

Architectural Ethics: The Criticism of Igbo Palaces in Defence of Moderate Moralism in Nigeria

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Abstract: Architecture is connected to ethics in many ways. The intricate architecture of Igbo palaces in Nigeria embodies a complex interplay of cultural identity, power dynamics and moral significance. These structures, often serving as symbols of traditional authority and community heritage, reflect the Igbo people's rich cultural values and historical narratives. However, the intersection of traditional and modern architectural practices has also led to tensions and contradictions, raising important ethical questions about the role of architecture in shaping societal values and norms. Through an exploration of the moral dimensions of Igbo palace architecture, this research reveals the ways in which these spaces reinforce Igbo values such as community, respect and tradition. The palaces' design and layout often embody these values, creating a sense of belonging and identity among community members. The dominance of carved images, sculptures and engraved arts which reflect their connection with their ancestry as a symbol of royalty is the common feature in both traditional and modern Ibo palaces. Nevertheless, the influence of modernity and globalization has also led to the incorporation of new architectural elements, sometimes challenging traditional norms and values. The defense of moderate moralism as a framework for evaluating the moral significance of built spaces is central to this discussion. By acknowledging the moral dimensions of architecture, we can better understand how built environments shape our experiences, interactions and understanding of the world. In this context of Igbo palaces, moderate moralism provides a nuanced lens through which to examine the ethical implications of architectural design and its impact on community cohesion and cultural preservation. It is important that Modernism in architectural designs of Ibo palaces should be moderated to avoid undermining the Igbo culture.

Keywords: Ethical Criticism, Igbo Palaces, Moderate Moralism.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The *Igbos* (popularly called the *Ibos*) are an ethnic group native to the southeastern region of Nigeria, with a rich cultural heritage and deep history dating back to the 9th century (Afigbo, 1981). "*Igbo*" is used to designate the language of this group, being a Niger-Congo language spoken by the *Igbo* people (Crystal, 2000). The *Igbo* language is a tonal language with a complex system of vowels and consonants (Ikekeonwu, 1999). The *Igbo* people have a strong tradition of oral storytelling, music and art, which are integral parts of their cultural identity (Ogbalu, 1973).

Igbo culture is known for its emphasis on community, respect for elders and strong family ties (Okonjo, 1976). The *Igbo* people are predominantly farmers, traders, artisans and entrepreneurs (Nzimiro, 1972). Their traditional society is

organized into autonomous communities, each with its own system of governance and leadership (Afigbo, 1981).

The practice of architectural criticism is supercharged with ethical evaluations. Certain works of architecture are praised for their sustainability, their encouragement of an autonomous and satisfying life for their users, or for their contribution to the peaceful cohabitation of different social or ethnic groups. Other works are criticized for the harm they cause to the environment, for their negative impact on the health or well-being of human beings, or for the morally despicable functions they serve (Christopher, 2015).

➤ Statement of Research Problem

The design and construction of Igbo palaces in Nigeria raise important ethical questions about the representation of cultural values, the distribution of power and resources, and the balance between tradition and modernity (Afigbo, 1981). These architectural spaces are not only symbols of

traditional authority but also repositories of cultural heritage, embodying the history, norms, and values of the Igbo people (Ogbalu, 1973). However, the ethical dimensions of these spaces are often overlooked, and the application of moral principles to their design and evaluation is not well understood (Ikekeonwu, 1999). The lack of attention to the ethical implications of Igbo palace architecture has significant consequences. It can lead to the marginalization of community values and identities, the perpetuation of power imbalances, and the erosion of cultural heritage (Nzimiro, 1972). Furthermore, the neglect of ethical considerations in architectural design can result in built environments that are inhospitable, unsustainable, and detrimental to human well-being (Lefebvre, 1991). Despite the importance of these issues, there is scarcity of research on the ethical criticism of Igbo palaces and the application of moderate moralism as a framework for evaluating the moral significance of these built spaces. This knowledge gap hinders the development of architectural practices that promote social cohesion, respect, and human well-being in Igbo communities (Emenanjo, 2015).

