

Cultural Significance of Building Rituals of Yakurr Communities in Southern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

In every society and civilisation; there are rules, approaches, and belief systems that guide the successful construction of a building project. This acceptable process of building construction is described as the culture of building of the people. It is well-known that foundation rituals are a deep-rooted practice in the construction of buildings and structures. Foundation rituals among other rites form the fulcrum of the culture of building a people. Foundation rituals or ground-breaking ceremonies are performed to mark the official commencement of a construction project. A phenomenological study approach was used to properly explore the building foundation rituals of the Yakurr people in Cross River State, Southern Nigeria. Focus group discussions were conducted with selected village councils, paternal and maternal families in the study area. Foundation laying ceremonies and other building construction rites were also observed. Building sites were visited and the lived experiences of Yakurr natives were gotten through interviews. The content analysis of the transcripts showcased some unique cultural attributes associated with the building process of the Yakurr people. The findings are relevant to both the built environment professionals (BEPs) Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) industry towards the execution of building projects that will satisfy the cultural needs of the natives.

Keywords: Architecture, building construction, foundation deposits, foundation rituals, ground-breaking ceremony, Yakurr foundation

INTRODUCTION

In every era, the shelter of the people was a reflection of available tools, methods, materials, and culture (Britannica, 2023). The advancement in technology and industrial revolutions between the 19th and 20th gave birth to new construction technologies and building materials. The architecture of that time was termed modern and coincided with the period of scramble for Africa. The transfer of modern architecture across the world through building construction techniques and materials at that time was swift. However, the assimilation and domestication of modern architecture within various societies of the world had cultural and religious colouration [46]. This phenomenon gave birth to the various cultures of building. Thus, every society has a culture of building that is consistent with what encompasses the acceptable process of building construction [12]. The culture of building is what a society uses at a particular time to ensure that its buildings are successfully built and safe for use.

Culture evolves just like the practice of architecture and the processes of construction evolve and vary from place to place [41]. Nevertheless, irrespective of the society, culture and technology; construction starts with the acquisition of land and the client's brief. Subsequently, the building plan is developed and an estimate is made to cover the realisation of the client's brief. Before the commencement of the construction on site, all the required paperwork will be done and building permits secured from the relevant authorities. Thereafter, the site is prepared for excavation to receive the building foundation. From there the walls are built to a satisfactory plinth height, backfilling follows, and then the superstructure. The superstructure comprises the floor, walls, columns, beams, windows, doors, lintels and roof [1]. Irrespective of the economic level of the client and the type of building; whenever the roof is installed, the building can start accommodating, materials, machines, men and animals. Although building services make the building efficient while finishes add beauty to the

building; the successful installation of the roof is the first announcement that a new building has dotted the landscape. As straightforward as this process look; the cultural fabric of a place can influence the success of a building construction process.

LITERATURE SURVEY

Documented studies exist on cultural motifs associated with the construction of buildings and civic constructions has a longstanding heritage, originating at least in the nineteenth century, which includes references to certain rites and rituals involving human and animal sacrifices [24; 31].

Across several cultures and civilisations, the official commencement of a building construction project is marked with a ground-breaking ceremony. Dustin [14], even noted that the earliest documented ground-breaking ceremony was performed in Ancient China in the year 113 BC while Li [25] recorded that ground-breaking ceremonies from the very beginning always had mystic content. Hence ground-breaking ceremonies can also be called foundation rituals. The ceremony often involved the physical excavation of the ground. Just like building permits are paid for before the construction commences, in some societies the burial of some consecrated items in the excavated ground is done to secure the permission, approval and blessings of the underworld. In those days, the ceremony was performed to compensate for the offence that the excavation of the ground for construction purposes would cause the gods and ancestors of the land. This is because breaking the earth for construction purposes will mean disrupting the peace of the ancestors and the ecosystem of the gods.

For this reason, many cultures and religions perform foundation rituals to offer peace offerings to the gods and ancestors of the land. The offering comprised incense, stable foodstuffs like fruits, grains, beans, tea leaves, flowers and wine of that era. Consecrated relics and medium of exchange at the time – coins and even notes also played key roles during the ceremony. The ground-breaking ceremony was entirely a religious affair to dignify and announce the coming of a new building or structure on Mother Earth. Such ceremonies are well documented in Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism and Feng Shui [14; 45].

Ground-breaking ceremony otherwise known as ‘turning of the sod’ or ‘sod-turning’ [2; 14; 40]; is usually attended by dignitaries of the client, end-users and the construction team. The shovel used for this ceremony is subsequently gold-painted and preserved for future displays. Some estate developers even raise a wall party to mark ground-breaking ceremonies. Others use excavators instead of the traditional shovel. All these modifications are to draw publicity and attract more investors and clients [32]. Germonprez [19], has observed that the early modern churches in Southern Netherlands observed foundation rituals. The ceremony involved the erection of a wooden cross on the area where the altar of the church is to be located with the priest wearing a special ceremonial dress.

Foundation ceremonies are performed to kick-start the building construction process. This ritual is universal, traversing many centuries and across many civilisations of the world. These foundation rituals formed the fulcrum of the culture of building of a people. Rituals as repeated communal social norms with little flexibility. Rituals repeatedly follow a particular pattern of performance or trend [5; 23]. For instance, precise items must be provided, the timing must be accurate and specific individual roles must be well-defined.

Each civilisation has specific and discrete building rituals it observes in a particular era. These rituals are embedded in the culture of the people. Just like Hunt [22] and Ashenafi [3], postulated that every society has a culture of building and construction strategies that is consistent with their framework of awareness, tools, approaches, rules, and belief system; the Yakurr people in Cross River State, Southern Nigeria have a culturally acceptable process of building construction. Consequently, for buildings to be constructed successfully and safe for use among the Yakurr natives, certain cultural aspects must be met during the process of construction.

Having gone through several scholarly works about the Yakurr People in Cross River State of Southern Nigeria, none has addressed the issue of foundation rituals and the culture of building the People. There has also been an increased recognition of the Yakurr People especially the Ugep natives as they are among the few

tribes in Nigeria that have attempted to preserve, regenerate, and propagate most of their aboriginal beliefs, cultural norms, customary rites, and traditions over time [30]. These facts under laid the motivation for this work.

