

BOOK REVIEW

Architectures of Belonging: inhabiting worlds in rural West Africa. Edited by Ann Cassiman. Antwerp: BAI Publishers, 2011. 213 pages, numerous colour photographs. ISBN 987-90-8586-590-2

This book consists of nine contributed chapters plus a Preface by George Intsiful, Dean of Architecture at KNUST, a Foreword by the well-known writer on the indigenous architectures of Ghana, Labelle Prussin, and an Afterword by the vice-mayor of Antwerp and the vice-rector of the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. The Afterword informs us that the volume was produced to accompany an exhibition entitled 'Home Call' at Antwerp's Museum aan de Stroom, which focused on the Kasena and how they use their houses, and was based on the work of Ann Cassiman, the editor of the volume and author of three of its nine chapters. Prussin entitles her Foreword 'The Anthropology of Architecture and the Architecture of Anthropology', which sums up the essential features of the approach of the contributors to the book. The Preface and Foreword were both written by professional architects, although Prussin is also one of the pioneers in the study of indigenous architecture in Ghana. However all the contributors of articles are anthropologists (and not architects).

While the 'rural West Africa' of the title might suggest a broader range, the book is in fact centered on the culture area that includes part of south central Burkina Faso and north central Ghana, especially the Kasena area (in both countries) which has been the focus of editor's own research. Under the general umbrella of the anthropology of architecture the major topic areas include housing and domestic economy, globalization, and the construction of personal and group identities. The ethnic/linguistic groups whose settlements and buildings are discussed include, besides Kasena, Mossi, Bisa (better known in Ghana as Busansi), and Fulani.

The first of the nine chapters is the “Introduction: Culture and Dwelling”, by the editor, who also provides the final chapter, thus bracketing the collection. She emphasizes the West African dwelling as a signifier of its occupants’ lives. Architecture is a metaphor, but like the lives of a building’s inhabitants it is always in flux. She divides the chapters into two sets; chapters 2 through 6 discuss the houses of particular cultural groups in particular settlements as exponents of meaningful form, while chapters 7 through 9 in different ways discuss the relations between traditional architecture and contemporary global processes, constituting in fact a critique of the “heritage” approach. Considerations of modernization, globalization and their consequences are present in all chapters, most obviously Tonah’s on the Fulani, but these final chapters generalize beyond specific localities.

The second chapter, “Bodies of Belonging: an ethnography of the Kasena house” is also by Cassiman. Following on the mainly theoretical “Introduction” she gives a very useful introduction to the physical house, relating it to the lineage structure of its inhabitants. She stresses that membership in a house is not ended by death (pg. 41), and extends the metaphor of house as both a social and a physical entity, comparing the founding of a new house to a birth (pg. 63).

Chapter 3, “Concepts of Home among the Kasena” by Albert Kanlisi Awedoba explores the Kasena idea of ‘home’ using linguistic material. Cultural capital is passed on within the context of home, hence in this language, the expression meaning literally “house things” is a metaphor for knowledge of traditional ways of doing things. Taking a grammatical tack, it is explained that the word *songo* “house” belongs to the nominal class and concord pair (gender) that includes “land”, “bush” and names of countries, in contrast to *diga* “room” which belongs to a different gender. “House” includes “rooms”, both literally and metaphorically of a lineage and its segments. The opposition is alluded to and explained in riddles.

The importance of the “house” is reflected in proverbs, riddles, personal names and stock utterances. The house moreover has a “face”, ie. front, which is where business affecting its external relations is conducted. The importance of the rubbish heap as an integral feature of the house, which is also mentioned by Cassiman, is reiterated. Since every individual should have a home, it is no doubt significant that the Kasena

word for “rubbish heap”, *tampuuri*, is etymologically related to the word for “vagabond”, *tampiri*.

