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Yoruba Language: Semiotics and Meaning in the Southwest Nigeria Built Environment

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Abstract

This study interrogates the intersection of architecture, language, and cultural semiotics within the Yoruba built environment of Southwest Nigeria. It investigates how indigenous linguistic expressions and idioms encode architectural meaning, spatial logic, and socio-cultural values, offering a uniquely Afrocentric framework for interpreting built forms. Drawing on qualitative methodologies—such as semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, field observations, and oral histories—the research deciphers the symbolic dimensions of Yoruba architecture through a semiotic lens. Anchored in the Mutual Contextual Beliefs (MCBs) of the Yoruba, the study examines common statements to reveal the cognitive and philosophical processes underpinning architectural conceptualisation. Diachronic analysis further illuminates the evolution of spatial language from precolonial to contemporary contexts, while also highlighting the erosion of cultural spaces due to modernisation and colonial legacies. Findings reveal that architecture in Yoruba society transcends function to serve as a medium of memory, identity, and cosmology—richly expressed through metaphor, idiom, and embodied space. The study advocates for the reintegration of indigenous semiotic frameworks in contemporary architectural practice, contributing to heritage preservation, cultural sustainability, and the decolonisation of design pedagogy in Africa.

Keywords: *Architecture, Culture, Yoruba, Built-form Spaces, Language, Semiotics*

Introduction

Architecture is inherently site-specific, embodying both utilitarian functions and profound cultural meanings. Beyond its role as a shelter or functional space, architecture serves as a powerful medium of cultural expression—an artistic and symbolic form through which societies communicate identity, values, and collective memory. Historically, built forms have operated as cultural texts, long before the advent of print media, articulating the ethos, beliefs, and social structures of their creators through spatial language, symbolism, and design [1–3]. Architecture thus occupies a central place in the cultural landscape, acting as a repository of meanings inscribed in buildings, landscapes, interiors, and urban forms.

The cultural dimension of architecture, however, has become increasingly marginalised in contemporary discourse and practice. As modernist paradigms, globalisation, and homogenised design aesthetics gained prominence, the socio-cultural narratives that once informed architectural production were often sidelined [4–6]. Yet, good architecture remains rooted in human collectives, drawing from the socio-cultural patterns of life and expressing

shared meanings through material form. Scholarly traditions have long recognised the evolution of architecture across historical and cultural contexts, classifying built forms variously as primitive, vernacular, high-style, monumental, and spiritual, each bearing distinct cultural and symbolic significance [7, 8].

Semiotics, as the study of meaning-making, sign processes, and actions, is inherently a human endeavour centred on the formation and transmission of meaning. It originates from human thoughts and actions, which are governed by complex cultural messages and conventions. These conventions rely on the human ability for intuitive and instantaneous interpretation. Architecture, as a public domain phenomenon, embodies a linguistic structure—both visual and otherwise—that enables multidimensional communication. Architects, therefore, must ensure that their work conveys meaning effectively within the cultural and environmental context in which it exists. This is often achieved through the articulation of beauty, richness, and metaphorical interpretations embedded within the built environment. The application of semiotic principles in architecture is evidenced by the frequent use of linguistic terms such as 'words,' 'poetics,' 'phrases,' 'syntax,' 'semantics,' and 'semiotics' in architectural discourse. Despite the evolution of architectural styles across different time periods, locations, and societies, symbolism remains a constant feature in architectural language. A notable example of this is the interpretation of the Sydney Opera House in Australia, which has been analysed through various semiotic perspectives. The foundational theories of semiotics, as established by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), provide a framework for understanding architectural signification. Semiotics is not an isolated discipline but rather intersects with various fields, including the arts, literature, mass media, social sciences, anthropology, biology, transportation, and urban studies. This interdisciplinary application underscores its relevance in analysing the built environment.

In the African context, traditional and vernacular architectures—particularly those of the Yorùbá-speaking communities of Southwest Nigeria—are notable for their rich contextual language of forms, symbols, and spatial patterns. These architectures are not merely functional; they are semiotic systems that encode meanings through elements such as motifs, spatial hierarchies, construction techniques, and ritual practices. However, the emergence of modern architectural expressions, especially in postcolonial and developing societies such as Nigeria, has often failed to integrate these indigenous cultural dimensions adequately. As Rapoport [5] argued, the task of the modern architect involves not merely innovation but also the rediscovery and adaptive reinterpretation of traditional building practices. Notable efforts have been made in this regard, such as the work of Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, who sought to reconstruct traditional spatial logic in contemporary design, exemplified in projects like the Gourni Village [9]. These efforts emphasise architecture as both a material construct and a cultural artefact, embedded within broader immaterial cultural frameworks including language, rituals, and collective memory. In this context, semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, as well as their use and interpretation—offers a compelling analytical framework for understanding architecture as a system of communication.

