

Between local architecture and modernity: An ethnography of the Bulsa house in Northern Ghana

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the concept of well-being as expressed in the context of local architecture and the changes that have taken place in this area among the Bulsa in northern Ghana. Anthropologists and sociologists have argued that the essence of local architecture is not so much about the materials or aesthetics of the physical structures but, most importantly about the cultural values, religious, economic practices, and the social relationships among inhabitants of the house. Using ethnographic data gathered over a period of (3) three years, the paper argues that local architecture among the Bulsa is more about how practices of well-being determine the core reasons for the erection of a house than it is about the material or designs used in constructing the house. The paper contributes to our understanding of how changes in local architecture impact sociocultural meanings of well-being and determine the ordering of the physical organisation of the space of a house. The paper concludes that, today, in the Bulsa area, both local architecture and modern-style buildings define and express everyday dynamics of well-being among inhabitants, ancestors, and their animals in the house.

Keywords: local architecture, well-being, modernity, Bulsa, Northern Ghana

Introduction

This paper explores the concept of well-being within the context of local architecture among the Balsa and the changes or transformations that have taken place in this area in the last three decades. In many parts of Africa, sociologists and anthropologists have theorised the connection between local architecture and modern housing and shown how changes that are taking place in this area are impacting social relationships and physical organisation of the built environment of peoples (cf. Prussin 1976; Vellinga 2005; Dafinger 2011; Cassiman 2011; Addo 2016). In Ghana, scholars such as Meyer, (2011), Cassiman (2011), Addo, (2016), Oppong and Badu (2012), and Nukunya (2016), have argued that migration, religion, education, history, aesthetics, family, gender relations and lineage structures are major factors influencing the meaning, purpose, and changes of local architecture. For example, Addo's work (2016) in Vittin, a suburb of the Tamale metropolis, showed that local architecture is not just a physical dwelling, but importantly, it offers the inhabitants a sense of identity, rootedness, and history and expresses dynamic relations between the living and the dead (2016:109). Additionally, Cassiman (2011) has demonstrated that among the Kasena, of the Upper East Region of Ghana, local architecture/dwelling shapes a house's social and physical space and provides a sense of belonging to the inhabitants. She underscores the importance of women's contribution to the house, not only with respect to

childbirth, but also in matters related to funerals, conjugal issues and the actual erection and external finishing to a house.

Elsewhere in Africa, Prussin, (1976:8-10) also showed how among the Fulani of northern Nigeria and Sudan, the physical man-environment expresses the supernatural, existential, and religious life of the people and how the meaning of certain material symbols influence the functionality of the concrete environment (see also Tonah, 2011 on the Fulani of northern Ghana).

The above illustrations bring to the fore that, in Ghana, as in other African societies, the essence of local architecture is not so much about the materials or aesthetics of the physical structures, but as Vellinga argued, “houses are interdependently linked to the cultural values, religious, economic needs and social relationships of the inhabitants” (Vellinga 2005, 4). Human dwelling is thus, a universal dimension of material culture that cross-culturally defines and shapes the domestic domain, while serving as a framework for corporate activity, solidarity and affirmation of cultural values, norms, economic and social life (cf. Stender, et al. 2022, Ingold 2011). In the specific case of the Bulsa, while anthropologists such as Meier (1999), Kroger, (2001), and Atuick (2020) have done work related to marriage, funerals, and death, there is very little that has been done about Bulsa local architecture and practices of wellbeing and changes that have taken place in this area in the past three decades.

This paper's goal explores how cultural, religious, and symbolic meanings and practices of well-being underpin the erection of a Balsa house. Further, it seeks to find out how social and cultural change has impacted dwelling practices or architecture among the people. The paper contributes to our understanding of how sociocultural practices and meanings of well-being determine or order the physical organisation of local architecture of the inhabitants of a house. The paper concludes that today, in the Balsa area, both local architecture and modern-style buildings define and express everyday dynamics of well-being among inhabitants, ancestors, and their animals in the house.

Background: The concept of well-being, or *nyinyogsa* among the Balsa and within the context of the house

The concept of well-being is varied and has been articulated quite broadly in medicine, economics, psychology, philosophy, economics, sociology and anthropology, among others (Mathews and Izquierdo 2010, Osei Tutu et al. 2020; Ferraro and Barletti 2016). For example, Ferraro and Barletti, (2016) argue that culture and place i.e. the lived reality of people are significant markers of understanding the meaning and purpose of individual and collective well-being. Recently, great attention has been placed on the importance of well-being to society and how to measure it. However, cultural

notions of well-being are quite varied even within the same society. Writing about wellbeing from a cultural perspective in Ghanaian society, Osei Tutu et al, (2020) argued that cultural models of wellbeing tend to put “greater emphasis on sustainability-oriented themes or material sufficiency and successful navigation of normative obligations” (2020,1). In anthropology, notions of well-being may not be lacking, and we have the example of the work of Mathews and Izquierdo, (2010). However, hardly does one find literature linking well-being to dwelling or architecture and demonstrating how the house is fundamentally a context for constructing and promoting well-being. This gap is what the paper seeks to fill by showing how Balsa local architecture or house is not just a construction of mud and thatch but primarily a sociogram elucidating and reinforcing wellbeing practices through the house's different structural units.