This research seeks to address this problem by examining the ethical criticism of Igbo palaces and exploring how these architectural spaces can be understood and evaluated through the lens of moderate moralism. By investigating the intersection of architecture, ethics, and culture in Igbo palaces, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the moral significance of built spaces in Nigerian society.

➤ *Aim And Objectives*

• *Aim*

The aim of this study is to explore the ethical dimensions of Igbo palace architecture in Nigeria, with a focus on defending moderate moralism as a framework for evaluating the moral significance of these built spaces.

• *Objectives*

- ✓ To examine the cultural and historical significance of Igbo palaces in Nigeria, highlighting their role in representing community values and identities.
- ✓ To investigate the ethical implications of Igbo palace architecture, including issues of power distribution, cultural preservation, and modernization.
- ✓ To analyze the application of moderate moralism as a framework for evaluating the moral significance of Igbo palaces, considering factors such as respect, social cohesion, and human well-being.
- ✓ To identify best practices for incorporating ethical considerations into the design and development of Igbo palaces, promoting culturally sensitive and sustainable architectural practices.
- ✓ To contribute to the development of a nuanced understanding of the intersection of architecture, ethics, and culture in Igbo societies, informing policy and practice in the fields of architecture, urban planning, and cultural heritage preservation.

➤ *Scope of the Study*

• *Geographical Scope*

This study is restricted to ethical criticism of *Igbo* palaces in both the traditional and modern setting. The study concerns itself with only palaces in the Eastern part of Nigeria. The ethical criticism on the modern *Igbo* palaces using the *Obi* of Onitsha palace in Anambra State was central in this work.

• *Thematic Scope*

This study will explore the ethical dimensions of Igbo palace architecture, including; cultural representation and identity, power distribution and social hierarchy, traditional and modern architectural practices, sustainability and environmental considerations along with community engagement and participation.

• *Methodological Scope*

This study will employ a qualitative research approach, incorporating; case studies of selected Igbo palaces, observations of palace architecture and cultural practices, analysis of relevant documents and literature and interviews with traditional leaders, architects, and community members.

• *Theoretical & Temporal Scope*

This study will draw on theories of architecture, ethics, and cultural studies, including moderate moralism, to analyze the moral significance of Igbo palace architecture. This study will also cover the historical development of Igbo palace architecture from pre-colonial times to the present day, with a focus on contemporary practices and challenges.

➤ *Study Area*

The study area of this research is Onitsha. Onitsha is a city located in Anambra State, southeastern Nigeria, on the eastern bank of the Niger River (Okafor, 2015). With a rich cultural heritage and historical significance, Onitsha is an ideal study area for exploring the intersection of architecture, ethics, and culture in Igbo palaces.

The city is home to the *Obi* of Onitsha's palace, a historic and culturally significant structure that serves as a symbol of traditional authority and community identity (Obi, 2010). Onitsha's palace architecture reflects a blend of traditional Igbo and modern influences, providing insights into the evolution of architectural styles in the region (Emenanjo, 2015).

Onitsha is known for its vibrant cultural festivals and traditions, which play a significant role in shaping the city's identity and community cohesion (Okoye, 2018). The city's strategic location on the Niger River has also made it an important commercial center, with a rich history of trade and commerce (Nzimiro, 1972).

By focusing on Onitsha as the study area, this research can gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between architecture, ethics, and culture in this

specific context, and contribute to the preservation and promotion of Igbo cultural heritage.

