

Ekpeye Architecture Culture: Ekpeye's Culture Influenced Built Identity

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Abstract

Traditional architecture amplified through regional identity and heritage, use of local materials, reflection of local customs and traditions, craftsmanship and community involvement distinguishes the traditional architecture of minority tribes of Nigeria with characteristic influence of culture. The Ekpeye Ethnic group, located within the northern area of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria had its traditional architecture influenced by active and passive cultural practices. The cultural influence in traditional architecture was evident from initiation, the perceived idea of owning a property, the design of the property, construction and residence in the designed space. The culture caused the belief system in Ekpeye's gradual influence on inhabitants that culture became intertwined in the everyday life of the Ekpeye person. The study traced the subtle and gradual transfer of traditional built practices to children to the continuous reminder through social activities in adulthood, up to its preservation by the aged. The culture influenced architecture differentiated the built forms according to belief system, social strata and traditional leadership. The research lent credence to the compound word architecture-culture and illustrated the existence of the same in the traditional architecture of a simple yet remote traditional ethnic group of Ekpeye in Rivers State.

Keywords: Ekpeye, Architecture Culture, Built Identity

INTRODUCTION

The art of design, science of building, space design, critical study of buildings and the built environment described architecture and the application of architecture to a specific place or region involved the exploration of social, cultural and historical contexts of architecture (AIA 2020). Architecture used function and technical considerations to generate aesthetically appealing designs as a thought process for the making space (Kahn, 1960). Traditional architecture applied to architecture principles, indigenous knowledge, culture and regional identity generated cultural expression of the architecture of a people. In traditional architecture, regionalism and careful consideration was given to culture in the application of core architectural elements (Rapport 1969) **Culture:** Shared values and customs, behavior, artifact and social norms of a people described culture. A comprehensive description of knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, habits that distinguished members of one group from another. (Hofstede, 2001) Architecture culture is a shift to a culturally inclusive approach to architecture (Omale, 2024). Culture is more than a matter of aesthetics or function for architects but perceived as a form of civic generosity to the area concerned (Rugart 2024). Culture in architecture is important in the appreciation of every ethnic group. Ekpeye, Architectural combines traditions to evolve designs for daily use. Identifying

cultural elements in the tradition architecture, its documentation conservation and preservation of the Identity of Ekpeye traditional spaces is the footing for an ideal traditional identity in Ekpeye Architecture designs.

Architecture culture: The compound word Architecture-Culture explained in its entirety with Ekpeye traditional culture, illustrates the existence of the same traditional architecture principles in a simple yet remote traditional ethnic group of Ekpeye in Rivers State (Obuzor, 2024). Architectural preservation of the key elements of culture in traditional spaces provided a background to the study. Architecture culture identifies formal features in traditional architecture such as the Ekpeye ethnic group in Africa.

Traditional Spatial forms: Physical layout and Organisation of shared spaces that reflected social, cultural and economic dynamics within a community are the spatial forms in discuss. Spatial forms considered were spaces that facilitated socializing, cultural exchange, community building, shared spaces, public areas, areas where local custom were practiced, held traditional values and private traditional spaces.

Architecture and culture are related since a society's structures reflect its values, beliefs and ambitions. Architecture is a physical expression of culture and evident in plans, construction techniques and spatial arrangements. (Jsui.ac.in) Architecture culture identifies formal features in traditional architecture such as the Ekpeye ethnic group in Africa.

Oral tradition: The oral transfer of architecture traditions in Ekpeye began with the subtle transfer of knowledge of the Ekpeye culture and traditions to children as early as they can listen. Folklore and history were narrated to children by their fathers while seated in the mud mounds of the Private lounge "Ulu Udho", in the evenings after dinner had been served and the moon is out. The gradual transfer of traditional built practices to teenagers along farm paths or fishing routes, the communal lounge interactions and family lounge discussions. Those who had learned these traditions from parents passively were continuous reminders of their children and youth through social activities in adulthood. The necessity to preserve this culture, guide younger generations and correct those that may wish to erode such traditions became a responsibility carried out daily by the aged or elders who automatically led the community (Obuzor, 2024).

