

# Igbo Traditional Architecture: A Symbol of Igbo Cultural Identity

Chidimma Berne Okoye and Obinna E. Ukanwa

**Abstract**—The Igbo is found in South-Eastern part of Nigeria and they form one of the three major cultural groups in the country. Igbo traditional architecture makes use of local building materials, construction methods and takes advantage of the local climate. It is an aspect of material culture that reflects the belief, values and religion of the Igbo people. However, globalization and western colonialism have led to the destruction of the principle of traditional architecture as well as their cultural significance. As a result of this, architecture in Igboland today lacks uniqueness and local identity. The paper aims at stimulating the revival of Igbo traditional architecture as a means of promoting the Igbo culture. The Igbo traditional building materials and forms were evaluated. Settlement patterns of existing residential/ housing estates in Igboland were examined. The use of Igbo arts and paintings were re-emphasized. Oral interviews and archival search were also conducted. Results show that Igbo traditional architecture is a sustainable architecture; it is environmental friendly, resource efficient and the building materials are readily available. The traditional settlement pattern fosters unity in Igboland. The paper recommends that Igbo traditional architecture is a visible means of identifying the Igbo.

**Index Terms**— Culture, Cultural identity, Igbo, Igboland, Resource efficiency, settlement, Traditional architecture.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The twentieth and twenty first centuries are marked with increasing globalization and homogenization. The unique cultural identity of the Igbo is gradually disappearing. Both the material and non-material Igbo cultural heritages are endangered. Architecture in Igboland has undergone transformation within these centuries which led to the decline of the traditional architecture. After the colonial encounter, the Igbo abandoned their local building materials and construction techniques. They adopted the architectural style of their colonial masters. It became prestigious in the villages to erect buildings similar to Europeans buildings. As a result this, architecture in Igboland today lacks uniqueness and local identity. It longer depicts the culture and tradition of the Igbo.

Cultural identity is what makes a people who they are. It is the foundation on which every other aspect of their being is built upon. Cultural identity simply means the feeling of belonging to a certain social or cultural group [1]. Cultural identity as an integral part of a person's self-perception creates the notion of cultural differences or similarities which are essential in this era of globalization. It creates an outward and visible means of identifying a person as part of a particular cultural group. Cultural identities are regarded as collective identities [2].

The role of buildings in expressing the culture of a people cannot be overemphasized. Architecture is an aspect of material culture as well as an element of

cultural identity. Igbo traditional architecture reminds us of our cultural values; it reflects the belief, religion, social class and climate of the Igbo. The use of local materials in building construction is an identity factor of regional differentiation [3].

The revival of Igbo traditional architecture in the modern contest is thus a means of sustaining and preserving the Igbo culture and tradition. It plays important role in shaping the Igbo identity.

## 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to revive Igbo traditional architecture as a means of promoting the Igbo culture. The specific objectives include;

- ✚ To identify the Igbo traditional building materials.
- ✚ To examine the settlement pattern of existing residential /housing estates Igboland.
- ✚ To evaluate the traditional building forms
- ✚ To re-emphasize Igbo arts and painting in the finishing of building

## 3. THE IGBO AND IGBO CULTURE

The Igbo is found in South-Eastern part of Nigeria. They form one of the three major cultural groups in the

country. Administrative, it is made up of the entire Omambala (Anambra), Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states, parts of Delta and River State [4]. The Igbo are surrounded by the Edo to the west, the Ijo, Urhobo and Isoko to the south and south west. To the east are the Efik/Ibibio groups and to the north are the Igala, Idoma and Tiv.



Fig. 1: Map of Igboland in Nigeria  
Source: <https://enekethebird.wordpress.com/tag/igboland/>

Igboland lies between latitude 4° 45N and 7° 05N, which puts it firmly within the tropics [5]. The Igbo believe in the veneration of many gods (polytheism) including the supreme God- Chukwu [6]. They value the practice of communalism and love among each other.

#### 4. THE IGBO TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE

Traditional architecture is the architecture that evolved in an attempt to address the basic need of man; provision of shelter. It is the product of physical and cultural factors which are peculiar to the Igboland and society. Igbo traditional architecture makes use of local building materials and construction technique. It takes advantage of the local climate to enhance architectural integrity and environmental quality. Igbo traditional architecture adheres to the basic green architecture principles of energy efficiency and utilization of materials /resources in close proximity to the site.

