

Sculptures and Caryatids: Necessity and Aesthetics Building Materials in Southwestern Nigerian Yoruba Palaces

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Yoruba palaces are famous for their rich artistic traditions and culture, renowned for the use of sculptures, caryatids, metal works, and wood carving. The people are also famous for a holistic culture that excels in creative arts and contribute significantly to global culture. In the past, there was extensive use of sculptures and caryatids in Yoruba palaces but today, the usage has declined. The sacred, honor, dignity and glory of palaces and the beauty of using these materials for decorations and beautifications have been eroded due to civilization, modernization, education, colonialism, and cultural evolutions. Therefore, this paper is going to evaluate the importance of these materials as necessity aesthetics building materials in the Yoruba palaces with a view to bringing back the lost sacred, honor, dignity and glory of the Yoruba palaces.

The study employed descriptive and integrating on-site surveys. Qualitative approach was adopted. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. The principal survey technique used was interview and purposive sampling method was used in selecting the palaces in Yorubaland. Six palaces were selected namely: Alaafin of Oyo, Olubadan of Ibadan, Alake of Abeokuta, Soun of Ogbomoso, Olowo of Owo, and Ataoja of Osogbo. Data collected was analysed using historical approach.

The study revealed that sculptures and caryatids were used extensively in old Yoruba palaces in the past. Majority of the palaces used them either outside or inside of the palaces to decorate and beautify the palaces, but today the materials are not widely used in the palaces. Majority of the caryatids and sculptures have been destroyed in majority of the palaces due to demolitions, renovations and reconstructions of the old palace. Palace museums that are archives of Yoruba culture are no more in existence and no provision or spaces in the new palaces to keep all these materials.

This study concluded that it is high time the Yoruba people and Kings cherish traditional and local materials such as sculptures and caryatids, embrace them and blend new and old materials together in the beautification of palaces in order to balance cultural preservation with modernization. The study recommended extensive use of sculptures and caryatids in Yoruba palaces in order to bring back the lost glory, honor and dignity of these palaces.

Keywords: Sculptures, Caryatids, Cultural, Yoruba palaces, Yorubaland.

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1.0 Introduction

Yoruba palaces in Southwestern Nigeria are among the richest architectural traditions and are known for their profound use of carvings, caryatids,

figurative posts and sculptures that embodied religious, political and social meanings which serve as both decorative materials and powerful symbols of cultural, political, and religious significances.



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They serve as tangible manifestation of Yoruba cosmology and hierarchical social structures and this reflects in their special arrangements, and decorative motifs.

Palaces are also royal residences for Yoruba Kings; serve as centers for governance, cultural festivals, and conflict resolutions (dispute settlements). They are the centers for preservation of heritage through rituals music and arts, sacred spaces where the history, myths and spiritual beliefs of people are preserved and passed down from generation to generations. The palace structures reinforce the divine roles of the Kings as the spiritual and political leaders of the Yoruba people.

The sculptures and caryatids in Yoruba palaces are not just for decorations but they are cultural masterpieces, symbolic statements of power, tradition, spiritual and historical memory. They have layers of meaning tied to the Kings authority, the people's beliefs, and connections between the physical and spiritual realms, where the souls of the communities reside. They are carved with human figures or deities to protect the palaces and connected to the ancestors and they are used extensively in the old palaces in Yorubaland. The carving can be in wood, stone marble, and ivory, while the modeling can be in clay, mud; wax and casting can be in bronze and metals.

The use of sculptures and caryatids in Yoruba palaces today have drastically reduced due various challenges militating against the conservation and continuous uses of these materials in Yoruba palaces. These include: modernization, colonialism, cultural evolution, civilization, urban expansion and development. As modernization spreads and new materials become available, many palaces have been redesigned, renovated, and reconstructed using modern materials with new technology. The use of the old materials such as sculptures and caryatids also decline through colonial influences, missionaries and modern architecture, which greatly and significantly impacted the palace designs and leads to total decline of cultural, aesthetics, functional elements and values of these palaces.

