

Inclinations in the Use of House Gates Among the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria

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Abstract: *Space has been an essential part of people from time immemorial, and people are permanently marking their territories to prevent intruders while safely guiding their lives and properties. In achieving this, the fence is constructed in compounds with secured entrance gates, which are sometimes further guarded by supervising authorities. Gates have become accessories for buildings in contemporary times; they are often artistically designed with a touch of elegance and distinction to the buildings. The designs and forms are often made to evolve with the affiliations of the owners. This practice that started with residential buildings is observed to have been extended to virtually everywhere people require privacy, such as offices, churches, mosques, shrines or temples, and even motor parks. This study looks at the use of artistic gates in Yoruba residential buildings, studying development and variations in the types. It further classifies the styles in the decoration of the gates. The study reveals diverse styles of gates in Yoruba buildings. These forms are classified, and a total of 17 gates were purposively selected for analysis.*

Key Words: designs, evolution, gates, typology, Yoruba-cities

INTRODUCTION

Gates are devices connected to fence walls to seal entrances in order to restrict unwanted guests and control access to private dwellings by intruding outsiders. They are, therefore, points of entry into walled or barricaded enclosures, as modern fences are often accessed through solid, highly embellished wrought-iron gates. They, like fences, are evolving architectural accoutrements in many Nigerian cities, increasing the aesthetics of the buildings where they are erected and the urban fabric in general. They are also a means of communicating the philosophies and other information about the owners of the buildings.

Branding entrances of buildings and compounds started long before the advent of gates, but the practice was limited to the houses or compounds of chiefs and the affluent in society. An example

is Olutimilehin's compound (which houses the lineage of the progenitor of Osogbo), embellished with images of the sixteen points lamp of Osun (*fitila* or *atupa olojumerindilogun*), a man in white holding a big fish (*agbeja*), and a hunter leading an elephant, all illustrating the myths of the origin of the town. These images in Olutimilehin compound are highlighted by the accompanied caption, "*omo amerin wa wolu*" which means, one who leads an elephant into the town (Fig. 1). Similarly, the grand entrance into Laayan's compound, in No. 9 Popo Street, Osogbo, is embellished with stucco cast lions and elephants in the round, acknowledging the owner as a one-time man of timber and caliber in the society (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1: The grand entrance into the into the Oluwatimilehin compound, Street, Osogbo.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.

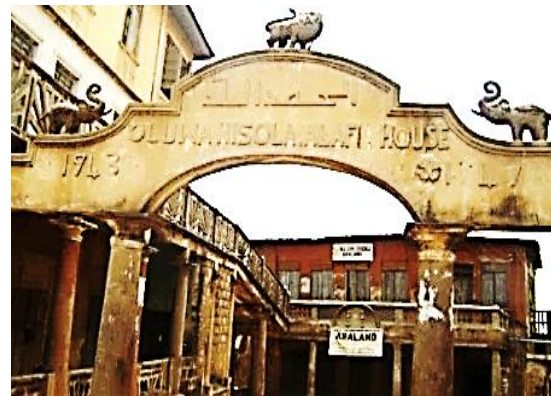


Fig. 2: The grand entrance, the Laayan's compound, No 9, Popo Street, Osogbo.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.

The building of elaborated grand entrances embellished with symbolic personal identifiers insignias, which have a relationship with the family histories or forms that reflect philosophical values and serve as identifying signs, is, however, observed to be limited to high chiefs and royal personages, capable of having mini palaces at the time. This is aptly documented by Ilesanmi (2012) in his claim that gated buildings were exclusive of residences of chiefs and essential personalities in the traditional society. The blockage of the entrances into compounds of chiefs and the affluent is observed in some parts of Yorubaland, and examples can be found in the main entrance into the Lajoma's compound, No. 40, Olugun Street, Osogbo (Fig. 3). Similar branded blockages can be seen in the Ogboru compound and many other royal family compounds (*akodi*) in Ile-Ife and Aremo compound in Oke-Are, Ibadan. These are all compounds with multiple buildings fenced together, with movements of outsiders restricted, except through one main entrance.



