

## AFRICAN ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY IN THE TIME OF GLOBALIZATION: THE EXAMPLE OF OBI BUILDING STYLE OF SOUTHEAST NIGERIA.

MOSES OÑUGADI NJOKU

### *Abstract*

*African traditional architecture has evolved over the years; however, it has retained its social and ecological relevance. This study aims to ascertain the extent of this evolution as it pertains to the obi building style of the Igbo people. The research techniques employed include exploration and qualitative methods of inquiry. Research assistants collected photographs of the obi from various regions of Igbo land; these images were analyzed to provide primary data for the study. Interviews were conducted to obtain information on specific traditional practices related to the obi across different zones within the study area. The findings revealed similarities in design and practice, as well as other peculiarities specific to certain places within the study area. It also shows that there have been many improvements in building techniques and materials; however, there remains a need for architects and builders to be original and to consciously consider climatic conditions and cultural identity, to arrive at a new style of architecture with an authentic regional flavor and identity.*

### INTRODUCTION

Over the years, African traditional architecture has evolved. It continues to undergo various forms of evolution and hybridization as a result of acculturation and cultural mixing, as African societies are exposed to external influences. This has brought about far-reaching, somewhat irreversible changes to norms, identity, and African life in general. These changes affect every sphere of life in Africa, be it religion, government, healthcare, arts and culture, education, trade, environment, and ecology. Socially and politically, contemporary African society is very different from that of the early 19th century onward. The people have learned new habits, met new cultures, traveled, and been educated in foreign lands. Some have gone on to become wealthy and influential, thereby fostering an eclectic, ostentatious attitude that has evolved into an unbridled pursuit of whatever is exotic, regardless of its suitability to the local environment and ecology.

In this cornucopia, identities are lost, and new ones are taken up, while some are upcycled to assume new functions and appearances. Con-

sequently, African art and architecture are not left untouched by the myriad changes sweeping across the African continent. In the arts, the appeal of traditional art has waned considerably, giving way to a form of modernism most closely associated with Westernization. In art, although the Cultural Revolution that greeted the independence of several African States gave birth to the development of an artistic style that reaches back to the traditional art and culture of the pre-colonial African society for inspiration and guidance, the force of globalization has continued to whittle down the early success achieved by the pioneer nationalists. At present, architects are seeking to return to building styles most suitable for the African environment and ecology; however, the results of these concerted efforts remain to be seen on a widespread scale. Architects and builders in Africa continue to borrow and integrate mostly foreign architectural elements into building projects, some of which are considered purely cultural in function and symbolism. This, therefore, is the current state of the practice of designing and constructing the *Obi* building type in South-Eastern Nigeria.

The architectural style of *obi*, as found in Southeast Nigeria, has undergone several changes in both design and relevance and has received little scholarly attention. A few writers have also written about this type of building. Several regions/areas in Igbo have different approaches to the design, location, and construction of the *obi*, and these differences carry different cultural implications. As crucial as the *obi* is to the Igbo worldview and identity, it has undergone several modifications over the years. These changes have not been documented chronologically, especially given the several regional differences in design, location, and tradition. Nonetheless, the resilience of this cultural practice in the face of sweeping globalization is worth studying.

The challenges posed by globalization are among the formidable obstacles facing African traditional architecture; these challenges have impeded its ability to assert its identity, hindering further development and refinement. This study, therefore, examines the problem posed by the concept of the Universality of Modernist Ideology, which led to the export of the International Style of architecture to the developing world in the 20th century. Globalization and universalism in architecture could be argued to have merits and demerits, in African traditional architecture and culture, it has had significant impacts some of which have been negative however there remains the problem of historical documentation of this impact and how the African culture especially the Igbo culture has been holding up the last line of self-identity and originality which is a chief component of regionalism as an architectural paradigm.

## STUDY AREA

Southeastern Nigeria is one of Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. The Zone comprises five states: Anambra, Abia, Imo, Ebonyi, and Enugu. Climatically, the area lies within the tropical rainforest biome, characterized by dense vegetation. The zone has two seasons: wet (March-October) and dry (November-February). Demographically, the zone has a total population size of sixteen million, three hundred and eighty-one thousand, seven hundred and twenty-nine (16,381,729), approximately twelve percent (12%) of the overall population of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, according to the 2006 National Population Census in Nigeria. Southeast Nigeria is the centre of the Igbo cultural area, where Igbo language and culture predominate, with minor but similar cultural attributes. The choice of the study area is based on the uniformity in cultural practices around the area and the prevalence of the *Obi* within the zone.