Communal spatial forms

The uniqueness of each tradition interpreted, differentiated the extent to which culture affected the architecture style and determines the built forms that were created. Designs for pagans dwellers lay intensely on their reverence to their supreme being (Unoshi) evidenced in how the belief system is accommodated. Christian dwellers had the common belief system that behooves on them to adopt foreign religion, import foreign design ideas that conflicted with the stipulated norms of Ekpeye in a way that the new culture imbibed diluted the endangered Architecture culture of moderate consistencies. The arguments and quest for cultural preservation in built forms in Ekpeye was continuous, where the pagans accused the Christians of diluting culture and traditions with foreign adaptations and the Christians accused pagans of bringing fetish ideas into regular traditional architecture principles, the mediators in these arguments were the elders (Egbe, 2024).

Historical Background

The historical trace began with the land and people of Rivers State: Niger Delta (Allagoa 2006). The external influence on the architecture and culture and their interaction through trade and with rulers: Pre-colonial economic development in southern Nigeria (Northrup 1978). The study continued to the land and people of Rivers State, the Colonial influence on Ekpeye cultural

Heritage (Eke, 2017), enumerating the features of culture influenced architecture of the Ekpeye people and Ekpeye cultural values evident in their lifestyle, architecture, recreation, mode of worship, vocation, craftsmanship, communal employment and personal engagements within families, kindred, tribes and communities. The study identified traditional spatial forms, determine the architecture

Ekpeye Architecture Style

The tradition architecture of Ekpeye ethnic group balanced spirituality with nature showing strong bond with the environment (Obuzor, 2024). The buildings were native mud huts and timber buildings that exhibited cultural ideas using sustainable materials and reverence for the environment. Ekpeye indigenous Architecture combined conventional traditional building materials, traditional methods and decorative elements (Okpokiri, 2024).

Colour: The initial colour identity of a traditional spatial forms were a deliberate creation of pigments created from naturally occurring land and rock formation, plants or sap from prehistoric trees. The occurrence of certain colours affected its application as an overlay or mortar spread or as pigments for illustrations and creation of symbols and motifs. Colours in traditional architecture had evolved to a kaleidoscope of cool and formal colours creating a harmonious blend of naturally occurring colours (Imaah, 2002).

Material: The basic materials for construction in traditional architecture are natural occurring materials in the environment. The use of materials is the final process which begins with careful sourcing of the needed materials, preparation of the materials and crafting of some, the installation process and finally the finishes applied to complete the process. Careful consideration of quality in choice of materials and accessories determined the durability of the structure and creates an appreciation of the traditional built forms (Imaah, 2002).

Texture: The texture, best described as a combination of small parts to create a continuous appearance. The texture of traditional built forms is a harmonious combination of the various components that create the entire space. Texture includes the size of objects, shapes and its relation to the surroundings and other objects (Imaah, 2002).

Rhythm: The consideration of the close relationship of patterns which was achieved by a combination of design elements with significant intervals between. Rhythm could reflect a rush of patterns, dignity in designs, and gradual blend of forms while a quick tempo suggests gaiety in design elements (Imaah, 2002).

Shape: Differing shapes of structures had different emotional effects on the observer. A crouching shape definitely creates a different impact and effects on the observer when compared to an expanding shape (Imaah 2002).

Form: This form was composed of objects and the spaces between the objects, they could be positive forms which included over-emphasized or prominent objects or negative forms which are deliberately de-emphasized less prominent objects and almost blended into the environment.

Traditional architecture embraced architecture elements unique to the traditions of the ethnic group, for Ekpeye ethnic group these traditions are applied in daily living (Obuzor, 2024).

Rural Architecture:

The architecture of rural towns in Ekpeye involved sustainable practices that reflected the values of the community and co-operation among villagers. Structures like barns 'Ekwe gbidi', farm houses 'Okpuga', private residence 'Ime Udho', communal lounges 'Ulu Igwa', public meeting spaces 'Ulu- Ula', supported the rural architecture style which was a combination of traditional building techniques and locally obtained materials (Obuzor, 2024).



