

# Cultural Streetscape: Its Value-System, Space and Significance in Oyo Town, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** *Cultural streetscape is a remarkable street scene that embodies the local culture. It helps in defining and defending urban forms, improves the physical, economic, and socio-cultural mechanisms of urban streets, provides street views for buildings, and shares communal activities and identities. Streetscape is a significant and multi-dynamic component of urban design that contributes to the success of cities and towns. However, as a result of constant urbanization and neglect, African streets that were previously sites of different cultural expressions and local beliefs are quickly turning into areas devoid of local values and meaning. More so, the significance of a cultural streetscape that facilitates ingenious street views, solves ecological challenges, and retains the local memory of places is becoming scarce in the literature. Through an in-depth interview, analysis of pertinent academic outputs, and firsthand observation of the core residential areas of Oyo town, this study revealed the value and significance of cultural streetscape in building, shaping, preserving and sustaining local place identity. Proper archiving and infusion of cultural streetscape elements into the old and new streets design are necessary to ensure Yoruba place identity does not completely become void.*

**Keywords:** *Cities, Cultural, Identity, Streetscape, Urbanization.*

## INTRODUCTION

Streetscape is an element of urban life that enhances the street experiences, the aesthetics of neighbourhoods, towns, and cities as well as defining borders and functional spaces. As streets play a significant role in the development of cities (Watanabe, 2002; Adepeju & Oluwole, 2012), so too can the streetscape influence how streets are created. Cultural streetscapes are the historic and natural street views produced by the extensive use of street features to produce places that are memorable and infused with the "spirit of place" (Fadamiro & Adedeji, 2016).

A crucial component that influences both the design of buildings and the survival of people is culture (Adedeji & Amole, 2010; Fadamiro & Adedeji, 2012; 2016). According to Jahoda (2002), culture and nature are inextricably linked in human evolution. In many instances, culture has taken the place of nature where it is thought that "culture may be developed by

learning from nature" (Fadamiro & Adedeji, 2016). Instead of being seen as a super-organic being or a collective consciousness existing outside of the realm of human experience, culture should be understood as the geographical and temporal entities that are fundamental to comprehending the civilization of any collection of people (Fadamiro & Adedeji, 2016). Cultural streetscapes serve as both the meeting point between nature and the mind and reflect the street features of a group of people which identify them as belonging to one culture.

The Yorubas of southwestern Nigeria exhibit a relatively high degree of cultural uniformity reflected through spatial expression, concentration, street formations, and designs; these form the local identity (Wheatley, 1970; Adejumo, Okedele, Adebamowo, 2012). The cultural symbols embedded in Yoruba streets and other significant locations reflect the place's "economic, social, festive, religious, and historic" identity (Wheatley, 1970). However, the 21st century's untiring wave of urbanization has swept the cultural dexterity of the street thus leaving formless and identical streets that are similar in architectural design (Shamsuddin, & Sulaiman, 2008; Embaby, 2015). The incursion of foreign elements into the street through the creation of "dual city and tropical architecture modernism" completely ignored and eroded people's culture during the design and planning process; this is responsible for the failure of the cities and their components parts to date. This study, therefore, aims at establishing the importance of culture in street designs and embracing the values and significances of sustainable cultural streetscape that creates desirable personal, place, local, social meanings and identities.

### **Streetscape in Time and Space**

Streetscape design, its impact on the function and physical climate of the city, as well as the opportunities for social interaction it provides, can be traced to Leon Battista Alberti, an Italian architect (Laura, 2010). Alberti was the first scholar to recognize the differences in street forms and scenes that caused the major shift in city planning. This planning concept employs the proper arrangement of elements within the street, which positively induces the overall image of a city and thus creates visual excitement (Rappoport, 1987; Hartanti & Martokusumo, 2012). This implies that a well-designed streetscape is critical in achieving a sustainable city not only for its aesthetic value but also for the clear image and identity it creates (Lynch, 1960; Weber, et al., 2008). Streetscape facilitates social interactions, public activities, and well-being, and makes outdoor activities in the streets enjoyable. It is an essential component of urban streets that adds visual glitz and meaning to the human environment. Furthermore, when the urban streetscape is improved, communal experiences in the street are made more interesting and enjoyable; safety, visibility, beauty, and place identity are achieved (Urban Design Element, 2008; Mehta, 2008; Foster, et al., 2010; Rehan, 2013; LiX, et al., 2018; Otak, 2019).

