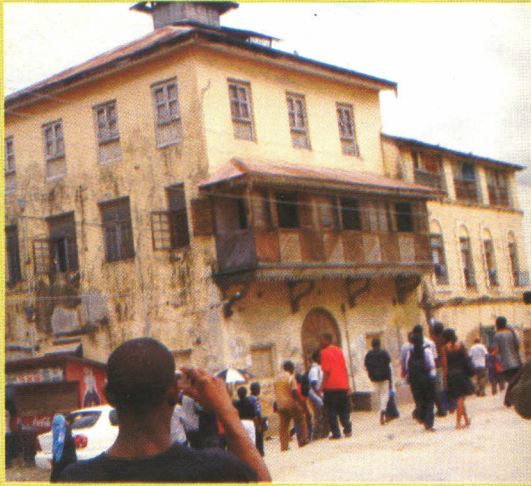
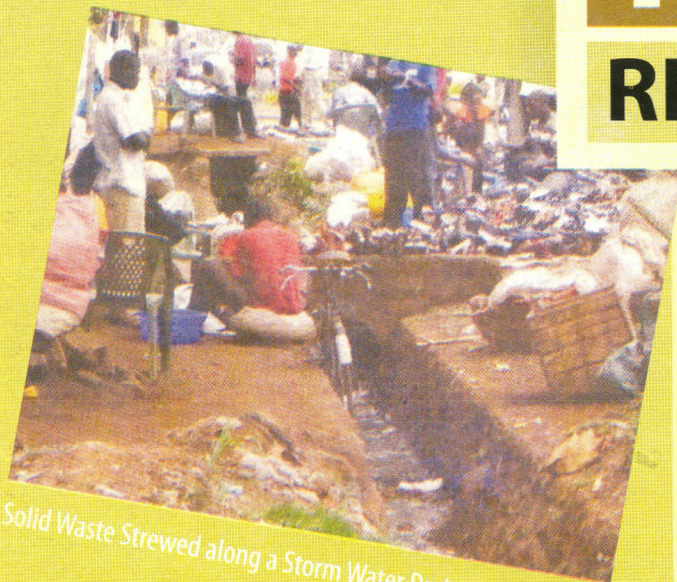


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REVIEW 4 (2010)

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The Renewal of Ile Akogun in Ile-ife, Nigeria; A Paradigm for the Conservation of Yoruba Iconic Architecture

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Abstract

Ile-ife has many socio-culturally iconic buildings. Unfortunately, most of these presently range from being poorly maintained to derelict. Though the town records a sizeable annual influx of tourists (as participants in the Olojo and other traditional festivals, as well as routine visitors to the museum and other historic sites), its tourism potentials have not been fully tapped—particularly those centered on its architectural monuments. Ile Akogun, is the official residence of Ife's traditional chief-of-army-staff. Nearly 100 years old, it is one of the town's heritage buildings. It is characteristically an impluvium-courtyard typology. Apart from being imbued with mythological nuances, special spatial considerations have been made in its articulation. Faculty of the Obafemi Awolowo University and some concerned indigenes of the town, are engaged in a drive to sensitize the public to the implications for Yoruba posterity of the neglect of traditional architectural monuments. One way of doing this, is by renewing dilapidating heritage buildings. The article discusses the proposal to renew Ile Akogun. It narrates its socio-political significance, linking it with Oranmiyan (the pre-cursor of Akogun), the descendant of both Ogun (the god of iron) and Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yoruba race. It concludes that in conserving heritage buildings, Ile-ife has the material to compare favourably with other nations that thrive on architecture-based tourism. The submission is supported by a design proposal to restore both the utility and heritage value of Ile Akogun.

Key words: architectural renewal, architecture-based tourism, dilapidating heritage buildings, heritage architecture upgrading, iconic architecture, Ile Akogun, Ile-ife's tourism potential, impluvium-courtyard, traditional architectural monuments, Yoruba vernacular architecture.

INTRODUCTION

With respect to the ethnological origins of the Ifes, there are two predominant schools of thought. One suggests a pre-existing loose and unassuming settlement, coaxed into political, social and economic vibrancy by a group of migrants, under the competent leadership of Oduduwa. The second, based on a creation myth, portrays Oduduwa as super-human, having descended from heaven on a chain, to establish Ile-ife (Osasona & Hyland, 2006, p.33). What has been proved by carbon-dating and other empirical means is that by AD 1100, the settlement was well established (Jeffery, 1958). Whichever the favoured account, the unassailable fact is the cardinality of the person of Oduduwa to the origins of present-day Ile-ife, and the generality of the Yoruba nation-state. The Yoruba traditional political structure is, essentially, a monarchy, with the *oba* (the paramount ruler) being an embodiment of administrative, political, social and spiritual authority. In practical terms, however, he is supported by a hierarchy of civil and military chiefs and priests.

The *akogun* title is more than two centuries old; by mid 19th century, it was a title accorded one of the High Chiefs in Ife kingdom (Falola & Oguntomisin, 1984) and today, the bearer is eighth in rank among the Ooni of Ife's "right-hand chiefs". According to Ife folklore, the first (unofficial) bearer of the title was *Oranmiyan*, who was a descendant of Oduduwa and Ogun (who, though credited with humanity, is regarded as the god of thunder), by a woman whose first conception was a subject of raging controversy; both personalities

claimed to have been responsible for the pregnancy. The legend further compounds the controversy as the male child born, *Oranmiyan*, was two-tone in complexion: half his body was light-skinned (like Ogun), while the other was ebony-black, like Oduduwa! (In fact, in the very name *Oranmiyan* this controversy is entrenched, as it could mean "I have been vindicated", or "subject of controversy" (Owoyomi, 2009). In the spirit of this enigmatic parentage, *Oranmiyan* grew up to be a fearsome hunter and warrior, and eventually became the settlement's war commander (or "field marshal", as popularly referred to, temporarily). Today, the *Akogun's* roles are multi-faceted: he is the socio-political head of Okerewe Traditional Council, making him the liaison between the *Ooni's* palace and Okerewe Quarters; in this capacity, he is the chairman of the Okerewe Traditional Court (*opo idajo*). On the spiritual plane, he plays a major role during the annual *Olojo* and *Edi* festivals: the preliminary rituals to these festivals hold at his official residence, superintended by the chief priest of the Oranmiyan Shrine, who thus receives specific dates for the festivals. In addition, during the coronation of a new *Alaafin* of Oyo town, the newly-installed *oba* receives his staff of office at the *Oranmiyan* grove, from *Eredumi* the chief priest, and in the presence of the *Akogun*; there is a foot-path from the *Akogun's* palace to this grove. Until present-day democracy — ushered in by colonisation — divested traditional institutions of virtually all but ceremonial roles, the *Akogun* was also chief strategist and head of all military campaigns.

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