

The Cowrie and the Coin.

This essay written in 1999 is what may be seen as the beginnings of a search for a way in architecture, which acknowledges the layered nature of the modern African society. A suggestion, of directions, which only feed off what, exists initially, as a means of legitimising and perhaps celebrating the present for all it's apparent perpetual anarchy and chaos.

The will of appropriation, the reality of adaptation, the will to survive, all, successes, which demand overdue attention. No longer does 'Other' accept the imposed with banana boat glee, the alien must bend to the stubborn resilience of the tropical climes and it's humanity within.

We have been gifted by time, the sobering privilege of precedence and the graphic substance of history post the drunken euphoria of independence, to take a more considered and impassioned look at ourselves. This time however the burdening fog over the playing field which held the Coloniser and Colonised locked in struggle for supremacy, a shroud which obscured the visions of our fathers' generation is but a haze in the distance which we can behold and no longer dread.

So the stage for the theatre of the future generations is about to be set, we have been handed a rather fatigued 'baton' of responsibility to add our own layer of being. As we discover the joy of our dualities, we no longer need to writhe between polarities in angst as to which we are, we now exist as a new syncretite, mutant, hybrid, but the space to hold the new 'us' must be rethought, discovered, permitted to emerge.

*'Okolobia's sons shall learn to live from fathers failing blending diverse cultural
types the cream of native with adaptable alien kind
the dawn of an age-
the season of salvation.'*¹

Perhaps we have learnt so we can now build the stages.

Giles David Omezi

November 2002

Introduction

Culture represents a map by which societies can be apprehended and perhaps understood. Essentially it is a footprint of the existence of a people, implying a continual state of flux, which manifests in some form of physicality. It thus follows that space place matrix of societies existence is resultant of it's histories, flux and locus. This seems apparently so as to become fused in the collective psyche and therefore identity of a people/society. The notion of nation 'ness' cannot be considered without the space-place matrix which permits the people/society to be. When this occurs, they become Diaspora. The shift, in locus redefines their identity. Identity and Space-locus constructs manifest, can be illustrated best by looking at the icon of the Greek temple signifying the Greek and Greco-antiquity. Space constructs it seems may not always be architecture, why? Contemporary perceptions of architecture burden the word with a contrivance which permits and accommodates habitation, informed collectively and individually by man. Variations in degrees of contrivance seem to

delineate building from architecture. May I suggest then that the degree of a wilful accommodation of man i.e. habitation suffices to foster such delineation. So man, established as central to the space constructs, what then loads the resultant for it to become distinct and of locus? That I have established, but most importantly it is about the nature of the man located.

This essay a continuation of my theme from last year shall attempt to build upon issue raised in my initial enquiry. in essence it centres on the possibilities of responding to the particularities of people, locus and the flux of continuity which defines existence. Hence the concentration on a component of the Nigerian nation. I shall attempt to utilise certain ideas of Carl Jung centring on the state of the psyche i.e. consciousness and unconsciousness as a means of understanding the coda which may implicate a responsive Nigerian environment. Contemporary Nigerian literature, in particular the works of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka provide ways of connecting to what was and is. A way of discerning the immanent energies

which exist within the individual as to colour. A dissection of the universal components of man and what taints may illustrate this further. Broadly, the tensions of conscious and unconscious within self, a set of co-existing oppositions form the basis of enquiry as a vehicle for examining the manifestation of contrivance – architecture. It is the nature of oppositions that interests me as it shapes the future of Nigeria; a state which is as a result of oppositions. Last year I had no access to material, which could have indicated the possibilities of synthesis, a logical progression that seems to be occurring in the everyday of the nation. This has been addressed by further research on one of the works of a Nigerian artist/ architect; Demas Nwoko.

memory

Uncle Demas's house (memory 1)

As a child, I remember the spaces, not for their precise physicality but more for the resonance evoked from deep within me. Contrasting the harsh glare and intense heat of tropical sunlight with an oasis of cool sombre quietude. The spaces are dark, holding reminiscent of what I couldn't articulate. I remember the colours, of the earth burnt sienna and mahogany. Of the scorching earth outside yet inside my bare feet touched the cool polished floor –ground? Sombre mahogany posts, beams, chairs and tables acknowledge the depths of the rainforest belt where the house sits. Harmony with nature it seems, the nourishing of life by the earth. Yet, despite the subduing, light was ever-present outside excluded but always there. Removed, these images of this house linger till this day as memory updated it seems a version of what was becoming what is.