The methods employed for this research are both historical and qualitative. To gather information, several sources, including literature, catalogs, journals, books, and other publications and archives, are consulted; both online and offline, these constitute secondary sources. The primary sources are oral interviews and photographs taken directly by the researcher and his assistants. Purposive sampling was employed to select the study sample. The information gathered is analyzed using the qualitative methods of inquiry – formalism and contextualism – as applied in art-historical inquiry.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Ikebude described the *obi* as “domestic architecture for a male head of Igbo compound” (Ikebude, 12) Also, quoting Aniakor and Cole (1984), The writer went further to “describe *obi* as the male meeting house of an extended family, which is the conceptual and, often, the physical centre of a domestic Igbo architecture” (Ikebude, 31) The *Obi* is a simple building type, usually rectangular with free access entrances most times flanking the façade. Although the design may vary, the *Obi* is intended to facilitate the free flow of traffic and ventilation. This is achieved through large windows and, at times, dwarf walls, which create open spaces just before the eaves. The grandeur and ornamentation of the *Obi* depend on the owner's social and economic status. Lexically, the *Obi* is also taken to mean the house built solely as the abode of the male owner of the Igbo compound. A typical example of this appears in Ikebude's review of *Obi Nwandu*, a wealthy chief in Nimo, a style popular in the 1970s.

The many changes in the design and style of the *Obi* over the years are a consequence of the improvement in the economic fortunes of the Igbo

people following the end of the civil war. Ikebude explicitly puts it this way. Modern *obi* has undergone remarkable transformations, although history is ever-present. These transformations, which Okoye (2002) attributes to strong influences from foreign contexts (European, Arabian, and Igbo sculpture), render *obi* a multicultural cartography (Okoye, 2002). While independence from the British colonial system in 1960 provided impetus for the development of modern “functionalist” *obi*, an oil boom in the 1970s was responsible for the aesthetically driven nature of their designs. The oil boom, in particular, was responsible for the emergence of nouveau riche Igbo who embarked on massive building projects to reconstruct the war-ravaged region (the Nigerian-Biafran War of 1967–1970 destroyed a majority of the buildings in Igboland) and to signal new social status. Stressing the overarching importance of the oil boom to modern Igbo (domestic) architecture, Cosentino (1991) states that money from the “Udoji economy” (or oil economy) found its way from the big cities to the villages, where the new rich constructed “villas” and “lodges”. “Udoji economy” is a phrase that described the Nigerian economy of the 1970s. Due to the enormous revenue from crude oil sales, the Federal Government of Nigeria established the Udoji Civil Service Commission in 1973 to recommend changes to civil servants' salaries. The commission recommended an across-the-board pay rise for federal workers, which increased consumer expenditure levels (Okoye, 2002; Ikebude, 56-57).

Madukasi (2021) wrote extensively on *Obi*, focusing on its use as a sacred homestead for ancestor veneration in Igboland. He described it thus:

The *Obu* or *Obi* has a conical shape and is open in the middle. The *Obu* appears in a great variety of sizes. The *Obu* is evidently widespread in parts of Igbo land but is most prominent in Anambra State (467).

This assertion is faulty in two instances. First, as can be ascertained from the earliest forms of *Obi* recorded by scholars such as Dmochoschi, *Obi* is more commonly rectangular than conical. The findings of this present study also prove this point. Secondly, it appears that Madukasi concentrated his study on the Anambra area, as there is currently no statistical evidence of a higher prevalence of this building style in Anambra State.

Industrialization, a precursor to the birth of modern architecture and, in turn, to Universalism, has been noted as the breaking point of Western “vernacular” traditions (Curtis, 1996). Western architectural traditions also experienced the consequences of industrialization, leading to the abandonment of traditional styles and the adoption of a new paradigm suited to the needs of the machine age. Walker S. and Giard J. edit. *Handbook of Design for Sustainability* (2013) traced the origins of unsustainability to

the emergence of modernism and the destruction of the traditional worldview. Noting that the key point of departure for modernism started around the 16<sup>th</sup> century, following the growth of reason and scientific rationalism. Consequently, Walker and Giard (2013) agreed with Mathews (2006, p. 86) that “the philosophy of materialism that developed assumes that physical matter is the whole of existence and reality, and does not recognize inner principles, attributes or deeper meanings” (p.3), also quoting Talor (1990, p. 4). The writers noted that “this period was accompanied by a change from the traditional to the modern worldview, a worldview that was shallower and flatter than its predecessor.”

