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THE DESIGN OF BANYANKOLE TRADITIONAL HOUSE: POWER DIMENSIONS, HOSPITALITY AND BEDROOM DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

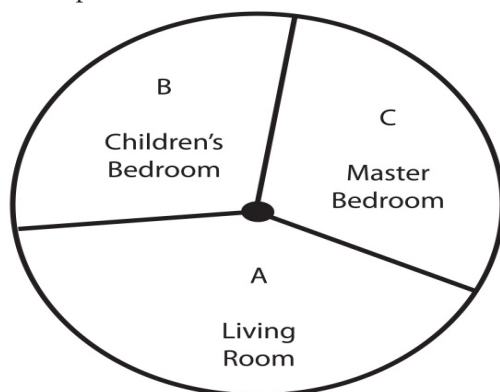
This paper analyses the design layout of a traditional Kinyankole house in which the design was meant to promote and strengthen family power dimensions, bedroom dynamics and hospitality. In many societies, culture is a social function embodies values, beliefs and customs that bring out the society's identity, solidarity and how traditions and shared values are communicated among members and also preserved. Basing on tacit knowledge, I interviewed five elders about the social connotation and meaning of the Banyankole house design using in-depth informal interviews. First, I argue that the house design epitomized the power structure in which families and the entire community were governed. Second, the design showed how welcoming and organized the families were. Third, the layout of the bedrooms represented respect and strategy of the bedroom dynamics. I conclude by observing that some aspects of indigenous designs need to be adopted into contemporary designs because of their design values.

Keywords; bedroom dynamics, family hospitality, family power dimensions, Kinyankole house

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture plays an important role in achieving originality and aesthetic value considerations in the design and creativity field (Weggeman, Lammers, & Akkermans, 2007; European Commission, 2009). In fact, the European Commission (2009) argues that culture is the expression of humanity's creativity that brings out meaning, knowledge, talents, civilization and values of individual groups. As the world becomes one block under globalization, I argue that cross cultural designs will be a required design characteristic before any product penetrates the global market and sustain its visibility there. The fact that production machinery and technology has globally been standardized, cultural uniqueness will be the most identifying character for any successful product. In addition, the emergence of several design approaches that have been recently developed to manipulate various design challenges, continue to narrow down the variety of design concepts on the market. Although contemporary designs are appealing to the user, users do not have any embedded attachment to the designs. Unlike the traditional designs which were based on well-studied frameworks and were part of the community values, contemporary designs are simply accepted on their face value. The case of Banyankole house design is one of such designs that were embedded with a lot of well-studied frameworks that highlighted community values and demonstrated a well-organized society. The Banyankole are a Bantu speaking group of people living in Western Uganda. They have two main social sub-groups of Bairu (crop growers) and Bahima (cattle keepers). Apart from being referred to as occupants of the Ankole Kingdom in Western Uganda which was a creation of British rule at the beginning of the 20th Century, the Banyankole are believed to have lived in the areas which were favorable for their occupations for example Rwanda, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo and other districts of Uganda (See Karugire 1971; Morris, 1962; Kirindi 2008 & Kamuhangire 1992)

The Banyankole house design represented the power dimensions, hospitality in the family set up and bedroom dynamics. The Banyankole material culture items clearly spelt out each member's responsibility and roles. The houses were temporary built with organic materials, especially flexible trees and thatched with grass. The house designs were round and were divided into three main spaces (Figure 1). The spaces included the living room, the sleeping room for the head of the family and his wife and the sleeping room for the children and some times where visitors would sleep.



[Figure 1] Kinyankole house exterior (courtesy of Uganda Museum) and layout

The first space "A" served as the living room. It was a sitting room, dining and kitchen and sometimes as a pen for newly born calves. Space "B" served as Children's room and sometimes for visitors. Space "C" served as a Master bedroom only used for the husband and wife. Each space was carefully designed to serve its purpose.

2. METHOD

Principally, the study followed a deductive approach, where narratives of five elders in Kanoni and Engari-sya sub-counties in Kazo county Kiruhura district were used to share their tacit knowledge about traditional house design.

Young people were not included in the study because the youth have been influenced by modern living styles, religious influence and educational systems which could generate biased data. I allowed free expression because according to Alvesson (2002) cited in Canale (2011) knowledge is becoming an asset and as such it has to be protected and treated carefully because tacit knowledge has an important perspective of development. The data was collected through in-depth interviews and phone calls to five elderly senior members of the community who were purposefully selected. As Saunders et al. (2007) observe that the tools for semi-structured interviews do not necessarily have to follow a particular order, Respondents were allowed to freely narrate their stories with minimum interruptions (Saunders et al., 2007; Zaltman & Moorman, 1988).