Historical Framework of Building Foundation Rituals

In the ancient Mediterranean world among the ancient Greeks, Egyptians, Levantines (today Lebanese, Central Syrians, Northern Syrians, Palestinians, and Jordanians), Hatti-Hittites and Mesopotamia (today Iraq, parts of Iran, Kuwait, Syria, and Turkey) exist numerous archaeological evidence, pictorial representations and literary documents about the performance of foundation rituals. Hunt [22], pointed out that founding rituals were observed for all buildings and were not limited to sacred buildings such as sacred temples, palaces, tombs and ramparts. Süel and Soysal [36] also documented the founding rituals of the Hattian-Hittites, while Cojti Ren [10] examined the foundation rituals of the ancient K'iche'an People in Guatemala.

In ancient Egypt, for example, foundation rituals are well documented through inscriptions on temple walls and relief sculptures. The king carries out the foundation rituals in sequence as follows: 'the determination of the temple plan; Sprinkle plaster (such as white chalk) or sand over the site; Digging the first foundation trench; Filling the foundation trenches; Forming the first brick; Placement and burial of foundation deposits consisting of bricks or slabs of several precious metals, jewellery, and stones, as shown in Fig. 1.

Fig. I: A selection of electrotype copies of Coins, jewels, luxury properties from the Earlier Basis deposit in the British Museum



Source: Hunt [22]

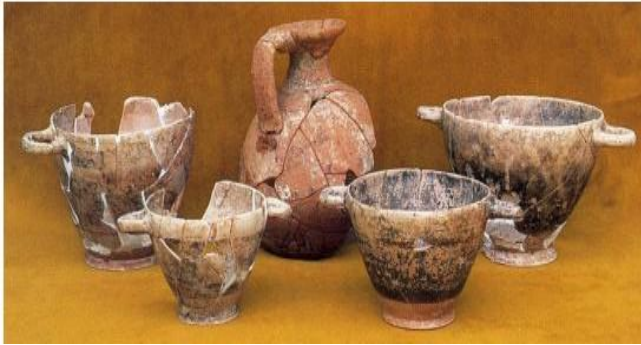
Other foundation deposits buried during the rituals include ceramic vessels (Fig. 2 and 3) and the remains of a sacrificial bull and sacrificial goose [22].

Fig. 2: Some relics found in excavations of foundation deposits above the entrance to the acropolis of Athens, Greece



Source: Wells [44]

Fig 3: Ceramics from an Archaic deposit found at the Heröon of Opheltes at Nemea, Greece



Source: Miller [27]

Hittite founding rituals according to Naumann [29], were carried out for city fortification walls and other buildings. The foundation deposits consisted of plates, cups, cups, drinking bottles, and sacrificial jars. However, when rebuilding a destroyed temple or building a new house, the following basic ritual deposits were recommended to weave bad energy: a mine of refined copper, four bronze pegs, and a small iron hammer. Kurakki should be placed in the middle of the building, the ground should be dug and copper should be placed in it. It is then secured on all sides with dowels and made stronger with hammer blows. In addition, attached to the four corners (stones) of the new building is a cornerstone made of silver, a cornerstone made of gold, a cornerstone made of *lapis lazuli*, a cornerstone made of jasper, a cornerstone made of marble, a cornerstone made of iron, a cornerstone made of copper, a bronze cornerstone, a diorite cornerstone. For the Greeks, the endowment deposits consisted of coins, jewels, luxury real estate, small drinking cups, prayer vessels, sacrament leaves, and remains or ashes of sacrificial animals. The Greeks also used charcoal and fleece as laxatives for sacred sites [22].

Foundation ritual practices of the Egyptians, Greeks, Levantines, and Mesopotamia seem to be going extinct as a result of modernism. In contrast, the Hindus performing the foundation ritual practices of Bhoomi pooja (also known as Bhumi puja) for the construction of buildings has not lost relevance to date. Clarke [9] has discoursed that in South India, Bhoomi pooja has three (3) phases. The first is the Bhoomi pooja foundation ritual. Bhoomi Pooja is performed before the commencement of the construction, to obtain the help of the Earth goddess. This ritual is a way to honour the goddess Earth and the god of direction and land - *Vastu Purusha*. The Hindus perform this ritual to kick-start the building construction process.

The Bhoomi pooja foundation ritual as can be seen in Fig. 4, 5, and 6 honours the lord Ganesha, the snake god, the five (5) elements of nature, and *Kalash*. This foundation ritual is always performed in the morning according to the precise *muhurta* (Hindu timing) based on the client's time, date, and place of birth [13].

Fig. 4: Bhoomi pooja ceremony of house construction showing foundation deposit of note money, flowers, coconut, burning of incense, relics, ceramic utensils



Source: Life-is-Awesome-Civil-Engineering-Plans [26]

In Egypt, the ancient Mediterranean and Mesopotamia, foundation rituals were performed to recognise the gods as builders and labourers needed for the successful execution of the temple construction projects.

Fig. 5: Bhoomi pooja ceremony of house construction showing foundation deposit of note money, flowers, coconut, burning of incense, relics, ceramic utensils



Source: Life-is-Awesome-Civil-Engineering-Plans [26]

Fig. 6: A client, his family and some women participating in a Bhoomi pooja ceremony



Source: Life-is-Awesome-Civil-Engineering-Plans [26]

The second is lintel pooja. Lintel pooja (Fig. 7 and 8) is done during the construction of the lintel of the main entrance door of the building. This is done to bless anything that enters the house and also invoke blessings into the house. The last ritual is the Ganesh pooja. Usually performed before the house is put to use. Women play significant roles in all stages of the Bhoomi pooja rituals. Although Bhoomi pooja ceremonies are very important in Hinduism, they are not compulsory.

Fig. 7: Some of the items used for lintel Pooja



Source: Clarke [9]

Fig. 8: Erection of the consecrated lintel



Source: Clarke [9]

Desk [13] stated that; just like in other religions and civilisations; the Hindus perform this foundation ritual to ‘eliminate impediments and negative energies’ that may be associated with the construction of a structure or building and its subsequent use. The rituals also attract the blessings of the gods. The Bhoomi Pooja pandits (priests) require the following *samagri* (items) for the rituals: *agarbatti* (incense sticks), *betel* leaves, *betel* nuts, camphor, cardamom, cloves, coconut, cotton, deep or diya, *durba*, flower bunch, fruits, banana, coconut, *ganga jal* (sacred water), *grren* limes, *lalash*, *kalava* (red thread), *kum kum*, mango leaves, *mishri*, *nava danyam* (9 seed types), *navratnas* (9 gem types), oil or ghee, *panchdhatu* (five metals), pick axe, *prasad* (offerings), quarter coins, note money, rice, *roli*, turmeric powder and water.

