

A Parallel of West African Vessels: Body Ornamentation and Building Ornamentation

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Let us consider the body and the building as manifestations of human existence whose physical embodiment is similar to that of a vessel: an artifact used for drink; the inside and outside are primary components to function. The ornamentation of these "vessels," in West African society, we find is an important and realizable means of visible communication in these societies. This paper examines this metaphor with particular attention to the parallels that exist between body ornamentation and building ornamentation within the following regions of West Africa: the Bight of Benin, the Escarpment of the Jos Plateau, the mountains of Cameroon and the Sahel of the Southern Sahara.

West Africa has traditionally been perceived as non-literate by Western standards.¹ Even today, literacy rates are well below fifty percent. However, one reason for this misinterpretation may be that the visual component is far more critical than the written in maintaining a successful network of communication. Visual artifacts associated with behavior are commonly used to communicate identity, and oral traditions served to maintain continuity over time. The visual element inherent in the artifact or in the natural environment is the vehicle through which actual or preferred membership in a cultural or economic group can be overtly and publicly communicated. The visual symbols occur both through ritual and through architecture. Therefore, experiencing ritual is akin to experiencing architecture. The complexity in meaning syntax are such that ritual, inclusive here of the ornamentation of the body, unfolds over time before the beholder and the beholder must move through or around the built environment to experience a place or concept in its entirety. This anthropocentrism is of vital importance to West African thought, spatial constructs, and shows the extents to which the manipulation of the body vis-à-vis the built environment is part of the primary communication of these African cultures.² If both the manipulation of the body's vessel and the building's vessel is filled with visual communication it could be said that there are certain dwelling metaphors placed on their bodies and conversely anthropomorphic readings made on their dwellings.

Perhaps this reveals a direct parallel, in that the body is

seen as a media as manipulable as the architecture and that the architecture consists of parts or forms that are similar/related to the body.

The Body. The vessel called The Body, may receive a position of status within a society or culture based on the ornamentation of that vessel, and how revealing it is to the world around it. This includes the outermost layer of our vessel, consisting of clothing, jewelry, and headwear, and

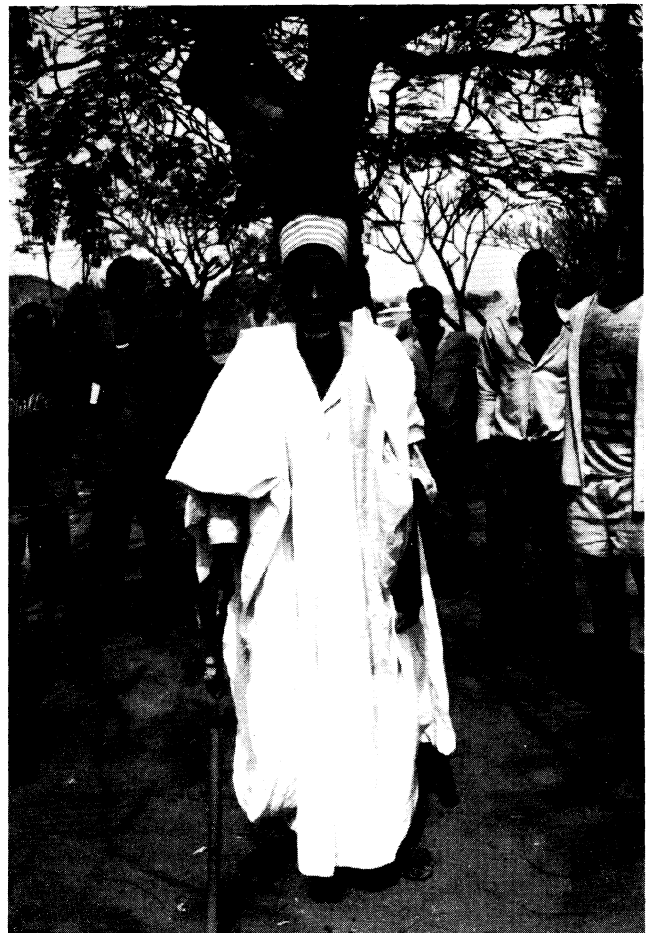


Fig. 1. Hausa babarigan.

the more intimate layers: that of hair and skin.