3. RESULTS

The tacit knowledge collected from the five respondents illuminated several considerations that informed Banyankole house designs. Data from respondents revealed that Kinyankole house designs were based on a framework

derived from the activities and roles of each member of the family as well as the entire community. Respondents further revealed that whenever one was constructing a house, several members of the community would participate.

Space A: Living Room

The living room was designed in such a way to allow different activities to take place in a home. Traditionally, a house did not have fixed doors because the house was considered as part of the kraal. The main gates of the houses were secured with a mihiigo (assorted dry tree branches that were used to close the main entrance of the kraal). The cattle stayed near the house, especially cows that had calves. It was also believed that as cattle rested, their breath was a pre-cursor for sound sleep for their owners. To avoid the cattle from damaging the grass thatched houses, a wooden retainer was usually erected in front of the house. The living room space was divided into the following work stations; Orugyeegye (Milk pot platform), Akarugu (one side of the entrance), and Amahega (the other side of the entrance).

Orugyeegye (Milk pot platform)

The spacious design and material culture used in Banyankole houses were not meant to only serve the day-to-day activities in a home, but also helped in identifying distinct characteristics of various community members and to segregate roles in homes. Families perceived indigenous house designs and materials as a means to assign responsibilities, determine maturity, and instill respect in a way a household or community was run. The study respondents informed the researcher that some areas in a house such as orugyeegye (milk pot stand) were significantly important in managing the affairs of the family. This was observed from the position of the orugyeegye and in the manner in which milk pots were exhibited on it. Orugyeegye was located in a central position in a house. The milkpots were also arranged according to their sizes and who used them. The entire arrangement showed the pride of the community, the power dimensions and hospitality of households.

Orugyeegye is traditionally located astride the emwomyoyakanono (centre pole of the house). One of the respondents who was found seated next to orugyeegye attending to her milk pots explained that orugyeegye is a center of power and a reflection of roles and obligations of each homestead member in traditional Banyankole culture. She recounted that the orugyeegye was located in the middle of a house astride the enyomoy'akanono because it was the main food store where everybody had to be served. Ekyanzikya'nyineeka (the milk pot in which the head of the family was served) was placed next to enyomoy'akanono because nyineeka was a central figure and the head of the family. The other milk pots were then arranged on either side of ekyanzikya'nyineeka following their importance. The milk pot such as one for the wife, children, visitors, and for making ghee and those milk pots without a specific user were displayed on either side the milk pot for the head of the family. The aim was to show the hierarchy of power at home. Respondents observed that the woman's special place in the home was next to the orugyeegye because that is where she could serve the milk to her family. This was very important because through it, women were able to participate in family matters. On the other hand, orugyeegye was also a place from which women traditionally drew their respect and contributed to the affairs of their family. In the first place, women were able to know how much milk was collected each day, which cow had more milk and which cow had the best milk for making ghee or serving to visitors. It was next to orugyeegye where women spent most of their time and effectively administer to their families. If one was not appreciated by the woman in the home, one would fail to get milk to drink because only women were allowed to handle all activities surrounding the orugyeegye.

Amahega (Fire place)

On one side of the entrance, there was amahega (the cooking place). This is the place where food was prepared or roasted and where water for washing hands was boiled. The fire place was installed with traditional adjustable cooking stones which were adjustable so as to accommodate different sizes of cooking pots unlike the modern cooking stoves that instead have different sizes of plates or burners. Above the fireplace there was orutara or obugamba (a drying rack) which was designed for preservation and preparation of food items. Orutara was made out of pieces of wood which were joined using fibres from tree barks. Several items such as millet, cassava, meat, grasshoppers were dried on the orutara. More so, bananas were put on orutara to ripen. The space that remained between the fireplace and the house wall was used for keeping the pots especially for mingling millet meal and boiling meat.

Akarugu (one side of the entrance)

This was one side of the entrance of the house which was reserved for newly born calves. Whenever the cows produced, the calf was kept inside the house opposite the fireplace. It was done so to avoid the calves from being eaten by wild animals, but also to provide warmth for them. The calf would later be transferred to the calf-pen after two or three days. In families of crop cultivators, akarugu was a place where goats and hens used to stay at night. Although this practice was later discouraged as unhealthy, the initial design for keeping animals safe from wild animals cannot be underestimated. In homes where the goats were kept in akarugu, several poles were erected and each goat had its pole. The rest of the space was a living room for the family members. The design did not encourage the use of chairs. Actually traditionally, the house had two wooden stools. One of the stools was for the head of the family (ekitebekyanyineka) and the other for special visitors. However, the living room was neatly covered with grass (eyojwa) which was collected by women and young girls from the hills. Various skins would then be placed on top of the grass. It is on this neatly done and colorful arrangement (remember the skins had different spots of color) that formed the general design of a Banyankole front space of the house.

gifts promoted house designs and increased hospitality in a home.