On sustainability, Walker S. and Giard J. opined that sustainability emerged as an idea amid the erosion of the certainties promised by science, industrialization, and modernism, amid fears and evidence of an uncertain future and an ill-fated ecosystem for man.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Theory of Traditional Systems is categorized into Instrumental Value Systems and Consummatory Value Systems. Not every scholar believes in the outright breakdown of the norms and value system of traditional Igbo society. Dike A. (1985) employed David Apter’s theory, which categorizes traditional systems into two: those with “Instrumental” values and those with “Consummatory” values. Both scholars argue that the Igbos are capable of traditionalizing Western Values. Therefore, the present research will be conducted with the hope of either refuting or lending credence to David Apter’s cultural categorization theory.

Several writers have sought to define the concept and theory of Regionalism as they pertain to their respective areas of interest, whether in the arts, politics, government, or the economy. However, the current research examines regionalism as an architectural paradigm, even though it could also be applied to other aspects of human engagement. Therefore, Leen, Meganck, et al. capture this most appropriately by viewing regionalism not as a well-defined concept.

Style or stylistic issues, but, as a broad concept, an underlying idea that promotes the use of local architectural vocabulary and local building materials: regionalism as an attitude that strives for close interaction with the perception of the ‘genius loci’, the ‘spirit of the place’.

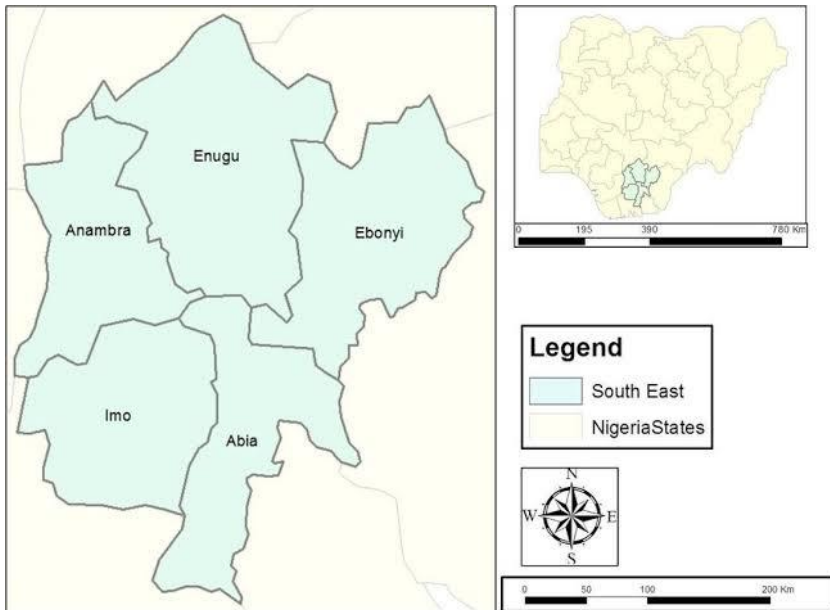
The above understanding of regionalism supports the present study, which emphasizes the ideational powers of the *obi* as an architectural language and archetype that contemporary Igbo architects must further develop to achieve an effect or result most appropriate to the local environment and culture.

## EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Dmoschowski's *Art Introduction to Nigerian Traditional Architecture, South-Eastern Nigeria, the Igbo-Speaking Areas* contains several detailed sections on Igbo architecture, building plans, technology, embellishments, and materials. Dmoschowski provided valuable insights into the designs of the *Obi* (*Obu*) across different regions of the Igbo-speaking area; however, he did not make it the focus of his investigations and therefore included only a few instances in the study's population.

So far, little attention has been paid to documenting differences in the design and use of the *Obi*, particularly across Igbo areas. This gap is addressed in the present study.