Many communities embrace modernization for its comfort and prestige, while others express

concern about the erosion of cultural identity in Yoruba palaces that leads to departure from ornamentation and motifs usually find in traditional Yoruba palaces. Many Researchers always emphasized on palaces and shrines, its cultural and symbolic significance but neglect the aesthetics and importance of sculptures and caryatids in Yoruba palaces therefore, this paper is going to evaluate the importance of sculptures and caryatids as necessity aesthetics building materials in the Yoruba palaces with a view to bringing back the lost sacred, dignity, honor, and glory of the Yoruba palaces.

2.0 Literature review

Sculpture is a three-dimensional art form that involves shaping and manipulating of materials to create artistic expressions, either in the round or in relief. It is also a process or technique of carving, cutting, modeling or assembling to craft unique pieces that can be representational, abstract, conceptual, or representation of figures from solid materials such as wood, mud, stone, metal and clay. The art forms allow wide range of creative expressions from intricate details to large scale installations.

Sculpture serves many purposes in the palaces such as artistic expressions, decorations, commemorations, expression of feelings, teachings, symbolic, protection, historical records, status and power, ritual uses, ceremonials, and cultural significances. It conveys emotions, ideas and expressions in tangible forms although, it requires skill, creativity, and attention to details, resulting in unique and beautiful pieces that reflect the artistic visions.

Caryatid is a specialized type of sculpture that functions as an architectural support or a column carved in the form of a woman figure. It can also be defined as a column that is sculpted to resemble a human figure, serving as a structural support to buildings and entablature, symbolizing strength, warrior, deity, ancestor that showcase the vital roles of women in the society. It serves as ornamentation with symbolic representations, spiritual significant, royal authority and cultural identity. It can also act as structural columns in shrines and royal receptions.

Scholars have consistently emphasized the symbolic depth of Yoruba art; such scholars include William Fagg (1963) and Oyadokun (2001) who described Yoruba carving as among the most technically refined materials in Africa. Robert (1983) described Yoruba sculptures as aesthetics of the cool where calmness, order, and symbolism dominate representation. It serves as ritual and communicative purposes, and understands to be carriers of spiritual authority, transforming buildings into living cultural entities, and producing works that are both symbolic and aesthetically pleasing. It always expresses moral and spiritual values.

Henry and Margret (1983) studied sculptures as part of ritual performance systems, and that sculptures at thresholds, courtyards and verandahs serve as spiritual boundaries while Babatunde (1985) observed that Yoruba sculptures are didactic reinforcing social order, morality and gender roles. These roles include:

1. Mother and child caryatids symbolize fertility, continuity and motherhood.
2. Hunters and warriors represent courage, bravery, justice, masculinity and protection.
3. Sculptures and caryatids in palaces teach values without words, that is, visual sermons.
4. Women alone are represented as sources of fertilities and mystical powers.
5. Human figures symbolize values.
6. Sculptures encompass religious shrines, masks and ritual regalia.
7. Snakes for protections, crocodiles for authority and birds for spiritual connections.

Sculptures and caryatids are very important in the decorations of Yoruba palaces and are commonly used in palace gates, doors, verandah posts, columns, royal stools, shrines, walls, and give the impressions of type of people living in such towns, their occupations and a time, history or origin of such town.

2.1 Importance of Sculptures and Caryatids in Yoruba palaces

Sculptures and caryatids are very important in the design of Yoruba palaces in that:

- They make the palaces to be significant, identified and well recognized.
- They are used as decorations to beautify the palaces from the outside of the building to the inner courtyards.
- They are used to express the caliber of Kings and the people in the communities in terms of their occupations, origin and creativity.
- They are used to represent the gods in Yorubaland and these gods are mostly kept in palaces such as Ogun (god of iron), Sango (god of thunder) and twins (ibeji).
- They are used to represent the past heroes and Kings in Yorubaland.
- They make the palaces to be sacred and honored.
- They are vital to the cultural identity of the Yoruba people, representing their history, beliefs and social structures.
- They are used as columns to support the buildings and entablature.
- They are used as royal furniture such as stools, chairs and tables.

3.0 Methodology

The study employed descriptive and integrating on-site surveys. Qualitative approach was adopted for the study. It focused on the importance of sculptures and caryatids that are architecturally integrated into Yoruba palaces such as columns, beams, doors, verandahs, and courtyards. The study consulted historical documents and existing literature to enable build a holistic comprehensive understanding of the study. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources derived from multiple sources such as published and unpublished materials in books, journals, internets, and interview.

