s family house indicates citizenship of the town as it informs on the identity of the family they come from. Several of the

respondents said the first thing to show that one is a citizen of the town is to know and identify his family compound (*Agbo -Ile*). The family house is seen as a reflection of family status as suggested by some of the participants. It shows the tradition of the family, religion, strength, occupation, wealth and social status.

From the interview, it was discovered that each Yoruba family has a typical identity that can be traced to their family house. The people attach a particular feature of identification to their houses so that they can be easily recognized within the community. During the focal discussion, it was noted that the social status of the founding fathers of the family determines the types and the size of the family house. A respondent clarified that *since the status of the head of the family, (founding father) differs from one family to another, so does the house differ*. It can then be interpreted that the house type and size defines the status of the founding fathers and their position in the society.

Majority of the respondents explained that the family house is a symbol of pride in their culture and a very important part of the family history. The findings align with Clapham's, (2005) position that buildings are physical structures which create meaning and identity. The neighbourhood differentiates people, and is also important to the lifestyle and identity of the inhabitants. For some respondents the location of the family house communicates meaning. The family houses at the inner core of the city belong to the ruling class, traditional chiefs and the early settlers in the community, while family houses outside the city core were believed to be for families with lower social status. Gram-Hanssen and Beck-Danielsen (2004) also suggested that people associate specific residential neighbourhoods with different symbolic values. The study also confirms the opinion in literature highlighted by Osasona et al, (2007), that the house and its location are symbols of social identity and community recognition, a setting for pursuing a livelihood and the nucleus for physical, organic extension. Likewise, it is a space within which generations of families express their existence and preserve their history and identities.

What function does the family house perform?

'It is the place where the family meeting and other social and spiritual functions takes place'. (Respondent X).

When asked about the functions of the family house, majority of the respondents said the family house performs different functions for different families. Generally, it is the place where the family meeting takes place. The father of the house calls everybody to order for a celebration, a family meeting, a prayer or a ritual etc. The male children and their families and the yet to be married children all celebrate the end of the year in the family house; they use this medium to get to know each other better. Others say they perform rituals and rights in these houses as they have sacred spaces within them. Majority of the respondents explained that the family house serves as venue for family social events such as burial rites, child naming and other social and cultural functions. The respondents see the family house as more than shelter because it performs economic, social and family functions (see Figure 2).

As explained by most of the respondents, the family house serves as a place of abode and residence for family members who could not afford their own personal house or were not financially buoyant to rent a house. As a result of this, a few family members still live in this their ancestral home with their family. In addition, the family house is also seen as a means of

making money as some of the rooms are rented out when there is not member of the family willing to occupy the available rooms.

Wiesenfeld, (1997) and Sadalla, (1993), used individuals in understanding the meaning. They both acknowledged the meaning that people attribute to their dwelling as a function which the building performs. Rapoport (1982), also conceived meaning as a viable mechanism that links the environment and people. Meaning can also be seen as part of function. He explained meaning as an important aspect of function, that is how we shape and use places depend on the meaning we give to them. In this study, the respondents attached meaning to functions the family house performs. This finding also confirms the findings of Ayoola (2012), that three categories of values namely, economic values, family values and social values were found important in defining the meaning of housing.



Figure 2: A typical family house in Akure

Meanings attached to physical attributes of the house

Certain dwelling attributes were considered important in the construction of the family house in Akure. As explained by most respondents, meanings were attached to three key physical attributes of the family house; location, house size and types, building materials. These were mentioned by majority of the respondents. According to Jiboye (2012), certain factors determine the pattern and development of house-forms within the traditional African context. Osasona (1998), was of the opinion that both socio-cultural and environmental factors constitute major determinants of house-form. Williams (2007) also contributed that the physical characteristics of the house depend on the surrounding environment, available building materials, technological know-how, and some cultural determinants like the social

and economic status of the owner. Therefore, a typical house can then be seen as a product of physical constraints and social parameters.

Location

'The location of the family house was determined through spiritual guidance and proximity to work place'' (Respondent Y)

Most respondents attached meaning to the location of their dwelling and when asked about the significance of the location to the existence of the family house, majority said *their family houses were built few kilometres from their farm lands to ease movement and monitoring of their crops*. Predominantly most of their forefathers were commercial farmers. Proximity to work place was then considered important in the siting of their family houses. However, some respondents said as at the time of trying to settle, the oracle told them the location where to settle and build. This suggests that religious belief also influenced their decision on housing. Another respondent said this is their ancestral land, they own it and it has been handed down from generations. This was also considered an important factor in the location of the family house. The analysis of discussion further showed that socio-cultural factors influenced the meaning of houses in this study.

House size and type

'The size of the family and social status determined house size and type'' (Respondent ZZ)

Respondents described the house size and type as an important dimension in the construction of the meaning of the family house. Majority of the respondents revealed rooming apartment as their preferred house type since it allows for more rooms to cater for the housing need of the family (Figure 3). The respondents explained that house size and house type were shaped by the economic situation of their founding father as at that time. However, a few of the respondents claimed the size of their family house was solely determined based on the family size as at the time the building was done. According to Colleen, (2004), the meaning of housing differs from people to people. A man's position in the society, occupation and other resources also affect the house he builds for himself. The findings suggested that the house size and type are not only a consideration of the social and economic status of the family but also a reflection of the needs and size of the extended family



Figure 3: Typical family house showing house type and size

Building materials

Predominantly, most family houses in the core section of Akure were built about 50-100 years ago. It was observed that most of the family houses were built with clay, earth (mud), wood, timber, zinc roofing sheet, and in more recent times, brick, cement and paint (Figure 4). Majority of the respondents considered these materials as the most available and common materials back then when their fore-fathers built those houses. In the literature, meanings are also attached to the process of construction of a home (Wiesenfeld, 1997). Colleen (2004) also explained the role of culture as an analytical concept and the interrelationship of people and their houses. Through studying the dwelling process, the personal and social meaning associated with the physical aspect will be understood. The implication of this is that the choice of building materials can be linked to the availability of material in a particular location.



Figure 4: Typical family house built with laterite and zinc roofing sheet

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The discussion of the meaning of the family house in Akure reveals that there are rich and diverse meanings and explanations attached to the house. The understanding of the meaning of the family house and its attributes contributes to the existing literature on the meaning of housing. It specifically contributes to the cultural meaning of housing particularly in the Nigerian context where there are limited studies on the meaning of housing and its attributes. The explanation of the meaning of housing not only focused on the function of the family house but it also includes other attributes of the house and its environment such as location, housing type and size, number of rooms and construction materials.

The research identifies the importance and benefits of the family house and its link to the cultural beliefs of the residents. Findings conclude that the family house is a joint inheritance of every descendant of the family and every member has equal right since ownership is by inheritance. The family house is also seen as a place linking one to his root, one's ancestral abode. The family house also serves as venue for family functions and engagement, and also where traditional rites are performed. The size and type of family house are however dependent on family needs, social and economic factors. This study also reveals that housing communicates identity at different levels and the house is a reflection of status. The study concludes that the meaning of the house is influenced by certain cultural factors; therefore future research should investigate the meaning of housing across different culture

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