➤ *Definition of Terms*

- **Palace:** A palace is a large and impressive building, often serving as the official residence of a monarch, noble, or high-ranking official (Oxford English Dictionary, 2020). In the context of Igbo culture, a palace refers to the traditional residence of a monarch or traditional ruler, often serving as a symbol of authority, power, and cultural heritage (Afigbo, 1981).
- **Ethics:** Ethics refers to the branch of philosophy that deals with moral principles and values, examining what is right and wrong, good and bad, in human behavior and decision-making (Beauchamp & Childress, 2013). Ethics involves critical reflection on moral issues and dilemmas, with the aim of promoting responsible and respectful behavior.
- **Ethical Criticism:** Ethical criticism is an approach to analyzing and evaluating cultural artifacts, including literature, art, and architecture, from a moral perspective (Booth, 1988). It involves examining the moral implications and consequences of creative works, considering factors such as representation, power dynamics, and social impact.
- **Moral Values:** Moral values refer to the principles and standards that guide human behavior and decision-making, reflecting what is considered right and wrong, good and bad, in a particular culture or society (Rokeach, 1973). Moral values are shaped by cultural, social, and personal factors, and influence how individuals and communities interact with one another.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Moral Standard*

Researchers have debated the nature of moral standards, with some arguing that they are absolute and universal (Kant, 1785), while others contend that they are relative and context-dependent (Herskovits, 1972). There are two examples of theories that explain moral standard: Theory of absolutism and Theory of Relativism (choice).

The theory of absolutism is also known as the theory of moral justification, which was first developed by Plato to combat the view by the Sophists that moral values are relative to particular societies. Moral values, he claimed, are absolute, eternal and changeless. John Stuart Mills, British Economist and Philosopher stated that “an action or custom is bad or wrong if the action is promoting unhappiness” (Mill, n. d.).

The other theory of moral standard is Relativism. This theory implies that societal values are a matter of choice on the part of the society, driving the notion that eternal truths or moral values are artificially created. Unlike the absolutists, freedom is a moral action, determined by the

moral values of society. Moral actions that are unacceptable to society are therefore condemned (Fagothey, 2005).

Morality as a concept is the ability to establish differences between what ought to be done and what ought not to be done. This relates to conduct of individual's behaviours or attitudes. Morality deals with the goodness and badness of human action, character and dispositional values (Abubakar, 2010). Hence, moral values are standards that are endorsed, maintained and transmitted by the society to her members.

➤ *Ethics*

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with moral principles and values, examining what is right and wrong, good and bad, in human behavior and decision-making (Beauchamp & Childress, 2013).

Ethical theories, such as consequentialism (Bentham, 1789) and deontology (Kant, 1785), provide frameworks for analyzing and evaluating moral issues and dilemmas.

➤ *Moderate Moralism*

Moderate moralism is an approach to ethics that emphasizes the importance of moral values and principles in shaping human behavior and decision-making, while also acknowledging the complexity and nuance of real-world situations (Carroll, 2000).

Moderate moralists argue that moral judgments should be based on a careful consideration of context and circumstances, rather than rigid adherence to absolute rules or principles.

➤ *Igbo Traditional Architecture*

Igbo traditional architecture includes the building styles and designs that are characteristic of the Igbo people, reflecting their cultural values, history, and environmental context (Denyer, 1978). Igbo traditional architecture is known for its use of local materials, such as wood, thatch, and mud, and its emphasis on functional simplicity and community-oriented design (Prussin, 1986).

In Igbo architecture, generally, palace buildings, extensions such as walls and posts, and panels such as doors, are considered architecture. Hence, morals and other wall decorations, and relief carvings on posts and doors, are all architectural processes. Motifs used in wall designs are adapted mainly from *uli* and *nsibidi* patterns. *Uli* is traditionally a women's art form made up of a set of designs and symbols that are painted onto bodies, woven into textiles, and painted on the outside of buildings. *Nsibidi* is a written and performed language that belongs to a male secret society called *Ekpe* (meaning leopard) (Cole *et al.*, 1984.).