Fig. I: Map of South-Eastern Nigeria showing the study areas



## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The researcher sampled 39 obi images from different parts of Southeastern Nigeria, including Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States. Out of the total, 22 were from Imo, 13 from Anambra, two from Enugu, and two from Abia States. They are further subcategorized into families (23), kindred (4), village (7), and town (3). The locations are as follows: Igbo-ukwu

(2), Nnewi (6), Orlu (2), Ngor-okpala (3), Ukwulu (2), Mbaise (8), Awgbu (1), Nike (2), Mbanjo (1), Amaigbo (3), Owerri (5), Ibeku (2). Unknown (2)



Plates 1: Ogbunugwo Uzochukwu  
2022 Obi samples from Okwuorji  
Village, Owerri-Ebeiri, Orlu, Imo



Plates 2: Njoku Onyeka 2022. Obi  
Denka, Obi Onuaju, and Obi Anaka



Plate 3: Obi houses from Nnewi,  
Anambra State  
Anekwe Chinedu 2022



Plate 4: Some Obi samples from Eziana,  
Logara, and Ngor-Okpala, Imo State.  
Esogwa Chidimma, 2022.



Plate 5: Obi houses from Ukwulu, in Njikoka L.G.A, Anambra State. Obinani Chidimma, 2022



Plate 6: Obi from Obetiti Nguru in Aboh Mbaise L.G.A, Imo State. Anyanwu C, 2022



Plate 7: Christian Okpala, 2022 Entrance to the compound of Awgbu an 18th-century Warrant Chief; Chief Mmadiadichie and his obi, in Anambra State.



Plate 8: Okpaleke Nnenna, 2022 Obi HRH Kanu Okpaleke, Ndiokpaleke Town, Orumba North L.G.A, Anambra State



Plate 9: Parts of the Obi at Umuchigbolji Nike, Enugu State. Nwabueze Ebere 2022.



Plate 10: Nworah Uche, 2020. The interior of an Obi with many traditional objects and title symbols.

## ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The *obi* is not only a room where the male head of the family receives his guests; it is also the spiritual abode of the family's ancestors. Therefore, special attention is given to specific elements of the building type in order to accommodate the spirits of the departed. Nworah (2020). It is passed down from the male head of the family to his firstborn male child, and then through succeeding generations. A man cannot build an *Obi* in his father's house unless he goes out to purchase his own land and starts his own family. When such happens, the father's *Obi* becomes a bigger *Obi*, and all the male children still gather in it to discuss family affairs.

## COMMON FEATURES

Here are some of the shared features noticed in most of the samples studied. They are usually rectangular in shape, with a few that still mimic the old hut-like pattern with thatch roofs. There are large windows, most of which are permanently open.

Usually built with double entrances and exits at both ends of the building. In the interiors, animal skulls and other bones are usually hung as trophies. (This is noticed in fewer instances) Nworah (2020) describes these as things that show the owner's bush adventures and his earthly material conquests. Other everyday objects found include various traditional paraphernalia such as *Nze*, *Ozo*, and chieftaincy title staff (*ngwua-giriga*), *ikenga*, *okpesi*, *arobunagu*, red caps, and other traditional hats, including *okpunkata ozo* title seats, etc.

Presence of small rooms/stores adjoining the main lounge. This is usually prominent in kindred and community-owned *Obi*. Designs also vary according to the owner's wealth, social standing, and title.

Widespread use of modern building materials. Clay bricks and mortar have been predominantly replaced with concrete blocks and cement.

Complete absence of seats in many instances, while many also had concrete/mud mastabas, built to follow the internal space right onto the walls—chip-carved wooden window panels and screens, especially among the older ones, or some communally owned ones.

Many low-budget versions feature dwarf walls, creating a rectangular formation from which metal poles rise as pillars at the four ends to support the roof. There have been a few attempts at modernizing the old system of thatched roofs. Some owners incorporate the *obi* into their main building, making it part of a balcony or extension. Those owned by kindred, villages, and towns are more ambitious and grandiose in style and size, probably to make some communal statements and accommodate

more people. This was evident in the design of the *Obi* at Enugu-Ukwu, which resembled a mini-stadium.

Among the Owerri areas, the *Obi* is predominantly located at the entrance to the compound, forming a kind of gateway or isle that ushers incoming guests, with seats usually made of concrete flanking both ends of the space.

The use of cement plaster to cover the surface of the mud walls of old versions, giving them a facelift

### STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES AND PECULIARITIES

Several structural elements distinguish some *Obi* designs from others. Although there are a few rigid regional peculiarities in the designs, there are pockets of uniqueness in the random selection of *Obi* from different areas. Most *Obi* that are communally owned exhibit a stronger affinity for some form of miniature basilica. The examples are those of Umudim, Awgbu, Abubor, and Enugu-Ukwu communities. That of Enugu-Ukwu reminds one of Roman amphitheaters, with its stadium-like stands, seating for spectators, and a stage for public performances.

