

## Configuring, building and inhabiting the house from a gender perspective

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### Abstract

*The study of vernacular architecture allows to know a culture through its domestic constructions. It also permits learning from its values to apply them in new architecture. In order to achieve both objectives, it seems pertinent to gain an in-depth knowledge of the reality, something which involves questioning what this traditional habitat means for each member of the community. Gender, as a category of analysis, is applied in a research on the vernacular architecture of the Mossi culture and its transformation, as an initial approach to the study of the role which women have played in relation to this traditional habitat. This analysis was based on a literature review which was subsequently contrasted with data collected during two stays in the village of Baasneere (Burkina Faso) in 2018. The study, which considers the relationship of women with the configuration, construction and use of dwellings, shows two opposing aspects of the house: its essence as a setting for tradition-based power relations and a flexible nature capable of easily accommodating change. Finally, the research raises the possibility of investigating how this relationship with inhabiting and building the house varies with the modernisation of architecture.*

**Keywords:** Vernacular architecture; Burkina Faso; women; transformation.

### 1. Introduction

Architecture is the art of separation, the creation of boundaries that structure space. However, a boundary is also a relationship between what ends and what begins. As the philosopher Françoise Collin (1994) explains, architecture can be the art of thresholds.

The most frequently mentioned dualities, when talking about limits in architecture, are inside-outside, interior-exterior, private-public, closed-open and individual-collective. A simple analysis would establish an association between these concepts, placing the most internal reality in opposition with the most external. However, following Collin's reflection and in keeping with the ideas of architects such as Van Eyck (1961) or Hertzberger (1991), the reality of spaces is much more complex.

This complexity mainly stems from a highly subjective component: the qualities of a place may vary according to individual perception. A neighbourhood square can be part of a house, the interior of an unwelcoming building can be the outdoors. Everything appears to depend on the degree of autonomy, security and comfort that a place is able to generate in a person. In addition, there is also the weight of experience: memories associated with a given place link to it in a positive or negative way. Arguably, all is related to the appropriation of space and to that feeling of *enracinement* which Simone Weil considered to be the greatest need of the soul.

When analysing architecture in relation to gender, it is usually noted that tradition relegated women to the domestic sphere, and that "interior", "privacy" or "inside" were the concepts most associated with them (Rosaldo, 1974).

Thus, architecture would have divided its domains between the two extremes, adding "feminine" and "masculine" to the opposing phenomena mentioned above. However, referencing Collin once more, a reflection beyond the simplification of these phenomena would suggest that interiors could not in fact be considered the domain of women unless they had a personal space within them. "Domestic" should not be confused with "private". The room of one's own, demanded for all, was ultimately (and most importantly) a place to be oneself.

It should also be remembered that gender is not an absolute category and that individuals are influenced by multiple circumstances. Generalisation should therefore not be admissible. Gaining an understanding of a social reality is a complex task that requires consideration of different variables from all aspects of life. To that end, the first studies incorporating a gender perspective into vernacular architecture research appeared during the 1990s (Kwolek-Folland, 1995).

The study of vernacular architecture allows to understand a culture through its constructions. The materials and techniques used, the places generated and the types of buildings created have a reason for existence and are explained by the complex social and cultural relations established by a community in a specific environment. Habitat is, therefore, inevitably permeated by gender, among other relational systems, and the adoption of this issue as a category of analysis allows for a more detailed approximation to reality: Who inhabits these spaces? Why? Who builds them? What role does each member of the family play in configuring the dwelling and the village? How do these roles change with the modernisation of society?

Does traditional architecture offer an equitable distribution of space or does it perpetuate the subordination of a given part of the community? Have women had a place of their own in vernacular solutions?

This article is part of an ongoing research on vernacular architecture in Burkina Faso and its transformations, and focuses in particular on the traditional habitat of the Mossi culture. As in other contexts, the roles traditionally associated with women and men and their respective positions in the family have determined the configuration of households. Women, especially the carers of their relatives, seem to have governed the affairs of the compound. However, their relationship with the house has not been limited to inhabiting it. The roles traditionally assigned have also reserved a place for them in the process of construction and maintenance of the buildings.