Landscape elements are of great importance to streetscape; they enhance the urban environments, improve the urban microclimate as well as provide residents with relaxation, and physical and psychological health. Landscape contributes to the character and beauty of urban streets by creating soft, contrasting, and cultural spaces. Cultural landscape features within urban streets provide a sense of "direction and familiarity" while also stimulating interactions, uniqueness, and vitality. These elements provide appealing visual qualities for the

streets and the entire city; they also serve as a point of reverence and provide a clear image of the urban environment, with the attendant impact on place identity. Samad (2009) emphasized the use of maps as a guide to avoiding feeling lost in an unfamiliar urban environment; however, with a legible cultural landscape, fewer maps are required for identification within a city.

### **Oyo in Geographical Space and History**

The Yorubas are the majority in southwestern Nigeria. The region is located between longitudes 1° 25' E and 6° 45' E, and latitudes 5° 55' N and 9° 10' N, and it currently comprises six federating states of Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti (Anderson, 2006). As of 2006, of the 46 million people living in Southwestern Nigeria, about 40 million were Yoruba (National Population Commission, 2006). The current population of the region is estimated at 63 million based on an average annual population increase of 3.7 percent (Federal Office of Statistics, 2009).

The formation of the *Yoruba* nation is covered in many histories. One such belief states that *Olodumare* (God), who created the world, sent his son *Oduduwa* to *Ile-Ife* (known as the source) to serve as the progenitor of the entire human race (Fadamiro & Adedeji, 2016). In another twist, the migratory school of thought asserts that *Oduduwa*, a renowned warrior, traveled with others from the east of Arab to of *Ile-Ife* (Johnson, 2001, p. 15; Obateru, 2006; Fadamiro & Adedeji, 2016). Whichever of the evolutionary history of the Yoruba race is true, it was noted that the early communities of the nation had very little social stratification and centralization before *Oduduwa's* entrance; instead, the settlements were connected by a common language, trade, religion, and *Ifá* divination (Akintoye, 2010). *Ile-Ife* and the entire Yoruba nation changed in pattern and became united on the arrival of *Oduduwa* who became the city's first ruler. *Ile-Ife* later became the region's most important political and economic centre, its urban ethos and constitution were exported by princes throughout Yoruba land, thus contributing to the emergence of a network of city-states linked by trade and other forms of exchanges (Akintoye, 2010, p.420).

Yoruba cities are typically radial in shape and space with a very strong central core that houses the king's palace and king's markets (Oja Oba), all of which are intrinsically part of Yoruba life. Post offices were later added during colonial rule to facilitate administration and protect commercial activities. The residential streets of typical Yoruba cities are well-defined in spatial configurations (Obateru, 2006; Adejumo, et al., 2012; Oti & Ayeni, 2013). It is important to note that the morphology of Yoruba settlements, such as cityscapes and townscapes, are culturally determined and can be read through cultural semiotics (Fadamiro & Adedeji, 2012; 2016). For instance, the townscapes and cityscapes are usually abutted by "sacred" sites as cultural landscapes for the worship of the Yoruba deities.

A Yoruba prince by the name of *Oranyan*, who led a military expedition from *Ile-Ife* into the northeast between the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, is credited with the founding of Old Oyo Town (Johnson, 1921; Goddard, 1971, p.201). The Tapas stopped him from travelling past the Niger River (the Nupe or the people of Borgu). The Prince and his followers

settled beneath the sizable hill known as *Ajaka*, which marked the beginning of old Oyo, as they had no desire to return to *Ile-Ife* after failed mission. By the 17th century, the empire had grown to become the leading political force in Yoruba (Goddard, 1971; Johnson, 2010). Oyo conquered most of Yoruba land in the 17th century and became the most powerful empire in the region. It recorded its greatest expansion between 1730 and 1748, during which it traded various goods in return for horses and salt. Oyo was also actively involved in the slave trade with European traders on the coast through the port of Ajase, which today is known as Porto-Novo. Oyo subjugated the kingdom of Dahomey in the west in two phases between 1724 and 1748 (Oyo Empire, 2015).