According to Mathews and Izquierdo, (2010),

Well-being is an optimal state for an individual, community, society, and the world as a whole. It is conceived of, expressed, and experienced in different ways by different individuals and within the cultural contexts of different societies: different societies may have distinctly different culturally shaped visions of well-being. Nonetheless, well-being bears a degree of commonality due to our common humanity and interrelatedness over space and time (2010, 5).

Mathews and Izquierdo acknowledged the universality of well-being but also emphasised how different practices in different cultures shape wellbeing. I am particularly inspired by the concept of well-being espoused by the two authors because it resonates with the Balsa concept of wellbeing, literally translated as *nyinyogsa*.¹ Well-being is socio-culturally constructed and is experienced by individuals and groups, but may also be compared interpersonally and interculturally because all individuals partake in the worlds of others across different societies (Wiseman and Brasher 2008, 355). Among the Balsa, well-being is embedded in everyday sociocultural and religious life among the inhabitants of the different structural spaces and units of the house/compound. The Balsa speak Buli and live in the Balsa North and South Districts in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The two districts comprise thirteen (13) communities that share common customs, cultural beliefs, norms, and values. Among the Balsa, the residential arrangement after marriage is virilocal and the system of inheritance is patrilineal. This means that, “when a young man marries, he stays with his spouse within his father’s compound with other extended family relations. Usually, he will either live in one household with his parents or break a portion of the compound and build outwards” (Gariba and Atuick, 2022, 81).

¹ In other language groups, well-being may be expressed using different terms or words. For instance, among Akan groups, well-being is expressed as *ahoto* or *asetena pa*, or *agbe no no nyue* (see, Osei Tutu et al, 2020).

In the Bulsa area, every compound has a landlord, *Yeri-Nyono*, who is usually the oldest surviving male of the patriline. In this way, a woman cannot be the landlord of a house. The *Yeri Nyono*, takes his authority from his religious role, where he acts as an intermediary between the ancestors and living members of the extended family. He is the caretaker of family land, and the political and religious head of the household. He is often given the right to the final word when matters affecting the well-being of the different family members of the house are discussed.

During fieldwork, one of my older informants, John Anoro, shared: "In Buluk, a house, is a house not because of the physical structures, but because it is essentially a unit of wellbeing *nyinyogsa*, a place where relationships among inhabitants of the house, the ancestors and kin are expected to be cordial and full of 'cool body' *nyinyogsa*, or 'sweet body' *nyinmagsum*."² Cool body or sweet body are bodily metaphors related to house where the *Yeri Nyono* ensures that the house is a place of healthy relationships, peace, unity, plenty of food to share among families and kin. The Bulsa are a religious group and from that point of view, they consider a house as a metaphysical world involving an unbreakable relationship between the inhabitants and God, *Naawon*, the living spirits, deities and the ancestors *kwoma* who play a great role in the everyday activities of the living (Kroger, 2001).

² Interview conducted at Wiaga-Sinyagsa, January, 2023

The Balsa, however, believe that life is not a linear process, but one that is also full of unexpected and turbulent outcomes understood as *nyintuila* or 'hot body'. In an interview with Baba Akoba, he told me:

nyintuila happens when a house is immersed in intrafamily conflicts, unexpected deaths, lack of offspring, theft, punishment from the ancestors. Also, *nyintuila* shows that the inhabitants of the house lack happiness, peace, harmony and a sense of belonging.³

Understood in this way, *nyinyogsa* is not a permanent non-negotiable state, but a process of continuous creation and reinforcement of everyday social and cultural practices that promote wellbeing involving healthy relations between the living, the ancestors and animals. As Ingold (2011) argued, dwellings or houses "have life histories, which consist in the unfolding of their relations with both human and non-human components of their environment (2011, 187). When the inhabitants of the house fail to act in ways that create and reinforce *nyinyogsa*, then *nyintuila* will engulf the house.

In this way, a house becomes a visible depiction of well-being, and the expression of well-being is intimately embodied in the different structural units of the house. Thus, in this paper, well-being, *nyinyogsa* means the daily collective and individual effort of the inhabitants of a house to promote a sense of belonging, sharing, conviviality, commensality and interdependence among themselves, God and the ancestors and to avoid acts that may turn the house into a hot body, *nyintuila*.

³ Interview conducted at Sandema, July 2021

Methodology

The paper draws on ethnographic research carried out for a period of about three years between June 2020 and January 2023, and through participant observation with semi-structured and structured interviews. The interest in this research was triggered and shaped by two fundamental goals. Firstly, to understand how Bulsa's local architectural designs and structures inform well-being and vice versa. Secondly, to appreciate the impact of modernity and the changes that have taken place in the architectural culture of the people in the last three decades. I engaged landlords, family heads, elderly women, youth, and local builders. These actors were chosen because of their experience and knowledge of the architectural history of the Bulsa, and their roles in the physical and social organisation of the house. Through structured and semi-structured interviews, I gathered information on thematic areas such as the role of landlords, the ancestors, the matriarch of the house, the beliefs and practices of well-being, importance of the different structural units of the house and impact of modernity on architecture in the area. Additionally, I visited four (4) homes where the erection of new houses was taking place and saw how men, youth, friends, children and women were all involved in the erection of the house at different levels of participation.