Uli designs are done by women, and they also transplant these body motifs on to the walls of domestic compounds and shrines. Circles of all shapes are among the most recurring motifs in many *Igbo* wall and panel decorations. They appear as planetary bodies such as sun,

part of a moon, centre of stars, and as reptiles, human beings, instruments. Many *Igbo* compounds in *Okija* and *Enugu* are also circular, oval or semi-circle; even when the plots of land on which they are built do not demand so (Visona, 2000).

In the typical *Igbo* community, only a few architectural features can be accepted as typical for the entire *Igbo* land: The rectangular plan of dwellings, which are without windows, the verandah in front of the houses and universal use of the forked posts to carry the roofs (Dmochowski, 1990).

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach, incorporating case studies, interviews, observations, and document analysis to explore the intersection of architecture, ethics, and culture in *Igbo* palaces.

➤ Research Design

The research design is based on a case study approach, focusing on selected *Igbo* palaces in Onitsha, Anambra State, Nigeria. The case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of the architectural and cultural significance of these palaces.

For this paper, the philosophical design was adopted. A philosophical design is one that follows a qualitative research pattern and recognizes speculative, analytical and prescriptive methodology in attaining a research fit (Mason, 2008). This research design was adopted to avoid manipulation of variables under controlled environment and to foster the evaluation of various notions or perceptions from an analytical perspective to draw inferences and make conclusions on a given phenomenon. In this regard, the philosophical design was implored to critically examine some ethical issues on *Igbo* palaces in defense of moderate moralism. This is needed to draw inferences from reviews.

➤ Data Analysis

The data collected were collected from secondary sources namely: articles, textbooks, newspapers and relevant websites. Inferences were drawn on the basis of the researcher's views.

The data collected was analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying patterns and themes related to the research questions. The analysis focused on understanding the cultural and moral significance of *Igbo* palaces, and how they reflect the values and principles of the *Igbo* people.

Three broad philosophical tools based on descriptive methods were employed in this study. These philosophical tools included: speculative, analytical and prescriptive tools. First, speculative tools were used in anticipating mixed perspectives on the subject matter of what is ethical for an *Igbo* palace. This helped produce an open minded research that is not conclusive in considering the perception of a few or a majority as superior to others. Secondly, analytical tools helped the evaluation of the various views on moral standards, in relation to the traditional and contemporary *Igbo* palaces. Lastly, prescriptive tools helped to draw conclusions based on analytical outcomes to guide policy decision on *Igbo* palace layout and construction.

➤ Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select data and case studies, using a document analysis template to analyze relevant documents.

By employing a qualitative research approach, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between architecture, ethics, and culture in *Igbo* palaces.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

➤ Cultural Significance and Moral Values

Igbo palaces are highly valued for their cultural and historical significance, serving as symbols of traditional authority and community identity. This study highlights the importance of moral values such as respect, community, and tradition in *Igbo* culture, which are reflected in the design and use of the palaces.

➤ Architectural Features

The palaces feature traditional *Igbo* architectural styles, including the use of local materials and designs that reflect *Igbo* cultural values. Typically, the *Igbo Obi* is situated at the center of the family compound, in the public section of the compound which is spaced away from that of a married woman, who would reside in the private section. The public nature of the building is expressed through its direct physical and spatial link with the family entrance, known as *Mgboezi*. This is the intermediary location that bridges the internal, family space and external, communal space. The centralized location of the *Obi* in the family compound accentuates the *Igbo* notions of nobility, affluence and leadership. Also, at genealogical stages, the *Obi* annotates the *Igbo* social ideology of achievement and leadership, having relics and significant paraphernalia such as chip-carved doors, which are avidly absent in other *Igbo* houses (Anyanwu, 1989). Every *Obi* is calculatedly placed in every compound in such a way that the *mgboezi* faces it directly.