This research aims to explore the inevitable relationship between architecture, and especially traditional heritage, and gender roles, aiming to explain this type of architecture from a female gaze. In the field of research, the approach employed when observing reality is a determining factor while the cultural framework itself occasionally influences what is studied. Without aiming to offer categorical answers to the questions posed, this article will attempt to bring to light the role of women in the configuration, construction and use of the vernacular habitat in Mossi culture.

## **2. Materials and methods**

The aim is, therefore, to try to present traditional Mossi dwellings from the perspective of women, as part of a research project that began in 2018.

Specifically, the study is based on a literature review, complemented with data collected during two research stays in the village of Baasneere (Centre-North region, Burkina Faso) in the initial stages of the research.



Fig. 1. The village of Baasneere in 2018.

The existing literature on Mossi culture comes mainly from the fields of geography, anthropology and sociology. Geographical studies focused on land occupation systems, means of production and consumption and, in general, the establishment of communities in the territory (Kohler, 1971; Lahuec, 1980; Marchal, 1983, 1987; Imbs, 1987, etc.). Anthropology and sociology covered the history and the political and social organisation of the Mossi (Zahan, 1961; Tiendrebeogo, 1963; Skinner, 1964; Izard, 1970; Gruénais, 1984, etc.) as well as the economic and technological transformations that social groups experienced during the colonisation and subsequent independence of the country (Hammond, 1959, 1962). One particular study (Lallemand, 1977) focused on the analysis of the way of life of a family in a village located in the same region as Baasneere. The study examined the characteristics of the family economy and, more specifically, the social relations between family members, which provided valuable information on how the household was inhabited.

More recent research continued to study production systems and land use integrating gender and social norms to provide a first and, over time, more detailed insight into Mossi women's access to land (Kevane & Gray, 1999; Cavicchioli, 2018).

In the discipline of architecture, the first studies conducted on the country's habitat mentioning Mossi architecture, were reports commissioned by the UN or within the framework of the UNDP (Silva, 1970; Boetschi, 1978), as well as general compilations on the different cultural groups (Fiedermutz-Laun, 1986; Kéré, 1995). These studies, combined with the information compiled from research in the abovementioned disciplines, formed a working basis for the comparison of the information obtained during the visits.

The fieldwork consisted of participant observation in the daily life of the families in the village, the recording of graphic data on the traditionally configured dwellings, and informal conversations to identify the uses of the spaces.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Configuring the house

As in other West African cultures, the traditional Mossi dwelling was an enclosure (*zaka*) formed by a series of individual buildings grouped around a courtyard. The buildings were situated on the perimeter, defined by the earthen walls or braided straw mats (*seko*) between them. Each of these buildings is assigned to an adult member of the family unit: a man, his wives and children along with his younger brothers and their families. Boys used to occupy their mother's house until the age of 10, when they could share a building with other children, and girls did so until the time of their marriage. However, in 1977 Lallemand reported some flexibility in childcare. Daughters and sisters left the family compound upon marriage to move into their husband's, although they maintained ties with their family and were allowed to separate and return home if they so wished. The transitory connection between the parental and the marital home, and the constant guardianship of a father, brother or husband, has been reflected in the writings of women authors as a non-belonging to any place (Emecheta, 1975; Ogundipe, 1994; Schipper, 1996).

Even so, in terms of architecture, the presence of women was decisive in the configuration of the dwelling, as the enclosure expanded as new marriages took place. Each woman in the compound inhabited one or more buildings and a courtyard facing the main central space. The house was thus flexible to the family growth.

These individual units were traditionally round constructions (*roguilga*) and, less frequently, rectangular-shaped rooms (*rogo*).

The predominance of circular houses meant that the Mossi enclosures also tended to be circular in plan (Kéré, 1995). However, this contrasted with data collected at the time of the research, since only 61 of the 300 cases in the sample were traditional round houses. The compounds, at that time, were mostly orthogonal in shape, including the courtyards.