Although I come from the area, I was able to take an outsider's position and to build a good relationship with the research participants in a manner that enhanced the success of the research or fieldwork.

The article is divided into a number of interconnected parts expressing the pivotal idea that local architecture among the Balsa of northern Ghana is more about how practices of wellbeing determine the core reasons for the erection of a house, than it is about the material or designs used in constructing the house.

Results

The founding of a house and well-being - Yeri ate ka nyinyogsa

Among the Balsa, (and perhaps other northern groups), a house, *yeri* comprises semi-detached compounds, rooms, courtyards, an open shed, granaries, rubbish heap and graves, among other units. During fieldwork, Anoro Atangta, a landlord, explained that “for the Balsa, a house is the basis of identity, belonging and wellbeing, so it cannot be built and immediately inhabited. A house must be founded through a ritual birth so to seek the protection and blessings of the gods and ancestors on the builders and later the inhabitants”.⁴ In her work among the Kasena, Cassiman found a similar practice, “a house is ritually founded in, and molded from the earth. It grows and changes in harmony with the lives that unfold within its confines. The house is thus a dynamic, organic being offering protection and giving identity to its inhabitants” (Cassiman 2011, 26). Cassiman’s position corroborates Atangta’s sentiments, showing why a house must be ritually born into

⁴ Interview conducted at Wiaga-Sinyangsa, June, 2022

existence to serve as a pathway to offering a sense of identity and belonging, but primarily wellbeing among the inhabitants.

Traditionally, when a young man (often the first son) and his family want to move out of his father's compound, he first informs and seeks the blessings of the landlord, who will ask him to consult a diviner to find out if it's appropriate to move or not because every new settlement entails a degree of social and spiritual precarity which might negatively impact one's wellbeing and so must be well negotiated and navigated (cf. Prussin, 1974). When the consultation reveals he cannot move because he might incur the ancestors' wrath and impair his family's well-being, he may defer the movement to a later day. However, when he is given the 'green light', he gets up at dawn, moves to a portion of the lineage land, drops a millet stock, a sign that he can feed and fend for his family, and stays there till daybreak. When morning comes, the landlord of his father's house or his representative will persuade him not to move. But, if he is adamant, he is left to stay. According to Luke Agyab, one of my elderly informants,

Starting a new house requires the approval of the family head and elders because it is like adding another layer of life onto the wellbeing of the family and demonstrates that one's movement does not sever one's protection, social support and roots from the paternal home to which he always will belong.⁵

In recent times, however, it has been observed that there are people, especially among the youth and urbanites once they have money, they

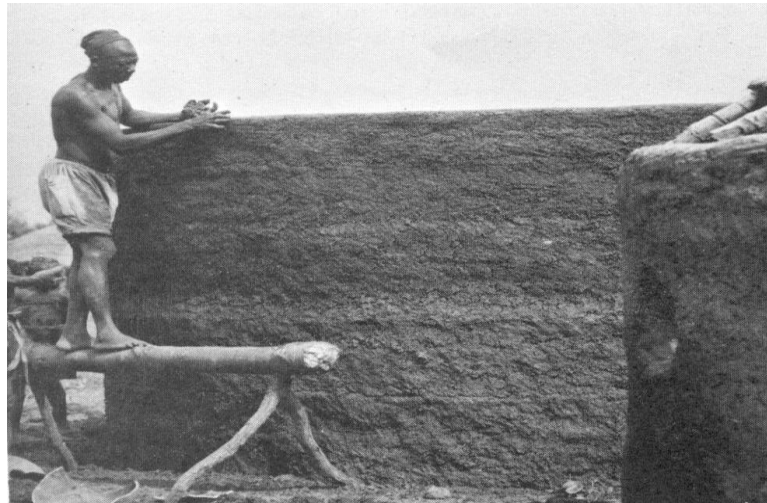
⁵ Interview with Adiekase Abula at Sandema-Wablinsa, June, 2020

disregard the preparatory rites, and start building and may move into the new house before the family head is informed. This group disregard the preparatory rites because of individualism and modernity. Later, when the young man begins the actual building, the landlord of the paternal home will go to the designated site, hit the ground three times with a hoe to signify formal approval for the erection of the house to begin. Building a house is a rigorous activity involving the cooperation of the male inhabitants of the house, women, children, friends and one's kinsfolk. This communal effort is a central tenet of patrilineal societies, where "men build communally, but it is also they who exercise jurisdictional rights over the residence, rights validated through genealogical and ancestral ties" (Prussin1974, 193, see also Cassiman 2011).

In the Bulsa worldview, there are only two cardinal points, namely the East *kori*, and West, *yeri ning*. On the one hand, the East is associated with multiple dangers, including xenophobia, strong dangerous winds, and malevolent spirits. On the other hand, the West is linked to diurnal and nocturnal safety, blessings, and protection. In fact, they say well-being comes from the West. This knowledge helps in appreciating why a Bulsa house, starting with the open shed through the main gate to other parts of the house is generally located facing the West.⁶ When the house is finally completed, it is ritually born into existence through the smearing of watery substances and

⁶ See Tonah (2011), about similar views related to the Fulani house in northern Ghana.

oil and the making of libation by the landlord seeking the protection and blessings of the gods and ancestors on the occupants, but especially the women whose fecundity will bring forth offspring to sustain the house from generation to generation. As part of the birthing of the house, the owner brews *pito* and invites inhabitants of the compound and his kinsmen and women to drink in thanksgiving for completing his personal dwelling whose primary essence is the wellbeing of the inhabitants.