Begel et al. [4], conceptualised the building rituals of the Tzotzil People of Chiapas in Mexico. They summarised the views of Holmes [21], Nash [28] and Vogt [42] positing that among the Tzotzil People, foundation rituals stood to fortify the building against any evil that may be associated with where the construction materials were sourced from. Since the tools and materials used for construction were of Spanish and Arabian origin, the rituals were a necessity. Furthermore, the rituals remained a means of creating cordiality among the spirit of the building, the spirit inhabiting the land the building occupies, and the spirits of the human beings that will use the building.

Because the past is the key to the present and the future, Begel et al. [4] buttressed the contemporary ‘necessity to negotiate with the master(s) of Earth for the right to occupy a space and the delineation of a protected space against evil spirits, diseases, and calamities’ via the performance of foundation rituals. Whereas we all have a belief system that guides our relationship with the world around us; built environment professionals should prioritise the belief system of their client, the end users, and the locality of the construction project.

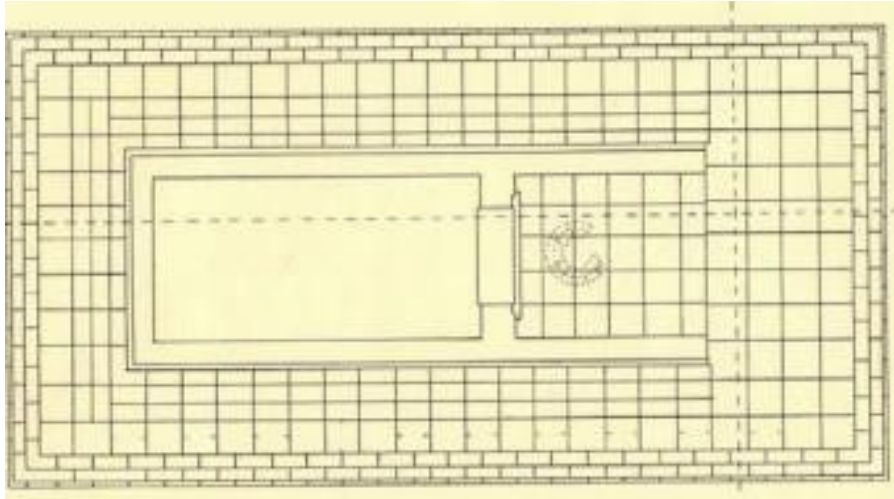
For instance, it is normal to have prototypes of buildings in different localities and with similar construction procedures and materials. The same building in two different localities can represent two (2) different cultural landscapes. This is because the distinctive features of that same building in a different landscape will be the mirror of the core values of the individuals within that locality who moulded it, and who proceed to live in it. Hence, when a building in the process of design, construction, and use; absorbs intangible cultural elements [37] like oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and skills domiciled in a community and transmitted through generations; that building becomes a cultural landscape [7; 8].

Location of Foundation Deposits

As a ritual that follows specific rules to satisfy its purpose; foundation deposits are always strategically buried in specific locations. The Greeks buried the foundation deposits underneath walls, sandwiched between

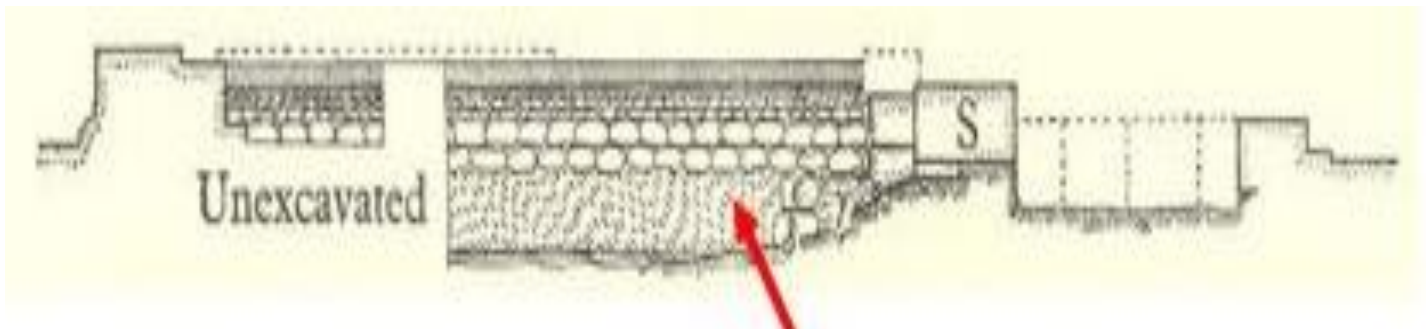
courses, under floors (Fig. 9 and 10) or thresholds at inner corners (Fig. 11), and in foundation trenches. The Classical period in Greek history was dominated by house rituals. Altars were permanently incorporated in houses and situated around the courtyards, entrances, store rooms and areas of most circulation and visibility household altars represented social identity and religious inclusivity [22].

Fig. 9: Plan of the Temple of Herithea at Kastabos



Source: Cook [11]

Fig. 10: East – West longitudinal section with the arrow pointing to the location of foundation deposits



Source: Cook [11]

Fig. 11: Foundation deposits in Ancient Greece



Source: Smagh (2023)

In Mesopotamia, the foundation deposits were kept inside pits or boxes built with bricks and buried beneath the substructure. The supplicatory materials were scattered around the building foundation. Later, the deposits were buried under walls, beneath the temple podium, floors, and around the corners of the building [22]. Weinstein [43], stated that in the case of Egypt, the foundation deposits were buried under the courtyard floor and areas close to the most vital parts of the building such as the inner corners, walls enclosing the temple, roof-supporting walls, columns, and at the base of statues (Fig. 12). The deposits were made of small inscribed plaques of various materials.

Figure 12: Earlier statue base of Athena Nike showing the location of foundation deposits



Source: Hunt [22]

The Hindus preferred the Northeast corner of the building as the ideal site for the burial of the deposits. Thus, the excavation for the first block, brick or column in the Northeast corner is the location for the burial of the deposits [7]. Archaeological evidence revealed that Hittite foundation deposits were found near the foundation of city fortification walls and at the four (4) corners of the temple.

In the field of architecture, there is a process through which buildings dot the landscape. However, every society invades these various steps or processes with what is culturally accepted and inclined to their belief pattern. Hence, aside from the basic construction materials, other items were added for the purification of the land, as an atonement for the physical strength of the house and to ward off bad omens associated with the environment where the building will be located. Building rituals were also an avenue to make the home an abode for the gods [35]. The house foundation deposits served as a connection for the household between the physical world and the spiritual world [33; 34]. For sacred buildings, the rituals are performed to make the building an abode of the god it is meant for.