Old Oyo Empire reflected the Yoruba's cultural beliefs and ethical orientation. The empire was widely regarded as the largest single empire that ever existed (figure 1), and it served as the royal and commercial capital of the Yoruba nation (Akintoye, 2010; Jiboye, & Ogunshakin, 2010; Olubi & Ayoola, 2020). However, *Afonja* started a slave revolt in 1823 and the empire of Oyo collapsed during the first two decades of the 19th century which plunged the entire Yoruba nation into warfare. After the collapse, the new Oyo which is approximately 130 kilometres south of the old Oyo (Goddard, 1971) on latitude 7.850°N and longitude 3.933°E of the Greenwich Meridian emerged. It has a land area of 2,427km<sup>2</sup> and is located approximately 55 kilometres north of Ibadan, the state capital.

New Oyo town is a medium town with a population estimated at 428,798 during the 2006 population census. Using the 3.7 percent annual population growth, Oyo town is currently estimated with 666,781 inhabitants. The town is divided into three local government areas: Atiba, Oyo East, and Oyo West. Atiba local government comprises the town's core areas that showcase ideological, cultural, and philosophical inclinations, Oyo East and West are the newly developed, transition, and periphery areas where modern development is more pronounced. The cultural significance of Oyo in the Yoruba nations makes the understanding of its cultural prowess in formation, street design, street views, and overall place identity critical (Olubi & Ayoola, 2020).



Figure 1: Political enclave of old Oyo. Empire under Alaafin.

Source: Official Site of the Alaafin of Oyo. , Oba Lamidi Olayiwola Atanda Adeyemi III (<http://yorupedia.com/subjects/ yoruba-from-19th-to-date/progenie-of-oduduwa>).

### Oyo’s Cultural Streetscape in Time and Space

Most of the early "refugees" who fled the old Oyo after it collapsed in the 1830s resided in Ago-Oja; Ago eventually became Oyo (Ago D'oyo), and the then *Alaafin* built the new Oyo as a replica of the old (Johnson, 1921; Goddard, 1971). He succeeded in building a closed society that is Aafin-centric (palace-focused) and satisfied the people's need for ritual and culture (Wheatley, 1970). The town's growth as a network of winding footpaths, which became one of its cultural identities and is reflected in the street design till today, had a huge impact on the town's physical layout and social success.

The core residential quarters in Oyo display an array of old compound houses (*Agbo-ile*) and rooming housing (face-face) with very few modern or conventional architectural designs. The *Agbo-iles* are agglomerations and clusters of enclosed spaces; a character synonymous with Ago-Oja and entirely Yoruba architecture. This reflects the Yoruba customs, family life, and the importance of their natural environment that serves as a symbol of a family acknowledgment as well as the basis for social, geographical, and cultural identity. Although, most of the houses in the neighbourhoods contravene planning and setbacks standards (see plate 1) yet the streets retain their historic narrow footpaths nature before urbanization. Streetlights, drainages, and signage were later added to the historic streets (see plates 2, 3 & 4).



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It was observed that the family houses and the local streets serve as a clear representation of social identity and local recognition for the residents; despite the poor state of the homes and the neighbourhoods, it remains the pride of the residents. This position indicates the dominant role of the core residential areas in urban life; it actively contributes to the creation of the city's physical environment while also serving as a source of strong social bonds and identity. More so, urban development and urban growth of the 21st century that is responsible for the transformation of urban places in design and character has less impact on Oyo's streetscapes.



Plate 1: Oroki streets' view, Oyo.

Source: Author's Field Observation (2022)



Plate 2: Pakoyi streets' view, Oyo.