Despite the relevance of semiotics in architectural and cultural analysis, a significant gap remains in scholarship focused on the semiotic dimensions of traditional architecture in Southwest Nigeria. In particular, the symbolic languages and meaning-making processes

embedded in the architecture of the Yorùbá people remain underexplored. While existing studies on architectural semiotics and cultural communication—such as those by Sargazi [10] and Sinha [11]—offer valuable theoretical insights, they are situated within global or Western contexts, and thus often overlook the unique socio-cultural and linguistic particularities of African built environments. This scholarly neglect persists despite the growing recognition that cultural processes fundamentally shape the production and interpretation of architectural meaning. The multi-sensory, interpretative approaches of semiotic theorists such as Hua, Otsuji, and Pennycook [12], Boyle [13], and Zevi [14] provide a robust foundation for decoding the cultural languages of space and form. These approaches facilitate a deeper understanding of how architectural elements function as signs, communicating identity, tradition, and values within specific socio-cultural contexts.

This study, therefore, seeks to bridge this gap by situating the traditional and vernacular architectural heritage of Southwest Nigeria within the broader discourses of cultural preservation, identity, and sustainable development. It aims to develop a semiotic framework for interpreting and documenting the architectural forms and spatial practices of Yorùbá communities.

By leveraging the region's linguistic and cultural richness, the study contributes to advancing architectural theory and practice—promoting a culturally responsive design ethos, enhancing historical understanding, and fostering a more sustainable and context-sensitive built environment. The insights from this research will inform the preservation of architectural heritage, guide contemporary architectural interventions, and support the broader objective of embedding cultural meaning in the evolving urban landscapes of Nigeria and beyond.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, anchored in both descriptive and interpretive paradigms, to investigate the socio-cultural and symbolic dimensions of traditional architecture in Southwest Nigeria. The research was framed within interpretivist and advocacy/participatory research philosophies, recognising the multiplicity of socially constructed realities and emphasising the need for inclusive, culturally sensitive inquiry. The advocacy dimension was particularly pertinent due to the historical marginalisation and evolving vulnerabilities of indigenous architectural traditions in the region. Underpinning this research was the intent to critically engage with the Mutual Contextual Beliefs (MCBs) of the Yoruba people regarding their built environment. This conceptual lens enabled the exploration of collective perceptions and shared meanings associated with spaces, forms, and cultural artefacts. Through this lens, the study sought to uncover the enduring socio-cultural and historical dynamics that have shaped architectural heritage in the region. Furthermore, the research aimed to assert and preserve regional architectural identity in the face of homogenising global influences and the proliferation of international architectural styles that often undermine local context and significance.

The research was conducted in Southwest Nigeria, a geo-political zone comprising six states: Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo. Geographically, the region spans approximately 76,852 square kilometres, situated between latitudes 5°55'N and 9°10'N and longitudes 10°25'E and 6°45'E. It is predominantly inhabited by the Yoruba ethnic group,

whose historical roots trace back to Oduduwa and the ancient city of Ile-Ife—widely regarded as the cradle of Yoruba civilisation. The Yoruba people have practised monarchical governance since at least the 7th century A.D., and their traditional belief systems—initially centred on Olodumare (the Supreme Being) and various orisa (divinities)—have evolved alongside the advent of Islam and Christianity. The Yoruba are also historically renowned for their expertise in farming, trade, arts, and architecture, all of which contribute to the cultural richness of their built environment. A case study approach was employed to facilitate an in-depth exploration of selected cultural built forms, symbolic spaces, and architectural artefacts that encapsulate the region's heritage. An initial identification of 28 traditional cultural sites was carried out across the six states. Following a reconnaissance survey, the selection was refined to 18 historically significant cities that reflect both pan-historic relevance and sub-cultural diversity within Yoruba architecture. These sites provided rich evidence of cultural continuity and transformation, both spatial, symbolic, and material. The distribution of these cities and corresponding heritage elements is presented in Table 1, illustrating the geographical and cultural breadth of the study.

To achieve a nuanced understanding of the cultural dimensions of architecture in Southwest Nigeria, the study utilised multiple qualitative data collection techniques, namely:

Table 1: Study Samples of Case Study Areas in the Southwest States of Nigeria

Study Samples								
<div>EPOCH/ TOWNS</div>		Traditional and Vernacular Architecture						Common Statement
		Built-form		Landscape				
SN		Royalty/ Palace/ Title Holders	Commoners/ Domestic	Religious	Groove	Natural Landform	Potsherd Pavement	Syntagm/ Paradigm Common Statement
	Ilé Ifẹ̀	●	●		●		●	
1	Iwo							●
	Ogbomosho	●	●					
	Igbara- Odo	●	●					
	Ilé –Oluji	●						
	Owo	●						
	Ede							●
	Ọyọ					●		
	Efon-Alaye	●						
	Osogbo				●		●	●
	Ijebu – Ode							
	Ibadan		●				●	●
3	Abeokuta					●		
	Ota							
	Badagry							●

1. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Guided interviews were conducted using an open-ended protocol designed to elicit layered responses on the semiotic, cultural, and symbolic functions of built-forms. Participants included community elders, residents, custodians

of heritage sites, and tourist guides. Diverse perspectives were sought across gender and age brackets to ensure a holistic representation of views.