Picture of traditional building in progress



Sticks installed for walls in Odioabidi community (Source: researcher 2024)

Cultural influence:

The Ekpeye way of preserving its culture was by oral tradition via architectural elements, crafts, Land marks, vocational and recreational activities. The second instance was dependent on the family the Ekpeye man belonged to, His trade, his recreational preference and his belief system. These determined if he was polygamous or not, preferred to live in a family nucleus or elaborate family system.

The culture of coming of age of the young man also necessitated the addition of rooms for the young men (Udho Ugboji) around the premise this changes the compound layout. Kingship, age and hierarchy affect the size of land apportioned to an individual and this influenced the built forms within the plots thereby affecting the compounds (Ijere, 2024)

Traditional Ekpeye communities had architecture features similar to buildings with deep eaves, elaborate construction, separate buildings and exquisite decoration. Organic Material types and their eco compatibility were considered, with focus on mud mortar, earthen plaster, thatch, mud mounds into walls with bamboo as reinforcements in the traditional architecture in Ekpeye communities (Ijere 2024).

Family

Family in Ekpeye was closely knit with building designs that enhanced the privacy of every compound. Every male within his allocated plot which held the cluster of huts that made up a private compound for the family. Ekpeye people lived in clusters of families, kindred and tribes within communities with clear demarcation of residential areas, public areas, work areas, administrative areas and shared communal areas forms, each had specific building types and rules kept all Inhabitants in check. (Ijere 2024)



Picture of Ulu ekpe in community (rounce: researcher 2024)

Trade



Thatch installation in progress (source Researcher 2024)



Picture of craft work in progress (source: Researcher 2024)

The earliest settlers in Ekpeye were predominantly hunters, fishermen and farmers, the women supported their husbands in the family/families. In the quest to fend for families and the extended family, people explored the environment in order to meet the daily needs of the family through carving, weaving, thatch making, pottery, trade and traditional crafts (Obuzor, 2024)

Architecture styles in Ekpeye.

The architecture style of Ekpeye ethnic group in description was passive with specific traditional instructions on the geometric patterns, shapes, forms, architecture elements and architectural

principles applied in the various designs that made up the traditional styles in Ekpeye traditional architecture (Obuzor, 2024)

Objectives

The objectives of the study are as stated below:

1. Identify the cultural influence on the traditional built forms in the Ekpeye ethnic group.
2. Analyze the cultural elements and communal influence in the Architecture style within the Ekpeye Ethnic group.
3. Develop a comparative analysis for culture influenced architecture of Ekpeye and other ethnic groups.
4. Develop a framework for Ekpeye traditional architecture

Ekpeye tradition and spatial forms

Ekpeye traditionalists believed Ekpeye to be a land where every visual expression was backed by culture and beliefs. One of such was the law of duality as postulated by the Greeks (Obuzor, 2024). Ekpeye believes everything about creation was done in twos. Everything is in twos, good and evil, male and female, fat and slim. . Front and back, fine and ugly, good and bad. Ekpeye believes that the law of duality i and expects that bad situation could be neutralized by good (Ijere, 2024). They believed the woman and the man are separated entities and should have Their separate buildings. The secondary residence ' Udho Una and Udho echinabo" were for the women and the children. Building for various functions were differentiated (Eleh, 2014). Examples were, "Udho Oku" - Kitchen building, 'Udho Una'-sleeping building, "Udho Utani"- firewood shed, "Ulu Udho"-Private lounge, "Udho Ugboji"-young boys building.

Contributions to the discuss

(David J Clark 1969) resided in Ula-Upata community observed Ekpeye, an independent language from Igbo, he assumed communities of kingdoms, speaking different dialects of Ekpeye with re-occurring pattern and features related to each other. (Maxuel C. Ikpe 1972) wrote children books on Ekpeye language. (Isaac C. Amini-Philips 1994, 1998) wrote a thesis on King Nworisa of Ekpeye land and Ekpeye history, (Ozo-Makuri Mdembele 2011), gave orthography of Ekpeye history, Roger Blenche prepared a dictionary of Ekpeye language. Namdi Eleh described the geographical Ekpeye territory as dense swampy region of the delta between the Sombrero and Orashi tributaries of the Niger River. Annually Ekpeye celebrated First son's festival (Ogwu Ukpukpumini) to welcome the rainy season, festival of first daughter, Ogwu Ekpeye to mark the native calendar period of rest, and this is successfully followed by festival that began a new year and an era for work which includes Architectural designs and construction (Eleh 2014). Ekpeye traditional architecture classified built forms in micro environment and macro environment.

