Awujale Palace Architecture: A Monumental Symbol of Age-Grade Contributions in Yorubaland

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Abstract

In Yorubaland, southwestern Nigeria and elsewhere, palaces are a common piece of architecture dedicated to royal residence. Though differing in designs, styles and sizes from town to town, the differences could be attributed to historical background of the towns, culture and the financial capability of each community. However, in spite of their importance, scholars have not shown much interest in their architectural designs. This is also the case with the Awujale Palace in Ijebu- Ode which has not been studied despite its prodigious size that has been described as uncommon in modern day Nigeria. Apparently, a good knowledge of the forms and functions of its structural component as well as its significance to Ijebu-Ode and environs will put it in its rightful position among other royal residences/palaces in Yorubaland. This paper discusses among others, the historical origin of the Ijebus, the various ages –grade societies that exist in Ijebuland and their contributions towards the building and development of the palace in Ijebu-Ode. In doing this, it considers the function and significance of the palace to the people of Ijebu-Ode in general. It also examines and describes the form of each of the structural components and their builder age –grades.

Keywords: Awujale, Palace architecture, Regberegbe, Southwestern Nigeria, Yoruba sub-group.

Introduction

Awujale is the title of the paramount ruler of Ijebuland, IDMLGI (1978). Ijebu is one of the four major divisions in Ogun State. The remaining three are; Remo, Egba and Yewa (formerly) Egbado, (Adekoya 2005). Ajetunmobi (2003) asserts that Ijebuland is located in the coastal area of the southwestern Nigeria. It covers a territorial land space of about 2,000 to 3,000 square miles and it constitutes a large area of the present Lagos State and Ogun State. It is bounded in the north by Oyo State, in the south by the Lagoon and Lagos State, in the east by Ondo State and in the west by the Remo division of Ogun State. It is inhabited by the Ijebu who are popularly called "*Akile* Ijebu" that is, Ijebu proper; (Oladimeji 2001).

The Ijebu people are a subgroup of the Yoruba race, one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Traditionally and by virtue of their location, its people are predominantly farmers, fishermen and traders, but more importantly, they once served as middlemen in the trade between the Europeans in the coast and the other Yoruba sub-groups in the hinterland from the 15th century to the end of the 19th century. They are highly enterprising.

The Old Ijebu kingdom became a province under the British colonial political structure and lost its natural seaports and its international boundaries to Lagos Colony and later Lagos State. Okuwa (2004) affirms that the natural port of Ejirin, Epe, Atijere and Ikorodu were integral parts of the Old Ijebu Kingdom. Ajetunmobi (2003) notes that the citizens of these towns speak Ijebu dialect, but they are now important towns and cities under Lagos State today.

The present Ijebuland consists of well over seven hundred towns, cities and villages. Ayandele (1992) notes that by the middle of nineteenth century there was a total of six hundred and forty seven (647) settlements of various sizes in Ijebuland. Oladimeji (2001) in his assessment states that the present Ijebuland can be classified into two sub-groups; the Ijebu in the riverine or coastal area known as "Ijebu

waterside". This group includes Iwopin, Oni, Ibiade, Ibefun, Itebu manuwa. The other group is comprised of the Ijebu whose homes are in the hinterland. The towns in this group include Okun-Owa, Aiyepe, Odogbolu, Ijebu-Imushin, Ijebu-Ife, Ala, Itele, Owu, Ikija and Isonyin. Others are Atan, Ogbogbo, Iworo, Erunwon, Oru, Awa, Ilaporu, Ijebu-Jesa, Ososa, Ilado, Isiwo, Iloti, Ijagun, Ogbo, Odosenbora, Odosimadegun, Oke-eri, Iperin, Idowa, Ijebu-igbo, Ago-Iwoye, Ijebu-Ode etc. Some of these towns are headed by separate *Oba* while each village is also headed by a *Baale.* The *Oba* of various town and village head (*Baale*) come together to constitute the Ijebu Traditional Council (ITC). They recognize the *Awujale* as their paramount ruler. Hence the title, *Awujale* of Ijebuland.

Political Administration

The present Ijebuland is fragmented into six local government areas for easy political administration. The local Government areas are:

1. Ijebu-Ode Local Government, Ijebu-Ode
2. Ijebu-East Local Government, Ogbere
3. Ijebu-North Local Government, Ijebu-Igbo
4. Ijebu North East Local Government, Atan
5. Ogun Water side Local Government,, Abigi
6. Odogbolu Local Government, Odogbolu.