According to local testimonies, the round typology was the typical construction while the rectangular one would have been reserved for heads of households in the past. This coincided with the findings of previous research which identified this new typology, with its terraced roof and larger size, as the one preferred by notables and military men (Dubourg, 1957). Men and women under these family heads would inhabit round traditional buildings. Hence, architecture marked difference and hierarchy.

This was not always the general rule, though. Drawings by Lallemand in the 1970s showed rectangular constructions, rare at that time, used in three cases which allowed the custom to be qualified:

- In the courtyard of the eldest wife of the family head, who, according to Lallemand, had more authority than her husband.
- In the courtyard of a young couple who had emigrated to Mali and then returned to the village.
- In the courtyard of a woman who often visited Ouagadougou (the capital) accompanying her husband who, instead, preferred to inhabit a traditional round hut.

This could be indicative of two situations. Firstly, the notable of a family could also be a woman, not just her husband. Secondly, regardless of the family hierarchy, in the 1970s housing innovations were introduced by those in contact with the foreign or urban world and, contrary of expectations, there was certain freedom to introduce these changes into the family compound.

In 2018, the most common typology in Baasneere, regardless of the gender of the inhabitants, was the rectangular building covered with corrugated sheets. Some older women, however, still preferred the typical round buildings. These seemed safer and cosier during the stormy season, compared to the rectangular houses covered with metal, which were more vulnerable to heavy rain and wind. Moreover, these typical constructions

were linked to traditional remedies and customs and, according to the testimonies of elderly women, they still stored their fetishes or sacred objects in them. For this reason, in some traditionally configured compounds, the women's private courtyards consisted of a larger rectangular building and a typical round one, used on rainy days or to house their own belongings (Fig.2).

This could be a significant detail. Although the configuration of the dwelling as a group of individual units around a courtyard was maintained, there was no longer any sign of privilege reflected in the type of construction inhabited. Furthermore, in the women's maintenance of a traditional hut alongside the modern construction, it was possible to observe the preservation of a cultural heritage, somewhat divested of the burden of subordination that it may have had in the past.

Next to the access to the enclosure a structure of branches forming a shed was traditionally used by the elder and head of the family to control access, receive visitors and establishing the connection of the house with the rest of the village. The area beside the entrance (*samandé*) functioned as an extension of the courtyard and, when shared with other enclosures of the same family branch, it formed a semi-private anteroom.

This concatenated configuration of places with different degrees of privacy, from the village to the individual room, provided a great wealth of spaces, offering many opportunities for family members to interact with each other and with the rest of the community.

This spatial richness was maintained in most of the dwellings analysed in Baasneere, but had been lost in recent constructions, which favoured privacy. The new dwellings consisted of indoor rooms shared by the whole family and were located in the centre of a courtyard enclosed by walls.

Family granaries (*tudgou*) were located outside the house compound, closer to the fields, to protect them from possible fires. In individual courtyards, men and women could have small granaries to store crops from their private fields.

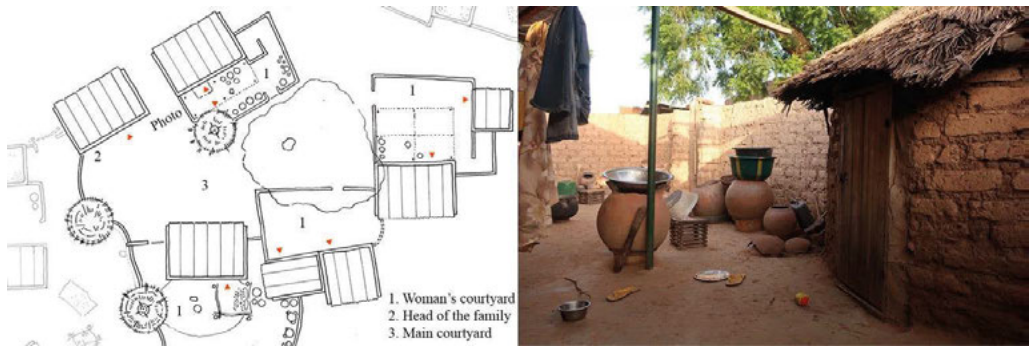


Fig. 2. Example of the combination of round and rectangular constructions in some women's courtyards.