The Yakurr Communities

Yakurr is one of the eighteen (18) Local Government Areas of Cross River State of Nigeria. It was created out of Obubra Local Government in 1987. The headquarters of the Local Government Area is Ugep. The Yakurr People live in the central senatorial district of Cross River State of Nigeria. The towns and villages that make up Yakurr are Ugep, Ekori, Idomi, Nko, and Mkpani. Other Yakurr villages are Assiga Old Town, Assiga New Town, Assiga Beach Town, Inyima and Ekpeti (Ayiga clan) and the Agoi communities made up of Agoi Ibami, Agoi Ekpo and Ekom Agoi. According to Ubi [38], all Yakurr villages migrated and settled between 1617 and 1767 except Ekom Agoi. Ekom Agoi migrated from Agoi Ekpo as recently as 1945 due to the effects of World War II. The village is an offshoot of one (1) of the three (3) clans of Agoi Ekpo. Ekom Agoi had their first primary school in 1956.

Beecroft was the first Briton to visit Yakurr. He visited Ekori between 1827 and 1857 to settle disputes that disrupted the flow of palm oil obtained via Ekori and its environs [15]. Sequentially in 1898; as stated by Enang [16], Captain Chessman gave an intelligence report of the Yakurr population as follows - Ugep (5,747), Ekori (3934), Mkpani (2,324), Nko (1,928) and Idomi (1,022) respectively. The earliest record of missionaries

in Ugep was in 1910. The missionaries established the Church of Scotland Mission (Now Presbyterian Church) in 1910 and thereafter in 1912 started the first primary school in Yakurr – the now Presbyterian primary school, Ijiman, Ugep.

METHODOLOGY

Several qualitative strategies exist for studying human phenomena. However, for this study of the building foundation rituals of the Yakurr people, a phenomenological study approach was used. Focus group discussions were held with purposefully sampled four (4) paternal families in Ugep, one (1) each in Idomi, Mkpani and Nko villages and the village council of Assiga New Town. These discussions took place during their official meeting days and at the residence of the family/village heads. Being formal meetings, minutes were taken for record purposes. To reach saturation, individual discussions on the subject matter were also held with the *Ata* (Village Head) of Agoi Ibami and some knowledgeable people from Ekori and Ekpeta. Copies of the list of items for foundation rituals were also obtained from the meetings. The essence of this technique was to get real-time unfiltered responses of the people. Responses that are rooted in their oral tradition, beliefs, feelings, thoughts and perceptions.

Based on the research questions; a semi-structured interview guide was used for the focus group discussions and individual discussions on the subject matter. The responses were audio recorded and transcribed for content analysis. The transcripts were coded for the existence of key concepts using selective reduction in line with the research questions. The authors also gathered prompt responses from artisans, clients, professional colleagues and associates about Yakurr building rituals. The experiences shared by the artisans, clients, professional colleagues and associates were correlated with the transcripts from focus group discussions and individual interviews.

Construction sites were also visited and participant observations were made during the foundation rituals of some paternal families. In the process photographs and videos were taken. The photographs and videos were used to correlate with the transcribed responses of participants. To get a broader perspective of the concept, literature from several religions and civilisations was also studied and content analysed for similarities and differences with the building rituals of the Yakurr People. This guided the basis for the analysis of the results. The outcome was a strikingly regular pattern with similar usage of words to describe the research questions.

RESULTS

Evolution of Foundation Rituals among the Yakurr People

Historically Daryll Forde [17; 18] a British anthropologist, in 1935 and 1939 undertook extensive fieldwork about the Yakurr People in the Cross River State of Nigeria. He studied the history, culture, beliefs, traditions, cultural landscape, households and socioeconomic life of the Yakurr People. He was assisted by Dr. Okoi Arikpo, the son of Arikpo Egede who was then a student at Hope Waddle Institute, Calabar. Although Forde's research covered the whole of Yakurr, he was based in Ugep throughout his work. The result of his novelty work was the *Yako Studies* published in 1964. Throughout his expedition, he did not record any brick, block or zinc-roofed house in Ugep.

The first documented zinc-roofed semi-permanent house (house with mud/live stick walls, cement/sand plaster, cement floor screed and corrugated zinc roof) was found in Assiga New Town. It was the house of Chief Robert Usang Onun built in 1937. The second semi-permanent building was that of Chief Inyang Usang, the father of Oval Inyang Usang Inyang who is the present Oval of Assiga New Town. It was built in 1938. This is attributed to the border of Assiga with the Cross River through which the white colonialists traversed and trade took place. So, if the first Yakurr village settled in 1617 while the first zinc-roofed house in Yakurr was built in 1937. It can then be stated that it took 320 years of settlement of the Yakurr People before the first modern house was built.

It can be therefore posited that before 1937; all the settlements of the Yakurr People were made up of thatch, life-stick and mud houses. These construction materials were sourced from their tropical environment. The

process of construction and configuration of their houses then was a reflection of their culture, belief, lifestyle, family size, social organisation, security consciousness, well-being, sense of community belonging, sense of brotherhood, socioeconomic values, available tools and technology. As the awareness of the Yakurr People increased over time, thatch, bamboo, life sticks and mud houses gradually gave way to the use of modern building materials and construction techniques for the development of the houses. This transition further gave birth to the culture of building of the Yakurr People.

The Yakurr foundation rituals are only observed for buildings constructed with the use of modern construction materials, tools and techniques. This is attributable to the fact that the aboriginal construction techniques of the People do not involve any excavation of foundation trenches. The People only do a trench-like excavation of the earth for burial purposes. Thus, foundation trenches from the very beginning till the time of this work were perceived to be burial graves. Hence out of fear of death, the rituals were invented to appease the gods and ancestors of the land.

Administration of Building Rituals among the Yakurr People

Every Yakurr son or daughter belongs to *Kepon* (paternal family) and *Legimo* (maternal family) simultaneously [17] and enjoys land ownership rights from either one or both families as applicable. A paternal family is the extended family of one's father while the maternal family is the extended family of one's mother. *Kepon* and *Legimo* in the Yakurr setting own land. In Yakurr communities like Idomi, Ugep, Mkpani, Ekori and Nko (Yakoo clan); *Yepon* (paternal families) are the owners and custodians of the land while in Assiga Old Town, Assiga New Town, Assiga Beach, Inyima and Ekpeti (Ayiga clan) and Agoi Ibami, Agoi Ekpo and Ekom Agoi (Agbo clan); *Ajimo* (maternal families) are the owners and custodians of the land.

