

CULTURAL INTERIORS: THE BEDROOM AS AN IDENTITY OF THE NUPE WOMAN IN CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Abstract. *Men and women both experience space in different ways. Women are considered to occupy a high position in society due to their socio-cultural roles played. They are custodians of the domestic space; as such, they are positioned with how traditional spaces are constituted. Furthermore, spaces configured in vernacular architecture embody cultural meaning and values. One of the most important spaces within the home is the bedroom, often considered a space for copulation and rest. However, for the women, the cultural values of the bedroom go beyond its function as a resting place in most cultures. As such this study embarked on understanding the meaning and values of the bedroom of the Nupe woman and how it is spatially configured to meet her cultural identity and values. The research employed a qualitative approach toward a deep understanding of how the bedroom space of the Nupe woman is constituted spatially. The elicitation of data was carried out in 5 different Nupe communities and the content analysis of the transcribed interviews showcases a convergence in the character and meaning of the Nupe woman's bedroom to be a space with distinctive cultural values, beyond it being a space for rest, but which is also filled with the history of the past and preserved for the future.*

Keywords: *Bedroom, culture, gender, interior spaces, Nupe woman, traditional architecture*

1. INTRODUCTION

The utilisation of domestic space differs between genders. Society especially in Nigeria attributes domestic work to women. What this implies is that, due to these gender roles defined for the home by society, women and men will have different experiences. [1]. For example, the kitchen is considered a feminine space because cooking which is carried out in this space, is attributed as a duty of women.

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To convey the way of life of an individual (culture) is through the spatial organization of interior spaces. These spaces create avenues in which the development of cultural understanding can be fostered. According to [2] anthropology and sociology scholars have struggled with definitions of culture. However, the term culture can be referred to be an integrated system of behavioural patterns that are learned and which over time becomes a characteristic feature of members of a society [3, 4]. Therefore, it can be put that the culture of a people encompasses beliefs, habits and overall lifestyle, which translates from generation to generation. One way this culture is reflected is through its architecture (vernacular architecture). In vernacular architecture, culture is an important phenomenon that deals with the everyday life of a community. In traditional architecture, what determines building practices are the traditions, values, customs, beliefs and norms of the people. With traditional architecture, designs of buildings can reflect the lifestyle peculiar to a people, thereby representing cultural heritage [5, 6]. These representations of vernacular architecture portray unique forms of identity that can be documented. However, Nigerian cultural landscapes with over 250 ethnic groups have limited documentation of cultural spaces [7]. The few studies that try to bridge this gap such as [8, 9] focused more on the spatial configuration of the building envelopes and not much on the interiors of the buildings. It is to be understood that the interior, especially the bedroom, constitutes the primary space of social transactions and is thus important in understanding the cultural values of any given community. More so, the Nupe people in central Nigeria have long been established to have a rich cultural heritage [8, 10, 11]

This paper, therefore, explores the meaning of space (bedroom) through the eyes of women and how their identity is expressed therein. Consequently, it is the purpose of this paper to understand how cultural interiors (space) affect the identity of an individual and facilitate the meaning of culture within the specific context of interiors. This is to establish further knowledge that surrounds a people's customs, ideals, and general way of life. This paper discusses the cultural interior with a focus on the spatial configuration of the Nupe woman's bedroom to identify values and meanings that reflect her cultural identity.

2. DOMESTIC SPACE AND GENDER

To have a true analysis of the meaning of what a home is [12] & [13] suggests that this can be investigated through gender studies. [14] & [15] carried out studies relating to gender and they observed that gender emerges from daily transactions or interactions. According to these authors, gender concerns itself more with 'what' rather than 'who'. It is defined by what a person does and not necessarily by who that person is.

In the study of gender, certain terms such as gender roles, identity and utilisation of space come into play, which are all important [16]. Gender roles are defined as roles that are social and attributed to either males or females [17; 14]. In other words, gender roles are accepted norms by the environment although this differs in one culture from another. For example, in Nigeria, society terms being the breadwinner of the family to be a masculine role. On the other hand, identity in gender studies refers to how an individual views him/herself as either masculine or feminine. Gender identity refers to self-definitions constructed socially due to interactions with other people [18; 14; 19]. When it comes to space utilisation, men and women experience and interact with space differently [20; 21; 19]. More often than not, there is a tendency for individuals will interact differently based

on the features that make up the domestic space. The spatial arrangement of a house is therefore shaped by gender relations, which in turn brings about different experiences between men and women [17; 21]. It therefore shapes patterns and activities of daily life.