Fig. 3: The grand entrance into the Lajoma's compound, No. 40 Olugun Street, Osogbo.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.

This is germane with the finding of this study that the use of enclosing walls with gates in domestic buildings among the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria is a new development as people in Yoruba communities were closely related in the past, with good social interaction and interdependency, that does not warrant the delineation or gating of buildings to fence off other neighbours who are usually members or associates of the family. Therefore, this paper studies the outdoor gates to enhance the understanding of the progression and emerging forms in their use.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a scarcity of studies on the use of gates or their progression in Nigeria. Studies by Ilesanmi (2012) are concerned with the social and psychological effects of barricaded premises on residents. Fadamiro et al. (2015) look at gated premises as an offshoot of social inequality and urban insecurity in Nigeria. Abejide (2020), however, focuses on the evolution of fences in Yorubaland.

METHODOLOGY

Data for the study was collected through field observations and oral interviews with relevant informants. The study selects 17 historically based gates, adopting a purposive sampling technique. Data were also sourced from the literature. A descriptive method of art historical studies was used in the data analysis.

THE USE OF GATED BARRIERS IN YORUBALAND IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The earliest use of gates had been traced to the exits of defence walls of some ancient cities in many parts of the country (Ikpakronyi: 2005:74), although some of them were observed to be mounted by guards rather than being sealed by physical barriers (ibid). Ikpakronyi (*op.cit.*) further documented the use of narrow wooden gates in most compounds around Awka, in Anambra State (in the Eastern part of Nigeria), in the 1940s, before they were documented to have been replaced with metal gates around the 1950s. Osasona (2006:36) linked the beginning of the Nigerian gated-fence culture to gated barbed-wire barriers in the European reserved areas in the 1950s (in residences of the colonial district officers). Similar sealing of buildings with gated barbed wired barricades in residences of the European officers were observed in south-western Nigeria up to the early 1970s.

THE DRIVING FACTORS OF THE USE OF GATED BARRIERS

Modernisation, migration, and the influx of foreigners into Yoruba towns militated against the Indigenous social interactions of the people, leading to the need for segregation with gated fences. Other factors responsible for the upsurge of gates in Yoruba domestic building are trifold; the first was the aftereffects of the Biafra civil war in Nigeria from July 1967-15th to January 1970, which left many people overdrawn. The poverty-driven state of many rouse criminal activities and public disturbances (Osasona 2006:37; Muzan, 2014:16-32, (Marenin and Reisig, 1995:503, Abejide 2020:2).

Secondly, there was the bonus award of special salary increment to civil servants immediately after the civil war as an incentive for the people's support to the government during the Biafra war (Obijiofor, 2008, Ikeliomwu, 2011:24-25; Omitola, 2012:133), the indulgencies from Udoji incentive left a wide discrepancy in income which made many uncomfortable. The insurgences from the above factors compelled the construction of gated fences, which sometimes require security guards to ward off intruders into buildings. These conditions were heightened by the better state of the nation's economy from the then newly discovered crude oil, leaving a free flow of money in circulation. Lastly, the need for ornamented gates is also asserted to have come from the innate human need for beautification and visual pleasure (Marenin and Reisig, 1995:503), while the promotion of social status is a secondary factor.

CLASSIFICATION OF GATED BARRIERS

Gates are in two broad categories: which are the wooden barriers and direct arc welded metal gates.

THE WOODEN GATES

The earliest gates or barricades were built with planks that were cut to size, assembled, and fastened together with nails before they were attached to fence walls with iron hinges. The wooden gates

were often plain and devoid of designs or embellishments but existed just as security devices in the homes of colonial administrators and later residences of the affluent in the society. Wood was, however, often destroyed by termites and weathering, a problem that stopped with the introduction of iron gates.