Consequently, the owners and custodians of land in any community are the ones solely responsible for the performance of building rituals for the construction of modern buildings on their land. Even if the paternal family land is sold or donated to a non-indigene of that paternal family (irrespective of the origin of the person), a government agency, Non – Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or Non – non-profit organisations (NPOs). The People also affirmed that there is no disparity in the list of items or procedures for the performance of building rituals. The ritual requirements are the same for indigenes, non-indigenes, government agencies, Non – Governmental Organisations and non–profit Organisations. However, based on the financial capacity of the client, the quality and quantity of food and drink refreshments may vary.

Site Opening Rituals (Mbolorfe)

It is common knowledge that all construction processes start with the acquisition of land that is suitable for the proposed building. In the culture of the Yakurr People, the client selects the location of the plot of land he desires to erect the modern building. He then notifies the *Obol Kepon* and his council of elders. On an agreed day, the elders will visit the site to ratify the size of the plot needed and delineate the boundaries of the land. This they do to ensure peaceful coexistence among paternal family members and also guide against unlawful encroachment while ensuring that proper setbacks and sanitary lanes are kept.

Peculiar cases existed in Ugep, where the elders of the *Kepon* (paternal family) would relocate an existing mud and thatch house within or around the selected plot for the modern building. The owner of the mud house with the aid of the paternal will relocate to another plot of land, happily giving up his land for a fellow kinsman to erect a modern building that will beautify and promote the village landscape. The paternal family will then assist him in sourcing local construction materials like live sticks, thatch, and mud and also provide labour to rebuild him another mud house on a different plot of land.

The contemporary practice is that after the acquisition of the landed property suitable for the project; the necessary paperwork will be done and permits granted. Similarly, the Yakurr People perform *Mbolorfe* (libation) to formally affirm the new ownership of the land and also notify the gods and ancestors of the land of the intention of their son to open the site for construction purposes. The *Obol Kepon* (Paternal family head) or any designated elder of the family (Fig. 13) who has completed *Ykpan nÖne* (first rites to become an elder indeed) will perform the *Mbolorfe*. Items required for this ritual are a keg of palm wine, some pieces of dried

fish or *kemain* (a dried lap of red deer), six (6) nuts each of native kola and bitter kola with a plate of locally prepared palm oil sauce. The performance of *Mbolorfe* rituals formally announces the commencement of the construction project.

Fig. 13: Performance of *Mbolorfe* by *Obol Yaseni* – *Obol* James Usani Ibiang to mark the official commencement of a residential building in Ugep on October 21, 2022. Authors, 2022



On a set date, the *Kepon* will give a message through their town crier for strong men, youths, and women to support the building project by conveying sand, stones/pebbles, and other materials to the site free of charge. The client who is a paternal family member will also be given access to the family forests to get the timber needed for the work. After the setting out of the building; strong men and youths will excavate the foundation trenches with simple tools to the required depth at no cost. After the completion of the excavation, the entire paternal family - men, women and youths together with the client's age-grade members, close maternal family members, and well-wishers will reconvene for the performance of foundation rituals and burial of foundation deposits.

This ritual is also important because of land encroachment disputes that may arise. Some of these disputes may warrant the closure of any part of the excavated foundation trenches. Once adjustments like such occur, death atonement rituals must be performed by the client before such a trench or trenches can be covered and adjusted. If not performed, it is believed that the client or any member of his immediate family will die mysteriously within a short time. To the Yakurr People, no excavation of trenches or pits can be covered without atonement rites. So, to avoid any such occurrence, the custodians of the land must be present to perform *Mbolorfe*; and affirm the land boundaries and the footprint of the proposed building for adequate setbacks before the commencement of the excavation.

Foundation Rituals and Burial of Foundation Deposits among the Yakurr People

The foundation of a building or structure is that part of the walls, piers, and columns in direct sedentary contact with the earth. The foundation is the concrete base of walls, piers, and columns that transmit both dead and live loads to the ground. Foundations can be built with bricks, stones, concrete, and steel. Foundation footing may have a base course of concrete or bricks and stones bonded with mortar. The nature and condition of the subsoil, bearing capacity, behaviour under seasonal and groundwater level changes, and the possibility of ground movement generally guide the design of the foundation. Concrete is a proportional mix of cement, sand, gravel, water, and sometimes additives. The mix ratios of concrete are determined by the strength of concrete required. In practice, the foundation of a building is the most critical part of a building or structure, because on it rests the walls, floors, columns, beams, lintels, windows, doors, ceiling, roof, building services, and finishes.

The foundation provides suitable support and stability for the building and transmits to the ground all the dead and live loads that come on the building over a sufficient area of subsoil. The foundation prevents the failure of the building or uneven settlement. The life span of any building or structure depends on the quality of its foundation. The construction of a good building foundation is both time-consuming, technical, and financially demanding. In recent years, this area of the building has seen significant advances.

That is why, across several eras and civilizations, the foundations of temples, churches, statues, shrines, city walls, and other buildings foundations always received special attention. In ancient times, architectural practices were viewed as divine and imperative [22]. Among the Yakurr People foundation of a building also received special attention. The following items will be presented by the client for the foundation rituals: *Utabi* (Snuff) for the elders, some pieces of dried fish or *kemain* (a dried lap of red deer), one big live female native goat with *kebutal* (robe put on the leg of a goat), five (5) big tubers of yam, one (1) big bunch of plantain, twelve (12) nuts each of native kola and bitter kola, a big plate of locally prepared palm oil sauce, a bottle of English hot and several gallons of up palm wine as seen in Fig. 14.

During foundation rituals, the goat is slaughtered and its blood is sprinkled around the building footprint. The head of the goat together with six (6) pieces of iron money or six (6) coins of any denomination, three (3) pieces each of native kola nuts, dried fish, and meat are placed on a white or stainless plate with a small piece of white cloth. These make up the foundation deposit of the Yakurr People.

Fig. 14: Some Foundation rituals items presented on November 1, 2022



Authors, 2022

The foundation deposit is buried inside a hole dug in the front entrance or a chosen portion of the foundation trench. The fresh coconut is cut into three (3) parts and the water is emptied on top of the foundation deposit. As a sign of the gods' acceptance of the sacrifice, in the process of cutting open the coconut into three pieces; two of the three pieces of the coconut must face downwards. If that does not happen, the gods will not accept the ritual, and the entire rites are restarted.