[22] also developed the term 'doing gender'. This concept translates to certain socially accepted activities that are either masculine or feminine in their expressions. In other words, according to [23] the concept of 'doing gender' simply means interactions that are seen as a way in which gender identity can be expressed. Doing gender in the domestic space can be interpreted and expressed differently through objects, spaces and practices. For women, their experience of the domestic space is influenced by practices as women, in general, are more domesticated taking responsibility for the housefront [17; 20], therefore as expressed by [23], in the domestic space, accountability exists. On the other hand, domestic space is a term that is said to have existed in the 1970s. Mary Douglas, a British social anthropologist coined this term in 1972. She used this to define the meaning of spatial arrangement settlements. According to [18] & [24] domestic space, therefore, was interpreted to be a domain secluded for women to take up the responsibility of domestic chores. Furthermore, the construct of a house shapes the occupants' experiences, and their way of life and defines identity as housing supports certain practices through its layout and different tasks performed [25].

[24] puts forward that space is a socially produced construct. Anthropologists argue that space in its light is produced materially and socially, and architecture constitutes one of such that is produced culturally. It is a part of life that is integral. Culture and environment are interrelated in that they both shape each other as culture can be seen most expressed in the home environment. For individuals, the home environment plays an important role in shaping cultural values as people tend to be more comfortable and relaxed in places concurrent with their identities. The understanding of elements that reflect cultural identities in the house environment is vital in understanding social satisfaction/ identity.

3. NIGERIA AND THE NUPE COMMUNITY

Nigeria is a heterogeneous society that comprises ethno-geographical north, east, south, west and middle belt regions, each with its own culture and as such exhibits a peculiar housing form [26]. About 250 ethnic groups exist, which are majorly comprised of the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba [27]. The Nupe communities are located in central Nigeria and are found majorly in Niger, Kwara and Kogi States (see Figure 1). The Nupe people are considered one of the second tiers among the 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria [8].

Although the Nupes and their settlements are said to have existed since the early 13th and 14th centuries, they exhibit unique cultural characteristics of their own [29]. The traditional architecture of central Nigeria has common features such as their curvilinear housing forms, mudded walls and thatched roofs. The new trend however is the rectilinear form associated with modernism, with influences by colonialism [26]. [8] describes the Nupe settlements to be large villages commonly known as *Ezhi*, and *Kangi*, which is a smaller settlement. The pattern of these settlements is characterized by an un-walled series of compounds clustered together, entrance halls (*Katamba*) that form a homestead (*Emi*). The collection of houses referred to as *Emizhi*, forms a ward (*Efu*), whereas, in big settlements farms, land, or open space separate these wards. The coming together of the *Emizhi*, and *Efu* form a village, while the collection of two or more neighbouring villages is the *Ekkah*.

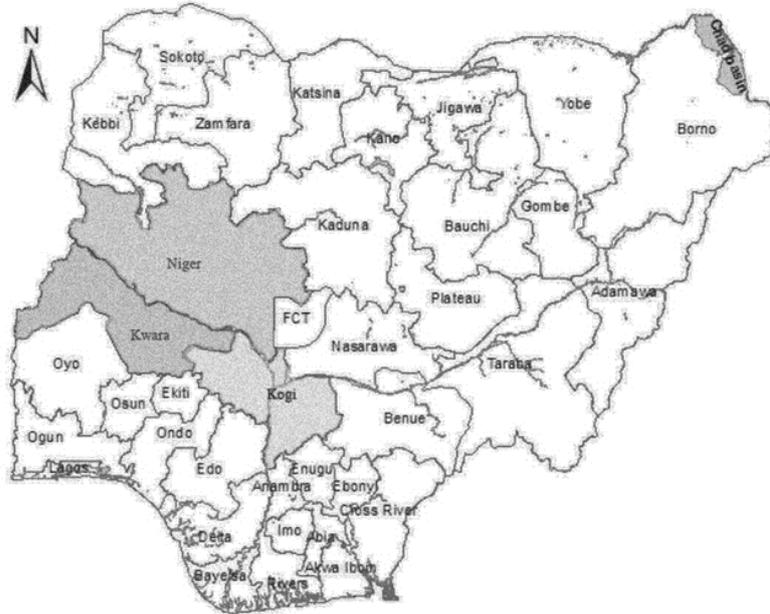


Fig. 1 Map of Nigeria showing Nupe settlements of Niger, Kwara and Kogi States [28, Adapted by Author, 2021]