2. **Structured Observations:** Observational fieldwork focused on understanding how traditional architectural elements influence human behaviour, communal interactions, and spatial appropriation. A structured schedule was developed to document visual, material, and behavioural aspects of selected cultural spaces.
3. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Ethnographic engagement was further deepened through FGDs involving sub-cultural community members. These discussions facilitated collective reflections on themes of cultural identity, architectural symbolism, preservation, and contemporary relevance.
4. **Systematic Review of Oral and Written Literature:** The research incorporated extensive analysis of oral traditions, indigenous narratives, and historical anthropological accounts. Emphasis was placed on extracting design principles and symbolic logic embedded in traditional architectural practices, which could be reintegrated into modern urban development.

A semiotic analysis framework was employed to interpret architectural symbols, forms, and spaces within their socio-historical and cultural contexts. This involved decoding the representational meanings of spatial arrangements, decorative motifs, materials, and cultural artefacts. By combining multiple qualitative methods within a culturally embedded framework, the research provides a robust platform for reclaiming and repositioning traditional architecture as a living cultural asset. The findings aim to contribute to broader discourses on architectural decolonisation, cultural sustainability, and heritage-led development, offering actionable insights for policy, education, and practice in contemporary Nigerian and African architectural contexts.

Results

Throughout this study, the deliberate and consistent use of indigenous built environment terminologies and common statements was central to maintaining a culturally grounded architectural focus. These local expressions not only guided the identification and interpretation of case studies but also enabled a novel, culturally relevant semiotic approach to architectural analysis. The integration of these terms provided unique insight into how architecture is perceived, symbolised, and encoded within Yoruba culture, particularly in relation to metaphorical expressions embedded in language. A pivotal question that emerged during focus group discussions concerned the precedence between cultural built-forms and the indigenous terminologies or common statements used to describe them. Participants generally agreed that built forms and cultural spaces preceded the formation of these qualifying terms. The naming conventions and descriptive statements, therefore, evolved as interpretive responses to existing spatial and architectural realities. This evolution was significantly shaped by oral traditions, with written documentation becoming prominent only after the influence of Islam and Western education—most notably through the codification of the Yoruba alphabet by Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther in the 19th century.

Historical architectural evidence supporting this linguistic transition was found in the earliest documented Nigerian storey residential buildings in Badagry and Ota (Figures 1-7), which date back to the 19th century. These buildings illustrate the shift from oral to literate

modes of knowledge preservation, marking a significant phase in the semiotic evolution of Yoruba architecture. Among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria, the house (ilé) holds profound cultural significance, often metaphorically extended to the cosmos.

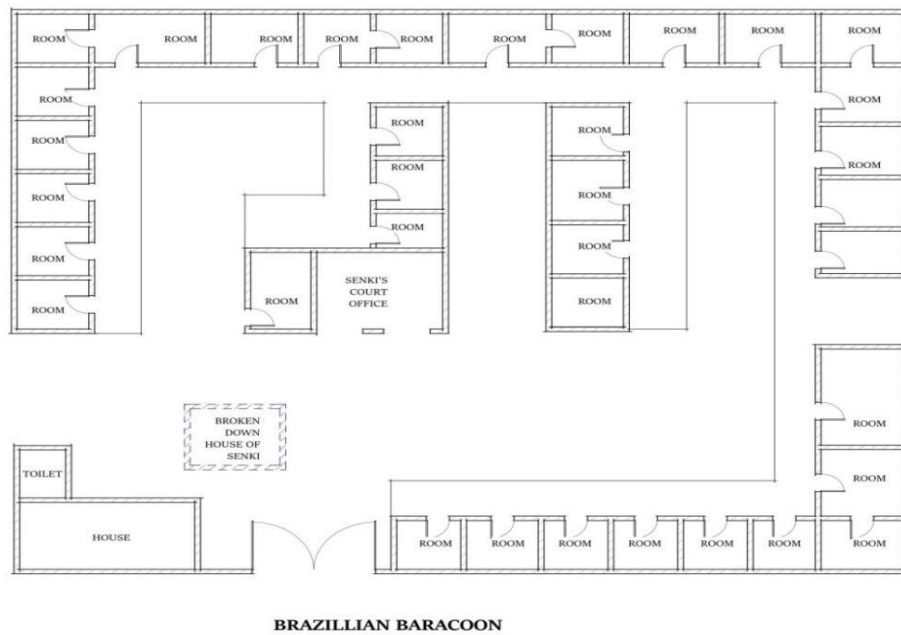


Figure 1. Seriki Faremi Williams' Brazilian Barracoon in Badagry (Floor Plan)
Source: Author's Field Work



Figure 2. Seriki Faremi Williams' Brazilian Barracoon in Badagry (Front View)
Source: Author's Field Work