The goat is used to prepare yam pottage or porridge. The food may be prepared openly around the site and eaten there or in any suitable location aside from the site. However, before the guests are served the food, a designated elder of the family who has performed *Ykpan nÖne* (rites to become an elder indeed) will pour libation (offering of prayers by pouring wine on the earth) and call on the ancestors of the paternal family. He further begs the ancestors not to see this excavation of trenches as a sign of death but as a great effort of one of their illustrious sons to set up a modern building that will beautify the village landscape.

The summation of most rituals among the Yakurr People is offering a small portion of food and drink provided by the client or celebrant to the ancestors and gods of the land first. This is done by pouring the food and drink to the ground while offering prayers. The food items can also be buried as the case may be. Most Yakurr rituals may require singing, drumming, and dancing while others command total silence with only body gesticulations. After this, the paternal family will be on the watch-out to observe the final roof installation rituals after notification by the client.

Roof Installation Rituals

For a building to act as an enclosure, it must have external walls and be covered by a roof. The roof is the topmost covering in a building. It is done during the finishing of a building. The roof prevents a lot of sound (minimizing incoming sound), dust, wind, and rain, and also helps the occupants cover their privacy. Among the Yakurr People, the roof of a building is given special attention. The *Kepon* supports the client at this level with nails for the roofing and wood from their forests.

On the day the carpenters complete the installation of the roof, the client observes the final building rituals. He will provide One (1) big live duck fowl, five (5) big tubers of yam, twelve (12) nuts each of native kola and bitter kola, a big plate of locally prepared palm oil sauce, a bottle of English hot and several gallons of up palm wine. Yam pottage or porridge is prepared with the duck fowl for the entertainment of the paternal family members, workers, and well-wishers present. The *Kepon* celebrates the successful completion of the house. They use this opportunity to thank the gods for helping the workers finish the roof installation without injuries or accidents. Like other building rituals, the workers are always encouraged to participate in the food and drink refreshments presented during the rituals.

Client's protection rituals

A building acts as an enclosure for the human activities inside it. A building protects the occupants, equipment, and goods housed within it from weather elements like rain, wind, sun, and relative humidity. As the building does the physical protection of its occupants, the Yakurr People perform protection rituals to invoke the spirits of their gods and ancestors to protect the client, his family, and its occupants.

As a rule, the *Kepon* will set up a protection ritual before they all leave the construction site. These rituals drive away any bad energy or evil spirits from the site. Items used for the protection rituals are a one-week-old chick, a piece of *kojom-kpol* (native white chalk), dried *lorfu-wa* (sacrificial leaf), *liponi* (raffia robe), six (6) cones of dried corn, three (3) fresh coconuts and one (1) *enopoona* (raffia stem – *Raphia africana*). Locally, the raffia palm occupies plays a key role in the traditional architecture of the People. The leaves and sticks are used for making raffia roofing sheets. The raffia sticks are also used horizontally as roof purlins and horizontal support for the vertical wall posts. The raffia ropes are also weaved into traditional curtains, dance and club costumes and interior and exterior decorators for houses and *ketam* (a house or place surrounded by trees that serves as an abode for Yakurr cultural clubs).

A designated elder of the family offers prayers and erects the *enopoona* in front of the building. Tied at the top of the raffia bamboo are the live one-week-old chick, one dried corn, and *lorfu-wa*. The fresh coconut is cut into three (3) parts and the water is emptied inside the hole dug for the erection of the protection ritual. Then the native white chalk is soaked in water and rubbed on the erected raffia bamboo. The coconut with roasted corn is eaten while the coconut shells are placed around the raffia bamboo (Fig. 15a and b, and Fig. 16).

Fig. 15a: Foundation laying ceremony for a residential building in Ugep, Cross River State, Nigeria performed on August 22, 2023. Authors, 2023



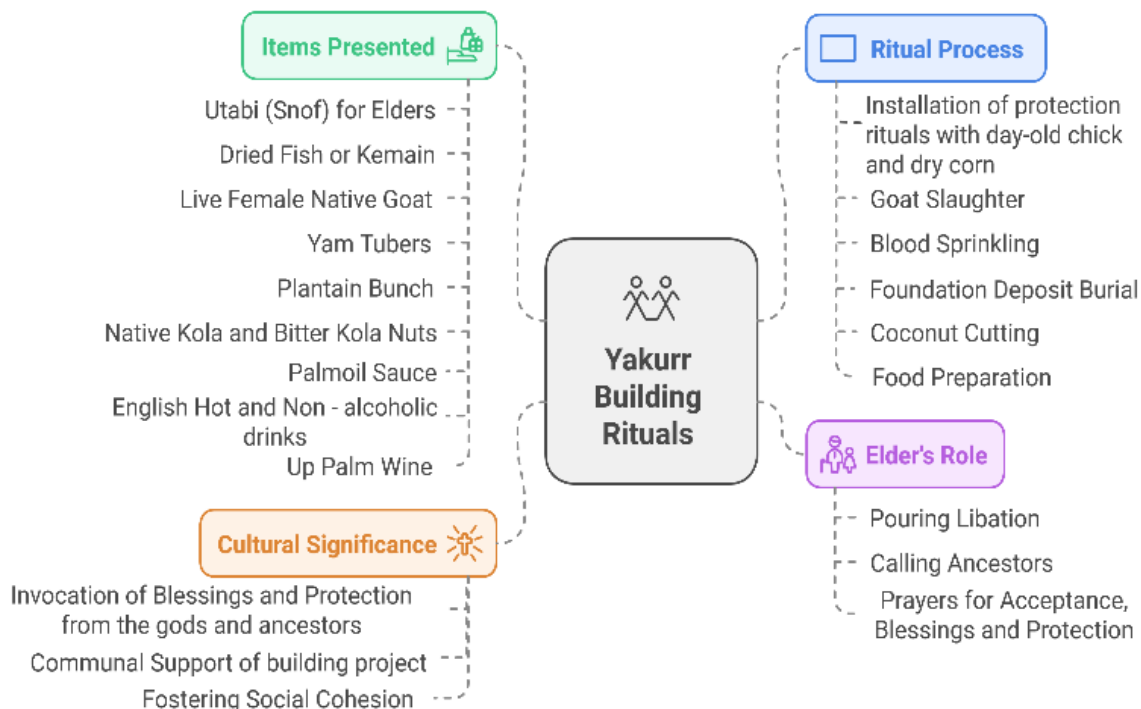
Fig. 15b: Foundation laying ceremony for a residential building in Ugep, Cross River State, Nigeria performed on August 22, 2023. Authors, 2023



Fig. 16: Foundation rituals for a poultry farm building in Ugep performed on May 15, 2023. Authors, 2023



Fig. 17: Synopsis of the building rituals of Yakurr People in Southern Nigeria



Calendar Days and Time for the Performance of Foundation Rituals

Rituals often require specific timing for them to be effective. Foundation deposits of the Yakurr People are buried in the morning between 7 a.m. and 10 a.m. Other foundation rituals are also concluded within this stipulated time. However, the cooked food entertainment is served the moment it is ready.