Source: Author's Field Observation (2022)



Plate 3: Agunpopo streets' view, Oyo town.  
Source: Author's Field Observation (2022)



Plate 4: Akesan's Streetscape Oyo town.  
Source: Author's Field Observation (2022)



Oyo Town is a cultural town where one cannot undervalue the anticipation for cultural landmarks and identity. As iconic representations of particular ideas, cultures, historical events, and beliefs, these landmarks hold a special cultural significance for the people and more for all of mankind. In most cases, they represent the shared cultural heritage of all people, and they are considered to be masterpieces of human creativity (Fuentealba, 2022). They add cultural sense to the street views and form a significant part of the cultural streetscapes. Firstly, the first entrance gate of Aafin of Oyo (background in plate 4) was built in the 19th century; it represents the Yoruba traditional architecture, the legacy of the old Oyo Empire imported into the new, and typifies cultural significance of Oyo town till date. Another renowned cultural relic that gives the town form, meaning, and place identity is the *sekere* statue (an African musical instrument consisting of a gourd surrounded by cowries), which is situated in the middle of Akesan Road (see plate 5). The "kings park," also known as the Akesan market is another landmark worth referencing because of the cultural cohesion it offers. The market located close to Aafin is named after a daughter of an Alaafin who was argued to have settled there with her husband Ajagbe (Olaniyi, 2020). Akesan market was razed in 2020 but has since been remodelled and rebuilt; it remains the largest and most important market in Oyo town.



Plate 5: Cultural landmarks in Oyo (Sekere stature in front of Aafin)  
Source: Nobei (2022)





Plate 6: Cultural landmarks in Oyo (Atiba Hall )

Source: Author's Field Observation (2022)

The British administrators authorized the design and building of an outstanding town hall in 1937 in Oyo town (Oyo Provincial Papers, 1936). The civil engineer Robert Jones, known as "Taffy" Jones, was hired to design and construct the hall. Atiba Hall (see plate 6), located near Akesan Market was commissioned in 1941. To date, the building is standing tall and serves as a significant landmark in the community with a sense of pride, direction, and identity.

### **Yoruba Urbanization against Cultural Space Identity**

Local settings, traditional towns, and cities predated colonial control in Nigeria, with culture serving as one of the guiding elements in the building and design of cities. However, the value system of Yoruba nations' culture and landscapes has been "delimited" as a result of the tremendous wave of urbanization of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Fadamiro, Adedeji, & Ibrahim, 2013). In some traditional urban centres, many sacred streetscape spaces and elements have been invaded, destroyed, and replaced for modern developmental purposes. Many towns and cities lack distinct identities that can be traced to their origin or history with local places left to fluctuate in nature, stature, character, and identity.

In Oyo, while the core residential neighbourhoods retain some of their cultural identity, the transitional and periphery areas of the town have lost the cultural place identity and character that can be related to Yoruba or Oyo place ideology. The local and cultural street components are rapidly disappearing in these zones; they currently offer streets that are completely blank to cultures and cultural streetscapes. Urbanization is creating a negative impact on the historic Oyo town and the entire Yoruba cities; a trend if not curtailed tends to turn the entire Yoruba traditional towns into places without identity and history in the nearest future.

Modern street design is not wholly decried here as it is the prevalent global approach to make streets, towns, and cities more useful, responsive, and intelligent. However, better places can be achieved when cultural beliefs and elements are incorporated into the architecture of the streets. Among such strategies to make Oyo town and entire Yoruba cities legible, and memorable, preserve history and restore local place identities include planting cultural trees with local history along the streets, erecting memorable local and ancient sculptures (statue) at strategic locations along the streets, naming streets after local heroes and events, remodelling places of history within the streets as tourist centres, and using locally carved streets benches, among others.

## CONCLUSION

Human society is always in transition; this suggests that particular cultural structures and lifestyles of a people are subject to changes and impacts under the dynamics of social transformation, urbanization, and modernization. However, the core residential neighbourhoods in Oyo town retain its traditional and cultural streetscape. This all-important cultural heritage needs to be maintained, retained, and preserved as a significant part of the cultural cityscape through hybridization, sustainability, coherent, and conceptual cultural designs. More so, the design of new and future residential neighbourhoods requires the incorporation of significant traditional architectural features and cultural streetscape elements that could improve cultural inclination and a sustainable way of life. This paper contributes to the growing body of knowledge on architectural sustainability, place identity, and preservation of local design ideologies.

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