#### 4. THE IGBO TRADITIONAL BUILDING MATERIALS

The use of local materials and techniques is one of the main features of Igbo traditional architecture. Igbos indigenous builders preferred the utilization of useful

materials such as vegetation and soil that were readily available in their immediate vicinity. The materials include;

##### 4.1. Mud

Mud is the basic material that Igbo traditional builders use in constructing their houses. Mud as a building material is usually a mixture of clay, sand and silt. The clay content determines its structural strength, cohesiveness and plasticity while its sand content provides resistance to abrasion and water damage [9]. It is used for foundations, floors, walls and sometimes roof. Mud is used in varying thickness and is sometimes reinforced with timber. It is also known as earth or Adobe.



Plate 1: A typical mud house  
Source: Authors field work (2016)

##### 4.2. Timber

This has been a very popular building material in Igboland as a result of the abundance of vegetation with trees that produce hard wood. The qualities the Igbo require of building timber include strength, straightness, length, resistance to termite attack, and durability.

##### 4.3. Thatch

This is the material traditionally used by the Igbo as a roof cover. The two main types of thatch in use are; grass and Raphia palm leaflets. Two main species of grass locally known as Ejo or Eyo and Ata are popular for this purpose [9]. There was a common pattern of roofing traditional Igbo buildings in the pre-colonial period. Pitch roofing was the commonest design at the [7].



Plate 2: A typical thatch roof

Source: Ezeagu, M. (2012). Igbo Architecture / *Ụlọ omé n'Ìgbò*

#### 4.4. Fasteners

The indigenous builders never used nails to join two or more parts of the building. They made use of various kinds of cord and string; for example; *akwala* (from raffia palm and *ekwele* from palm fronds).

#### 5. The traditional building forms

The shape of traditional Igbo houses has both cultural and historic significance. It tells a lot about a society much more easily than other aspects of material culture. Three main plan shapes identified in Igbo traditional buildings are:

##### 5.1. Circular and oval house

Most of the traditional house units were circular in shape [8]. This reflects the Igbo ideal of social success and achievement. The circular and oval house types were predominant in the areas south of Enugu; from Okunano to Ihe-Ogwu and extends eastwards to Okposi, and north-eastwards to the Cross River basin. With increasing scarcity of land, oval houses emerged while the circular type was reserved for the family head as a continuity of tradition [8].

##### 5.2. The Square and Rectangular plan

These houses characterize forest regions and are constructed with heavy forest materials in response to the immediate ecology. There are variations of this house type among the Igbo. The square and rectangular shapes give room for future expansion.

#### 6. The Igbo Settlement Pattern

A typical Igbo compound consists of a cluster of huts belonging to individual household units. The compound wall (*ngwulu*) of about 1.5m -2.5m height defines the physical boundary of the compound. An entrance gate is constructed to control access into the compound. The compound wall, the gates and

sometimes the houses are arranged to enclose a courtyard (*mbara ezi*) in which all other structures in the compound are located. The huts serve different purposes; the house of the family head (*Obi*), houses for the women and children as well as shrines. The *Obi* is the abode of the family head where certain family decisions are taken. It is located at the centre of the forecourt facing the main gate. The *Obi* is also symbolic; it functions as the tempo-spiritual essence of the collective identity