Methodology

The method applied in the study includes: qualitative analysis, ethnology, Community engagement, and personal observation. The proposed template for cultural architecture preservation was to improve the scenery, landscape, without distorting the traditional significance of these forms. The information previously gathered above generates the recommendations. The data collection process incudes;

- a. Schematics and illustration,
- b. pictures,

- c. Archived documents
- d. unpublished works of local historians
- E. Structured interviews

These, followed sequentially ensured a preserved Architecture culture and create a future research material. The persons interviewed were Men, Women, Elders, Chiefs, Kings, and the communities where the research was conducted in selected Ekpeye communities... Sub sets of each micro spaces documented included; Private space, Public space, Shared space, Administrative spaces, Social space, Recreational space, and Work space

Architecture spatial forms and Culture

Cultural influence on Ekpeye architecture as represented in spatial forms in communities. These are enumerated below:

Spatial form	Culture / Beliefs
Ime udho	The Egbeleta (entrance) may have had a miniature shrines, a particular shrub for demarcating the plot and for protection. Ulu-Udho (private hut) is located close to the entrance or the public area, ensured privacy of the family members from visitors. The main lounge housed the bedroom of the master of the house and was located adjacent to his private hut as he was regarded as the protector of the family. Female children lived with the mothers in her house from birth till they were married. The women only assed the husbands space when needed. Females got wrapper as they attained puberty. The male children stayed with their fathers at the age of education and were given a room when they came of age (teenage). (Okpokiri 2024)
Udho Echinabo	The man slept in a room adjoining the house the sitting room. The middle room was open to all members of the house (Obuzor 2024).
Udho Oku	.This was the kitchen. The work space was made up of Ige (shelves), which had the lower shelves and higher shelves. Atagadhiga was the medium shelf that is above the fire place. (Obuzor 2024)
Ozu dho:	The backyard had two native sheds for firewood and the bathroom, Ishi-udho utani was the firewood shed, and the bathroom shed.
Ulu Udho.	A visitor was received at the lounge, where the man rested and carried out simple craft. A hunter kept skulls of his highest kill as priced display of his hunting skills (Okpokiri 2024).
Ishi-udho	This was the toilet for the family. Ekpeye tradition aborted the sight of dirt so his convenience was located at the back of the compound. The home had a garden between the storage area, the backyard and the convenience (Ijere 2024).

Egbeleta

That was the entrance to the compound. A visitor was expected to stand at the entrance to the compound and obtain permission before he entered a compound. After which he is expected to proceed to the private lounge to be received by the house owner. Egbegbo was a traditional protection stick across the Egbeleta. Some egboebo may just be a stick of bamboo across the entry of the house or a simple stick above the the entrance.. Ekpeye believed that no man or spirit visited through the back gate of a compound. All visits were expected to access the compound through the front door. The belief of the owner of the compound is unknown so the visitor had to call out to the owner before entry. (Ijere 2024)

The private compound consists of the following; Udho Oku, Udho Ime, Udho Ime, Udho Una, Ulu and Egbeleta. The buildings are typically arranged in horse-shoe shape, L form or I form. Udho -nyize and Udho Ugboji. In recent timed the main buildings became more elaborate with extra rooms. Male rooms are still separated from female rooms (Odoi 2024)