The Yakurr People have a traditional calendar of six (6) days viz: *Ayoi Kokoh, Kokoh, Kokoh bloke, Ayoi Okponobi, Okponobi, Okponobi bloke*. *Kokoh* are regarded as male days while *Okponobi* are the female days. All interactions with the gods or ancestors of the land are performed on *Kokoh* - the male day. The aboriginal day for the performance of foundation rituals is *Kokoh*. That arrangement subsisted until the 1990s when all the various villages in Yakurr instituted their market days. The market day was a day the villagers did not go to the farm. You either go to the market or you stay at home. From that period, foundation rituals were performed officially on market days.

There is, however, an exception to this arrangement if there is a health emergency or accident traceable to the non-performance of building rituals. The weight of the health emergency or accident can make the client request that the elders perform the ritual any time and day as a matter of urgency to avert the anger of the gods.

Stage in the Building Process Suitable for the Performance of Building Rituals

Earlier in the history of the Yakurr People, building rituals were observed in three stages. Firstly, just after the allocation of the land and before the excavation of trenches. At this point, the paternal family members help in the conveyance of building materials to the site. The second phase is after the excavation of the trenches. At this stage the foundation deposits are buried and other incantations are performed before any further work is done. Recall that the trenches are excavated by the paternal family members as their contribution. Just as the excavation of graves for burial is the exclusive responsibility of the paternal family member of the deceased. The final phase is done after the installation of the roof. However, based on the experiences of the client, the building rituals can be conducted at any stage of the building. Especially if the client is facing some adverse ramifications in any manner.

Consequences of not Performing Foundation Rituals among the Yakurr People

The efficacy of architectural practice and building differs by location. The Yakurr People claim that individuals who neglect building rites either disregard the deities and ancestors of the land or exhibit selfishness or avarice. Consequently, the omission of foundational rites for any structure will result in the client facing repercussions from the deities and ancestors of the land. The gods and ancestors of the land will inexplicably afflict the children of the building's client with illness. The client and his family may encounter unusual accidents and events, nightmares, and maybe the abrupt demise of the client or any of his children. The consequences may arise at any phase of the construction process. The saga commences with the client's family members or intimate relatives experiencing dreams of the underworld, whereby a goat is being dragged by a rope or some late community leaders will be requesting sustenance. Throughout this study, multiple individuals attested to experiencing these consequences, including the demise of their children.

Paternal family members and non-paternal family members who do not undertake foundation rituals face these effects as a rule of thumb. Irrespective of their location whether at home or abroad. All the paternal families interviewed agreed to continue practicing foundation rites because it is a custom passed down to them. More so, the ceremonies allow the Yakurr People an opportunity to eat, drink and retain their feeling of community a sense of belonging. So irrespective of the implications, the People still enjoy their culture of construction.

Building Rituals among the Christian Folk in Yakurr

The Yakurr People are very religious. The Christians who profess to be 'born again' do not participate in building rituals nor do they observe building rituals for their buildings. However, it has been perceived that those Christians who did not observe the rituals often suffer repercussions. The fear of the consequences of not observing the rituals compelled some Christians to perform the rituals. During the interviews, the People

mentioned some ‘born again’ Christians who did not observe the ritual and suffered no repercussions. According to them, it depends on the level of your faith.

However, in a bid to mitigate any negative occurrences, some Christians organise their foundation ceremonies as can be seen in fig. 17 and fig. 18. During the ceremony, a Pastor or Priest will offer prayers over the land before excavation or after the excavation of the foundation trenches and then lay the first block at one corner or the four corners of the building. Anointing oil (olive oil), water or salt may be used during the prayers.

At the end of the ceremony, the clergyman is given an offering of a live goat or chicken according to the client’s ability. He may also be given some tubers of yam or a bunch of plantain and any amount of money. In some cases, depending on the client’s financial strength, only an envelope of money can be presented. Ideally, the Pastor or Priest is supposed to be given among others anything that has life.

Fig. 18: Foundation laying ceremony for a cassava factory building in Ugep, Cross River State, Nigeria being performed by Pastor Charles Okoi of Assemblies of God Church on June 11, 2020. Authors, 2020



Upon the completion of the construction project especially for individual residential buildings, a housewarming ceremony or house dedication prayers may be held to celebrate entry into the new home or building. The cultural building system has affected even the Christians in Yakurr. Every local or resident of Yakurr irrespective of your religion, is fully aware that there are forces that must be compensated or repelled before any building construction can be successfully completed and put to use.

Fig. 19: Foundation laying ceremony for a two residential building at Nko, Yakurr Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria being performed by Pastor (Mrs.) Yinka Isokon Arikpo of Redeemed Christian Church of God on October 21, 2022. Authors, 2022