The principal survey technique used was interview and purposive sampling method was used in selecting the palaces. Six palaces were selected namely: Alaafin of Oyo in Oyo state, Olubadan of Ibadan in Oyo state, Alake of Abeokuta in Ogun state, Soun of Ogbomoso in Oyo state, Olowo of Owo in Ondo state, and Ataoja of Osogbo in Osun state. The palace chiefs and workers were randomly selected and interviewed in selected palaces in order to understand the historical context of sculptures and caryatids. Data collected was analysed using historical approach.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

From visitation to Yoruba palaces, sculptures and caryatids were used extensively in old palaces in the past. Majority of the palaces used them either outside or inside of the palaces to decorate and

beautify the palaces. The craftsmen in the community presented some of these products to the Kings as gifts. There was always competition among the craftsmen and the Sculptors presented their best handiworks to the Kings, and made the materials to be many and numerous in the Yoruba palaces. Various parts or areas where sculptures and caryatids were used in the past include:

i. **Columns:** Caryatids in form of human figures were used as columns in old Yoruba palaces. They were used to support the verandahs, well ornamented, and decorated. Examples are in old palaces of Alaafin of Oyo, Ataoja of Osogbo, and Alake of Abeokuta. In Oyo palace, caryatids were used richly and beautifully with different patterned geometrical incisions. In the palaces of Alake of Abeokuta, the columns were well decorated and polished. They were made from growing selected trees, and carved in high relief as shown in Plate 1.

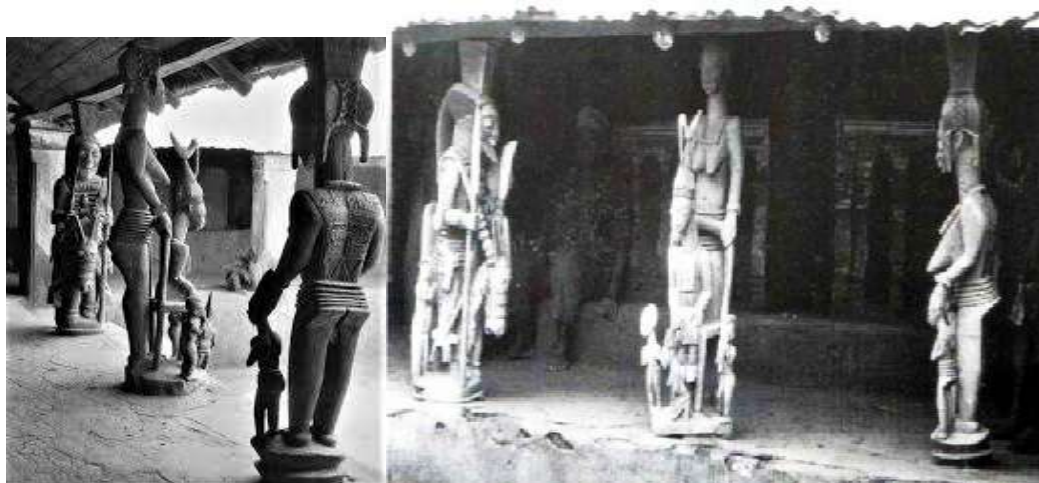


Plate 1: Caryatids as columns in old palaces of Alaafin of Oyo, Alake of Abeokuta, and Olowo of Owo.
 Source: Oyadokun (2001).

ii. **Entrances:** The entrances were typically elaborate with sculptures, caryatids and artistic expressions depicting ancestral figures, warriors,

deities and reflecting royal authorities and spiritual protections as shown in Plates 2 and 3.



Plate 2: Sculptures at old Olowo of Owo's palace entrance.



Plate 3: Sculptures at entrance to old Alaafin of Oyo's palace.

Source: Oyadokun (2001).

iii. Posts: Sculptures and caryatids were used as posts in the past to structurally support the verandahs and reinforce the symbolic hierarchy; cosmological narrates to palace culture. The posts were

ornamented using joinery and well carved. It embodied authority, continuity and ritual presence at every threshold as shown in Plate 4.