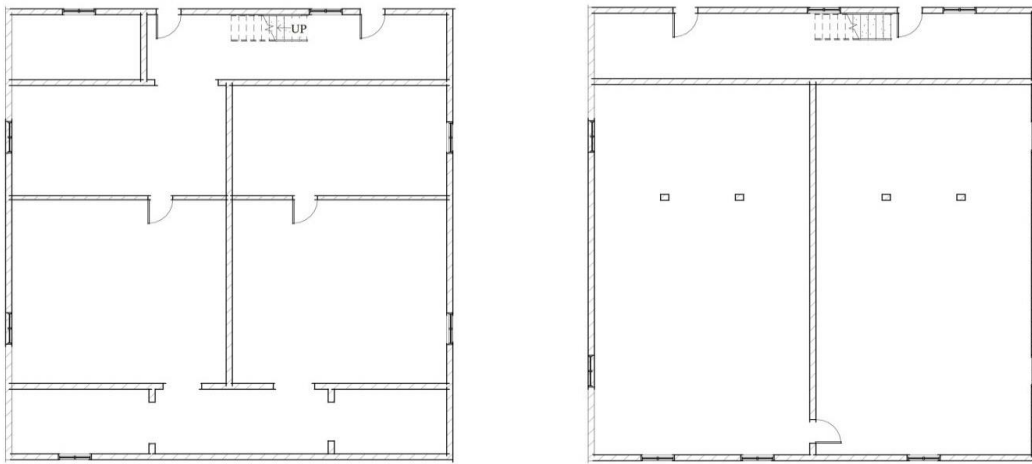


Figure 3. Seriki Faremi Williams' Brazilian Barracoon in Badagry (Front View)
Source: Author's Field Work



Figure 4. The First Residential Storey Building, Badagry (Floor Plan)
Source: Author's Field Work



Figure 5. The First Residential Storey Building, Badagry (Front and Side View)
Source: Author's Field Work

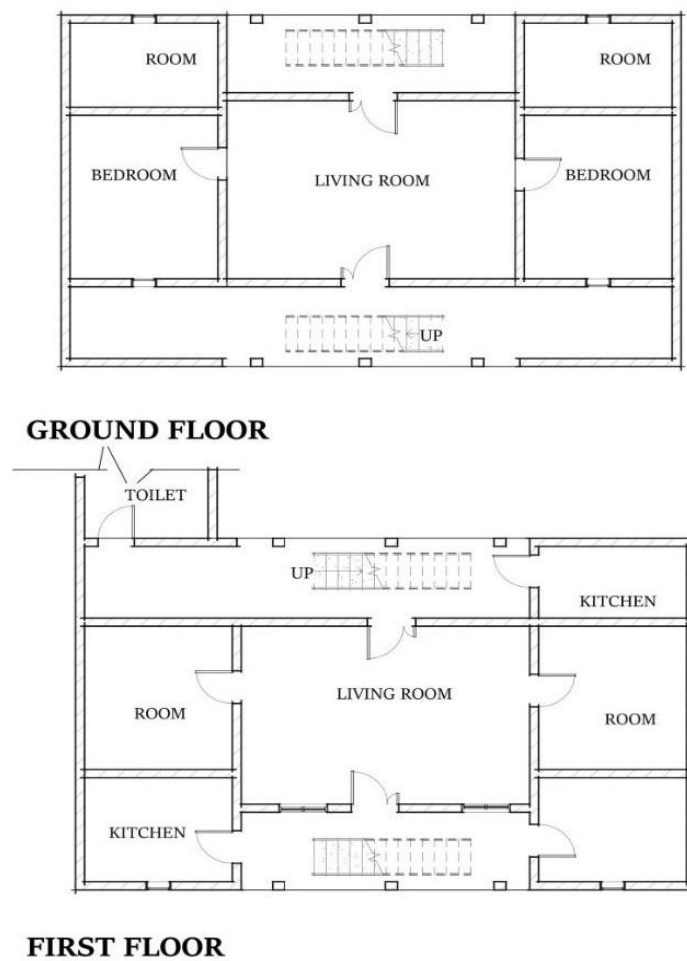


Figure 6. The Second Residential Storey Building, Ota (Floor Plans)
Source: Author's Field Work



Figure 7. The Second Residential Storey Building, Ota (Front and Side Vies)

Source: Author's Field Work

Terms such as "ilé-ayé" (house of the world) and "àjùlé òrun" (heavenly home) underscore the philosophical and spiritual importance of architecture. While the world is regarded as a transient marketplace or journey (*oja* or *ajo*), heaven is conceptualised as the ultimate, permanent abode. These metaphors serve as a foundation for understanding the symbolic classification of built forms and spaces as inherently cultural. The term "*orilẹ̀-èdè*", used to denote a nation, literally translates as "land resting on a language," further exemplifying how space, identity, and linguistics are interwoven in Yoruba cosmology and built environment semantics. This conceptual framing aligns with the "African triple heritage" theory—encompassing indigenous, Islamic, and Western influences—and situates Yoruba architecture within a layered historical and cultural timeline.