The vestment serves the primary means of marking status within one's tribe, as well as guaranteeing protection of the vessel. From the common citizen in simple tunics to the ruling elite in elaborate *babarigan*, what one wears is always indicative of status within social context. The Hausa *babarigan*, an elegant tunic, is typically constructed in three pieces of cotton fabric; the central third, divided in two at the neck opening, is not unlike the opening of a building or granary, carries the most intense concentration with its embroidered motifs. Moreover, it is historically imbued with protective meaning. From birth to death, both common and elite, distinguished the transitions in life, or status through types of cloth, certain patterns and weaves that they utilize.

Jewelry is conceptualized by its many levels of ornamentation. There is jewelry as simple adornment and there is jewelry as charm or protection. The nomadic/pastoral tribes of the Sahara use both of these in their societies extensively, perhaps indicating a lack of permanent household in which to store dowries. The type and number of earrings and necklaces may simply be an indicator of region; whereas the material of which it is made relates to status. In a discussion of simple adornment, young women buy earrings, bracelets, and rings to be given away as tokens of friendship and are sometimes collected over the course of one's life. A bracelet or anklet of twisted leather or metal, or a ring on a finger or

through an earlobe worn for protection is also collected over the course of one's life. The extent of which a piece of jewelry is given more or less significance is contingent on its physical nature. In ritual, the closed ring without a break symbolizes protection. Fulbe women wear heavy brass anklets for rainy season ceremonies symbolic of the feet touching moist soil in months to come. As seen here, qualities of closure or weight play an important role.

Jewelry as charm or protection is evident in the talisman or amulet. These traditionally take the form of small leather or metal containers encapsulating bones, horns, medicinal packets, bits of paper with Koranic writing, and certain roots or grasses which are believed to be full of supernatural powers. Worn close to the heart or around the waist or limb, some amulets serve a protective or preventative function, designed to ward off illness from babies or other specific evils. Others are worn to obtain wealth, increase attractiveness or virility, or to gain power over others. Some are designed to render bad unto others. Tribes such as the Wodaabe use talismans prepared with recipes passed from generation to generation.

The head represents the superior level of being, therefore the ornamentation of the head must be the most important consideration. Head dresses and hats are important in general tribe identification, especially when observed from a distance. Tuareg and Fulbe men wrap their heads with a



Fig. 2. Fulani jewelry.



Fig. 3. Tuareg with talismans.

five meter long turban to protect their faces against the wind and sand. Hausa men wear a colorful, embroidered cap similar in shape to the simple white caps worn in Northern Africa. The traditional Fulani herder's hat consists of a pointed basket body sometimes embellished with incised-pattern leather work. Young Fulani men are sometimes found with nontraditional flamboyant hats, making this the contemporary identification of young herdsman. Women wear a number of shaped headdresses; the shape, color, size and quality is determined by tribe identity and status.

A more intimate form of tribal identification is seen in hair styles. Traditionally in the Wodaabes, plaiting (braiding) or hairdressing is done by women. The hair is arranged into two side braids, with a third braid twisted into a knot on the forehead and a fourth knotted on the nape of the neck. This hairstyle is similar in nature to their nomadic tents. In the Fulani tribes, the beauty of the young man's coiffure is equal to that of the young woman. The hair is plaited with tiny wires and buttons and other objects giving the wearer a unique profile that can be identified at a distance (this too resembles their temporary living structures).

When the Fulani is older, the hair style is similar but much less flamboyant in nature. In the Nok societies, hair is often



Fig. 4. Wodaabe woman.