Okonkwos compound (memory 2)

'okonkwos prosperity was visible in his household he had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. His own hut or obi stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. Each of his three wives had her own hut, which together formed a half moon behind the obi. The barn was built against one end of the red walls, and long stacks of yam stood prosperously in it. ¹²

from birth to death coexistence

Linearity- a line, progressions between points; real or of life; birth to death. Our existence is essentially one of progression from birth to death, apparently inescapable and inherently so, a consequence of time, which forces on us the yoke of a forward linearity. However an implicit reference is made to that which has been in order for what may be to occur. In pondering the nature of man, his existence individual and collective, an elemental analogy probably suffices in furnishing a physicality of image, which clarifies. Our physical existence in time demands an arena for its manifestation hence space. Our perceptions are devoid of a concrete image of time in isolation i.e. time as singular entity. A pondering of our perceptions of time appears to point to an apparent inability to view time in isolation. Consciousness it seems apprehends time therefore determining existence, being established and nurtured by our perceptions of that which occurs in the space-time continuum. These perceptions, a complex consequence of the sensory

with the exception and the everyday are stored as images. This, being the most evocative reference of that which has been perceived.

Thus my linearity becomes a series of space-place images, a fragmented but disjuncted continuity. These fragments being memory. It appears then that I am a result of my disjuncted recollections. Space being the established crucible of man in time becoming the backdrop, which enshrines the frozen event. But the individual does not exist in isolation. The disjuncted fragments perceived and restored are component of a collective experience and therefore experience. Memories of the spaces in Uncle Demas' house represent the individual fragment shared with all who have experienced the spaces. It is about a real perception where the totality of the century has been employed as to render a vivid and lasting imprint. Without the physical experience it is difficult to convey the unique qualities of the space, therefore it is of the conscious. Let us examine however the extract from Chinua Achebes Things Fall Apart: i.e. Okonkwo's compound, Whilst it is

fictitious and does not exist, i.e. it is 'virtual' existing as words, it is a space construct which becomes real. Dependent on a collective experience of similar for its decoding, pointing to the existence of a collective experience. Mr Achebe reconstructs the past using words, freezing a fragment in the continuity of a people into a museum artefact. Artefact, as Okonkwo's obi as type is more or less endangered or obsolete in the present but yet I can dwell in it's virtually. How? ... *'consciousness grows out of an unconscious psyche which is older than it and which goes on functioning together with it or even in spite of it'*³. C G Jung seems to indicate a link between the conscious and unconscious, a co-existence of physic facts, the psychic balance of the individual dependent on open conflict and open collaboration at once. Therefore a collective decoding of Achebes space construct is wholly dependent on not just the conscious experience of similar real constructs but the archaic residues present in the collective unconscious. Hence the dark womb like space of Okonkwos obi, his most

private refuge has connotations, which reverberate beyond the virtual construct that the writer presents.

Jung's distinguishing of the conscious and the unconscious as thinking and being of differing time-scales; - *'whereas we think in periods of years the unconscious thinks and lives in terms of millennia⁴*' allows a pondering of the dark of Okonkwos obi, it's possible meanings and the inextricable fusion with the collective psyche. Igbo cosmology is built on the concept of a personal chi and the universal prevalence of Chukwu over the earth and skies. Before a man is born his destiny is determined by negotiation with his chi who is ever-present through life and with whom he must appease continually for his own sake and prosperity. A mans chi if his prosperity permits can be brought to dwell with him by the creation of a shrine dedicated to him focusing and acknowledging its existence physically. On death of a man this physical manifestation must be destroyed. Chi dwells in the chthonic realms of animo (spirit land) a parallel world and is called to earth via the raise of the rising sun. This seems very