Plate 4: Sculptures and caryatids used as posts in old Alaafin of Oyo and Olowo of Owo palaces.
Source: Oyadokun (2001).

iv. Courtyards and Verandahs: Sculptures and caryatids were used to beautify the courtyards and verandahs in Yoruba palaces. Sculptures in form of

human figures, carved figures were used as in the old palaces as shown in Plates 5 and 6.



Plate 5: Human figures at old Alaafin of Oyo, Soun of Ogbomoso, Olowo of Owo palaces courtyards.

Source: Oyadokun (2001).



Plate 6: Courtyard in old Alaafin of Oyo's palace

Source: Author's field survey (2025).

v. Passages, Halls and Receptions: Caryatids and sculptures were used to decorate the passages; halls and receptions present in the Yoruba palaces.

Caryatids in form of human and wooden figures were used as in the old palaces as shown in Plate 7.



Plate 7: Sculptures and Caryatids in old Olowo of Owo and Soun of Ogbomoso palaces.

Source: Oyadokun (2001).

vi. Doors: The doors were polished, carved, and well decorated with human and animal figures in the Yoruba palaces. They conveyed messages about power, protection, ancestry and spirituality. The doors were modest in scale, often recessed deeply so that visitors bowed when entering as assign of

respect. They were coated with brass foil and perfectly rendered. Asides their visual appealing, the doors acted as spiritual boundaries, believed to keep out evil and protect the Kings inner spaces as shown in Plate 8.



Plate 8: Carved doors in old Alaafin of Oyo, Alake of Abeokuta, Olowo of Owo, Ataoja of Osogbo, and Soun of Ogbomoso palaces.

Source: Oyadokun (2001).

vii. Beams and Lintels: In the past, all these structural materials in the Yoruba palaces were also decorated well-polished, and at times carved with

human and animal figures for the beatification of the palaces as shown in Plate 9.



Plate 9: Carved beam and lintel at old Alaafin of Oyo and Olowo of Owo palaces.

Source: Oyadokun (2001).

viii. Staircases: The staircases and the balustrades were made of the wood in the past. This wood was made from carefully selected growing trees. They

were polished, carved and well decorated with sculptures and caryatids as shown in Plate 10.



Plate 10: Sculptures and caryatids used as balustrade in old Yoruba palaces.

Source: Oyadokun (2001).

ix. Walls: The palace walls in Yorubaland were not left out; they were well decorated with clay as surface decorations as shown in Plate 11.



Plate 11: Decorated wall in old Alaafin of Oyo and Ataoja of Osogbo palaces.

Source: Oyadokun (2001).

x. Interiors: The interiors of the Yoruba palaces were also decorated either by moldings or by wood carving using human and animal figures. The

furniture used inside the palaces were perfectly polished and decorated too with sculptures and caryatids as shown in Plate 12.



Plate 12: Interior Sculptures used in old Alafin of Oyo, Alake of Abeokuta, and Olowo of Owo palaces.

Source: Oyadokun (2001).

xi. Past Heroes and Shrines: Sculptures and caryatids were in the past used to represent the gods and past heroes in Yorubaland and they were kept in the Yoruba palaces shrines. With extensive uses of

sculptures and caryatids in the shrines, it made the palaces to be sacred, significant, impressive and magnificence as shown in Plate 13.



Plate 13: Sculptures and caryatids at old Olubadan of Ibadan and Alaafin of Oyo palaces.

Source: Oyadokun (2001).

Oyadokun (2001) visited many palaces in Yorubaland and stated that the royal palaces in their rich interior decorations and finishing were the most impressive buildings in Yorubaland with the finest group of architectural sculptures and caryatids. The beasts of men as well as figures of tigers, crocodiles, serpents carved on blocks of wood were extremely well executed. All these statements testified to the beauty of sculptures and caryatids in decorating the Yoruba palaces in the olden days. Many of these sculptures and caryatids were enhanced with vibrant colors and these adding to their visual impacts and symbolic meanings.