Fig. 5. Fulani coiffure.

plaited in a ridge across the top of the head with objects woven on the sides. However, one of the most interesting forms of communication through hair design is seen in the elaborate hairstyle of Fulbes. Five concentric rings of amber beads are placed so as to revolve around a point that constitutes one's personal axis of space. This concept is important because it imparts the amount of attention placed on grounding or being a part of a larger cosmology. Hausa men make public display of grooming the hair about the head and face often being shaved entirely with a straight razor and usually by blind men who took the position of village barber.

Lastly and most importantly, the ornamentation of the body with the Tribal Mark is perhaps the most serious form of commitment to one's community. This is tantamount to the physical presence of flags or banners or other objects that represent place/group. It is the ultimate act that completes the traditional panoply of tribal identification of one's personal vessel. These marks are the armorial bearing of a tribe.

During a child's early years, the tribal marks are cut into the face; the tribe's identification first, then later a personal identification. Personal identifications can include the order of birth, day of the week, etc. If a child in a family dies, a mark is placed on the next child who moves up in rank. Some tribes indicate the transition into maturity of their young by adding a scar. Typically kohl is rubbed into the cuts giving

the scar a dark profile. But certain tribes allow a simple scar to form, using light and shadow to give its identification, as done on the skins of many buildings. Some scars, as in the Hausa, are added simply as beauty marks. These marks, called *akanka*, usually occur around the eyes, comparable to the Western use of eye makeup. Other portions of the body are often marked, above the waist as a means of warding off illness or protecting a limb. Post-colonial governments have discouraged and even outlawed disfiguring children with tribal markings to reinforce national instead of tribal identities that may be potentially divisive. It is rare in West Africa to see scarification practiced on children today (although children are painted or marked temporarily at times of celebrations).

The Building. Like The Body, the vessel called The Building, can help to establish personal and community identity through ornamentation. In traditional Africa, ornamentation of this kind is not seen as a luxury. African designs of the architectural ornamentation have usually become standardized through generations of use, which tends to iron out imperfections that arise between the design and the media in which it is realized. Many times this ornamentation is a pictorial symbol and can contain several meanings, the appropriate always determined by context.

While visually generic, layers of meaning are present and can only be deciphered, as with the body, over time.



Fig. 6. Nupe man with tribal marks.

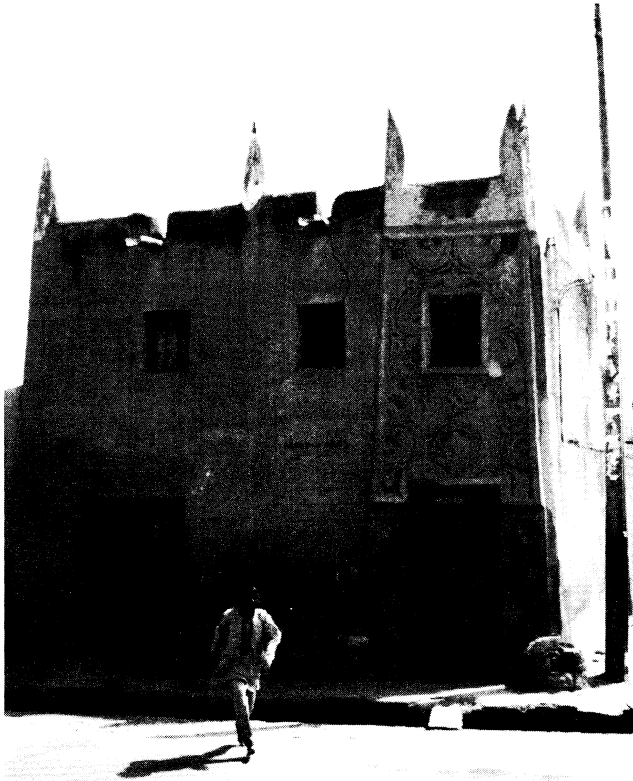


Fig. 7. House in Daria.