Some *obi* also exhibit structural forms of uniqueness that may reflect underlying traditional ritual connotations and purposes. This is most evident in the presence of four unusual steel columns arranged symmetrically to form a square at ground level at the front of the *Obi* at Umuchigbolji Nike. This particular *Obi* has an appearance further emphasized by the generous application of red pigment throughout its structure. The entire facade of the *Obi* is entirely open, left for the tall steel columns at the center, right in front. Behind it is a giant phallus-like pillar holding the central beam of the roof. Both sides of the structure and the rear have walls built up to the eaves, with two small windows on each side. At the rear is a small door that probably leads to a storeroom or a secret chamber/altar. At the rear end is a small door and three small windows set into the walls. Concrete mastabas run all the way round the interior of the *Obi*, including the frontal area. At the base of the large central column, a distinctive, neatly constructed socket system features a unique geometric configuration. This slab may be assumed to have been specifically designed to receive and hold the community's *ozo*-titled men's staff and paraphernalia. Outside, at the front of the building, is a small hut with a concrete roof and an open screen, secured with steel bars, that houses the community's large ceremonial wooden gong.

In Awgbu, at the house of the 18th-century colonial Warrant chief, Chief Mmadiadichie, one encounters a monument of historical significance. The entrance to this compound is enclosed by a mud fence with beautifully rendered *uli* paintings on the walls. The walls are protected

from direct rain by corrugated roofing sheets. The *Obi* has a single-step high stylobate, with tall, massive square columns spanning the building's length and breadth. With a high-set, simplified entablature that mimics the Parthenon's Greek temple. These massive square pillars, 16 in number, serve both structural and aesthetic, as well as social functions. Socially, it displays the warrant chief's towering, exalted position in the community. The columns are roughly horizontally connected at the center by a long beam that pauses only to allow for the position of the doors. The smaller part of the space created by these beams (the lower part) is closed up by the use of wooden screens carved in the Awka style. The upper limits are left free for lighting and ventilation.

Although small in size, especially compared to the previously reviewed *Obi* houses, the two *Obi* houses that the researcher obtained from Ukwulu in Njikoka L.G.A of Anambra State are. Both share similar yet distinct features that set them apart from the rest. They are built with the usual rectangular shape but differ sharply in their single-sided inclination, in which most of the structural/functional parts are accessed through a single side of the rectangle; this side has three members. The two entrances are positioned: first, at the end of the wall, interjected by a screened wall almost as wide as the entrance; then another entrance, followed by a single window at the center of the other end. Traditionally, the left-hand entrance when facing the building serves as the entrance, while the other serves as the exit, even though they are both on the same plane. (This is most practiced in areas around Amaigbo and Orlu in Imo State). This practice is strictly adhered to and could attract the wrath of titled men, such as the Nze, when broken. The screened wall at the center between the two doors serves as the seat of the ancestors. (Around Amaigbo areas, it is called (anyandimụọ), the eyes of the ancestors. Egbuogu (2022) stated that, traditionally, there are lands or locations where, when a man wishes to erect a compound, he must place the eyes of the ancestors using fancy blocks or a screen at specific points along the fence for their entrance and exit. He also stated that, in the case of *Obi*, especially contemporary ones with windows and doors closed with glass or wood, there is usually a need to place the 'anya ndị Mmụọ' at both the entrance and exit points. At Ukwulu, the entrance is known as "Oze"; the screen of this central part is made with fancy blocks, with carved screen doors positioned in the middle of one of the Ukwulu *Obis*. Right behind the screen is a chamber of about 2 feet, built up from the ground, where the *ọfo*, *ọzọ* staffs, and other instruments are positioned. Close to this chamber is a table containing a wooden plate with Chalk (nzu). During ceremonies, animal blood is sprinkled in this chamber to appease the ancestors or gods.