The Yoruba people, known for their rich oral traditions and symbolic communication practices, utilise both verbal (e.g., town crier) and non-verbal (e.g., *aroko*) modes to convey meanings. In architectural contexts, numerous indigenous expressions and common statements encapsulate symbolic and functional dimensions of space, even in cases where the physical structures have vanished. These common statements often reflect sophisticated indigenous knowledge systems in urban planning, landscape design, building construction, and interior architecture. Their analysis reveals that no aspect of Yoruba life exists outside the interpretive domain of built-environmental expressions. Thus, these statements offer critical insights into spatial typologies, social functions, and cosmological significance.

Tables 2 and 3 capture this analytical process. Table 2 presents a compilation of indigenous common statements historically used to describe and classify cultural spaces and built forms. Table 3 applies semiotic constructs—such as *signifier*, *signified*, and *paradigm* to systematically decode the architectural meanings embedded in Yoruba nomenclature. This semiotic approach to interpreting Yoruba architecture aligns with established theoretical frameworks such as Hölscher's [15] five levels of meaning and the African metaphorical interpretation models proposed by Boudier and Minha [16]. These frameworks validate the use of semiotics in unravelling the multilayered symbolism inherent in Yoruba built forms. The deep-rooted connotative meanings revealed through local metaphors and common

statements provide compelling evidence of the cultural sophistication and symbolic richness of Yoruba architectural traditions.

Cultural Semiotics in Traditional Yoruba Architecture

Traditional societies have long utilised semiotic principles in their architectural expressions. In Southwest Nigeria, where the Yoruba people reside, oral tradition plays a significant role in meaning-making. Historically, Yoruba architecture comprised vernacular construction techniques such as mud huts, which were deeply embedded in cultural narratives. One such cultural expression is the term "Akole-Inu," which translates to 'builder-on-the-inside.' This concept is encapsulated in the Yoruba proverb: "*Akole-Inu kan o le gbon titi k'oko t'agbon*," meaning, "A builder-on-the-inside cannot be wise enough to construct a wasp's nest." This phrase illustrates a deep cultural appreciation for conceptualisation in architectural processes. Just as a wasp's nest is intricately designed before construction, so too must a building be thoroughly conceived in the architect's mind before manifesting as a physical structure. This notion highlights the cognitive and symbolic importance of architecture in Yoruba society, reinforcing the idea that built forms are not merely functional but also embody deep-seated cultural and philosophical meanings.

Table 2: Semiotic Meaning of Common Built-form Terms Used in the Southwestern Part of Nigeria

S/N	Yoruba Common Statement	English Meaning	Denotation/ Function Meaning	Connotation/ Symbolic/ Cultural Meaning
1.	E ma torí Ede ba èdè jé	Do not, because of Ede town, desecrate the family hall	The city's urban role for glamour as opposed to the role of the family hall as a place of family bonding	The sanctity of the family hall as a space of unity must not be desecrated
2.	Ile àbèrè wò bí ilé òkété	a house you bend to enter like rabbits. However, it is said that the entrance of shrines is also made low to show the reverence given to the concerned deity	The size of the owner determines the size	An apt description of a non-befitting house
3.	Ilé oba ayé yí, dára wò bí ère	The king's palace is often so beautifully built and well-adorned that it looks like an artwork.	Denotes the scale, grandeur and high level of artistic detailing of the palace to depict horizontal and vertical aesthetics.	Connotes royalty and is a symbol of authority

4.	Iwo o ni 'lekun eru wewe ni won fi nde'le baba won	Iwo Township did not need doors, as maid- servants were used as guards	denotes the different roles of a door and a guard for security at entrances	connotes beyond the complementary human role to guard apart from the door, a time in history, the great prowess of the Iwos in keeping maiden slaves
5.	Òpó múlé ró	It is the column that upholds a house	The structural stability role of the column in a house	the stabilising factor in a home or society
6.	ar'apa s'opo	having an arm that is able to play the role of a column		Having what it takes to be a stabilising factor
7.	Ìwon Eku nìwòn ité	The rat's size determines the size of the throne	The functional role of the throne as a seat and the place of anthropometrics	The symbolic role of a seat as a throne
8.	Igba eké ní dáwó tilé igba Aláàmù ní dáwó tògiri	Many columns support a house, just as many lizards lean on the wall	The structural stability role of the column in a house, as well as	Similar to the ocean being made of millions of drops of water, or that a single tree does not make a forest. Highlighting teamwork.
	Fi òte é de lóri	The ridge cap covering of the roof, sometimes a small pot used to cover the point of the tying together of the thatch or palm-fronds		Connotes the crowning or sealing, but more than the saying “icing on a cake”
	Ògiri létí	The wall has ears	This is in the literal context of sound being transmittable through walls.	The connotation of the statement is to ensure decorum in society through the control of gossip. This is especially applicable where loyalty to constituted authority is such that the act of backbiting is grossly discouraged.