Not unlike the body, the building too conveys messages through its outer most layers consisting of media, structure/shape/roof (which delineates a building profile) and patterns of the skin of the building. What decides a media is usually availability of construction materials in a region. Moving around within a region that utilizes the same material, it can be seen that it is the execution of textures and the order of the materials that is used to differentiate tribal identity. A more refined manipulation of such order is based usually on status (having monies to afford the labor of craftsmanship). Building profiles are necessary for identification from a distance which historically was necessary in developing territorial boundaries. Spotting the periphery of many villages, one finds mini-representations (which serve as granaries) of the larger depiction of a tribe's architectural identity.

On the skin of the building, similar to the tribal mark, a more intimate identification can be made through patterns. An elaborate pattern can be read in different ways, depending on the viewer's knowledge or degree of sophistication. Forms of script, around the entrance of a building is considered to have supernatural powers, and as such are divorced from their meaning and stylized nature. Forms abstracted from a script were manipulated for protective purposes and applied in concentrated doses to protect both real and simulated openings. Some of this patterning is pictorial in nature and can have many abstract meanings. Many of the designs on African buildings, because of their reliance on

texture and relief, as well as on shape, could only be properly appreciated by the observer moving about in front of them. An understanding of their relationship with the prevailing climatic conditions is necessary. Very lightly incised lines, not unlike the tribal mark, show a clear dark shadow with great effect.

Ornamentation is clearly of considerable psychological significance, and it tends to occur at points of potential social stress. Buildings, like the houses of the chief, shrines, and meeting houses, are a power focus for the community and are highly ornate. Within the individual homestead, ornamentation in its psychological warning dimension is perhaps meant to be seen as serving to reduce potential ambiguity and embarrassment by identifying places of special taboo, and in establishing territoriality. In fact, thresholds are everywhere saturated with profound ritual connotations as spatial boundary points.

Ornamentation was also applied to points of structural stress. Aside from the obvious critical points, it is possible that the bowls and elongated scuppers set in the roofs of certain Hausa buildings might have originated as early warning mechanisms for structural failure. On buildings of the Gwari or Kanuri tribes, at the pinnacle of the conical thatched roofs, a finial of an overturned pot was placed to prevent leaks where the thatch comes together in a peak. As simple adornment, in the interiors of Nupe buildings, plates are placed at the confluence of several structural elements.

As found in most human settlements, African villages also express through their arrangement, the social structure of the group of people living in them. Of course the actual relationships varies from year to year as people are born, married, divorced, or die; but the general structure remains fairly constant. The relatively impermanent nature of the buildings meant that there could be a quick response to changed circumstances. On the domestic level, a man taking a new wife usually builds a house for her in his compound. At the village level, the death of a chief often brings about reorientation of the village as new houses are built to face the new chief's house. Villages and houses were built around people and their groupings; there was no question of people adapting themselves to fixed houses and villages. As such the shape of a village is expected to change shape over time. Historically, larger collections of these villages were kept within impressive fifteen meter high walls, such as the towns of Hausaland. One might imagine these walls as the skin of the vessel. However the changes that are occurring are within the walls as opposed to at the surface of the wall. Its center, however, that which is contained within the vessel, is that which is the whole that does not change.

Conclusion. The freedom with which traditional West African cultures manipulate their bodies and architecture manifests a type of ornamental communication through which tribes and cultures identify and define themselves. This non literate communication may seem vague and esoteric to the unfamiliar western eye but within the culture