WIDESPREAD USE OF GATES IN DOMESTIC BUILDINGS

Gates later became widespread with modernisation and its ensuing security glitches. However, welded metal gates gained more acceptance than wooden gates as security devices. The building of large welded solid iron gates, both in low and high reliefs, evolved fast as modern architectural accessories since metal is more secure, sturdier, and hard-wearing than wood, making it last longer. It also cannot be destroyed by pests nor easily by weathering, especially when coated with anti-rust. Metals can also be worked fast, which encourages inventiveness and makes possible varieties of unique decorative designs that are not possible with wood. The designs on the gates add a touch of elegance and distinction to the buildings while synthesizing utility and aesthetics. The speed and ease of arc welding further inspired the creation of highly complex ornamental and sculptural welded wrought-iron entrance gates with expressive symbolic images. Hence, the use of gates as aesthetic devices started with the emergence of metal gates.

THE FOUNDATION OF WELDED METAL GATES

Early metal gates were documented to have been executed by ironsmiths, hence were not creative like the ones attainable today, nor were they comparable to the modern ones in design (Ikpakronyi, 2005:73). Later came gas welding, and lastly the direct electronic arc machine welded metal gates, which were offshoots of welded metal sculpture. Direct arc welding according to Sobowale *et al.* 2024:163, is the joining of two or more metals by melting them, using electrodes and electricity-powered welding machines, which on cooling leave a permanently bond solid piece of metal.

Although the welded metal was recorded to have been introduced to the Nigerian scene in the early 1950s by Kenneth Murray for the fabrication of sculptures (Ikpakronyi, *op. cit*), Sobowale *et al.* 2024:157, echoing notable studies like Osborne (1970) and Andrews, (1983), traced the inauguration of welded metal sculpture to Julio Gonzalez (a Spanish), in 1927. Gonzalez's experiments in innovative welded metal sculpture are acknowledged in Fred (2005:925). Sobowale (*op. cit*) further traced the beginning of welded metal sculpture in Nigeria to Victor Nwaifo's National Diploma project titled the 'Saxophonist,' produced at the School of Arts and Design, Yaba College of Technology, Lagos in 1963.

However, with its acceptance as a medium for sculpture, it became a viable medium for producing gates, which quickly emerged as an architectural attachment. However, the flexibility of electronic arc welding must have inspired the building of welded metal gates. Nevertheless, Ikpakronyi (2005)

credited Olu Amoda as the initiator of welded sculptural gates in Nigeria, which he claims Amoda started from Lagos, from where it must have spread to other parts of the country.

The speed and ease of arc welding inspired the formation of highly complex ornamented welded wrought-iron entrance gates, with unique designs and expressive sculptural symbolic images, which permits its emergence as a medium of artistic expression, thus adding a touch of elegance and distinction to the buildings, while synthesising utility and aesthetics. It in no time became the in-thing and worthy accouterments to buildings. Despite welding gates being a modern development, they are highly diversified.

CLASSIFICATION OF METAL GATES

There are four categories of decorations in welded metal gates: linear see-through gates, metal sheet-covered gates designed with iron bars, and solid metal sheets decorated with relief forms.

LINEAR SEE-THROUGH GATES

Early welded gates were linear in presentation and were often fabricated with iron square or round pipes and rods, which relies on the direction in which the networks of iron rods used are bent; they were usually in very simple horizontal, vertical, or diagonal orientation (Figs 4 - 7).



Fig. 4: Gate constructed with simple linear pipes, at Ede road, Osogbo.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.



Fig. 5: A see through gate from rods, at No. 34 Catholic Hospital road, Osogbo.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.



Fig.: Intricate see-through gate, with straight rods and curvature, Parakin, Ile-Ife.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.



Fig. 7: A see through gate fabricated with simple vertical and horizontal rods in Parakin, Ile-Ife.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.

Gates were later made in intricate, see-through, flowing curvilinear designs, which were often achieved with convoluting iron bars (Fig. 8).

THE METAL SHEET COVERED WELDED GATES

The next phase was the covering of the earlier-designed iron bars with flat sheets. Thus, the board-covered gates vary from complex convoluting ornamented scrollwork (Fig. 8) to half-open see-through blockades with the plate covering only half of the gate, while one can see through the top (Fig. 9). After this, the embellishment of electric arc welded solid board gates with flat boards began. This enabled the making of variations of artistic decorations.



Fig. 8: Half see through gate embellished with scrollwork at No. 2 Abikoye Street, Osogbo.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.