***Awujale* Palace Structural Components**

A palace among the Yoruba is known as *Aafin*. *Aafin* is where the *Oba* (king) and his family leave. Olaoba (1995) notes that Yoruba palace are uniquely and spectacularly opulent in architectural designs. He maintains that the best architecture, art and craft are found in these royal residences. This entails that palace symbolize the culture of the Yoruba people. *Awujale's* palace is beautifully built on a very large plane ground of about 400sqm and the architect utilized this to the utmost advantage. The great compositional quality of the palace is strikingly apparent immediately one enters the large compound from the gate house.

Researching into *Awujale* palace architectural designs and history was not without some problems. In fact, it was laborious, not because of its massive size which Odukoya, (1999) describes as uncommon in modern day Nigeria, but for some other reasons it has been relocated and re-built. Ojo (1966) asserts that the Old *Awujale* palace was built at Itoro, the place where the Ijebu Ode local government is now located. Oladimeji, (2001) notes that, it is common in Ijebuland to renovate public buildings such as old mosques, churches or palaces. At times another one is built when the old one is either outdated or considered too small for their increasing population. Another difficulty is that reference materials are scare.

Corroborating the foregoing, Olaoba (1988), notes that, many writers focus their attention on the uniqueness of palace as a seat of political authority of the Yoruba *Oba* and as an index of Yoruba culture. He observes that most of the writers give vital historical information on the activities of the *Oba* and his retinue of palace chiefs over the years but not much has been done on their architectural designs. Olaoba (1988) notes further that earlier scholars like A.A. Adediran, S. O. Babayemi and Toyin Falola have worked on Ife, Oyo and Ilesa palaces respectively, J. A. Adeniran and Ulli Beier have written on Ijero and Ikere Ekiti palace architecture. Olaoba, however, believes that the work of Ojo (1966) is a general background study of Yoruba palaces. Nothing exists on *Awujale* palace architecture. Nonetheless, there are a lot of information about Ijebu culture and traditions. Oladimeji (2001) says that information on the culture of Ijebuland, especially their religion, is abundant but their traditional architecture is untouched by earlier scholars. This, he attributed to secrecy. He opines that the religious practices of the Ijebu people do not allow insight into it by non-initiates, especially women. He however, concludes that the traditional architecture of Ijebu does not seem to be different from the rest Yoruba groups.

Location of the palace

Adekoya (2024) maintains that the ultra-modern, magnificent *Awujale* palace is located in the heart of the city. It is built almost at the centre of the town on a plane terrain along *Awujale* Street. It occupies an expanse of lands where the former colonial District Officers residence was located. On the left is Ita-Afin Street; on the right is the Town Planning Office. Behind the palace is the ancestral home of the

Balogun Kuku's Dynasty compound in Ita-Ntebo Street. Directly opposite the palace is the palace extension. The palace is walled with a fence of about 10 feet high round, (Figures 1 & 2). On both the outer and inner walls of the fence are relief sculptural works of various themes like; celebration, homage, *Ojude-Oba*, chieftaincy installation and many others.

Figure 1

The left hand side front fence of Awujale's Palace



Source: Sam K. Adekoya, (2021)

Figure 2

The right hand side front fence of Awujale's Palace



Source: Sam K. Adekoya, (2021)

Builders and method:

The realization of the *Awujale* palace edifice was a collective effort of all sons and daughters of Ijebuland in general particularly the *Regberegbe* (age-grades). Odukoya (1999) cited in Adekoya (2024) notes that the modern structural complex reflects the collective commitment and interest of a people who conceived themselves as forming a viable and virile community and it is also a consciousness on the part of Ijebu individuals and groups of membership in their community or a desire to forward the strength, liberty and prosperity of the Ijebu people through their monarch, the *Awujale* of Ijebuland. Their efforts were coordinated by a committee mostly engineers/consultants headed by Architect Afolabi Kuku (the Olotu-Ona of Ijebuland) who the writer was told designed the edifice free of charge.