“Reading and Writing Space: Bisa Architecture in Burkina Faso” by Andreas Dafinger uses what he calls the “space syntax model” to try to elucidate the social rules that inform the physical environment, viewing spatial ordering as “a non-verbal language” (pg. 94). This author notes that the Bisa language does not make many distinctions in degrees of kinship, but that the spatial encoding of kinship through architecture is more precise and detailed than the linguistic. He demonstrates this by showing how the route from one room to another in a large compound house traces the genealogical relations between the owners of the rooms. This reviewer would have found figure 05 more revealing if the author had explained more carefully how his “permeability map of a typical Bisa house” is constructed. It is apparently based on the floor plan (“blueprint”) of the same house in figure 06, but the relationship is not so obvious as he seems to think (and we are not told what ‘a’ and ‘c’ stand for in the latter, nor whether the numbering of rooms follows any particular system).

Sabine Luning’s “Mossi Houses: Places for Meetings and Movements” describes among other things subtle differences from the Kasena and Bisa houses that may derive from the fact that, unlike the Kasena and the Bisa, the Mossi have long had a centralized chieftaincy system. The chiefs almost by definition are migrants to the land, but even “autochthones” may be migrants, often in several layers of migrations, who have established a relationship with the land. She discusses the concept of the “bush” as that which is not home or house, and how the establishment of a new house involves the conversion of bush into domestic space. The metaphor of house and personal identity arises again, as it seems that in Maane, the Mossi settlement she discusses, a pregnancy is thought to arise when a bush spirit settles in a womb, domesticating itself (pg. 122). Luning also has interesting things to say on the status and role of women, especially as reflected in joking relations among in-laws, and in women’s funeral rites as instruments to restore the integrity of the domestic space.

Chapter 6, Steve Tonah’s “Sedentarisation and the Transformation of the Pastoral Fulani Homestead in Northern Ghana” completes the description of four specific ethnic group settlements. In an overview of the situation of the Fulani who have

settled in northern Ghana (particularly the west Mamprusi area of the Northern Region) he points out that the traditional Fulani occupation of cattle herding has always required physical mobility, facilitated by erecting only temporary shelters of poles and thatch, and that this has been accompanied by a fairly sparse material culture and absence of decoration of shelters. Interestingly, he attributes the east-west orientation of the traditional dwelling entirely to practical physical considerations, such as the direction of the wind and of the rising sun. Cassiman (pg. 61) and Awedoba (pg. 86) give this orientation of structures among the Kasena a cosmological interpretation.

Today however the people are rapidly becoming more sedentary. Many young people are leaving the herding tradition for sedentary occupations, and exchanging temporary shelters for swish and cement houses wherever possible and accumulating more personal possessions. “Modernization” of domestic shelter in the Fulani case thus accompanies a radical culture shift. However the herding tradition does not mean that in the past they have been isolated from other cultural influences, for markets have always been at least as important for the Fulani as for other, sedentary groups.

In Chapter 7, “Self-Contained: Glamorous Houses and Modes of Personhood in Ghanaian Video Movies”, Birgit Meyer departs from the northern and rural focus to consider how Ghanaian video movies portray what is clearly perceived as an ideal, the large, expensively furnished urban house (or “mansion”) inhabited by a single nuclear family with servants. Households in such dwellings do not share kitchen and sanitary facilities with other households, hence the “self-contained” of the title. Continuing the pervading metaphor of house for personality, she considers that such a house is popularly regarded as “the most complete materialization of modern life” (pg. 161). The “seclusion” or independence of this ideal dwelling is a mirror for the modern ideal of independent personhood, continually “under construction”. In contrast, rural and by implication indigenous architectural forms are systematically portrayed as neither modern nor desirable. She points out too that the audiences of these films, among whom the vast majority cannot aspire to anything like the kind of accommodation or life style they see on the screen, nevertheless draw ideas for both domestic furnishing and personal behaviour from them – here, as elsewhere in the world, life imitates art.