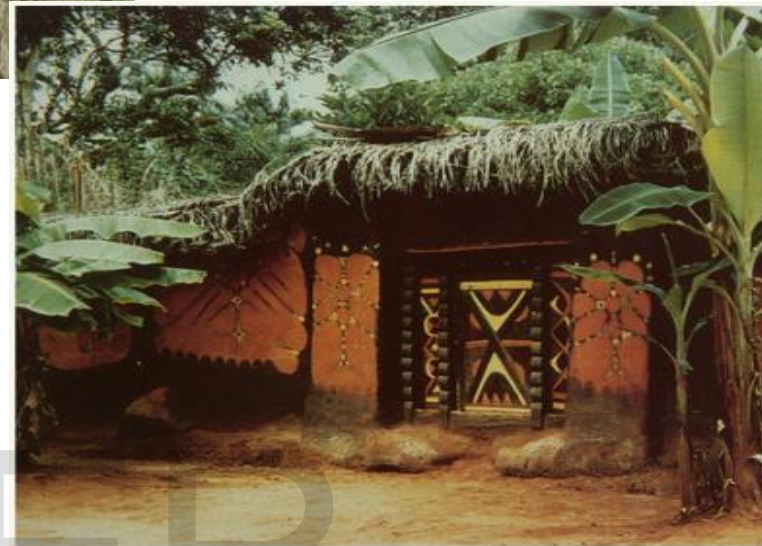


Plate 2: A typical Igbo compound wall with gate

Source: [Http://ukpuru.tumblr.com/](http://ukpuru.tumblr.com/)

Moreover, the layout design of Igbo village as analyzed by [9]. reveal maps that depict Igbo villages as branching out from a circular centre (fig 2). Igbo communities, whether village groups or the smaller settlements comprising them, are organised around an open, public space known as *Ilo* or *Ama* [10]. They circles point to a worldview which believed in a round world or cyclical understandings of the universe (source). The centre is conceptually significant because it is the symbolic centre of a people's universe [10]. Usually, such a centre is marked by a symbol like a live pole, an ancestral tree, a shrine or grove.

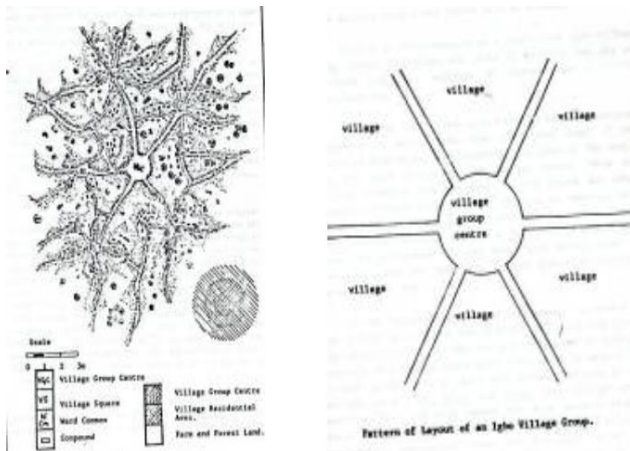


Fig. 2: The Igbo settlement pattern  
Source: Aniakor 2002

## 7. The Igbo Art and Paintings

The Igbo have a wide variety of art including traditional figures, masks and metal works. The uses of carved wooden doors as well as Uli painting were an integral part of the Igbo culture. Among all the artistic practices of the Igbo women uli wall painting and mural decoration were most prominent [11]. traditional art is the chain linking the past with the present [12].

### 6.1. Carved wooden door

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The Igbo people used carved wooden panels as doorways into the compounds of titled men and women. They were also found in the houses of the relatively wealthy as they used it to display their wealth and good taste.

### 6.2. Wall painting and mural decoration

In uli painting, motifs, symbols and colors determine the beauty of the wall decoration as well as its symbolism. Animal and bird motifs were used as they were sacred and signify divinities. Many wall and panel decorations depict images that adhere to designs with the circle as the centre.

## 7. Conclusion

The need to promote the Igbo culture and heritage cannot be over-emphasized. Igbo traditional architecture which is an aspect of the Igbo culture plays an important role in the life of the Igbo. It does not only depict the culture and identity of the people. It is energy efficient and sustainable. The courtyard that is centrally located and completely open to the sky acts as climate modifiers. The building materials are cheap and readily available. The authors suggest that the principles of Igbo traditional architecture should be reviewed, adopted and applied in modern design as a means of sustaining the Igbo cultural heritage.

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\* Chidimma Berne Okoye is an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Architecture Imo State University Owerri, Nigeria. E-mail: chidimmaok2007@yahoo.com

\* Obinna E. Ukanwa is a senior Lecturer in the Department of Architecture Imo State University Owerri, Nigeria. E-mail: housemastery2k@yahoo.com.