Other members of the committee include Engineers Olu Ogunbekun and Adeoye Fowora (who are civil/structural engineers), Engineers Olatunde Oyefodunrin and Akinlolu Soyanwo (they handled the mechanical engineering pertaining to all plumbing and air conditioning works respectively). Engineer E. A. Akinleye was in charge of all electrical works and Chief A. A. Adebanjo handed quantity surveying. It was gathered that the idea of a new palace for the *Awujale* started in the 1960s by prominent Ijebu sons some of whom are now dead. These were people like the late Chief T. A. Odutola (the *Ogbeni Oja* of Ijebu Ode), late Chief E.O. Okunowo (*Bobasuwa* of Ijebu-Ode), late Chief S. O. Shonibare (*Asiwaju* of Ijebu Ode) and His Excellency, late Chief Victor Olabisi Onabanjo, the first civilian governor of Ogun State.

Awujale palace is built with modern materials. Its structural components include the Heritage Hall, Banquet Hall, Arcade, a swimming pools, ITC building, Secretarial/Staff Offices, Queen's (Olori's) chalet, children lodge, V.I.P apartment, Guest House/car park, generator house to mention a few.

There are four iron gates in the walls surrounding the palace. The main -gate/main entrance which is positioned almost at the middle of the front wall and the second one is at the extreme right hand side corner of the fence, the third gate is on the wall that faces the building of the Town Planning Authority office while the fourth gate is on the left hand fence wall from the approaching view. There are gate houses on both sides which house the gate men and the security personnel. At the main entrances are two big iron gates demarcated with a pillar at the middle. This is done for easy movement of vehicles to/fro the place. The former gate (see Figure 3) was replaced with a new one by the *Olugbadebo* age-group (see Figure 4). The right hand side gate is for vehicles moving into the palace, while the left hand side gate is for vehicles exiting the palace. At both sides of the main entrance gates are abstract relief sculptural works and on top of the gate is the royal emblem.

Figure 3
The left hand side front fence of Awujale's Palace



Source: Sam K. Adekoya, (2021)

Figure 4
The right hand side front fence of Awujale's Palace



Source: Sam K. Adekoya, (2021)

On entering into the palace premises, particularly through the main gate house, one wonders that such scenery is found within the tropical region. The environment could be likened to an area in the temperate region or some of the Europeans countries. On the right hand side is a large open courtyard of about 400sqm (Figure 5). The courtyard is divided into considerable sizes of lawn adorned with flowers. The courtyard is usually used by the *Oba* to host the town's indigenes and tourists during *Ojude Oba* festival. The grasses on the lawns are green and the flowers are well maintained. In 2008 the statue of the *Awujale*, HRM Oba (DR.) Sikiru Kayode Adetona (see Figure 6) was mounted on what looked like a water fountain that was built at the middle of the lawn.

Figure 5:

Open Courtyard in the premises of the Awujale's Palace, Ijebu-Ode



Source: Sam K. Adekoya, (2021)

Figure 6:

The Statue of His Royal Majesty Oba (Dr.) Sikiru Kayode Adetona *in the premises of the* Awujale's Palace



Source: Sam K. Adekoya, (2006)

On the left hand side of the main gate is the generator house at the extreme left hand side corner behind the gate house. Opposite the generator house is a two-storey building. The ground floor of the two-storey building is the Heritage Hall while the upper floor is the V.I.P apartment. The courtyard in between the generator house and the Heritage Hall is blocked from the view of visitors entering the palace premises with a wall of about 6ft high. Behind the Heritage Hall is another two- storey building. The ground floor of this particular building is where the Ijebu Traditional Council (ITC) hall is located. That is, where all the *Obas* in Ijebuland normally meet. The upper floor is the guest chalet. In between the Heritage Hall and the ITC building is another courtyard. The two buildings are

joined together by a long corridor. The two building are referred to as "TWINS" building because of their almost similar structure (Figure 7).

At the back of the guest house is the building that is used for laundry and kitchen. The building is also joined with the Banquet Hall by another corridor. In between the guest chalet, Banquette hall and the kitchen is a courtyard which houses two swimming pools (big one and small one). The banquet hall is about 120metre away directly opposite the main gate. The hall is linked with the visitors lounge on the right with another corridor. The visitors lounge is on the left hand side on the same plane with the arcade. The Arcade/Pavilion (Figure 8**)** is the most striking and prominent feature of the palace which determines and distinguished its architectural character from other Yoruba palace. The arcade is centrally sited. This is where the *Oba* and the very important personalities (VIP) and guests normally seat during important festivals and ceremonies such as *Ojude Oba*, and *Obanta* Day, launching in the palace.