A. A local builder erecting an adobe-style house, Gariba (2023)

Women and the erection of the house

As earlier mentioned, women play a significant role in the building of a Bulsa house, an activity perceived as an extension of their domestic duties. Women among the Bulsa fetch water, prepare food for the builders, and meticulously do the finishing to the walls and the surface design (cf. Prussin 1974). This is done through the coating of the house with cow dung, sand, and a liquid

boiled from the bark of locust bean pads, *dawadawa*. During fieldwork, I visited a home under construction and one of the women explained to me:

“Cow dung, water and earth are a sign of fertility, spiritual protection, purity, and energy because we believe that cows are a source of energy for nourishment and the earth a source of fertility for both humans and animals. Water denotes life and purity. So, when we mix cow dung, water and earth together, we bring the divine and mundane together in a ‘harmonious’ relationship.”⁷



B. The design and smooth finishing of the outer wall of a local house, Cassiman (2011)

Through this activity, the women give a beautiful well-decorated smooth finish to the outer skin of the house. This will be repeated annually or when there is a need to reinforce the walls and to make them water-resistant.

⁷ Madam Agnes Lariba, Wiaga-Siyangsa, December, 2021

Additionally, the periodic maintenance of the walls and surface is an act of spiritually renewing and cementing the unity and strength of the relationship between inhabitants of the house, *Naawon* and the ancestors. Evidently, this underscores the role of women as essential actors in the organic wellbeing and sustenance of the Bulsa house.

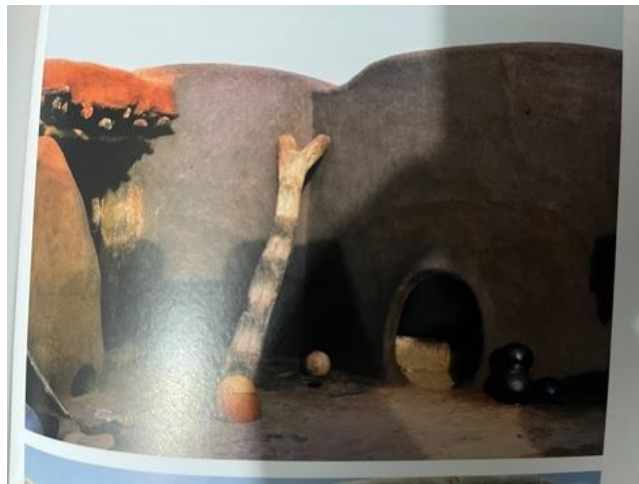
Naming of a house

Another significant aspect of founding a Bulsa house is the naming of the house, usually influenced by the life of a leading and well-respected personality of the patriclan. As part of normal practice, a house is named after a former landlord who first settled in the house or the current one. In the past, when the house was named after the landlord, it becomes his responsibility to show good leadership, including making sure the nutritional, health, and spiritual needs of the inhabitants of the compound were catered for. Today, this is not the case, the landlord's role is more religious than economic. The inhabitants of a house are very much known by the name of the house. For example, *ateng-yeri* means, Ateng's house and once a member of the house mentions the name in the community, the house is easily known. However, because the Bulsa house is founded through male elders of the lineage, whose role, among others, is to offer periodic sacrifices to the ancestors or gods of the land (something women cannot do), the house is not named after a woman.

The above narrative brings to the fore the fact that among the Balsa, a house is a dynamic network of interrelationships and practices involving the inhabitants, ancestors and with animals. It is through these dynamic interrelationships that wellbeing is built, expressed and sustained in the practice of everyday life (cf. Prussin, 1974; Awedoba, 2011; Luning, 2011).

The Twin Room - Kpilima doug

The twin room is the ancestral room, (*Kpilima doug*) comprising a two-part facility *dalung and dayiik*, which has a flat-roofed structure.



C. The Twin-room of the Matriarch of the house, Cassiman (2011)

The twin-room is considered the most important room in a Balsa house because it is the center of the house, wherever it is located, and the room where many acts related to the wellbeing of the inhabitants are enacted. It is the abode of the ancestors, shrines/gods, the place where mats, *taasa*, of