Source: *Authors' Field Survey, 2019*

Table 3: Use of Semiotic Vocabularies for Space Analysis

S/ N	Signifier	Signified	Mode of sign	Denotation/ Connotation	Paradigm/ syntagm	Metaphor/ metonymy
1	<i>Òrùlé</i> (Roof)	Physical covering to protect buildings	Iconical	Denotation and Connotation	Syntagms	Metonymy
2	<i>Óte</i> (ridge cap)	local material used to tie the sheaf or frond roof covering material	Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm	Metaphor and metonymy
3	<i>Àjà</i> (Loft)	The loft and storage area inside the roof space	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metaphor and metonymy
4	<i>Òkè-àjà</i>	Top of and interchangeable with the loft, still under the roof	Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Syntagms	Metonymy
5	<i>Eni</i> (Mat)	Transportable artefact/ furniture	Symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm	Metaphor
6	<i>Ópó-ilè/ Eké</i> (column)	Columns/ reinforcements	Iconic, Indexical and Symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Syntagm	Metonymy
7	<i>Ìpìlè-ilè</i> (Foundation)	House foundation	Indexical	Denotation	Syntagm	Metonymy
8	<i>Ògiri</i> (Wall)	covering around the house	Iconic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm	
9	<i>Igun-ilè</i> House corner)	Edges of the rectangular or square-shaped walls of the traditional house are for protection and ornamentation.	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm and Syntagms	Metonymy
10	<i>Ìlèkùn</i> (door)	Usually, wooden batten openable entrances let in or keep out for privacy.	Iconic and indexical	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm	Metaphor and metonymy
11	<i>Fèrèsé</i> (Window)	Small wooden & light inlets in older indigenous, but bigger wooden and glass in vernacular buildings	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm	Metaphor and metonymy
12	<i>Àterígbàwolé</i> (Entrance-porch)	It could simply be the entrance lintel shooting out slightly, or an extended covered entrance way.	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Syntagm	Metonymy
13	<i>Gbàgede</i>	The entrance extended covered or uncovered entrance space for close family or communal gathering.	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metaphor and metonymy
14	<i>Ènu-òná</i> (Entrance)	Entrance opening of the house for protection and ornamentation.	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Syntagms	Metaphor Metonymy
15	<i>Ojú-òná</i> (Way)	Literally means the eye of the way, the path to a place	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Syntagms	Metaphor Metonymy
16	<i>Àgánràndí/ Eran-ìje</i> (Goat-gate)	Often a wooden batten baluster door for in and out control of Pets	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Syntagms	Metaphor and metonymy
17	<i>Orúwá/Odèdè</i> (family- hall)	An extended or Large family lobby/sitting area is usually for wives and children.	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denoting cosy family living and Connotes communality	Syntagm	Metaphor Metonymy
18	<i>Iyàrà</i> (Room)	Sleeping space, usually a small, minimally living.	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metonymy

		outstretched arm's length square or a little more				
19	Ìyèwù (Private room)	Private small sleeping space, minimally outstretched arm's length square or a little more	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metaphor
20	Ojúlé (Rooms)	Literally means the eye of the house; that is, the number of rooms in a rooming house.	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm Syntagms	Metonymy
21	Ojúde (Entrance area/Fore-court)	Literally means the eye of the outside, that is, the external family social space.	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm Syntagm	Metonymy
22	Eyinkùlé (Back-yard)	An equally important space for cooking and all hygiene-related issues	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm Syntagm	Metonymy
23	Impluvium	Special design in the courtyard space for water collection.	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metaphor Metonymy
24	Courtyard	Usually, an enclosed open space.	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metaphor Metonymy
25	Àpotí /Ijòkòó (seat)	Low wooden stool for seating	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metaphor Metonymy
26	Àmù	Medium-sized family water pot	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation	Paradigm	Metonymy
27	Ládugbó	Large Water pot	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metaphor Metonymy
28	Orù	Small Water pot	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metaphor Metonymy
29	Ilé-ìwé (Bathroom)	Covered or open bathing space	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metonymy
30	ilé-ìdáná (Kitchen)	Open or covered cooking in an enclosed space.	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metonymy
31	Ilé-ìgbonse/ Ìyàgbé (Toilet)	Open or covered defecating enclosed space.	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metonymy
32	Àkitàn (Dump-yard)	Open dump yard.	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metaphor Metonymy
33	Àpáàdi- Luwo (Potsherd pavement)	Potsherd pavement	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metonymy
34	Àkòdì (Family meeting hall)	Usually, a small standalone family meeting hall (impluvium courtyard is also so called in Igbara-Odo Ekiti)	It is Iconic and symbolic.	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metaphor Metonymy
35	Àkéte/ Pèpéle	The raised platform could be a sitting or sleeping space	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metaphor
37	Ìbùsùn	Sleeping bed	It is Iconic and symbolic	Denotation and Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metaphor Metonymy
38	Eni	Mat	Iconic & symbolic	Denotation & Connotation	Paradigm/ Syntagm	Metaphor Metonymy

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2019

Semiotics and the Evolution of Yoruba Built Forms

The Yoruba people's perception of space and built environments extends beyond physical structures to include symbolic and spiritual dimensions. For instance, the term *ilé-ayé* (house of the world) signifies the Earth, while *àjùlé òrun* (the celestial home) represents the afterlife. These conceptualisations indicate a broader worldview in which human habitation is not limited to terrestrial but also extends to the metaphysical. Additionally, the Yoruba term *orileede*, which translates to "on the top of a land of a language," is used to denote a nation. This linguistic connection between geography, culture, and identity reinforces the semiotic nature of Yoruba architecture. The Yoruba built environment is thus a repository of symbolic meanings, many of which are encapsulated in common statements that describe spatial and architectural concepts.