Figure 7

The Twin Buildings (Heritage Hall and Guest House



Source: Sam K. Adekoya, (2021)

Figure 8

The Pavilion/Foyer at the Awujale's Palace



Source: Sam K. Adekoya, (2021)

Also on the right hand side of the arcade is the palace staff offices and secretariat. The whole structure (lounge, arcade and the staff secretariat is about 200m long. At

the back of the arcade building is the *Olori's* (wives) apartment and behind this is the garage and the children's lodge respectively. The children's lodge is also a two-storey building.

The authors were not allowed access into the interiors of the components during the field work, thus corroborating Oladimeji (2001) who asserts that, information on the culture especially religion are abundant but the temple or shrine and the traditional architecture which could have been relevant are untouched. This could be attributed to secrecy. Because he notes further that the religious practice of the Ijebu do not allow the uninitiated, especially women to have insight into.

Significance of the palace to the Ijebu:

In Yorubaland, royal palaces (*Aafin*) serve so many significant innumerable purposes. As earlier stated, Ojo (1966) posits that, royal palaces had the most imposing architecture because they are meant for practical purposes. He articulated their attributes to include; the embodiment of art and craft of the people, as well as museum of the kingdom where all their ancient, antiquities and cultural/ historical materials are kept. He also notes that they contain among other things, the town's assembly hall (where meetings are held and important ceremonies take place), court of justice, theatre and sport ground. It was also the fountain of the culture of its kingdom as well as the resipostry of the treasures of both the town and its outlying districts.

Awujale palace in Ijebu-Ode is another unifying symbol of the entire Ijebuland apart from the *Agemo*. The palace normally hosts all the *Oba* of Ijebuland, the Ijebu Traditional Council (ITC) for their meetings. Every year, during *Ojude Oba* festival, the palace also serves as the meeting point of the *regberegbes,* horse men and all other Ijebu sons and daughter at home and in the Diaspora. It houses the office of the Ijebu-Ode Development Association (IDA). The palace also epitomizes the wealth of the Ijebus.

Age Grade Societies among the Ijebu

Age grade societies are common features among the Yoruba of the south western Nigeria. Age grade according to Hornby (2000) means age group or age bracket which is defined as people of a similar age or within a particular range of ages otherwise known as "*Egbe*" in Yorubaland. A dictionary of the Yoruba language by UPL (2003) defines "*Egbe*" as company, party, rank, companion, equal, comrade, society, association, guild, class or fraternity. Bye and large, while the other Yoruba sub-groups refer to them as "*Egbe"*, the Ijebu called them "*Regberegbe"*. Sote (2003) notes that, the Ijebu age grade societies were referred to as "*Regberegbe*" in the eighteenth century. And the general name given to all age grade societies in Ijebuland is "*Wonpari*" (Sote 2003)

Though age grade activities exist among the Yoruba, it is more organized, elaborate and well-coordinated among the Ijebu than in any other Yoruba sub groups. Traditionally, the age bracket is mainly two or three year's interval. That is, people born within two to three years with the exemption of a particular age group that has a year difference (Fibiwoga, 1916-1917) as you will later see in the course of discussion. Sote (2003) opines that among the aims of the age grade societies is the provision of communal service and fostering close relationship among their members. In some Remo communities particularly Ipara-Remo, age grade societies are referred to as "*Egbe Ibile*", (traditional age mates) and they normally meet on every seventeen days which is known as "*Ojo gbara*", which by contrast is "*Igbara*" by the Ijebu . Sote (2003) notes further that in the past, members of age grade societies used to meet regularly at a place called "*Igbara*" where they deliberated on issues and reported to a body called the *Ajo-Owa*.

The emergence of the age grade societies among the Ijebu could be traced to the mid 18th century. The importance of the activities of the age grade among the Ijebu cannot be overemphasized as they played prominent roles in the survival of the Ijebu society. They cleared footpaths, constructed bridges or culverts and markets and cleared river banks for drinking water. They also provided the much needed security for the towns and villages. Since its emergence, these contributions by "*Regberegbe"* to the development of Ijebu-Ode and environs has not stopped, or diminished. Instead, it continues to wax stronger and stronger year in year out.

Nowadays the Ijebu age grades undertake the execution of vital projects such as the building of palace and library; the sinking of boreholes and the construction of a mini-amphi-theatre to host the annual *Ojude Oba* festival.

A Yoruba adage says;

"ti eegun eni ba joo re,
Ori a ya atokun re"

Meaning: if a masquerade dances well
Its guide or leader will be happy.