[30] gave extensive details of the Nupe community, which consists of round huts whose major construction materials are clay (*Eggun*) and thatch *Dongoh*, made from vegetable or mineral fibre. These huts are surrounded by a high fence-like wall structure made either of mud or woven vegetables (*Tsara*). With the advent of technology, newer building materials have replaced the more traditional ones, such as galvanised iron roofing sheets used in place of thatch roofs. Inhabitants of a typical Nupe compound comprise families related by blood. The head of each compound is the eldest male family member referred to as *Emitso* (the owner of the house). A central courtyard exists in each compound which has several rooms facing it. The Nupe vernacular architecture is characterised by round huts made using traditional sun-dried mud bricks, plastered in mud mortar, with a thatch roof.

The concept of housing generally, came about as a direct need to fulfil man's basic needs for shelter, security and comfort. The planning and construction of housing vary from place to place and usually give insight into the cultures and societies of the people [26]. Cultural spaces tell a story and give information about the history, values and lifestyle of a people. Cultural space is a phenomenon that encapsulates human interaction within an environment; man-made features in an environment are made up of space, time, meaning and communication. However, over time, variations occur when it comes to the function of space, the meaning therein and human interaction [31]. Space usage reflects the human social interactions engaged therein [32; 15]. Consequently, the position of women in each culture constitutes one of the factors that influence the house form and thus, this study explores the cultural identity, meaning and values associated with Nupe women's bedroom interior.

4. METHODOLOGY

To understand the cultural significance and spatial organization of the Nupe woman's bedroom, this research employed a qualitative data collection approach. This is to allow for an in-depth understanding of the conceptualisation of the Nupe Woman's bedroom in both the tangible (architectural space) and intangible forms (values) [33]. As such interviews and participant observation with the aid of pictures were employed. In doing so, the spatial layout of the bedroom was mapped while the interviews conducted were recorded using an audio recorder. The interview questions were open-ended but focused on the meaning and reasons behind the spatial arrangement of the bedroom. The elicitation of data was carried out in five Nupe communities and a saturation point was reached after 16 Nupe women were interviewed. Thereafter, the interviews were transcribed into text and the content was analysed for patterns and themes which were also triangulated with the observation made by the researchers. Consequently, the content of the analysis derived the establishment of the connection between culture, identity and interior spaces of the Nupe women.

5. SPATIAL ORGANISATION OF THE NUPE COMMUNITY

An important aspect of culture for the Nupe is their domestic architecture. [34] explained that the smallest nucleated settlement among the Nupe people is a compound (*emi*). A Nupe compound typically constitutes several small compounds (*emi*) that are connected by walkways. In its composition, a unit compound has an entrance hut (*katamba*), rooms for sleeping (*kata*), kitchen and storage (*katagi and edo*), a courtyard, (*zhempa*), toilets and bathrooms (*shikpata*), the hearth (*yekun*), and an animal pen (*ega*). The *Zhempa* is an outdoor space that is surrounded by sleeping rooms, a kitchen and animal pens. This space is used for a variety of domestic activities such as the washing and drying of clothes, a play area for children or a social space for gatherings. Entry into the Nupe compound is through the *katamba* which means lord's room; *kata* meaning room and *mba* meaning lord. The *katamba* therefore holds great significance to the Nupe compound structure and symbolises lordship. The *katamba* itself is a structure that has door openings on opposite sides of the walls (no doors or windows) as shown in Figure 2, and just as each compound has its family name, the



Fig. 2 Nupe *katamba* [34]

katamba is thus referenced accordingly [34]. This structure is culturally significant as the head of the compound uses this space to receive visitors, hold meetings and sometimes perform marriage ceremonies.