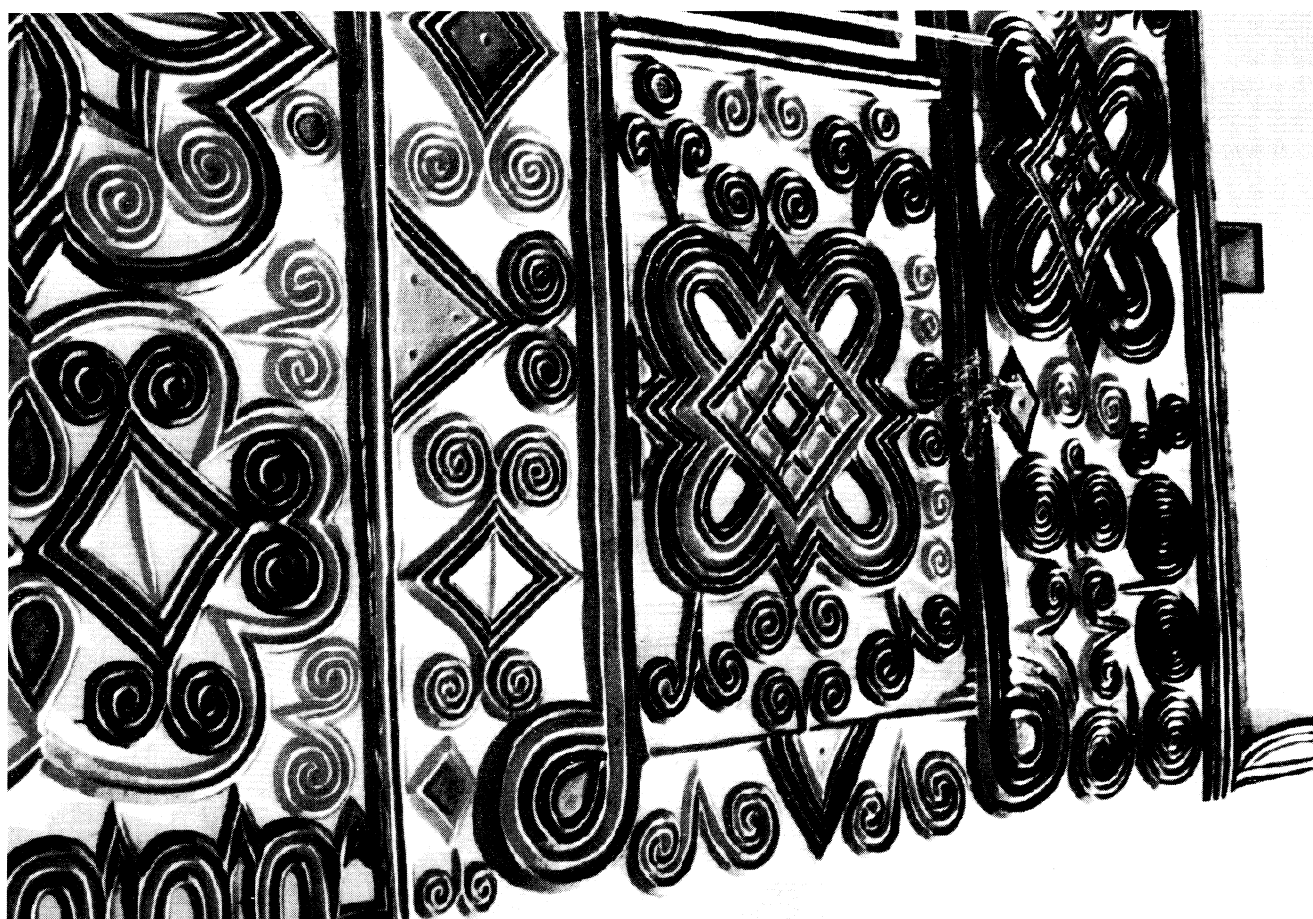


Fig. 8. Emir Palace.

the meanings are as sharp and clear as a well crafted sentence. At times, this non literate communication appears to be readily understandable but the urge to spontaneously draw conclusions must be suppressed. A more inclusive perspective and reading should be encouraged to attempt a non-biased observation. Western translation carries with it the danger of losing critical information. It is the essence of these people, demonstrated by this communication that we must attempt to understand.

NOTES

¹ This is relative to the city as well as rural populations. Although there has been an economically driven movement from rural areas to the cities, the education system has not grown at an equal rate to accommodate the new, illiterate populations.

² The ethnographic/architectural perspective that the author holds is a result of living for one year within these societies. The level of intimacy, however, was always at an expected distance.

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