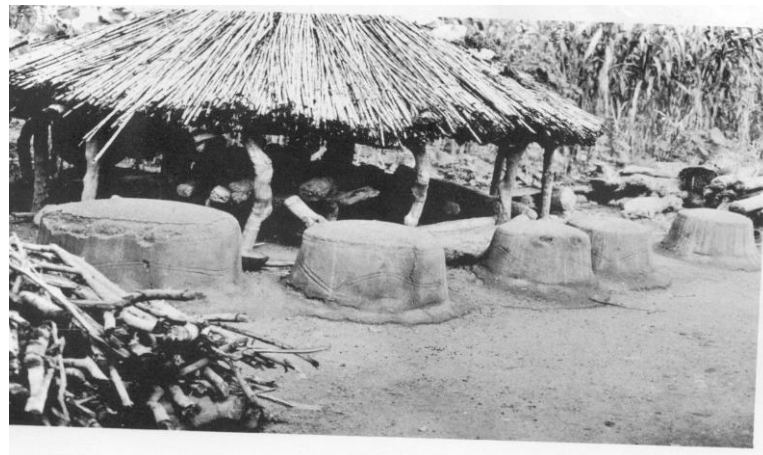
deceased members are kept until the family is ready to perform their funerals, and where widows sit and mourn the dead during funerals. The twin room is also the place where a newly married woman to the house is received by elderly women when she arrives. Here, the new bride is assured of the protection and support of the ancestors, women and elders in her marriage and fecundity to the house. During fieldwork, Asibi Azong, an elderly woman, told me, “the twin room is the heart and eyes of the house. That is where our ancestors are lying and where we draw strength to promote daily acts of wellbeing.”⁸ The matriarch (*amaa*), the eldest woman of the compound, lives there and takes care of the twin room. Sometimes, the *amaa* is also the wife of the compound head if she happens to be the eldest woman among the women belonging to the first landlord’s compound or family. She serves as the mouthpiece and mentor of the women and is seen as the mother of all in the compound, honoured and respected for that. She is responsible for preparing meals for sacrifices, including those connected to the ancestors or gods of the house. Knowing what is expected of her as a matriarch in the family, she is always careful of what she says and does. When visitors come to the house especially during funerals, they are first received at the open hut *kusung*, in front of the house where they are offered a warm welcome and a drink before proceeding to matriarch’s room, *amaa doug*. Presently, it has become a worry to culturally minded members that modern-style houses are

⁸ Interview at Sandema-Wablinsa, June 2020

not providing the culturally appropriate context where, for example, the role of the matriarch and the activities of the twin room are enacted.

The open hut – *Kusung*

When approaching a Balsa compound, the first structure is an open shed '*Kusung*' made with wooden beams resting on short Y shape wooden columns. It is roofed with thatch in a circular fashion. Located in front of the hut of the houses is the ancestral shrines *bogluta*, showing the number of generations of ancestors in the existence of a lineage. The picture below shows five ancestral shrines indicating that the ancestor with the biggest shrine *bogluk* lived five generations ago, and the present head of the homestead, *Yeri Nyono*, is the eldest of that ancestor's descendants.



D. Open shed (*Kusung*) in front of a house and ancestral shrines, Kroger (2001)

The ancestral shrines are often positioned in a line from the earliest male ancestor to the latest so that they form a kind of structure that in turn influences how brothers of the patriclan and their families live in the house.

This social stratification is very much respected because it helps to maintain order and stability among elders and their families in the compound. Also, it provides an eloquent example of the symbiotic relationship between the living and the ancestors who take part in the daily affairs of the living and protect them from evil, sickness, and calamities, but may sometimes punish them with disease and misfortune when it is required.

Writing about the Kasena, Cassiman aptly describes the open shed:

as the public space of the house, the front yard serves as a reception area and transitory space between outside and inside, between public and private, or between male and female space. The front yard allows filtering and surveillance of who and what can enter the house. It represents the “face” of the house, a kind of “visiting card” that indicates its size, capacity, wealth and quality (Cassiman 2011, 50).

As a filtering and surveillance space and face of the house, the open shed provides mostly male elders of the compound, the space to rest from their labours and receive greetings from visitors or strangers before they move into the homesteads/compounds of those they are visiting. More so, the open shed is the appropriate cultural context for family meetings among the inhabitants and kinswomen and men. In this way, the *kusung*, is a social space defined by age and gender; but also, a forum for fun, male talk, and conviviality. This said, women who are advanced in age and well-respected, and have become mentors and mothers to all in the compound may be allowed to stay with elders in the hut. The views of these women carry a lot of weight when, for example, issues of marriage or funerals are discussed.

When a stranger arrives in the hut, and before formal greetings commence, he is first given fresh water to replenish his energy having travelled from a long distance. In principle, a stranger is denied access into the homestead s/he is visiting until asked to proceed by the elders. A young boy will normally be available to lead the stranger. The greetings of strangers can take a long time to complete because the elders would like to know in detail their mission and whether the visit will bring bad omen or good luck to the house. It is believed that strangers are ambivalent beings, who may be bad spirits disguised as human beings carrying bad messages or good spirits bringing good news to the house. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the elders, especially the landlord who is believed to have a 'third eye' to 'filter' the intentions of this potentially 'bad' or 'good' person. The activities that take place around the open hut, provide the social space and ways in which wellbeing is achieved so that the lives of the inhabitants are not in danger. Today, some traditional houses may still have an open shed, but for those who have built 'modern' style houses, the open shed is completely gone.

The entrance gate, *Nansuing*

The entrance gate is a pair of cone-shaped pillars; at the base of each is a chicken roost. A Bulsa compound has only one main gate that generally looks towards the west, where the sun sets. The positioning of the door towards the west is meant to protect the compound against bad spirits (*tangbana*), strong

winds and rains from the east (see Drucker-Brown, 2001). At night, the gate is closed to prevent predators from plundering the livestock in the cattle yard. But more importantly, the gateway symbolises economic independence and success from hard work. If the joint family in a compound comprises several separate farming groups, each group will have its own gateway into the compound. Just inside the entrance, one finds a big yard (*nankpeing*) where cattle and sometimes sheep and goats belonging to each family are kept.