The above adage best describes the happiness of the *Awujale*, the paramount ruler of Ijebuland, His Majesty, Alayeluwa, Oba (Dr.) Sikiru Kayode Adetona, *Ogbagba II* when he acknowledged the contributions of the *Regberegbe* during the 2007 *Ojude Oba* celebration as documented by Adewale (2008). The Oba had said:

"we are pleased to observe the positive contribution
that our unique age-grade (Regberegbe) institutions
continue to make for the development of Ijebuland.
We are pleased to see a healthy rivalry among
them in their effort to do something tangible
for our society so as to immortalize their names
in the annals of Ijebu history".

The *Regberegbe* in Ijebuland and dates

Ijebu-Ode Development Association (1999) and Sote (2003) present the list below as that of the traditional age grade societies in Ijebuland:

	Age –grade Society	**Years**
1	Mafowoku	1845 – 1848
2.	Bobajolu	1849 – 1852
3.	Bobasete	1853 – 1856
4.	Gbobaniyi	1857 – 1860
5.	Oriyonote	1861 – 1864

6.	Majobaje	1865 – 1868
7.	Bobasanya	1869 – 1872
8.	Erobayo	1873 – 1876
9.	Obagbuyi	1877 – 1880
10	Obaneye	1881 – 1884
11.	Obayori	1885 – 1888
12	Obase	1889 – 1892
13	Obabeko	1893 – 1896
14.	Obalolaiya	1897 – 1900
15.	Obafowora	1901 – 1904
16.	Obagoroye	1905 – 1908
17	Obagbade	1909 - 1912
18.	Bobadega	1913 – 1915
19	Fibiwoga	1916 – 1917
20.	Obalolola	1917-1919
21.	Obalolade	1920 – 1923
22.	Obabosipo	1924 – 1925
23.	Bobagunwa	1926 – 1928
24.	Bobasegun	1929 – 1931
25.	Mofowoku	1932 – 1934
26.	Olugbadebo	1935 – 1937
27.	Bobayo/Tobalase	1938 – 1940
28.	Bobagbuyi	1941 – 1943
29.	Obaleke	1944 – 1946
30.	Bobajolu	1947 – 1949
31	Obafuwaji	1950 – 1952
32.	Bobagbimo	1953 – 1955
33.	Bobakeye	1956 – 1958
34.	Bobagunte	1959 – 1961
35.	Gbobaniyi	1962 – 1964

36. Jagunmolu 1965 – 1967

From the above list, two age grade names; Mafowoku and Gbobaniyi (nos. 1 and 4) appeared twice again in nos. 25 and 35 respectively. This perhaps suggests that members of the first two, that is, nos. 1 and 4 have all died and the new age grades that sprang up were later given their names by the *Awujale*, because it is the *Awujale* that has the singular honour or prerogative power to give names to newly constituted age grades. Sote (2003) corroborates the above when she writes that age-groups are usually given names during the *Ojude Oba* ceremony. These traditional names are pronounced from time to time by the reigning *Awujale* to cater for the younger generation.

One interesting thing about these *Regberegbe* is that their membership is not restricted to Ijebu indigenes alone. Membership is open to interested persons who fall within the age brackets of each *Regberegbe*. But there are different age groups for different sexes as the Yoruba would say:

Egbe okunrin oto
Egbe obinrin oto

Meaning; male age group apart
Female age group apart

Regberegbe's Contribution to the *Awujale's* Palace Architecture

The *Regberegbe* have been wonderful in their efforts and contributions to the development of Ijebu-Ode and its environs. In fact they have been described as the linch-pin of traditional Ijebu democratic forum of government. The list of their contributions is endless. For example,

1. Mafowoku Age Group renovated the Itoro roundabout and sponsored the production of *Agemo* statue (Figure 9) which was mounted at the Itoro round about between *Awujale* Street and Folagbade/Ibadan road. The statue is believed to be the unifying symbol of the whole Ijebuland,

as they are being greeted as "*Omo Alagemo Merindinlogun*" meaning the children of the owners of sixteen *Agemo.*