6. SPATIAL ORGANISATION OF THE NUPE WOMAN'S BEDROOM

Across differing cultures, the bedroom space is known mainly for the sole purpose of rest, and as such is an important space in the domestic environment although, for women, the function of this space goes beyond that. In the cultural landscape of Africa, the woman is considered the custodian of the house. Taking for example the different societies in Niger State, it revealed that in terms of size, the woman's room is oftentimes larger than the male counterpart [35]. A clear distinction between the *kata* (room) of the men and the women is seen in the decor (furnishing) and not the size of the room. For the males, their rooms consist of mainly a sleeping mat and clothes hung on a rope, while the female's rooms include furnishing with pots, the formation of *katagi* (cooking spot), a pot for drinking water and the visitor's stools. Thus, while the *kata* for the male folk is solely for rest, the bedroom space for the traditional Nupe woman transcends beyond being just a space for rest, as it encompasses space for cooking, storage of goods and valuables, and receiving visitors. One of the respondents buttressed this by stating: *"I receive visitors in my room and sometimes I receive them in the room of my second (co-wife)"*

The bedroom is also a space that accommodates grown-up girls and children, who play around in her (the Nupe woman's) bedroom, as the same respondent said *"My room is their room, I cannot stop them from coming here to play"*. The rooms usually have a single window, small in size and approximately 0.6m by 0.6m. [35] buttressed further in the description, that opposite this window is the door (*kpako*) which opens up to the right-hand side, which is most oftentimes, left open for effective cross-ventilation, to complement the small size of the window. For privacy, the door is covered with a traditional blind (*shegi*), which is made from reed grass (Figure 3). The bed is positioned at the right side of the door upon entry, for privacy also, which is, to avoid a direct view of the bed when the room is entered. The bed is also opposite the window for sufficient ventilation and admittance of



Fig. 3 Room showing *kpako* covered with *shegi* [Author, 2021]

natural lighting. To the left of the bed, a drinking pot is positioned. There also is a cooking area (*katagi*), towards the middle of the room, used during cold seasons or when the weather is not conducive. Behind the cooking area, towards the foot of the sleeping bed, lie several stacked clay pots of various sizes, and numbers, which are dependent on space availability and the woman's wealth. Figure 4 is a schematic diagram illustrating this description.

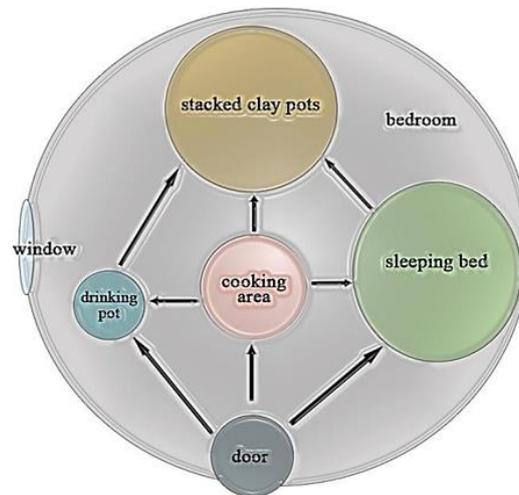


Fig. 4 Illustration of the spatial layout of the Nupe woman's bedroom [Author, 2021]

For the Nupe woman, these pots are the most valuable possession and the focal point of the bedroom. They are of great sentimental value to her as some of them were given as wedding gifts from relatives. The number of these pots is usually a connotation of how wealthy she is. The pots which are stacked in varying sizes (biggest at the bottom and smallest on top) are used as decoration and for storing grains and valuables (according to their frequency of use), as shown in Figure 5. For example, grains used daily are stored in pots on the top, while those sparsely used are stored below.



Fig. 5 Pots stacked according to size [Author, 2021]

Likewise, the Nupe woman's room is incomplete without these clay pots, which within the cultural context have multiple values in her life. Pots in the daily life of the local woman serve as a storage space, and as explained, private items or valuables are stored in them away from the public view. It, therefore, means that the local women always transacted with the pots almost daily because items such as grains and other valuables are kept inside them. The pots are arranged such that the most frequently used items are kept in the topmost pots, while the less frequently used items and valuable items such as jewellery are kept in the bottommost pots. This is explained by one of the female respondents

"I store items in these pots which keep them safe, away from people such as children. In the pots above, I keep items I use every day, and in the lower pots, I keep items I do not use regularly".

The clay pots also served as valuable assets that were either inherited from their mothers or given as wedding gifts, which they, in turn, passed on to their daughters to keep the tradition alive. The pots were an element of pride to the local woman as another respondent asserted:

"When I got married, I received these pots from my mother; some of them were bought with the money given by my husband's people during my wedding"

Another value these pots add is an element of aesthetics, which is a way of decorating their rooms to make them look beautiful. To this, one of the respondents said *"I use these pots to make my room look beautiful."* However, over time the decoration of bedrooms with clay pots declined with the infiltration of other cultures and modernization. Nevertheless, the concept associated with the use of pots as decorations, and storage space continues, though in a different manner as shown in Figure 6.