The 'African Triple Heritage' and Built Environment Specialisations

A significant finding of this study is the application of the 'African Triple Heritage' concept in Yoruba architectural semiotics. This framework, which integrates Indigenous, Islamic, and Western influences, provides a historical lens through which Yoruba architecture can be analysed. The oral-centric nature of Yoruba culture means that many architectural terminologies and meanings have been transmitted through proverbs, idioms, and symbolic statements. Focus group discussions revealed that symbolic language in Yoruba culture extends to all aspects of the built environment, including urban planning, landscape design, and interior architecture. These symbolic statements provide insights into the specialisation and expertise embedded in traditional Yoruba architecture. For example, references to town criers and the *aroko* communication system exemplify the importance of both verbal and non-verbal communication in defining cultural spaces.

Case Study Analysis: Ede and Iwo Towns

To further substantiate these findings, a case study of Ede and Iwo towns was conducted. These towns were selected due to their historical significance and well-preserved traditional architecture. The study identified symbolic common statements that reveal the deep connotative meanings associated with Yoruba built forms. Through desk research and field observations, it was established that Yoruba architecture, prior to external cultural influences, was inherently symbolic and conceptual. The study found that conceptualisation was a critical phase in Yoruba architectural design. The phrase *Akole-Inu* encapsulates the idea that architecture begins in the mind before physical manifestation. Furthermore, the complexity of structures such as the wasp's nest served as an analogy for the sophistication required in architectural design. Focus group discussions indicated that the Yoruba people recognised specialisations in urban planning, interior design, and space management long before the formalisation of these fields in modern architectural discourse.

Discussion

The integration of Yorùbá linguistic semiotic expressions in the built environment reveals a deep-seated cultural understanding of spatial organisation, social interactions, and the

symbolic significance of architectural elements. The findings of this study indicate that the use of human anatomical metaphors plays a crucial role in describing and interpreting architectural spaces, offering an indigenous lexicon that enriches the discourse on Yorùbá architecture. Through linguistic analysis and focus group discussions, this research elucidates the contemporary relevance of these expressions in understanding-built forms in Southwest Nigeria.

The findings underscore the use of human anatomy as a metaphorical framework for describing spatial attributes. Expressions such as *oju* (eye), *enu* (mouth), *eti* (ear), *ori* (head), *ese* (leg), *ilé* (ground), and *isàlè* (down) are commonly used to delineate architectural elements. For instance, the entrance of a house, referred to as *enu-òná* (mouth of the path), signifies its function as an access point akin to the human mouth's role in communication and sustenance. Similarly, *oju-òná* (eye of the path) denotes the focal or central area, while *eti-òná* (ear of the path) represents a secondary or adjacent path. The metaphor extends to roof structures, with *ori-ilé* (head of the house) evolving into *òrùlé* (roof), symbolising its protective role similar to the human head. This metaphorical system, corroborated by Babade [17] and Folaranmi [18], aligns with the traditional African architectural philosophy, where built forms are not merely physical constructs but embodiments of cultural values and identity.

The study analysed common Yorùbá statements to extract their spatial and social implications in two towns: Ede and Iwo. These expressions provide insights into communal living patterns, governance structures, and spatial hierarchy. A prominent saying, *E ma tori Ede b'eede je nitori ti a ba se tan l'Ede eede la ma f'abo si*, translates to a caution against prioritising urban allure (Ede) over traditional communal values (*Eede*). Here, *Eede* refers to the extended family courtyard (*Oríwá*), typically located at the rear of the house and reserved for women and children. This statement suggests a well-established urban system with structured governance and family-centric planning, reinforcing the critical role of architecture in sustaining social bonds [19-22]. Additionally, the expression *Ilé labo sinmi oko* (the house is a place of rest after working on the farm) highlights the traditional importance of home as a sanctuary, aligning with the economic significance of urban centres like Ede as hubs of prosperity.