much in line with Jung's revelations on the time-scales of the unconscious and the conscious, the before of the former and the now of the latter where chi may be the face of the unconscious⁵. Ani mmo is always of the chthonic illustrated best thus *'half a dozen young men ran up and down the different quarters their ogene and searching for the mask, for no one know which of the million ant-holes in Umuachala it would come through'*⁶. This extract from C Achebes Arrow of God focuses on the myth attributed to the coming to earth of the ancestral spirits, which possess the masquerades, their earthly adornment. Within that chthonic realm and the continual revisiting of the spirit, the earth is re-energised and replenished. A graphic illustration, of Jung's conscious and unconscious relationship. However whilst Jung used this premise to assist in his psychoanalysis, this formed the centrality of the Igbo belief system and governed myth and life. The darkness and the dark we can then see to be more than just incidental to as spatial experience as it posses more than a physical reading. Back to the man- chi relationship; his primordial maternal

beginnings exist in the nurturing of the womb its dark enveloping representing the limits of enclosure which is a part of mans being. The point after his confrontation with his unconscious (chi) and subsequent into being, birth of the conscious.

Okonkwos obi retains the qualities inherent to the womb and seems to mark the point of continual nurturing of the conscious. The dichotomy of the light heat/ dark cool in place in the compound is thus born out of resonance, which stretch beyond the functionality required by consciousness.

Reduced, as this dichotomy may seem it is in the words described to house, compound and courtyard that begin to bolster the man-chi, conscious-unconscious relationship. Obi – house, ezi – outside, uno – home⁷. One must also remember that Okonkwos time was of an agrarian economy implying that most work occurred in the light of the farms the darkness of his dwelling being incidental, perhaps a mark of a primitive society. However whilst trawling for a tangible codification of space - building - creation amongst the multi-ethnicity of Nigeria, the realisation that one can not see when

looking through the eyes of the occident i.e. the Greco – Judeo-Christian for the fundamental fact that the cosmological and mythical foundations differ. Ah! but within the oppositions there lie the potential of the new. Linearity of time once again prevail over the tensions of conscious and unconscious, man and chi, Igbo and English, forcing the eminence of continuity, over the detail of existence. In the quest for the beginnings of a responsive built environment transcending the bounds of the physical of the physical in this instance may offer solutions whose substance resonates beyond the physical existence as to be a true reflection of what we are.

*'Okolobia's sons shall learn to live from fathers failing
blending diverse cultural types the cream of native with
adaptable alien kind
the dawn of an age-
the season of salvation.'*⁸

continuity,
interlude and the
conscious

Modernity of the present, a wilful breaking with the past I view as nothing short of reinvigorating often flagging energies of continuity i.e. the duality of man's existence conscious and unconscious. Nigeria's history seems burdened with shadows of dual traditions; the discredited and the imposed. Then came independence, modernity more accurately the aspiration to Western modernity interlude; *'the unconscious has a Janus face: on one side it's contents point back to a pre-conscious prehistoric world of instinct, while on the other side it potentially anticipates the future'*⁹. Modernity is not new just as the present is always past, the inevitability of time. What sets the tune for the future is the galvanising of energies of what is – the now into a concise and coherent whole as to lend direction to continuity therefore intermittent injections of energy are essential to existence. But the modern can not be without the antiquated being a bridge that focuses man on the furtherance of his being – future.

nature of interlude, natural synthesis

'And so it is not I who make a meaning for myself but it is the meaning that was already here pre-existing waiting from me¹⁰'.

The cry of Fanon injected the psyche of the creative African set at the dawn of independence. Writers, artists, poets especially in Nigeria spawning a main stream ideology crystallised under the auspices of the Zaira art society. Established in 1958 at the Nigeria College of art science and technology, it was an informal forum, which formed the core of the subsequent Mbari club and society of Nigerian artists. Members of the group, students at the time sought quite clearly to evoke archaic residues of history not by kitsch or representation but by the concept of synthesis: the inevitable acceptance of continuity as against a polarisation of for and against. Uche Okeke the group's leader published what may be regarded the ideological basis of the group titled natural synthesis *'the key work is synthesis and I am tempted to describe it as natural synthesis for it should be unconscious not forced'*¹¹.