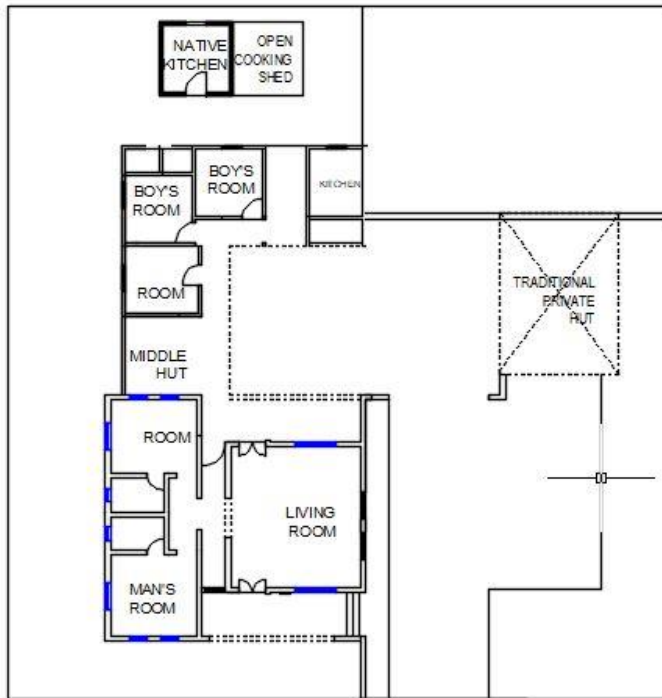


Illustration of a modern Ime Udho

Spatial forms in the Private residence (Egbeleta, Ime udho, Udho echinabo),

“Udho Una” was where the man slept, Udho Oku is where cooking was done, there was a traditional sendoff ceremony when the owner of the land or compound died as this ushered the first son as the new owner of his father’s compound and the head of the extended family.



The entry view of a private compound “Ime Udho” in Idoke community (source Researcher 2024)

One of the huts had restricted access to females or children in the instance where the husband was a traditionalist. They built differently with the belief that buildings had different functions and had beliefs or traditions that determined how the occupants lived within the house. Those who had not performed the traditions associated with cooking independently (U-be-Udho) were not allowed to cook separately (Ijere, 2024)

Entry porch (Agalaga)

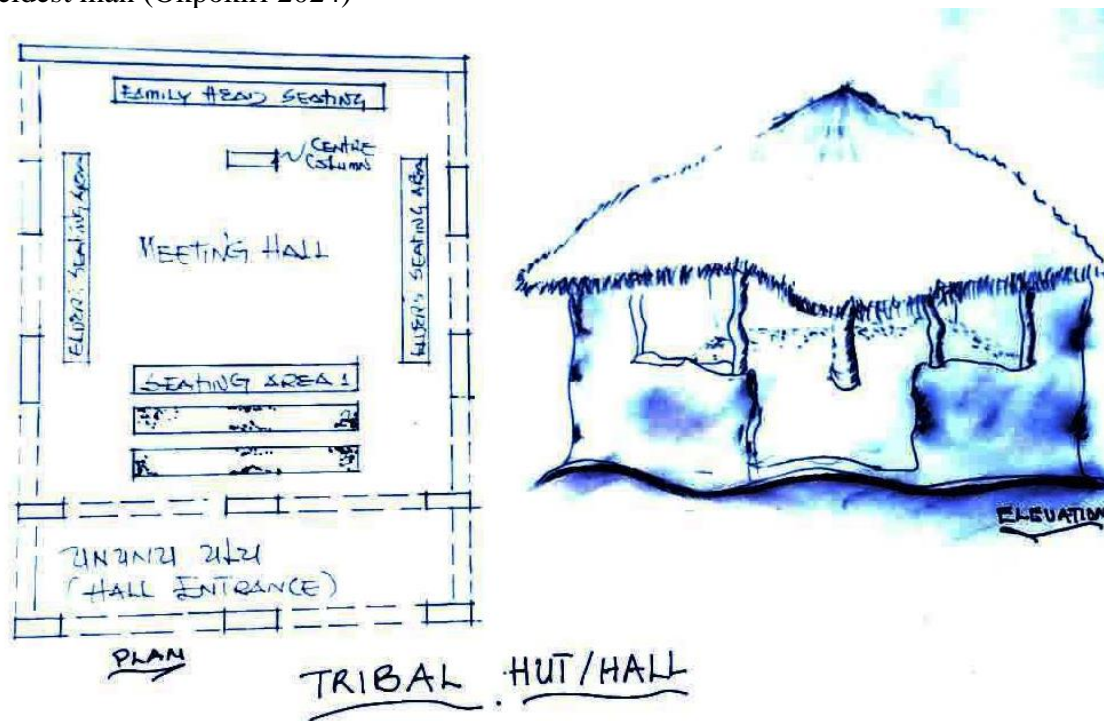
This was the entrance porch. It had traditions a belief that ensures its orientation. Its orientation in design was to face the sunrise. The traditional Ekpeye man was believed to wake up and say his prayer at the door and facing the sun rise. He proceeded to speak well to his day and sat to bask in the sunlight (Eminika 2024).