Fig. 9: Full metal blockage designed with convoluting iron bars at zone 6, Parakin, Ile-Ife. Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.

THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE PRODUCTION OF METAL GATES WITH RELIEF SCULPTURAL DECORATION

Ben Osawe was credited as the first Nigerian to engage in the art of welding metal sculpture in the Nigerian scene, the first work being the metal sculpture erected in front of the Central Bank, Jos, in 1969 (Ikpakronyi 2002:74). Both Murray's encouragement and Osawe's novelty inspired artists like *Olu Amoda* to delve into innovative welding of flat metal sheets in the 1970s, which dovetailed into welding of metal gates constructed from cut out plates and embellished with pieces of other plates. These gates are more advantageous to users, as they are often started with frames of rods or pipes covered with metal sheets on both sides, making them heavy and strong Sobowale (2023).

VARIATIONS OF THE SOLID BOARD WELDED METAL GATES

The motifs in the solid board welded metal gates diverge from geometric forms (Fig. 10), pure abstractions (Fig. 11), and semi-abstractions (Fig. 12) to expressive symbolic relief sculptural forms (Fig. 13). This existed simultaneously with gates embellished with manually painted or sprayed decoration, often used by people who could not afford the exorbitant cost of welding (Fig. 14).

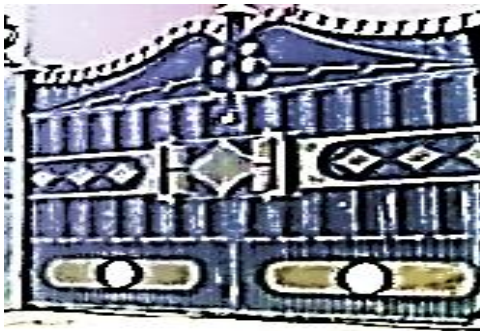


Fig. 10: Gate decorated with geometric forms.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.



Fig. 11: Gate decorated abstract form.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.

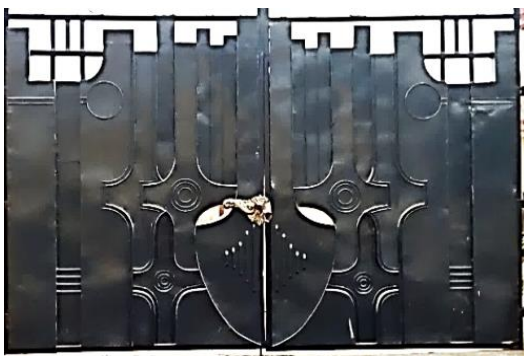


Fig. 12: Gate decorated with semi abstract form of human face.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.



Fig. 13: Gate decorated with semi abstract form of human face.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.



Fig. 14: Gate decorated with manually painted image of peacock in Modakeke.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.

A new rave in the production of gates is the emergence of mechanized automated beaten indented relief forms (Fig. 15), later additions from the year 2000. The designs are usually prefabricated, leaving the welders only to fix the frames while making it faster to produce than the welded sculptural gates. Also, while the solid welded gate is usually plain at the back, this type of gate usually leaves a reversed impression on the other side. Fig. 16 also showcases innovative pasting sheets of marble as embellishment on a gate, while the image at the center is prefabricated or factory painted.



Fig. 15: automated beaten indented relief.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.



Fig. 16: Gate decorated with painted automated form in Erio-Ekiti.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.

The sealing up of barricaded premises with gates, which started with residential buildings, was later extended to both public and private buildings, worship houses, and all other places that require confinement. Some are decorated with symbolic communicating forms or even with monograms or logos of the organisations (Fig. 17).



Fig. 17: Gate of TS Company Limited, Ilesa.
Photograph: F. M. Abejide, 2020.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has traced the development of the use of gates, an appendage for fences, from its inception to the present. It also assesses the evolutionary trend and the militating factors that contribute to the construction of gates in buildings. The study shows that the use of barricades for entrances of compounds or fenced premises started with wooden devices before the introduction of metals, which became more popular as security devices, especially for building gates, because of their strength and durability. However, these various types of welded metal gates come in a wide range of diversified designs; these can be the focus of another research.

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