E. Open gate, *nansuing* of a house, Gariba (2011)

The gate to a Bulsa house is perceived as a form of entrance of a child into the home through naming rituals and the departure of a deceased during funerary rites, symbolising the entrance and departure from this life. The Bulsa accord great religious and symbolic meaning to the main gate of a house and those who move in and out of it because it provides a pathway into the inner life of the house and must be well protected or guided so that disorderly happenings such as conflicts, misfortunes and inexplicable

diseases may not erode or destroy the wellbeing of the inhabitants. It is believed that when these untoward happenings begin to take place, the house will suffer from *nyintula* i.e., the inhabitants of the house will lack happiness, peace and harmony.

Customarily, anyone entering the house must do so through the main gate near the open hut. There are however, two smaller back gates that lead directly into individual family courtyards. One of these gates is open and the other is a wall with a long Y shape ladder leaned against it to allow for easy climbing and descending. These gates are used, for bringing in farm produce, when women go fetching water and entry point for regular visitors or kinsfolk of the families. Like the main gate, unknown visitors are not allowed to enter a courtyard through a side gate. Everyone in the family is well socialised in these matters.

The compound, *dabiak*, the kraal *Nangkpieng*, and the granary, *Bui*

Upon entering a house, the compound is the large open area enclosed by the homesteads of the different family units where the granaries, *buita*, are erected, but also the kraal where family livestock, especially cattle and sheep are kept. The compound consists of several cylindrical mud buildings thatched with straw, linked to one another, and surrounded by a mud wall. From a distance, it is difficult to distinguish the rooms. In a sense, the Balsa compound constitutes a sociogram of the families that inhabit it, and this is

projected into several directions. For instance, the compound provides access to all the homesteads, and as such constitutes a transitional space where members of the household easily meet and share pleasantries on their way out or getting into the house. It offers a bird's eye view of the wealth of a house.⁹ In a big compound, one finds members of the nuclear and extended families. The distribution of sub-compounds according to the family heads and their wives reflects the hierarchy of power relations existing among the brothers who claim to have a common male ancestor (cf. Cassiman, 2011)

The head of the eldest among the male's homestead is sometimes located just after the main entrance or on the left side of the twin room or *kpilima doug*, where he sees the activities taking place in the compound, including keeping an eye on the livestock that represents the collective wealth of the different families. One finds a similar arrangement of a compound among the Kasena with whom the Balsa have had social relations for centuries (cf. Cassiman, 2011). The morphology of a Balsa compound manifests the inhabitants' social and economic interrelationships so directly that when internal family changes occur, they are almost immediately translated into physical reorganization. For example, if an elderly man whose children maintain their own families elsewhere loses his wife and does not intend to remarry, his living quarters are reorganised to accommodate the

⁹ Among the Balsa wealth is measured not only in money, but also in terms of animals, wives and children and the amount of food in the granaries of the families of the household.

elder son(s) of one of the other elders in the house. Sometimes, repeated quarrels between brothers and their families may also lead to spatial reorganisation in which one party may be compelled to move out and build elsewhere with the permission of the landlord. Elders argue that this structural morphology is symbolic of the cosmology and communitarian character of the social organization of the people and how space is organised.¹⁰

A significant unit of the compound is the kraal *nangkpieng* where the livestock of the families is kept.¹¹ During fieldwork, I came to understand from older informants that for the Balsa, cattle, more than any animal are sacred and represent the dignity, respect and honour of the families. It is said that cattle are closely linked to the group's continuing existence and agrarian potency. For this reason, bullocks for example, are not easily sold out. They are well taken care of because they are always needed during the farming season to plough the fields for planting. Elsewhere among the Khoe of South Africa, Lombard and Parsons (2015) show how cattle milk is not only a dietary supplement but defines power relations between men and women and the group's intergenerational livelihood and agrarian fecundity. Sacrifices and libations are made periodically to seek the protection of *Naawon* for the

¹⁰ See Dafinger, (2011) for a broader analysis of the organisation and meaning of space within the context of local architecture.

¹¹ Today, because of dirt, mosquitoes, and other challenges, the kraal is located outside the house which also brings about the threat of theft.

cattle as well as sheep, which are important especially for certain sacrifices. Sheep are a symbol of peace and humility, and in this way, remind the families to always live in peace.

Also, the kraal serves as the burial area for male elders of the patrician while women (who always belong to their paternal homes) and young people are buried in old settlement sites serving as the family graveyard. But, burial rites vary across different parts of the Balsa area. During funerary rites, the kraal becomes an important unit of the rites of passage because it houses the granary where the mats of the deceased, especially that of family heads are placed against the granary.