On Bedroom Dynamics

The Banyankole house design was generally simple, had no ceiling yet well designed to take care of bedroom dynamics. The arrangement of the bedroom was determined by the entrance. The children's bedroom was designed in such a way that it had no privacy as its door was in the middle while the one for the parents the door was towards the outer wall. The occupants of the beds put their legs towards the centre pole. This was intentional because the children's head was towards the outer wall of the house and away from the master bedroom. This was helpful because when the parents were making love during the night, it was believed that the children could not hear. Okuhindukaahakitabo (turning on the bed) is a term used when a man engages his wife in sex. The sleeping design in the children's room was therefore meant to reduce the possibility of the children hearing the parent's conversation during the night. It was believed that sex was good, satisfying, and enjoyable during the early hours of the day -omwitumbi and that such sex encounter would result into pregnancy. Omwitumbi is the time between 2:30 am and 4:30 am. This was the time recommended for the man to turn on the bed. I posit that this was advocated for because at such a time, children were fast asleep. Unfortunately, in the contemporary societies, men can turn on bed at any time, even during day time, which makes sex less sacred.



Figure 2 Kinyankole house lay out showing the bedrooms, platform for milk containers, fire place and place for newly born calves (illustration by Banga Simon)

This was not an accident because the children's head was towards the outer wall of the house and away from the master bedroom. This was helpful because when the parents were making love during the night, it was believed that the children could not hear. Okuhindukaahakitabo (turning on the bed) is a term used when a man engages his wife in sex. The sleeping design in the children's room was therefore meant to reduce the possibility of the children hearing the parent's conversation during the night. It was believed that sex was good, satisfying, and enjoyable during the early hours of the day -omwitumbi and that such sex encounter would result into pregnancy. Omwitumbi is the time between 2:30 am and 4:30 am. This was the time recommended for the man to turn on the bed. I posit that this was advocated for because at such a time, children were fast asleep. Unfortunately, in the contemporary societies, men can turn on bed at any time, even during day time, which makes sex less sacred.

The master bedroom was also designed in such a way that it allowed the man engage his wife in an uninterrupted manner. The entrance to the master bedroom was towards the outer wall of the house. Unlike the children's bed, which covered the entire space in the room, the master bedroom had a small space where a man kept his spears, sticks and other important artifacts in the home. The bed design extended to the center pole and it was actually the center pole that marked the man's position. The science in the design was that it facilitated effective love making because the man used the pole as a support. The Banyankole have a saying that omucugimubi atiekyahikyaterera (a man who is poor at making love complains that the bed is slippery). In fact, the dynamics of making love were that the man used the center pole for stability and maintaining the target (Figure 3). This was a secret for adults and young boys could not manage turning on the bed because the skins were indeed slippery and one needed to have mastered the science of making love to be able to maneuver without a center pole. Even when the couple changed the style of turning on the bed from what is now called the missionary style to the akacabari (western jazz), not the western world but probably western Uganda, the man used the center pole where he rested one leg to be able to apply the western jazz. All in all, the bedroom was well designed to facilitate bedroom dynamics and was a masterly design of the Banyankole house.

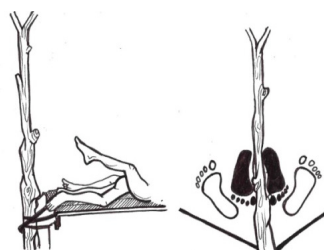


Figure. 3 Using the center pole for bedroom dynamics (illustration by Banga Simon)

5. CONCLUSION

The Banyankole home design was not only built for accommodation but also as an interaction space. The design promoted family values, respect among society members and a place for co-creation. The success of the family was gauged on the type of a home one had. The design actually did not stop on the house itself but the entire set up of homestead. The design encompassed the space for cows, the pen of calves, the house for the head of the family and other houses in case the family had grown up sons. The narrative of the Banyankole home design gives us a chance to understand the importance of adapting some aspects of indigenous designs into contemporary designs. This practice further, shows that the house design helped in creating a society with high values in terms of behavior respect, productivity and co-creation which should be a guide for contemporary design.

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