Demas Nwoko, a core member of the 'Zaria rebels'¹², had worked as an architectural draughtsman prior to going to art school making him familiar with the built. The fine arts allowed him the freedom to test and experiment within the framework of Natural Synthesis. Opting for sculpture and painting, he sources his plastic works in the sombre terracotta traditions of the ancient Nok people, eschewing the predictable exuberance of contemporary Nigerian art resulting in sinister mood in most of his paintings. The 'brood', evoked from the masks of his Igbo ethnicity, the symbolic essence of the sacred link between other world and earth. Art and literature fused in development and directions with collaborations encouraged in the Forum of the Mbari club. Nigeria's ethnicity burdens the nation with tensions most viable in the eruption of the bitter civil war of 1960 – 70. Mbari an Igbo word, was based in the Yoruba west, concretising the aspiration to nationhood, its members being multi-disciplinary and multi-ethnic. A cross – fertilisation of attitudes and ideas governed by the ideology of synthesis.

Demas Nwoko studied theatre design at Academic Beaux-Arts in Paris and subsequently collaborated with writer Wole Soyinka on his production of Dance of the Forests. His high point was the direction, set by costume design of Amos Tutola's 'eerie' 'The Palm Wine Drinkard. Again the resonance, chthonic – earth duality captured in Tutola's book seemed appropriate for him to extract a spell – binding performance. Amos Tutola's tale, a fantasy of a journey between worlds new-old, earth–spirit outlines the essence of the modern Nigerian drawing on cosmology, myth and oral tradition in a grammatical construct of seemingly flawed english but being representative of the energies from whence drawn. Duality – synthesis.

'He uses form and design to dramatise aspects of the human condition such as irony, bitterness, loneliness, cruelty and sometimes-humour and dignity, but rarely does he express ebullience, euphoria, or whimsy'¹³,

Whilst the post – independence euphoria drove mainstream architecture in Nigeria dictated by Maxwell Fry – Jane Drew duo, i.e. aspirations to an international modern aesthetic which eschewed the latency of the residual energies, Demas Nwoko began to focus his energies towards the built environment. Between 1975 and 1991, he built his residence in his village Idumuje Ugboko situated in the heart of Nigeria’s Rainforest belt. The ideology of synthesis thus crystallised within his creative psyche becoming manifest in Architecture.

building

'By means of the house we become friends with a world and gain the foothold we need to act in it. As an Architectural figure standing forth in the environment, the house confirms our identification and offers security.'^{14'}

Demas Nwoko's house mindful of the significance of dwelling, hinges on the typology of the compound i.e. the dialectic of inside and outside and the perception of house as being the totality of the compound. Orientation by man requires a locating from; a centre. For the Igbo man it is his compound. The social matrix which Okonkwo's compound held within the negotiating of the open space and thresholds between enclosed and exclosed, referred to a patrilineal hierarchy and social structure eroded by the components of this particular continuity. The blurring of consequential programmatic components of live – work – play within the confines of the compound type are contrasted here by a fragmentation of and delineation into a coherent

relationship forming the basis of the planning of the house. Hence live – work – play – service inform a separation centred on three hierarchical courtyards. These are hung off a binding circulation axis, imbuing a processional narrative through the hierarchy of spaces. Inside – outside experiences manipulated from the symbolic to the explicit with the dialogue remaining ever present. Entry is via either a portico into the main living house or a doorway into the servant's wing.*(plate 7)*

The desired programme starts to become apparent where living, service – play work and hierarchy become separated, each bearing the residues of memory. The main house holds the kitchen, bedrooms living room, dining room and utilities of the family, compartmented and accessed off a central space. This leads to a 'backdoor' from where the axis becomes a corridor off which servant's rooms sit. Terminating this axis is what may be seen as the service – play courtyard. A walled enclosure holding an underground cistern, pump and plant. This open courtyard provides a private play area for the family as well as an

extension of utility. His workshop is housed in a shed opposite the service courtyard. Cell – like cubicles back and face the servant’s courtyard accommodating workshop assistants and male children.

memories territories – space

We hardly ever used the portico entrance except when accompanying parents, even then it seemed to burden my young mind with a sense of formality. We, the children entered via the second doorway, through the backdoor directly into open dining area and central space. As the male cousins entered their teens each was given a room in the servants quarters for his own use thus permitting a degree of independence. I hardly ventured into the servant’s courtyard area, remembering it as the space which held people of which I had no measure of acquaintance. We used the service courtyard regularly being our preferred and permitted play area within the house, our outside where table tennis, football and garrulous tendencies were indulged away from the house. The living room

marked the beginning of Uncle Demas' near sacred territory, my memory blurred as to what was beyond save for realisation that within it's depths lay his sleeping quarters-his obi. When the villagers paid a visit they would sit and wait in the space between the recessed floor and the entry to living room, to be seen. The two- storey extension is recent. I remember it's beginnings, the ground floor was a garage.