wide entrance porch with deep overhang in Odioabidi community (source Researcher 2024)

Tribal Hall (Ulu Obodo ku),

The 8 tribes of Ekpeye (Obodo) created meeting halls located within the tribal street for people of the same ancestry. Kindred (Ekpe) described as people of the same grandparents (cousins) built huts beside the eldest man. Tribal or kindred halls built were not relocated even at the demise of the eldest man (Okpokiri 2024)



Ekpeye spatial forms were designed within the brief of the occupant and in conformity with traditions. Spatial forms designed with corresponding culture and beliefs are tabulated;

Spatial form	Culture / Beliefs
Ulu Obodo	The Meeting hall for people of the same ancestry. People from other tribes had restricted entry to the Ulu Obodo. Women were not allowed inside the Ulu. If she was party to the suit before the tribal leaders, she sat outside, beside the tribal hull. Every Ulu Obodo had a central column where the skulls of highest kill in hunting seasons are kept as a trophy. Carvings of the family totems were visibly displayed. The totem of animals in tribal halls were, Crocodile, Porcupine, idiot, Scorpion, Lion, Leopard, antelope (Eminika 2024)
Ulu Igwa.	General men's lounge for the community. No female was allowed. The space where decision on discipline and sanctity of the community are addressed. Minor offenders were tried there and dance the dance of shame (eli-ugbu) if found guilty (Eminika 2024).
Okpoga	Farm house, hunters hut, and a general hut or all vocational activities. Located in the farmlands. It was also used as a place of banishment for women who give birth to multiple children. She lived in the okpoga till all extra babies died of natural causes, or were taken by the government. When she was left with only one baby, she returned home (Adikema 2024).

Ekpeye design principles and Architectural response.

Traditional Ekpeye designs were made to align with the culture of hospitality that fostered relationship between individuals, the communities and the kingdoms. Listed are some Ekpeye cultural beliefs and the corresponding architectural response;

Cultural belief	Architectural response
1 The belief in a deity and request for constant protection from external forces by pagans.	Ekpeye Architectural miniature designs for the spirit and its location around the entrances of cpmounds in communities
2 Belief that the administrative leader is the custodian of communal owned things of value and therefore ensures its safety.	Artifact placed beside administrative block. Buildings give spiritual protection and Administrative Building which offers physical protection to the Artifact house (Ijere 2024).
3 Cultural belief of Space distribution and distinction	Farm houses/ work station are located around farms and plantations
4 Culture of play, relaxation and socializing	Design of playgrounds, public lounges, spectator stand for public areas, town hall and meeting halls (Adikema 2024).

5	Culture of chastity and hard work among adolescents	No special provision of female houses for adolescent females and designs for boys houses for adolescent male which were presented in almost empty state with the expectation that the adolescent male will work hard to furnish it (Ijere 2024).
6	Culture uniting the kingdoms, clans and communities	Ancestral spaces, communal spaces, spaces for inter community activities.

Ekpeye application of architecture elements

Ekpeye traditional architecture applied elements of Architecture uniquely. The elements and the application include:

Colour: The colours used in Ekpeye architecture are colour pigments from plants and natural geological formation the environment.

White: A seemly white colour better classified as a light shade of grey is from clay soil or a rare white soil sample type (Udhor) that exists in table lands near water bodies. It paints walls white by diluting in water and applying gentle spread on walls.

Red: The colour was exclusively from a rare sand type (Ajigbo), which is a soil deposit in areas that may present a rocky nature yet existed close to water bodies. Some anthills bring the soil to the surface for painting and decoration.

Brown: The brown mud on walls and its application as a paint gave different shades of the brown colour for building walls. The timber brown or different tree types provided the colour of furniture. Barks of large sticks are peeled off on furniture to achieve a yellow-brown colour.

Black: this colour was from charcoal, wall black was from forests with soils laden with fossil of plant and animals. Patterns were drawn with black on brown or white walls.

Yellow: This colour was not common because of the difficulty in achieving it. It came from the sap of trees or inner lining of the tree bark.