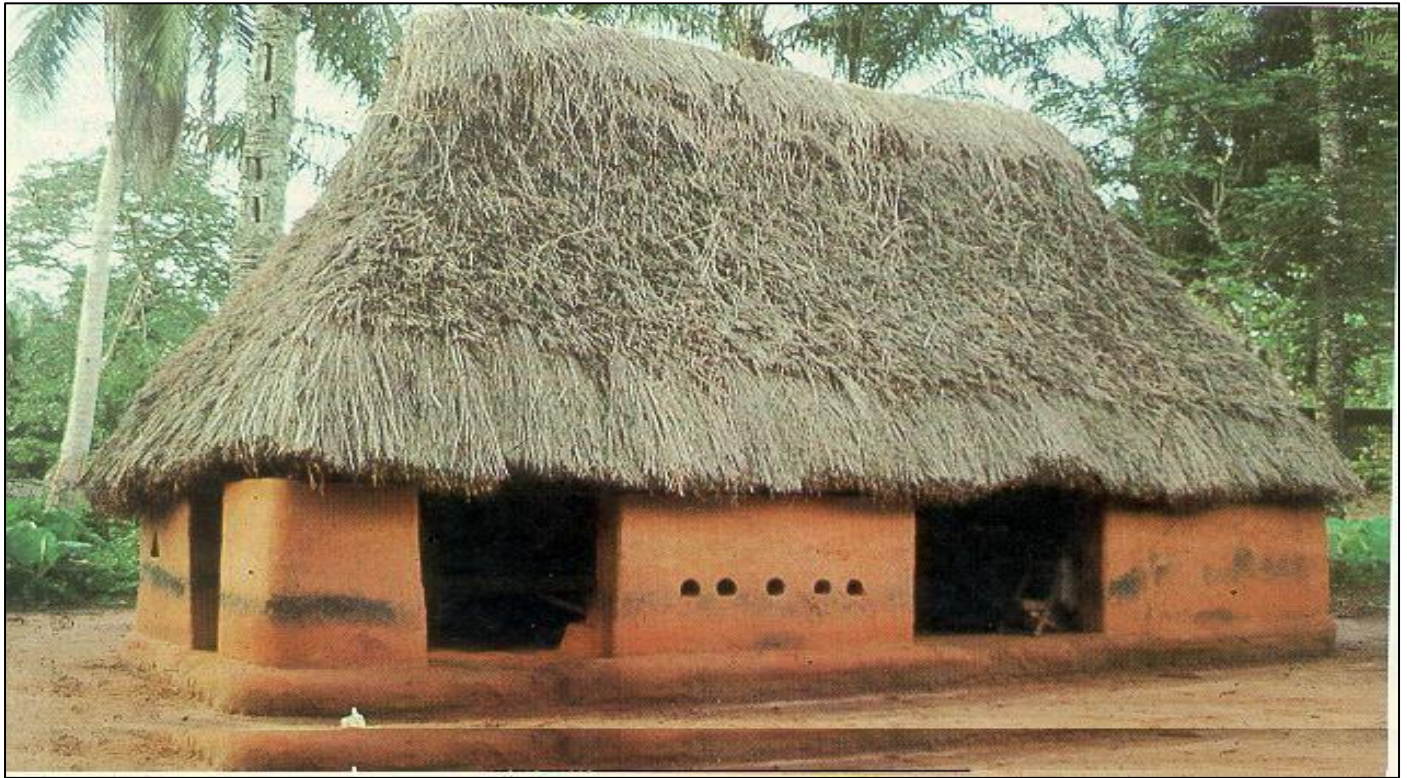


Fig 1 A Typical Obi House in Igbo Community.
Source: Guardian, 2023)

In *Igbo* palace architecture, generally, building extensions such as walls and posts, and panels such as doors, are considered architecture. As such murals and other wall decorations, and relief carvings on posts and doors are all architectural processes (Cole *et al.*, 1984). Circles of all

shapes are among the most recurring motifs in many Igbo wall and panel decorations. They appear as planetary bodies such as sun, part of a moon, center of stars, and as reptiles, human beings, instruments (Visona, 2000).