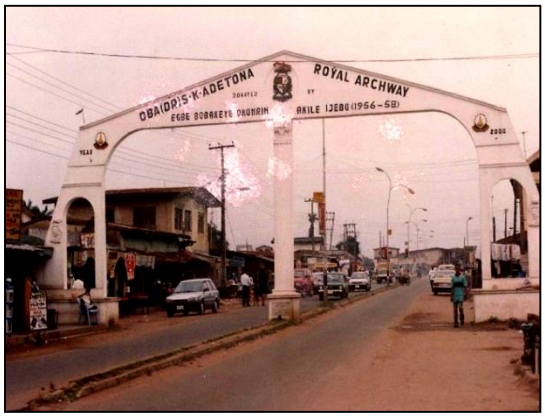
2. Bobakeye Age Group built the Oba (DR) S. K. Adetona Royal Archway along *Awujale* Street (Figure 10**)**
3. Olugbadebo age-grade replaced the palace main entrance iron gates with a more beautiful /ornamented iron gates (see Figure 3**)**
4. Some individual members of the *Regberegbe* have also contributed to the development of the town. For example people like Alhaji Adegunwa popularly called Fototek or Bigi was responsible for the building of the two swimming pools in the palace **(**Figures 11 & 12). Otunba Subomi sponsored the production of the *Oba's* statue within the palace**. (**Figure 6) on page 8 and also sponsored the mosaic works on the Banquet Hall (Figure 13**).**

Figure 9:
Dancing Agemo Statue at Itoro Roundabout,



Source: Sam K. Adekoya, (2012)

Figure 10:
Oba (Dr.) S. K. Adetona Royal Archway on *Awujale*'s Palace Road, Ijebu-Ode



Source: Sam K. Adekoya, (2021)

Figure 11:
Adults' Swimming Pool at the Awujale's Palace



Source: Researcher, (2021)

Figure 12:
Children's Swimming Pool at Awujale's Palace



Source: Researcher, (2021)

Another spectacular project is what they (Ijebu) called palace extension, but which the authors called a mini amphi-theatre (Figure14). Hornby (2000) defines amphi-theatre as a circular building without roof and with rows of seat that rise in steps around an open space). The palace extension is directly opposite the main *Awujale* palace, beside *Ita-Ale* market. According to source from the *Awujale* Palace, the palace extension was built by the entire Ijebu sons and daughters. It was completed in 2012 and has since been used to host their yearly *Ojude Oba* festival.

Figure 13:
Mosaic works on the frontage wall of the Banquette Hall



Source: Sam K. Adekoya, (2021)

Figure 14:
One of the Galleries at the Amphi-theatre at Awujale's Palace Extension.



Source: Sam K. Adekoya, (2021)

Conclusion

This paper has examined the *Awujale* palace architecture. It has also discussed the contributions of the Ijebu people's age grade societies in the building and development of palace architecture in Ijebu-Ode. It has no doubt exposed the fact that the *Awujale* palace architectural design is a deviation from the conventional style of other palaces in some other big cities and towns of Yorubaland, such as Ile-Ife, Oyo, Abeokuta, Benin, Ikole, Akure, Ado-Ekiti, Ikere Ekiti, etc. Nevertheless, the *Awujale* palace architecture still functions in conformity with the culture of ancient Yoruba palaces. It has the most imposing architecture for it was for practical purposes, the embodiment of the art and crafts of the people. It was the resipostry of the treasures of both the town and its outlying districts.

The palace consists of a large number of buildings of varying sizes, character and purposes. It could be likened to what the Yoruba's called *Agbo'le* or *Agbo ile* which could be described as a large compound containing a group of houses component units which could be some distance from one another. It was the museum of the kingdom. It also contained among other things, the town's assembly hall, court of justice, theatre and sport ground. It was also the fountain of the culture of its

kingdom. As the throbbing heart of the town, it was pre-eminent in a variety of ways. No doubt, the *Awujale* palace though modern, has all the characteristic features of the ancient Yoruba palaces.

Awujale palace, justifies the popular saying that

Kekere Ijebu owo ni
Agba Ijebu owo ni
Okunrin Ijebu owo ni
Obinrin Ijebu owo ni

Meaning Little Ijebu is money
Adult Ijebu is money
Male Ijebu is money
Female Ijebu is money.

The Ijebu's achievement through cooperation and contributions of the *Regberegbes* in the building of the palace is a clear evidence that they have a taste for good things and quality. It reflects the collective commitment and interest of a people who conceived themselves as forming a viable and virile community. The palace has been described by some scholars as an architectural masterpiece. It has also been adjudged the most modern palace along the west coast of Africa. It is obvious from the study that two factors contributed to the building of the *Awujale* palace edifice; the culture of the people and their financial capability.

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