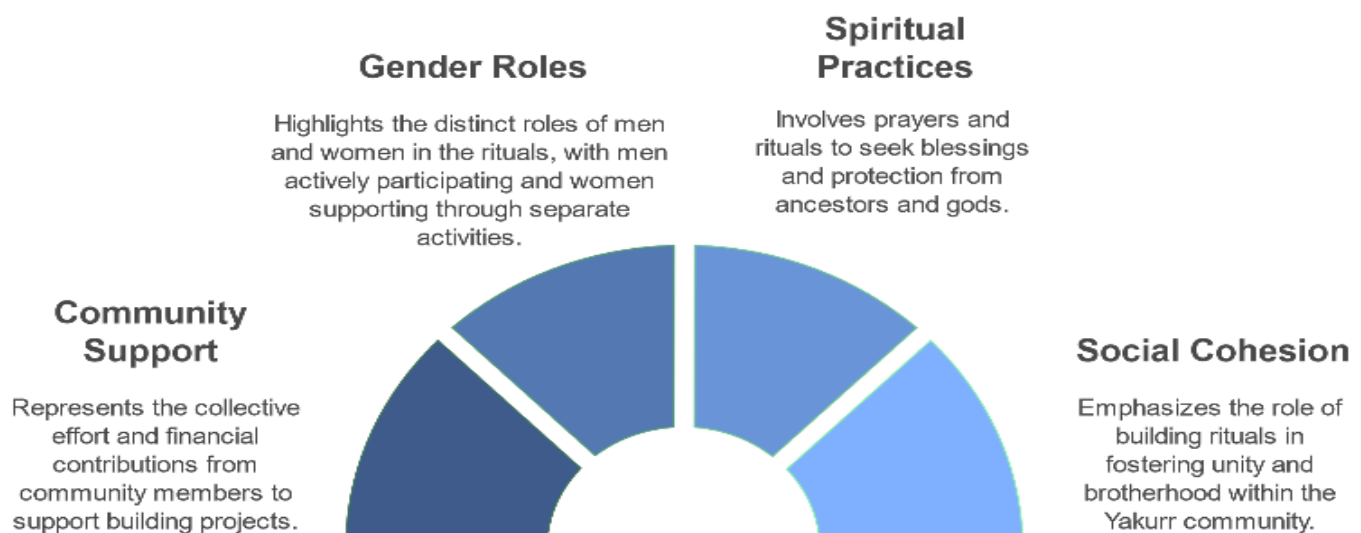


Sociocultural Significance of the Building Construction Rituals

Till date, the culture of building of the Yakurr People do not apply to mud and thatch dwellings but only modern building of all typologies and some civil construction projects. All through the rituals, the entire *Kepon* supports and celebrates with their son for the big step of establishing a contemporary structure. The help currently is through the gift of money to the customer instead of conveyance of materials, excavation of trenches, foundation filling and backfilling, and purchase of nails. Community adult males pay between five hundred naira (#500) and three hundred naira (#300).

Every community in Yakurr has *Kokom-wu* (an alliance of married women within the paternal household). It was found that only in the Ijiman ward of Ugep that *Kokom-wu* took part in building rites till today. In other wards and communities of Yakurr, this ceremony is seen as fully masculine. In Ijiman, the women are provided their separate food and drinks. They do not go to the building site on the morning of the rituals, unlike the men. Instead in the evening of the same day, they will congregate at the residence of their leader to have their entertainment and also pay their foundation fee. The women pay between three hundred naira (#300) and two hundred naira (#200) each to support the client in lieu of manual site work.

Fig. 20: Cultural significance of Yakurr building rituals



The rituals were holistic to celebrate with the client, support him and appease the gods against any calamity this new construction system may attract to the client and his family. They are performed by the Yakurr People to seek spiritual approval and blessings from the ancestors and gods of the land. Furthermore, prayers are offered to the gods for the protection of the workers and the continual provision of resources for the completion of the house project. Elders, young men, youths and women from the onset are active participants in building rituals. This building ritual practice like other Yakurr rituals has become a social institution that plays significant socio-political roles in promoting social cohesion, a sense of brotherhood, communal support, and unity within the Yakurr People [30].

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is normal to have prototypes of buildings in different localities with similar construction procedures and materials. The same building in two different localities can represent two (2) different cultural landscapes. This is because, the distinctive features of that same building in a different landscape will be the mirror of the core values of the individuals living within that locality who moulded it, and who proceeded to live in it. Hence, a building in the process of its design, construction and use; absorbs in it, intangible cultural elements like oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and skills domiciled in the community and transmitted through generations so that the building becomes a cultural landscape [8].

Hence, the relevance of building rituals in some localities cannot be overlooked. This is because man is a religious, spiritual, and emotional being who is always eager to connect with something greater than him [20].

This supernatural connection always results in positive feelings such as peace, wonder, satisfaction, appreciation, achievement, and acknowledgment. As it is today, many built environment professionals and developers often stop at getting physical building permits from the relevant authorities. Thereafter, materials, machines, and men are mobilised to the site for the commencement of the project, ignoring the system of beliefs of the locals.

According to the literature and the culture of building of the Yakurr People, it is important that building construction professionals should always go beyond the acquisition of physical building permits. They are encouraged to inquire unconventionally about the cultural setting, religious and spiritual inclinations of the host community, the client, investors, and end-users before starting any building construction process. This is particularly strategic if their services are needed among communities with distinct cultural origins. This may be necessary for the safeguarding of construction machines, materials, and labourers. This could also protect the client and his family from repercussions arising from their neglect to perform fundamental construction rites inherent to the local culture.

Conclusions

The investigation into the building foundation rituals of the Yakurr People has yielded valuable insights into the cultural aspects of construction within this community. The study utilized a phenomenological research approach, involving focus group discussions, observations of ceremonial practices, site visits, and individual interviews. Through a comprehensive analysis of the collected data, several key conclusions can be drawn:

- a) **Foundation Rituals as Cultural Pillars:** Foundation rituals, particularly ground-breaking ceremonies, represent a cornerstone of the Yakurr People's cultural identity in the context of building construction. These rituals are deeply rooted in tradition and hold significant meaning within the community.
- b) **Unique Cultural Attributes:** The study revealed unique cultural attributes and practices associated with the building process of the Yakurr People. These include symbolic gestures, traditional rites and communal involvement, which contribute to the distinctiveness of their construction practices.
- c) **Cultural Sensitivity in Building Projects:** The findings emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity and respect for local traditions when undertaking construction projects within the Yakurr communities. Professionals in the built environment should consider these cultural elements to ensure projects align with the community's cultural values and needs.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- a) **Cultural Training:** Building professionals and project managers should receive cultural sensitivity training to better understand and respect the cultural nuances of the Yakurr People and other indigenous communities. This training can facilitate smoother project execution and foster positive community relations.
- b) **Collaboration and Consultation:** Engage in open dialogue and consultation with local community leaders, elders, and stakeholders throughout the project planning and implementation phases. Their input and guidance can help bridge cultural gaps and ensure that projects are culturally appropriate.
- c) **Integration of Cultural Elements:** Incorporate cultural elements and practices identified in this study into construction projects where appropriate. This may include allowing for the performance of building rituals and respecting traditional building techniques while adhering to safety and structural standards.
- d) **Community Involvement:** Encourage active participation of Yakurr community members in construction projects. Involving local labour and skilled artisans can not only preserve cultural traditions but also enhance the sense of ownership and pride in the completed structures.

- e) Documentation and Preservation: Foster the documentation and preservation of Yakurr building traditions for future generations. This can be achieved through academic research, community-led initiatives, or partnerships with cultural preservation organizations.

In conclusion, recognizing and honouring the cultural significance of building rituals and construction practices is essential when undertaking building projects within Yakurr communities. The observance of this ritual can promote cultural preservation, community engagement, and successful project outcomes that align with the cultural needs and values of the Yakurr People. However, several Christians see the Yakurr building rituals as an aberration of their faith. They ignore the rituals, follow their Christian beliefs and still live peaceably in their homes.

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