Fig 2 Obi Oraifite Palace, the Oldest Igbo Palace, Anambra (Aerial view)
Source: Pilot News, 2023.

➤ *Modern Trends*

The modern palace of the *Obi* of Onitsha almost lacks this circular feature where the buildings are built round; leaving a fairly circular portion at the center.



Fig 3 Palace of the Obi of Onitsha, Anambra (Aerial view)

Source: Nairaland Forum, 2016.



Fig 4 Obi's Palace (Frontal view)

Source: Nairaland Forum, 2016.

The Palace of the *Obi* of Onitsha is a typical example of a modern palace, built with contemporary features such as tiles, interlocking/terrace blocks for the gardens, lawns and aluminum roofing sheets among others. Asides being a

one story building, the building is painted with white and not having most traditional paintings such as the use of motif and wall sketch patterns.



Fig 5 Side Paths of the Palace of the Obi of Onitsha, Anambra

Source: Nairaland Forum, 2016.

➤ Challenges

This study identifies challenges facing the preservation and maintenance of Igbo palaces, including neglect, decay, and the impact of modernization.

Table 1 Summary of the Features of the *Igbo* Palace

Features	Traditional Trends	Modern Trends
No of Floors	One floors	Two floors (One storey)
Roof Cover	Thatch/Palm fronds	Green aluminum roofing sheets
Ceilings	Cloth/Unprocessed wood/Palm fronds	POP and PVC ceiling
Windows type	Bare/Wood	Sliding glass windows
Paint Colour	None	White and red paintings
Wall Finishes	Traditional Designs & Engravings	Shredding and paintings, with engravings
Floor Finish	Mud tiles, No outdoor flooring	Tiles and terrazzo for interior interlocking blocks for the outdoor flooring
Landscape	Vegetation	Gardens, lawns and walk paths

Source: Researcher's Analysis

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

➤ Conclusion

The *Igbo* palace in the traditional setting were often made of traditional building materials like mud, timber, bamboo, palm, thatch and binding materials. This generally reflects the culture, norms and royal values within the traditional *Igbo* society. However, traditions are gradually

giving way for modernization as most *Igbo* Kings now build their palaces with ultra-modern features and materials such as bricks, blocks, modern roofing sheets. They also make use of modern finishes, painting, ceiling, flooring and fittings; depending on their taste and preference. The only common feature in both traditional and modern *Igbo* palaces are the dominance of carved images, sculptures and

engraved arts which reflect their connection with their ancestors as a symbol of royalty.

This study has demonstrated the importance of *Igbo* palaces as cultural and historical landmarks, highlighting the need for their preservation and maintenance. The findings suggest that moderate moralism provides a useful framework for understanding the moral significance of these built spaces. The study's results have implications for architectural practice, cultural heritage preservation, and community development in *Igbo* societies.

➤ Recommendations

- **Preservation Efforts:** Efforts should be made to preserve and maintain *Igbo* palaces, including restoration and conservation projects.
- **Community Engagement:** Community members should be engaged in the preservation and maintenance of *Igbo* palaces, to ensure that their cultural values and traditions are respected.
- **Cultural Education:** Educational programs should be developed to promote awareness and appreciation of *Igbo* culture and history, including the significance of *Igbo* palaces.
- **Moderation:** Modernism in architectural designs of *Ibo* palaces should be moderated to avoid undermining the *Ibo* culture and Experts in vernacular architecture should always be consulted before building or renovating old *Ibo* palaces into modern palaces.
- **Policy Development:** Policies should be developed to support the preservation and maintenance of *Igbo* palaces, including funding and resource allocation.

By implementing these recommendations, we can help to promote the preservation and appreciation of *Igbo* cultural heritage, and ensure the continued relevance of *Igbo* palaces as important cultural landmarks.

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