### 3.2. Building the house

The whole family was involved in the traditional building process with well-defined roles. If necessary, the help of other relatives or friends was also requested, and in this case, the owner of the house provided food and drink, prepared by women, in return. The construction of new houses usually meant the family was growing, something seen as a sign of prosperity celebrated with joy. Building was both a social event and a collective activity based on mutual help.

Fetching water from wells was one of the daily chores assigned to women and girls in the household. Thus, at the time of construction, they were also responsible for providing any water needed to mould earth.

The process began with the tracing of a circle in the ground with a stake and a rope. Men extracted the necessary material from an excavation near the compound, while women and girls brought the water and boys trampled the moistened earth to make the mortar and carry the balls of *banco* with which the men built the wall. The conical roof, with a structure of wooden branches, braided straw mats and straw protection, was built on the ground, then raised over the wall and tied down. Once the construction was completed, women were in charge of finishing the surfaces, wall coatings and decorations and the interior and exterior floors with mud.

*Banco* balls were replaced, at some point, by the use of sun-dried mud bricks. In fact, previous research noted how this innovation had also begun in the rectangular dwellings of notables (Dubourg, 1957). In 2018, this adobe construction technique was the most widespread in the village, regardless of the type of construction (round or rectangular) or the status of the owner. Something similar must have occurred with the roofing technique. As reported in other regions (Hanke, 2004), the new metal sheet roofing solution would have been adopted first in the dwellings of the military elders. Like the use of adobe, stone or, later, cement blocks, this innovation was a sign of privilege. This reflects the prestige culturally attached to home improvements, which always seemed to be introduced first in the dwellings of elders, family heads or notables. In contrast, like the use of adobe, the use of corrugated sheets was widespread at the time of this research (Lidón de Miguel, 2019).

The repairs, like the construction, were carried out by individual members of the community as a family chore. According to custom and the annual cycle of the seasons, this work was carried out after the rains, in mid-October, when the work in the fields had finished and the still damp earth and the abundant vegetation provided the necessary building materials.



It should be noted that, in 2018, the most recent innovations, such as the use of reinforced concrete or glazed windows, were no longer determined by the traditional social status of the family members, but by the economic level of each individual and his or her greater or lesser accessibility to the new materials. In other words, the most innovative constructions in the village no longer implied the distinction of a family hierarchy either.

It is also worth highlighting that recent professionalised construction methods necessarily required specialisation and resulted in more limited involvement of families, particularly women, in the construction of buildings in the village. With the decline in the construction of round houses, the tradition associated with the creation of new dwellings, based on cooperation and mutual help, was disappearing.

### **3.3. Inhabiting the house**

Household chores were traditionally organised and assigned by the first wife of the head of the family (*zaka naba*). These tasks included preparing meals and clothes, collecting wood from the fields, pounding millet and providing water for the household. In addition, women took part with men in the work of the communal lands and were also allowed to work their own personal fields. Equally, they could sell the products of their work on the market and thus obtain resources to be invested in the family or in the equipment of their personal living spaces. They governed the matters related to life within the compound, although there was also a hierarchy within the group of women in a household: between the first wife of the head of the family, the older wives and the young newcomers to the compound.

As Mangin explained in early texts on Mossi culture (1916), women were valued in families because, in a subsistence economy, new marriages meant a larger workforce and, thanks to the boys and girls possibly coming, multiple prospects for the future.

Later on, Lallemand (1977) reported on the great mobility of relationships between women and men: polygamous families that were reduced through Christian marriages or the reverse, new links and new ruptures, arrivals and departures of relatives to other regions or to the neighbouring Ivory Coast, etc. The family enclosure was continually adapted according to the need for new individual constructions or lack thereof, and this flexibility was still maintained in the traditional dwellings in Baasneere.