His chosen palette is of the earth natural timber; laterite blocks, terracotta tiles. The timber was from the surrounding rainforest whereas the main building fabric laterite blocks are made by utilising the laterite clay soil mixing it with a reduced amount of cement – fine aggregate and a binder. The mixture is set in moulds of standard block sizes and left to cure in the sun. Trabeated timbers refer to the memories of the archaic.

space: light. memory – synthesis.

Compound's dialogue of inside – outside perceived, as oppositions of light and dark become the basis of spatial experience in this house. The dark – the inhabited, the Refuge – the mood; 'Nigeria in 1959' (*plate 5*) a painting by Demas Nwoko a surreal ghouliness – the three figures in the foreground of an eerie brightness contrasting the natives behind whom almost disappear into the darkness. It seems the dark is special thus when one enters the central space of the main house and is confronted by a solid shaft of light suspended above it's symbolic meaning reaches beyond the physical. It appears as though Okonkwo's obi in its natural quietude is re-defined. Where the all enclosing house relates to this singular space (obi), the punctuation of solid light into a suggestion of courtyard (exclosure) being a symbolic act of distilling outside – inside to a potent concretisation.

More potent is the realisation of a synthesis of world-views, Judeo Christian and Igbo-light stained glass – cathedral, juxtaposed on the chthonic resonance of Okonkwo's obi.

Tropical Nigeria typified by its climatic extremes of intense heat, high humidity and precipitation demand architecture which either by reliance on mechanical systems or passive environmental methods. Economic realities of an impoverished nation demand an emphasis on the passive as against the insatiable aspiration and demand for cooled and vented systems. Demas Nwoko utilises simple principles in his response, the whole being material and spatial. One notices the presence of the day via high level windows tucked beneath deep overhangs, light reflect off light shelves via the soffit into the interior. Along the main corridor alternating blocks provide a grid enough to discern the interior but not discomfort. Natural laterite blocks imply a reduced dependency on cement, providing adequate thermal mass. Within the central space, the high ceiling permits hot air to rise that is then let out through the light shaft. Rain water collects in the depressed plane during the monsoon cooling but making the elements ever present.

conclusion

In returning to the fundamentals of man i.e. the psyche, and the opposing duality within, it seems natural that opposition is an innate component of existence. Not implying a desire for overt hybridity as the answer. My concerns are in discerning what is applicable in the context of continuity. By negotiating the stifling burden of colonialism, one becomes free to explore the rich sources of the everyday in flux for a true template for architecture.

Bibliography

¹ **Uche Okeke** *Art in development- A Nigerian perspective* pg.2(Asele Institute & African American cultural center 1982)

² **Chinua Achebe** *Things Fall Apart* (Heinemann Educational Publishers 1996) pg. 10 para 3

³ **A Storr** *The Essential Jung* Pg. 218 (Fontana press 1988)

⁴ As above, pg. 217 para. 1

⁵ **Chinua Achebe's essay: Igbo cosmology**, in articulating this concept, builds in a degree of ambiguity as to the definite dwelling place of 'chi', speculating on the the existence of earth, heaven and ani nmo. It would seem though that 'chi' transverses the three of them.

-*African Philosophy* edited by Chukwudi Eze

⁶ **Chinua Achebe** *Arrow of God* Pg195 (Heinemann International 1989)

⁷ See Appendix I for extract from my essay last year *The Cowrie and The Coin* for more on this.

⁸ **Uche Okeke** *Art in development- A Nigerian perspective* pg.2(Asele Institute & African American cultural center 1982)

⁹ As note 2

¹⁰ Quoted from **Wole Soyinka** *Myth, Literature and the African World* Cambridge University Press 1976

¹¹ As note 7

¹² The group staged exhibitions outside of the schools' structures, earning them the disapproval of the tutors. Their work moved away from that which the school required, forcing them to produce two sets, one for the tutors and one for themselves.

¹³ Author not known *New Currents, Ancient Rivers* *Contemporary African Artists in a generation of change* Pg53

¹⁴ **Christian Norberg Schulz** *Concept of Dwelling* (Rizzoli International Publications Inc. New York 1993)