Hans Peter Hahn's "Architecture and Ethnography: Explorations in the Process of Producing Aesthetic Places" returns to the rural and to the Kasena, but for the purpose of criticizing the "ethnic style" approach by which Kasena decorated architecture has become widely known and admired in the anthropological, cultural and tourism literature. The earliest documentation of Kasena architecture is traced to the German anthropologist Frobenius, whose work of 1908 (published 1909), biased as it was to ideas of cultural diffusion (176), adopted a rather Platonic attitude to the value of form as opposed to praxis. Despite later theoretical developments that have provided the formal object with meaning and context, Hahn believes that the anthropological approach has remained essentially static. Internal contradictions are underestimated, as are the effects of migration and colonialism. This essentialist view of culture however is readily adapted to the needs of tourism, and the global and tourist discourse feeds back into local ideas of what "pure" Kasena architecture is or should be.

Finally, Ann Cassiman takes up globalization as it is manifested in international tourism, in "The Commodification and Touristification of Architectural Pride: an Example from Northern Ghana". She reiterates Hahn's accusation that heritage organisations and tourism misleadingly project a static ideal, and discusses the Sirigu Women's Organisation of Pottery and Art. Sirigu is a Nankani-speaking settlement in the Kasena-Nankani district of the Upper East Region of Ghana – having visited the place, this reviewer can attest to the impressive nature of what the organisation has created. Perhaps the author herself has a problem with perspective here. She interviewed Melanie Kasise, the local woman who founded the organization, and confirms that in this case at least the commodification of the cultural artifact is controlled by the subjects themselves (pg. 203). At the same time, she believes that this kind of production caters to tourists' fantasies of the exotic Other (pg. 205), and remarks that cultural commodification "creates a distance between the tourist Self and the Kasena Other..." (pg. 207). Since Cassiman is arguing that this commodification is a deliberate creation by conscious Kasena agents, one wonders whether this is not in fact rather, or also, a deliberate manipulation of the distance between the Kasena Self and the tourist Other...

The tension between globalization and commodification on the one hand and a timeless exotic “tradition” on the other underlies all the chapters in the book. One thing that seems to be constant is that ordinary people shift to cement block rectangular houses and metal roofing sheets if they can, even though such buildings are neither beautiful nor comfortable. It is not hard to see why – the building materials are far more durable and less labour intensive, even though inadequate building techniques mean that metal roofs are often ripped off in a storm. The prestige of association with modernity emphasized by Meyer is also of course a major factor. One can only hope that an accommodation can eventually be reached, perhaps employing aspects of the Sirigu project model.

The book is elegantly produced. The paper and the reproduction of illustrations are of art book quality, indeed the pictures are quite beautiful, and an important feature of the book. However there are some problems. The unsatisfactory explanation of two important illustrations to Hahn’s article has been mentioned. In most chapters the photographs are hardly mentioned at all in the text, which may be frustrating especially to readers not familiar with the culture area. The illustrations accompanying Awedoba’s article are particularly irritating in this regard – they are not photographs but drawings of compound houses made by young Kasena school pupils. One might expect that such drawings would be discussed for what they might reveal of the young person’s perceptions of relations between social and physical space, but in fact they are not mentioned at all, and they have no apparent relevance to the chapter.¹ In Chapter 9, figure 04 is a chart of the motifs used in the mural paintings that decorate some Kasena houses. This could be of considerable popular interest. Unfortunately, even with a magnifying glass I found it difficult to read the labels to the motifs, and they turned out to be entirely in French. That the figure was taken from a publication in French is no excuse.

Happily, there are very few typos or misspellings. A rare mistake is that in Meyer’s article the dressing style known popularly in Ghana as *apuskeleke* is rendered *apuskelele*. The typeface used is attractive to look at but tiring to read for any length of time, and there is no index. These minor strictures aside, the book is a very

¹ According to Prof. Awedoba (personal communication) these pictures were commissioned by the editor, without reference to himself.

welcome addition to a field of inquiry that deserves more attention. It will be of particular interest to Ghanaians, both for the pictures and for the insights expressed.

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