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Lorenzon, Marta

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Chapter 2

Architecture and Gender: Lessons from Building Archaeology in Africa.

Marta Lorenzon

Abstract

This chapter focuses upon the role and contribution of women in the architectural process, specifically in earthen architecture, discussing numerous case studies from Africa. The main aim is to foster interdisciplinary research, combining building archaeology, ethnoarchaeology and postcolonial theories to shed lights on understudied aspects of earthen architecture. This contribution also presents the case for a more participative form of archaeology based on community engagement as a key aspect in the analysis of the architecture from archaeological contexts. The chapter addresses two major questions: what is the impact of postcolonial theories on the analysis of earthen architecture in building archaeology? How gender and subaltern studies have improved our understanding of the construction process and overcome pre-existing discipline bias?

Keywords: earthen architecture, decolonization, gender, building archaeology, African archaeology.

Introduction

In archaeological research we tend to associate the design and creation of architecture and the built environment with men. However, there are many examples of the prominent role of women in the creation of the built environment, both in modern and ancient contexts. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa there are numerous instances of women playing a significant role in the architectural process and participating actively in the construction and decoration of architecture (Blier 1994; Dalton 2017; Jolaoso 2001; Morton 2007: 168–169; Odeyale and Adekunle 2008). Archaeologists, however, tend to overlook the role of women in the architectural processes of the past, and gender bias persists in the analysis of architectural remains. This is well exemplified by the male narrative which is dominant on the archaeological research on the topic (Prussin 1995: 58; Tringham and Chang 1991; Wylie 1991). Part of the reason for this is that while the postcolonial critique and gender theory have become a mainstay of current archaeological thought, they have only been incorporated in a limited way into the study of architectural remains in the archaeological record. As explored in the introduction to the volume, architecture is still too often treated as the setting rather than as an active agent in social life that both reflects and shapes human experience. Through the new discipline of building archaeology together with ethnoarchaeological approaches, we can begin to correct these problems and misconceptions. The case studies I am discussing in this contribution show the importance of integrating these two disciplines, building archaeology and ethnoarchaeology, to investigate the built environment through more inclusive and encompassing lenses.

Gender Theory and Archaeological Approaches to Architecture

Building archaeology, or archaeology of architecture, is a distinctive branch of archaeology that concentrates on the analysis of architectural remains—the built environment—as part of material culture (Egenter 1992; Steadman 1996). Building archaeology focuses on studying architectural remains through a combination of macroscopic and microscopic observation to investigate the multiple steps of construction, building functions, and eventual alteration to original structures as key evidence of the socio-cultural and economical information embedded in the built environment (Bartlett 1994; Butzer 1976; Rapoport 1969, 1976; Steadman 1996). Building archaeology plays a critical role in offering insights into the life of past and present communities through the artificial, human-made landscape, in which interactions take place, peoples’ belief and values are tangibly represented, and a space for industriousness and creativity is created (Hodder 1994; Horton 1994).

The traditional approach to architecture in archeology has tended to problematically divide architectural remains into the fixed categories of “polite” versus “vernacular”, especially within western academia. “Polite” architecture is often used to describe buildings that are the product of elite classes and are designed and built following a predetermined set of conventions. “Vernacular” architecture is often conceived as that which represents the non-elite part of society, in which architectural form is determined by local knowledge and materials arranged in a mere functional fashion (Archer 2005; Brunskill 2000: 27–31; Upton 1983). This division oversimplifies the series of entangled and multifaceted relationships communities have within themselves and with the built environment, including the relationship between architecture and power. Glassie’s (1984, 2000) and Güvenç’s (1990) research have extensively broadened the term “vernacular”, arguing that the lexis should include the full range of the built environment,

overcoming the strict taxonomic divide between vernacular and polite architecture, which was created during the “modernization of the profession” (Güvenç 1990: 286). More recently, studies on earthen architecture as a form of construction that can be included in both categories have helped to blur the “vernacular” vs “polite” divide (Blier 2006: 230–239; Herrmann 1999; Hodder 2000). Although earthen materials have traditionally been broadly considered as characteristic of vernacular architecture, recent work has brought attention to the fact that from prehistory until the present earthen material has also been employed worldwide in monumental structures, for example at sites such as Uruk, Djenné, Malia, and Merv (Bourgeois 1987; Devolder and Lorenzon 2019; Herrmann 1999; Strommenger 1980). The study of earthen architecture in what are classically defined as polite and vernacular contexts has also widened the set of interdisciplinary data archaeologists employed in their investigation and interpretation, such as records collected through geoarchaeology, building archaeology and ethnoarchaeology (Aurenche 1993; Gosden 2001; Liebman 2008; Trigger 1984; van Dommelen 2011).

Gender theory in archaeology

Gender theory in archaeology emerged from the lack of inclusion in researching gender and social roles in past societies, in which “archaeologists, consciously or not, are propagating culturally particular ideas about gender in their interpretation and reconstruction of the past” (Conkey and Spector 1984: 2). Gender theory focuses on widening the interpretative horizon to include, for instance, female, trans-, and generally non-binary perspectives and representations that have been seriously underrepresented as an active agent in the creation of material culture (Conkey and Spector 1984: 4–7; Gilchrist 1999, 2004; Sørensen 1996). Analysis of material

culture in archaeological research has traditionally focused on elite material expressions and then extrapolated these as representing the experience and point of view of all members of society. Gender theory is one way that archaeologists have sought to include narratives that were previously excluded, in order to achieve a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of past society (Tringham and Chang 1991; Tringham 1994; Gilchrist 1997; 1999).