## DIFFERENCES IN NOMENCLATURE

There are multiple names by which the Obi is addressed across Igboland. The variance in local dialects primarily necessitates these differences. Okafor opines that *Obu* comes in various sizes and is referred to by different folk terms. Sometimes the folk terminology is determined by size and others by usage" (183)

It is called Onọkọrọ in Umuchigbo Iji Nike; the Mbaise people call it *Ovu*; in some parts, it is also known as Obiriama (Eziama, Ngor-okpala). In Mbieri, near Owerri, it is called Obuma; in other parts of Owerri, it is also known as *Obiri*. Awka people know it as *Obu*. According to Madukasi, "the Igbo community on the Omambala River Basin of Southeast Nigeria calls such houses *Obu*, while communities in the Awka axis equally call it *Obu* too. However, other communities around the Aguata and Nnewi axis refer to it as *Obi*, while the indigenous people of Onitsha refer to it as *Iba*" (467).

## CONCLUSION

The *obi* is an architectural and cultural heritage that is universal among the Igbo-speaking areas of South-Eastern Nigeria. It is one of the few cultural landmarks that identify the Igbo race as a unique and resilient homogeneous group on the global cultural map, with its own identity and social constructs. It is one of the few cultural heritages of the Igbo that have survived the onslaught of westernization and globalization. Its continuous adaptation and reintegration into contemporary contexts provide evidence that Igbo culture exhibits instrumental rather than consummatory values, as Apter's theory espouses. The presence of *Obi* houses in towns, villages, kindreds, and Igbo families continues to fuel communal living, echoing the concepts of 'onyeaghana nwanneya' and 'igwebuiké', which are core principles of the global call for sustainable practices. Remodeling of *obi* houses to meet the needs of contemporary Igbo life is an inevitable phenomenon that has led to the Igbo archetype's metamorphosis, further crediting the concept of regionalism in architecture.

The rapid development in Igbo land sometimes does not permit proper documentation and conservation of cultural heritage. Scholars and historians must understand the urgency of preserving and securing today's events and objects, because tomorrow's history depends on the present. More effort and investment must be made in documenting today's, that is, contemporary, happenings, for the simple fact that they shall, in no distant future, become history. This will ensure that Africa does not repeat the mistake of allowing others (foreigners) to write its history or to claim that it has no history. The present study is only a small effort within a

broader set of needs to properly document the cultural heritage of the Igbo, especially in its contemporary State. Architects and builders of African descent, especially Igbo building for the Igbo ecological and social climate must look back inwards and draw inspiration from the ideals that birthed the classical era of African art and architecture in order to forge an identity that is globally exceptional and locally sustainable; for this singular need, the obi architectural style, with its numerous positive attributes, lends itself, readily, as a good reference point and source of inspiration.

## REFERENCES

- Agboeze, Mathias, and Elochukwu Nwankwo. "Indigenous Communities and Community Development Principles in South-East Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects." *Developing Country Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 10, 2013. 85–94.
- Anedo, Onukwube. "Taboos Among the Igbo." *AMA: Journal of Theatre and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2009. 151–166.
- Curtis, William. *Architecture Since 1900*. New York: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1996.
- Dike, Azuka. *The Resilience of Igbo Culture, a Case Study of Awka Town*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd., 1985.
- Dmochowski, Z. An Introduction to Nigerian Traditional Architecture. Vol. 3. South-Eastern Nigeria, the Igbo-Speaking Areas. Ethnographica Ltd. 1990.
- Ikebude, Chukwuemeka. "Identity in Igbo Architecture (Ekwuru, Obi, and The African Continental Bank Building: A thesis presented to the faculty of the College of Fine Arts of Ohio University, 2009.
- Leen Meganck, Linda Van Santvoort, and Jan De Maeyer. *Regionalism and Modernity Architecture in Western Europe, 1914-1940*. Leuven University Press, 2013.
- Stuart, Walker. *The Handbook of Design for Sustainability*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. 2013, London.
- Obinna Anejonu, Peter Nwilo, Elijah Ebinne, "Long Term Assessment and Mapping of Erosion Hotspots in Southeast Nigeria" *FIG Working Week Environment for Sustainability*, Abuja, 2013
- Okafor, R. "Nigerian Organology and Classification of African Musical Instruments" *Nigerian Peoples and Culture for Higher Education*. New Generation Ventures Limited. 1998, 173–192, Enugu.

Madukasi Francis. "OBU: The Sacred Homestead for Ancestor Veneration in Igbo Traditional Religion" *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS) Volume V, Issue I, 2021, 467-476,*  
Nworah, Uche. "Obu D'Ulu" *Anambra Times*, Vol. 5, No.1. February 2020, 54-55.