The statement *Iwo o ni'lekun eru wewe in won fi ndele baba won* describes an architectural phenomenon in Iwo, where ancestral homes lacked physical doors but were protected by maiden enslaved people (*eru wewe*). This reflects a historical security system predating modern door mechanisms, paralleling contemporary human security services. The phrase highlights the distinction between openings and physical doors in Yorùbá architecture and suggests a legacy of social stratification influenced by the slave trade. Yorùbá lexicons extend beyond spatial identification to inform design thinking and cultural continuity. The study's focus group discussions revealed that younger participants found these semiotic approaches more insightful than conventional architectural pedagogy, demonstrating their potential for Afrocentric modernism and client persuasion in design decisions. Statements such as *Owo omode o to pèpè, t'agbalagba ko wo keregbe* (a child's hand cannot reach the shelf, and an elder's hand cannot fit into a small gourd) metaphorically depict intergenerational interdependence. Such expressions emphasise the inherent functionality of built elements while reinforcing socio-cultural values in architecture.

The *Kòbì* (projected verandas with high pyramidal roofs) of the Òyó palace (Figure 8) exemplify a spatial hierarchy in Yorùbá royal architecture. This architectural feature, associated with kingship and deified figures like Sango, serves as a social gathering space comparable to the *Ojúde* (royal forecourt) in Ijebu-Ode. The function of these structures aligns with the Indigenous *Gbagede*, an open-air customary court [23]. Such design principles maintain continuity from historical palatial typologies to contemporary communal spaces. Furthermore, indigenous architectural carvings on beams, lintels, and caryatids (*òpò*) represent status symbols, with motifs depicting warriors, mythological beings, and historical events. These carvings, prevalent in royal palaces of Ilé-Ife, Ilé-Oluji, Owo, Ogbomoso, and Òyó, serve as visual narratives, reinforcing the cultural literacy embedded in Yorùbá architecture [24].



Figure 8. The Alààfin of Òyó's Palace
Source: Author's Field Work

The findings of this study underscore the integral role of language in shaping spatial consciousness and cultural heritage in Yorùbá architecture. The use of semiotic expressions provides a framework for understanding past built forms, ensuring their relevance in contemporary discourse. As demonstrated, these linguistic constructs not only offer insights into architectural typologies but also reinforce the interconnectivity of cultural identity, social structure, and spatial organisation. By incorporating Yorùbá semiotics into architectural education and practice, Afrocentric design paradigms can be strengthened, fostering a renewed appreciation for Indigenous spatial knowledge. This study advocates for a re-examination of vernacular expressions as a means of bridging historical architectural wisdom with modern design approaches, ensuring the continuity of Yorùbá architectural heritage in contemporary urbanism.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the intersection of architecture, conceptualisation, and cultural semiotics within the Yoruba context, using indigenous linguistic expressions and idioms as analytical lenses. By engaging Yoruba common statements, it interrogated the nomenclature for the architect and the foundational idea that architecture—as both a practice and a process—has long existed in Yoruba epistemology, predating formal culture-contact.

The fieldwork and focus group discussions were instrumental in affirming that the art and science of built-form procurement among the Yoruba is deeply rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems and symbolic thought. A central proposition of this research is that architecture is inherently conceptual, with all design processes beginning as cognitive constructs. This notion finds cultural validation in Yoruba idioms such as "*akólẹ̀ inú kan kò le gbón títí kò kọ́ ti àgbón*," which literally translates to "the builder inside cannot be wise enough to build a wasp's nest." This expression, rich in metaphor, reflects an indigenous appreciation of conceptual design complexity and subtly affirms the intellectual depth required for architectural innovation. It also suggests an early recognition of architectural specialisation, even within the cooperative building systems traditionally practised in Yoruba societies.

Through diachronic analysis, the study traced the evolution of architectural meaning from historical to contemporary contexts, emphasising the potential for adaptive reuse and relevance. Faced with the erasure of original cultural spaces due to colonial legacies, urbanisation, and modernisation, the study pivoted to the intangible—language, proverbs, and symbolic discourse—as a means of reconstructing architectural identity. This linguistic semiotics offered a culturally grounded perspective on spatial logic and design intentions that are otherwise obscured in physical artefacts. It affirmed that the Yoruba architectural imagination is both conceptual and narrative, drawing on oral traditions, spatial metaphors, and encoded cultural values. Furthermore, insights from the focus group discussions revealed a pressing challenge in the current architectural landscape: the limited autonomy of architects to articulate Afrocentric design narratives due to client-driven demands. Unlike other creative fields such as sculpture, textile design, and performance arts, architecture remains constrained by economic and professional dynamics that inhibit the full expression of indigenous identity. The research also highlighted the potential for broader specialization in traditional Yoruba architectural thought. Expressions analogous to those analysed in this study may allude to roles akin to interior designers, urban planners, and spatial theorists—suggesting a need for further exploration into these culturally embedded specialisations.

In sum, the findings underscore the fundamental role of semiotics in understanding Yoruba architecture. The intricate relationship between language, cultural philosophy, and the built environment offers a valuable paradigm for interpreting indigenous African architectural systems. This study contributes to a growing body of knowledge that foregrounds the relevance of indigenous epistemologies in contemporary design discourse. Future research should investigate how these linguistic and symbolic frameworks can inform sustainable architectural practices that preserve cultural identity while addressing present-day spatial challenges.

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