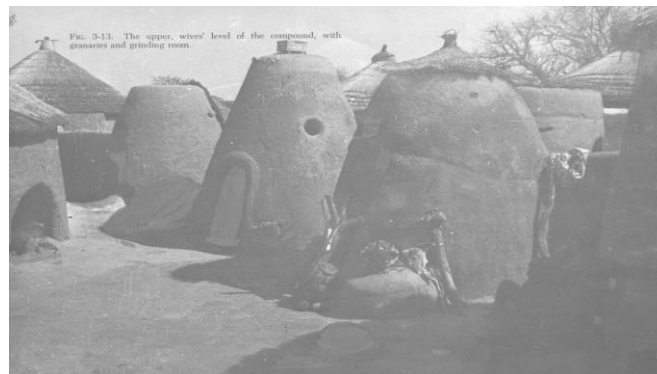
The granary, *bui*

The granary is a significant symbolic feature of well-being in a house. It is in the outer compound, which also doubles as the kraal, where livestock, especially cattle is kept. In northern Ghana, livestock is not only important among the Balsa, but also the Fulani among whom livestock is of great social, cultural and religious significance (cf. Tonah, 2011). In most parts of northern Ghana, “the shape and placement of granaries, the colour and finish of exterior and interior walls, as well as the traditional styles of roofing thatch, are all assertions of clan and lineage identity” (Drucker-Brown 2001, 671). The granary stores grains from where fathers provide for their wives to prepare the daily family meal and for visitors; for they always will be expecting a

close or distant kin to pass by. According to Prussin, “the granaries represent, visually and symbolically, a fulcrum on which these two domains balance; they are the guarantee of a household’s viability and sustenance, of its continued existence” (Prussin 1969, 62). My fieldwork observations corroborate Prussin’s sentiments but also brings out the interesting dimension that granaries are symbols of the economic independence of the families and the fertility, masculinity and responsibility of fathers. In Buluk, a father who allows his granary to be empty while alive, occasions ‘hot body’ and crowding out the possibilities of well-being in his family. In this sense, the granary is a “giver of life and fertility, guarantor of continuity, is itself imbued with a life force by means of sacrifices and libation ceremonies” (Prussin 1974, 195). The granary constitutes an important trajectory of life, hope and sustenance, promoting and sustaining well-being in different social aspects of the house.

Women take grains from the granaries to prepare the family meal, but it is the duty of men to ensure a continuous supply of grains to feed the family. Seedlings may also be kept in the granary and used when the rains come, and it is time for planting. A wife is not allowed to look into her husband’s granary, and it is as though she is trying to see the accumulative wealth of her husband (Cassiman, 2011). This belief explains why the granary is also said to be an intergenerational entity that fathers bequeath to their eldest sons before death. The granary is a father’s bride, which is why he is

the only one (his eldest son may sometimes do so) who can give permission for grains to be taken out of the granary. In fact, the “granary holds the essence of fatherhood. Through the ‘contained’ food inside the granary, and the man guarantees the continuity of life and of his lineage” (Cassiman, 2006:167). Thus, the granary constitutes an essential unit of well-being related to the compound's different social meanings and practices of life.



F. Granaries in the courtyard, *dabiak*, Kroger (2001)

Cultural change and the Bursa house

Cultural change is inevitable in any society. It is, however, significant that practices that promote change are be ordered to ensure the progress and development of society. Muller, (1984) argues that “changing demands made on housing are inevitable even in traditional and rural cultures, as households go through the cycle of growth and diminution and as parts of the house acquire new functions” (1984, 364).

In Ghana, as in other African societies, sociologists and anthropologists have identified modernisation, migration, urbanization, religion, money economy and education as prime factors of social change (cf. Awedoba & Peter-Hahn 2014; Nukunya 2016). In the Balsa area, as is the case among other ethnic groups in northern Ghana, modernisation, migration, religion, and education have been very significant in bringing about far-reaching changes and new developments in architectural taste or culture in the area visibly expressed in the rapid transformation of local architecture into modern architecture (Cassiman 2011; Tonah 2011). Similarly, writing about the Bisa of Burkina Faso, Dafinger (2011) demonstrates that, “over the last two decades, as in most other parts of western Africa, rectangular houses with corrugated iron roofs have increasingly taken the place of the more traditionally shaped round houses” (p.96).¹²

During fieldwork, it was obvious that, the changes that have taken place in local architecture are well appreciated among the generality of the people, but especially, the younger generation who see the change as a sign of enlightenment and participation in ‘modern life.’ Kevin Amaara, a youth, shared his sentiments: “today in Buluk, people of different social and economic standing try to upgrade the family house or individual houses from adobe to modern architecture because it is as a sign of respect, honour and

¹² See, Drucker-Brown (2001) for similar views on philosophy and meanings of local architecture.

great achievement. It is the dream of every family.”¹³ Somehow this perception explains why family heads or parents will periodically remind their sons and daughters in the urban centers and abroad to ‘transform’ the family house so they can also be seen participating in ‘modern life’. Indeed, it is generally perceived that a house not built with cement and roofed with corrugated sheets or at least having a combination of both modern and local architecture is said to be old fashioned. Families and individuals perceive the transformation of the house as expression of great achievement.



G. A combination of local and modern-style architecture, Gariba (2023)

Moreover, it is obvious in the area that for families that have built ‘modern’ style houses, the open shed and the place of the ancestors, the role of the family head and elders in maintaining surveillance or order in respect of those who enter the house the ancestors have completely disappeared. During fieldwork, the landlords I interacted with lamented that as the ‘face’ and entry

¹³ Interview conducted at Sandema-Wublinsa, 2022

point of the house, the disappearance of the open shed amounts to the erosion of the identity, historical roots, memory, connectedness to the living dead and an essential social space of wellbeing. For the elders, the open shed and the entry points “ensure a continuity of experience and the integrity of the self in old age” (Prussin, 2011, 14) and so extremely important to inhabitants of the house.