Green: The green colour from plant pigments was from squeezing leaves together and applying same on walls

Space:

Ekpeye living spaces were a direct representation of the family type and size with a pointer to the religious affiliation. Compounds had clusters of small huts and large houses. The pagans had small spaces at the entrance for protection, meeting halls that cater for up to six occupants, kitchen spaces with adjourning sleeping areas for children, sitting rooms for more formal guests, open cooking and roasting huts, service quarters or round men's room (Udhor Ugboji), bedroom for the man of the house attached to the sitting room.

Material

The materials for construction were natural occurring materials in the environment. These include mud "uza", clay "uudoh", sticks "ushi", thatch "Okenye" in some kingdoms of Ekpeye and "Okhai" in ancient Ekpeye, ropes from creeping plants "edhi igah", bamboo stems "owiliwa", bamboo and iron sticks "ukwa". Timber use came into play for building components and furnishing. Rafia palms also has its limited use in the construction of Ekpeye traditional houses as it is used as a brush in the application of mud or clay mortar for rendering of walls and floors.

Other locally available material use was done using a wide range of materials for finishes and furnishing (Odoyi 2024).

Form

The shape of traditional Ekpeye houses were rectangular, a combination of squares and lineally arranged spaces with hipped thatch roof, gable roof or shed roofs. In rare cases there existed a round or spherical shaped central open hut (Ulu) for private residence. However triangular shaped huts for meetings existed in areas such as public lounges (Ulu Igwa). There are no limitations in shape of building components that may be round, trapezoid or rectangular (Obuzor 2024).



Google earth capture of Idoke community showing compounds (source Researcher 2024)

Architecture styles

Architecture styles reflected cultural values through sacred spaces and religion, palaces , residential architecture, funerary architecture, civic buildings, public spaces, monuments, urban design. Ekpeye practices the traditional architecture which includes Indigenous architecture, rural architecture and pagan architecture (Obuzor 2024)

Cultural Symbolism

Ekpeye spatial forms had aspects of the culture that created decoration out of symbols, motifs or patterns. Some of these were clearly detailed representation of the totem of Ekpeye tribes; the skull of the highest kill or what object represented the deity worshiped. Other symbols represented some

important events, items of trade, plant of value, pectoral representation of some aspects of the culture like dressing, dance instruments, farming fishing and any other crafts that around the community . Artifact buildings “Udho Ogbukele” contained valuable community items, placed in close proximity to the town hall for spiritual protection and the Town hall/ Administrative building offered physical protection to the Artifact house. Ekpeye Architectural miniature designs for the spirit took on certain forms and had scary drawings or symbols on walls to instill fear on people of the deity worshiped (Adaye 2024).

Ekpeye architecture and modern influence

The erosion of modern architecture design features into traditional architecture designs necessitated the efforts made by the ancient communities to retain their cultural design and showed resilience of the ethnic group. In the act of dominance from major surrounding ethnic groups, Ekpeye had its share of influence on its culture, yet the continual enforcement of traditional principles on the built forms retained unique traditional spatial forms within the Ekpeye kingdoms. The Ekpeye people and their cultural heritage as shown in its totems, symbols, motifs, murals and graphics represented daily occurring items that were existing (Okpokiri 2024).

Conclusion

The Ekpeye people, their culture and traditions became principal focus and with the analysis came specific spatial forms (Okorobia 2007). Surveys of the Ekpeye ethnic group, ancient kingdoms, tribes, kindred and families, settlement pattern, communal spaces, community layout and details of elements distinguished each spatial form.

The significance of Ekpeye traditional architecture in modern urban planning, the identification of traditional features, and the possibility of its replication in modern era, the spatial characteristics and ways of display in buildings are expected to hold elements of traditional Ekpeye style of architecture that can be replicated and will evolve with time.

The conservation of the culture influenced architecture through evaluation of traditional and Modern Architectural Heritage as shown through Ankara’s Public Buildings (Turgut 2023) suggested steps for architecture heritage conservation. Architectural spatial distribution, Architecture culture preservation, Heritage conservation and the application of culture influenced architecture to features that distinguish spatial forms of specific ethnic groups such as Ekpeye.

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