Fig. 6 Enamelled wares to replace pot décor [Author, 2021]

The pots are now being replaced with enamel steel, especially by younger women. However, the principle and the functions that the pots served for the older generation of women, are transferred to the enamel wares. Pots, therefore, have different cultural values

within the life and culture of the typical Nupe woman in the community. The transformation in the replacement of pots with enamelled wares still shows that the cultural concept upon which the use of pots was initiated in the first place is still maintained.

7. CONCLUSION

The spatial configuration of the bedroom space constitutes an adaptive and cultural creativity for the typical Nupe woman's room. The space is considered not just for rest, but also a quarter for living; a space for socializing and receiving visitors. It is a place that encompasses rest, cooking, and receiving of guests, to bring and bond the female folk together. Doing gender is evident in the domestic space which is interpreted and expressed differently through the use of objects, and practices. The items in her bedroom space are not just placed haphazardly, but each item is positioned strategically with purpose; as the space has every bit of her identity with the items she uses in terms of furniture. This constitutes the intangible spatial utilisation. Her bed which is positioned to the right of the door opening for privacy, with a window opposite the bed for direct ventilation, and her precious pots, displayed directly facing the door, all come together to bring about a functional space. The spatial arrangement within the bedroom exhibits symmetry inflow in terms of each activity carried out within; a balance is achieved.

The women folk are more inclined to inherit their mother's properties. The clay pots, her most prized possession, which are either gifts or an inheritance passed on from mother to daughter, are the focal point of her room. They are displayed facing the door, so it becomes the first thing seen by visitors upon entering her bedroom. The number of stacked clay pots already informs the visitor of the woman's status whether rich or poor. These pots are her pride and hold sentimental value to her; they tell stories that have been passed on from one generation to another (cultural value). In the same manner, the Nupe woman continues to maintain the culture where enamelled bowls are used in place of clay pots to decorate the rooms and store items. It thus suggests that in the cultural lives of people, a change of material may not necessarily mean a change in concept, but rather an adaptation of the new material (technology) to suit the cultural lifestyle of the people.

Elements of the bedroom space not only take up the role of defining the space or her identity (tangible form) but also express the cultural meaning of a Nupe woman's bedroom (intangible form). In a way, they define the space and give identity to its interior. The *kata* (bedroom), for the Nupe woman, is an embodiment of past, present, and future; a reflection of her values and pride in who she is. Therefore, culture and environment are interlinked, where culture can influence its environment and vice versa. The home, in particular, is an environment where cultural values and beliefs are expressed the most. The study has shown that even in tradition, interior spaces interpret, translate, and facilitate the retention of culture.

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KULTURNI ENTERIJERI: SPAVAĆA SOBA KAO IDENTITET ŽENA NARODA NUPE U CENTRALNOJ NIGERIJ

I muškarci i žene doživljavaju prostor na različite načine. Za žene se smatra da zauzimaju visok položaj u društvu zbog svog socio-kulturnog aspekta. Oni su čuvari domaće prostora, i kao takvi su pozicionirani na načinom na koji su tradicionalni prostori konstituisani. Štaviše, prostori konfigurisani u narodnoj arhitekturi otelotvoruju kulturno značenje i vrednosti. Jedan od najvažnijih prostora u kući je spavaća soba koja se često smatra prostorom za kopulaciju i odmor. Međutim, kulturne vrednosti spavaće sobe prevazilaze njenu funkciju odmorišta u većini kultura, posebno one za žene. Kao takva, ova studija je krenula u razumevanje značenja i vrednosti spavaće sobe žene Nupe i kako je ona prostorno konfigurisana da zadovolji njen kulturni identitet i vrednosti. Istraživanje je koristilo kvalitativni pristup ka dubokom razumevanju kako je prostor spavaće sobe žene Nupe konstituisan prostorno. Prikupljanje podataka obavljeno je u 5 različitih zajednica Nupe, a analiza sadržaja transkribovanih intervjua pokazuje približavanje karaktera i značenja ženske spavaće sobe Nupe kao prostora sa karakterističnim kulturnim vrednostima, osim što je prostor za odmor, ali koji je takođe ispunjen istorijom prošlosti i sačuvan za budućnost

Ključne reči: *Spavaća soba, kultura, pol, unutrašnji prostori, Nupe žena, tradicionalna arhitektura*