4.1 Sculptures and Caryatids in Yoruba palaces today

Sculptures and caryatids are not widely used today in the Yoruba palaces. Majority of the caryatids and sculptures have been destroyed in majority of the palaces except few that are preserved. Palace museums which are the archives of Yoruba culture are no more in existence; therefore they are

no provisions or spaces in the new palaces of today to keep all these materials.

Many of the old palaces have been demolished, renovated or reconstructed with little or no sculptural elements or caryatids, either to decorate or beautify the palaces. Common decorative materials in most of the palaces today are portraits, photographs, painted walls, reinforced concrete columns, marble, cement, aluminum, glass steel, Plaster Of Paris (POP) and terrazzo floor finishes to mention a few.

Many courtyards, verandahs and wooden staircases have been destroyed and where they are existing, paints of different colors, steel, metal rails, grasses and swimming pools are used for beautifications and decorations. Hardly can one see a single sculpture or caryatid except art works. The doors used in most of the Yoruba palaces today are panel, flush, metal and wooden doors. Only few of the wooden doors are carved and those that are carved are not done perfectly like in the old palaces.

Lamenting the quality of works he saw in the new palaces, Oyadokun (2001) stated that carved figures have been standing on their heads. The

carved posts are of poor qualities, looked out of place, their functions have ceased as a piece of decoration, and they looked incongruous. Yoruba palaces today cannot be differentiated from ordinary buildings in the communities because they are both competing with each other. There is nothing to differentiate between the Yoruba palaces and the so-

called individual houses and mansions in the towns. Many of these individual buildings and mansions are even more beautiful, rigid, solid and of good qualities than the so called new palaces in the communities. Plates 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18 are examples of the new palaces as shown below:



Plate 14: New palace of Olubadan of Ibadan in Oyo state.

Source: Author's field survey (2025).



Plate 15: New palace of Alaafin of Oyo in Oyo state.

Source: Author's field survey (2025).



Plate 16: New palace of Alaafin of Oyo in Oyo state.

Source: Author's field survey (2025).



Plate 17: New palace of Soun of Ogbomoso in Oyo state.

Source: Author's field survey (2025).



Plate 18: New palace of Olowo of Owo in Ondo state.

Source: Author's field survey (2025).

4.2. Reasons for not using Sculptures and Caryatids in new palaces

There are various factors and reasons responsible for low or none using of sculptures and caryatids in the Yoruba modern palaces today. These include:

1. Lack of experience skill craftsmen
2. Modernization
3. Civilization
4. Education
5. Aesthetic
6. Religion
7. Belief of Yoruba people
8. Caliber of Yoruba Kings
9. Advent of new materials
10. Advance technology

5.0 Conclusion

Sculptures and caryatids in Yoruba palaces are important and necessity building materials that are used to beautify the palaces. They are distinctive aesthetically, structurally, symbolic, historically, culturally significance, and functioning as guardians,

teachers and symbols of cultural identity and heritage although new palaces are aesthetically pleasing, appealing and outstanding but old palaces are more historical, sacred and embodied the Yoruba beliefs about spirituality, morality and ancestry. The importance of these materials can never be overlooked in the beautification of Yoruba palaces.

This study therefore concluded that it is high time the Yoruba people and Kings cherish traditional and local materials, embrace them and blend new with old materials in the construction of palaces in order to balance cultural preservation with modernization. Local materials are good, cheap, durable, readily available and the best. All hands must be on desk, rally round in uplifting the images of these materials to beautify the palaces and inculcate the spirit of extensive use of these materials in the decoration of Yoruba palaces in order to place the palaces in the rightful positions they should be and to give the incoming generations the opportunity to see and witness the works of our fore- fathers.

6.0 Recommendations

This paper recommends the extensive use of sculptures and caryatids in Yoruba palaces in order to bring back the lost glory, honor and dignity of Yoruba palaces. It will also assist the young ones who are jobless to secure jobs by learning how to

make sculptures and caryatids, thereby reduce jobless and crimes among the youth because ‘An idle hand is an instrument for the devil’.

Sculptures and caryatids should be integrated into new palaces in order to maintain cultural identity, heritage, and to keep our handiworks, culture for the incoming generations to witness, improve upon them, and inspire national pride. There should also be provisions for traditional museums in the palaces so as to keep these materials for exhibitions, preservations, documentations, and references.

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