Additionally, some educated Muslim or Christian urbanites and locals disregard, for example, the rituals that must be performed before a house is inhabited as unimportant. More generally, they see these ritual practices as ungodly acts and an affront to the tenets or doctrine of their faith. Thus, most of them would rather invite the Limaam (Spiritual leader) or Pastor to bless the house before they move in. The traditionalists in the communities see the action of the above group as contesting traditional practices which have had a longstanding social and religious impact on acts of wellbeing related to the house and its inhabitants. The elders have argued that, the practice decouples or delinks the inhabitants of the new house from the paternal home and deprives them of the blessings of the ancestors whose endorsement and protection is practically and ritually significant for their continuing existence.

Additionally, there are others who because of their attachment to tradition and custom see modern houses as foreign ‘products’ that redefine and crowd out the salience of the cultural and religious identity that has for years formed the foundation of wellbeing. For instance, Grace Adeboa, a

middle-aged woman argued, “the soil or earth, the materials for the coating and finishing of the building and walls tell us more about wellbeing, our origin and relationship with *Naawon*, and our ancestors. Cement buildings may be durable but do not connect our being or existence to God, our ancestors and one another.”¹⁴ The sentiments of Adeboa, have also been articulated by Bosman and Whitfield (2015) who argued that, though modern architecture may be durable, it fails to capture local skills transfer, community participation, availability of material, technology and resources in local architecture in different cultures.

During a visit to the area, in January 2023, I discovered that a major deciding factor in the kind of choice a family makes to embrace modern architecture or to keep to the traditional is dependent on the level of poverty, *jangsa* or *wobsum*, in the area. By poverty, I simply mean monetary and material insufficiency. In an interview with Linus Akanpientiba, a landlord, he related that, “poverty is a major impediment disabling many families from reaching their wish or goal to participate in the new culture or civilisation of architectural change or transformation. Cement structures and corrugated roofing sheets take a lot of money and time, but the high degree of unemployment or joblessness in the area means that many homes cannot afford to erect modern houses. In Ghana as in other African societies, architectural change or transformation is a daily affair and it happens with

¹⁴ Interview with Adeboa Grace, 2023 at Wiaga-Guta.

great rapidity (cf. Drucker-Brown, 2001). Indeed, the growth and expansion of architectural structures and designs has changed the face of many communities across the world. Today, in Europe, structures such as churches, city halls, and other important places are kept as legacies and monuments because they reinforce the people's cultural and historical heritage and identity. Similarly, today in Ghana, there is a strong national and local effort to maintain old local architectures despite the rapid growth of modern architectures, because the old embody the history, aesthetic, pride, cultural and religious memories of the past of families, communities and the nation. The Bulsa area is not insulated against these changes because "changing demands made on housing are inevitable even in traditional and rural cultures, as households go through the cycle of growth and diminution and as parts of the house acquire new functions" (Muller 1984, 374). Thus, in my estimation, the centrality of the cultural, religious and social practices that embed well-being and influence how a house is constructed will remain with the people for a very long time to come. This is the 'new normal' of architectural culture and practice. In this sense, family heads or landlords must make a concerted effort to maintain the essential characteristics of both modern and local architectural patterns that enhance the quality of well-being and belonging among inhabitants of the house. (cf. Luning 2011 and Awedoba 2011).



H. A modern-style house in the Balsa area today, Gariba (2023)

Conclusion

The argument I have developed throughout this paper is that among the Balsa a house is shaped and reshaped not only by the transformation of the physical structures but most importantly by the values and norms of well-being. In other words, the Balsa house is a sociogram depicting the social, economic, and political interdependent relationships that create and sustain the well-being of the inhabitants (cf. Scott and Stokman 2015).

The role of the elders of the house, but especially the landlord is significant in determining the social, cultural and symbolic trajectories that inform how inhabitants of the house benefit from everyday practices of well-being. This is very much the case because, as well articulated in the text, the landlord is a pivotal figure whose actions and inactions are significant in promoting or weakening acts of well-being across the different compounds of the house. Wellbeing is inscribed in the very being of inhabitants of the house

and embedded in everyday social relations that give practical direction to what every inhabitant of the compound is required to do to reinforce well-being.

Moreover, I have demonstrated that, the unique relationship between the ancestors and the living unfolds the reality that for the Balsa life does not end in death. The relationship is an eternal one, which is continuously renewed through ritual practices to ensure wellbeing. In this sense, whilst the house is said to be an arena of protection, hope, defence, nutrition, conviviality and unity among members, it can also constitute an arena of conflict, disunity, fragility, and loss of life when social and power relationships between the old and young are not well negotiated and navigated. When this happens, the house is predisposed to become a 'hot body' and not a 'cool' or 'sweet' body. Thus, in my opinion, the cultural, symbolic and religious values and norms that promote well-being must be seen to be stable regardless of the change in the physical structures/environment of the house. Today, and in the future, everyday expression of well-being among the Balsa, will continually be determined by the dynamics of the social relations among inhabitants, their relations with the ancestors and animals as well as the structural morphology or arrangements of the house.

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