The main daily activities in the house took place outside, in the personal courtyards or in the main central space, under the shade of trees or small sheds. The outdoor spaces constituted the largest surface area and the most important part of the dwelling, while the interior spaces were used as shelters, mainly for resting or storage. This indoor space, associated with the individual adult, extended its influence to the immediate outdoor space, regardless of whether it was delimited as an individual courtyard. Thus, architecture was articulated in a series of scales of privacy (neighbourhood, grouping, enclosure, individual courtyard, personal buildings), linked to each other by transition places and associated with the different levels of kinship (neighbours, family branches, family unit, closest relatives).

Cooking and cleaning were done outside, on the floor of the courtyard or in mud structures. This tradition was maintained throughout the village, although some traditional dwellings also included constructions dedicated to cooking with adobe bricks arranged in latticework to allow ventilation.

Daily activities were still mainly performed outside and the functions of the interiors, with the exception of these new kitchens, had not changed. Only the recent constructions mentioned earlier, still in the minority, represented a change of function with more shared space indoors.

New professions, carried out by men and women, had been added to the work in the fields, and many young people temporarily left the village to study in the capital.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

Examination of the role of women in the configuration of the traditional Mossi dwelling has shown how their presence was decisive in the expansion or reduction of the family compound. The house was the constructed reflection of an extremely hierarchical patrilineal family structure, but this hierarchy was, in fact, complex and changeable. It was established between men and women, between old and young, towards newly arrived relatives, etc. The family unit could be understood as a dynamic system of relationships of affection, but also of power and alliance, situated in a flexible and adaptable setting. The traditional compound was ready to welcome changes in families and, with them, also a gradual relaxation of social norms and greater autonomy of women within the group.

It could therefore be argued that vernacular architecture was the translation of a hierarchical social system which subordinated certain members of the family, especially women, to very specific roles. Nevertheless, it is also worth considering that this system was extremely complex and flexible, changing over time, and that this architecture, in short, shared this same complexity, flexibility and capacity to adapt to change.

This can be seen when considering the arrival of the rectangular typology, that seemed to be associated, as indicated above, with the notables of the families. However, in the 1970s Lallemand already noted changes with respect to this custom, showing a degree of freedom and independence in who prompted the innovations of the dwellings. This freedom of inhabiting and building could be observed in a more generalised manner in the dwellings visited in Baasneere in 2018. One particular example was the presence of new and traditional constructions in women's private courtyards. They had preserved the typical houses not because they were subordinated to occupy these constructions, but because they recognised advantages in them which they could combine with those in modern houses.

The great permeability of spaces should also be highlighted. Organised without clear boundaries, they allowed views of the public from the private and vice versa. The opposing pairs mentioned in the introduction were naturally linked, allowing protection and exposure, withdrawal without exclusion. In contrast, new constructions were increasingly multi-room dwellings, which meant a clear transformation in the way houses were inhabited. What was happening in these new dwellings with the degrees of privacy and with flexibility? What place did women occupy in modern dwellings in the village? In this respect, further research is required to determine whether or not the modernisation of architecture was leading to a domestication of the female part of the family, as was already reported in other changing contexts (Rogers, 1980; Larsson, 1988, 1989).

Finally, the loss of building traditions generally led to lower levels of involvement from the community, including women, in the creation of new buildings in the village.

The study of vernacular architecture responds to the existence of values which can be preserved by learning from them. Conservation refers, not to the object itself, but to the intangible heritage of constructive knowledge and beneficial relations with the natural and social environment which should be safeguarded. But who holds this knowledge? What relationships from vernaculars may be useful for the future? Perception of a place is highly subjective and depends to a large extent on the behaviours that occur in that space. Architecture could be seen, then, as a device ready or not to accommodate certain attitudes. The Mossi dwelling seemed to have reserved very specific and traditionally determined places for women. At the same time, it represented also an architecture of thresholds that offered multiple possibilities and was able to allow for variation. More detailed research will help ascertain whether this flexibility can be the basis for a relational architecture truly generating autonomy, security, comfort, sense of appropriation and, ultimately, *enracinement*, for all individuals.

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