In building archaeology, archaeologists have put gender theory into practice by providing an approach directly based on ethnoarchaeology to reshape and rethink gender dynamics within past societies based on a task-differentiation framework (Conkey and Spector 1984: 14–28; Spector 1983: 90–95). This framework calls for an analysis of the archaeological record based on the social, temporal, spatial and material definition of any given activity such as raw source procurement and building construction. The existing androcentric bias in archaeology has been compounded by the lack of archaeological data linked to gender roles in architecture and the tendency of Western perspectives to associate certain pursuits, such as architecture, with masculinity and thus the ‘androcentric’ domain. By contrast, a task-differentiation approach together with ethnoarchaeological research have progressively dismantled the foundation of this bias and created a more inclusive gender narrative for archaeology (Conkey and Spector 1984; Joyce 2000, 2004; Miller 1988; Sørensen 1996; Spector 1983; Tringham and Chang 1991; Wylie 1991). In building archaeology, ethnoarchaeology has been employed as a useful method to bridge these various gulfs as shown by numerous case studies that in the last decades helped disprove these androcentric stereotypes, demonstrating a long-lasting relationship between female craftsmanship and architecture (Blier 1981; Joshi 2011; LeMoine 2003; Miller 1988; Mills 2013; Tringham 1994). Within this new theoretical framework, it is impossible to disregard the reductive narrative frequently employed in the analysis of architectural remains from

archaeological sites regarding gender, especially when local and indigenous communities were excluded from their investigation and interpretation (Boivin 2008; Gamble and Porr 2005; Ingold 2000; Kusimba 2017). The following discussion presents case studies that employ these aforementioned approaches to discuss the architectural creation of underrepresented groups, community narratives, and their archaeological values in Sub-Saharan Africa. These case studies demonstrate the importance of integrating ethnoarchaeology in building archaeology to reach an in-depth understanding of gender dynamics in the building process.

Case Studies from African Archaeology

Several case studies from North and Sub-Saharan Africa exemplify the importance of interaction between ethnoarchaeology, building archaeology, and gender theories as described above. In a study focused on Nubian earthen architecture, Dalton (2017) employed geo-ethnoarchaeological methods to investigate the creation of mud plaster and the related specific social practices near Amara in Northern Sudan. His investigations revealed a gender role division within the earthen construction process of the region: while the men carried out the bulk of the building activities, the women were in charge of the mud-plaster preparation and application. His descriptions of the active role of female plasterers, who use specific and diverse methods of raw material procurement, and their individual plaster recipes support the idea of a specialized craftsmanship and a diachronic skill transfer among craftswomen (Dalton 2017: 357–388; Elcheikh 2018: 245). Through the collection of ethnoarchaeological and geoarchaeological data from modern domestic contexts, this work provides fresh insights into the gender roles in local building practices in Amara, especially regarding the women’s contribution to house construction and maintenance

(Dalton 2017) (Figure 2.1). The comparison of these data, specifically micromorphological data regarding seasonal plastering from historical and modern domestic contexts, highlights the presence of personalized recipes in the ethnographic and archaeological record in Amara, trailblazing the relevance of ethnoarchaeology in understanding past architectural practices, while also suggesting that we think more critically about question of women's contribution to the building process in the past (Dalton 2017: 369–381).

Similarly, in Togo, Blier's (1981) analyses of historical earthen construction have drawn attention to the role of female plasterers and decorators working alongside male architects. In this case, ethnoarchaeological evidence suggested both roles were based on a strict apprenticeship and were regarded as having a high social status within the Tamberma community (Blier 1981; Morris and Blier 2004: 201–204).

Studies of other Sub-Saharan pre-colonial architectural traditions have also highlighted the significant role of women in the creation of the built environment, presenting tangible evidence from multiple sub-Saharan communities, such as Ghana (Frafra women), Kenya (Kikuyu women), Zimbabwe and South Africa (Ndebele women) (Arceneaux 1989: 82–84; Leakey 1977: 139–143; Odeyale and Adekunle 2008; Prussin 1969: 57, 88; Sheldon 2017: 15–19; Sogah 2010: 25; Whelan 2003) (Figure 2.2). Odiua (2008) further stresses how women in Daura communities (Nigeria) not only as worked as decorators, but also took an active part in the construction process, such as overseeing flooring and roofing. While the construction of walls and foundations is a male responsibility, women take over to prepare the roof finishing and ensure waterproofing (Odiua 2008: 121).

In the Maghreb and Saharan desert, Prussin (1995) describes extensively the role of women builders in nomadic communities through archaeological and ethnographic data. For

example, in the cases of Toubou (Lybia-Chad), Kababish, and Mahria nomadic communities (Sudan), the pitching of the tent, its design, the selection of building materials, and structural stability are always a female responsibility (Holter 1995: 130–133; Prussin 1995: 56–58). In addition to ethnographic data, Prussin also points to rock paintings in Tassili n’Ajjer (Algeria), which portrays female figures building a tent. This seems to mirror the evidence of her ethnographic research on the presence of women builders in the nomadic Saharan communities.

These examples illustrate the importance of women in the creation of the built environment in African landscapes, in which women have been and continue to be in charge not only of the raw source collection, but also of the design and construction of flooring, roofing, and plastering in both domestic and non-domestic structures (Jolaoso 2001; Odiava 2008; Prussin 1974; Van Vuuren 2008a and 2008b; Whelan 2003). This reality underscores the need to incorporate gender studies more systematically in building archaeology and the importance of local community knowledge in understanding the significance of material culture and architecture as social agents. First, gender studies open a new level of investigation that overcome the characterization of architecture from archaeological context as a “masculine accomplishment” prominent in Western academia (Tringham 1994; Sogah 2010: 12–13).

Second, the inclusion of local narratives helps to reverse colonial misconceptions about factors such as gender and produce a more complex, nuanced and genuine interpretation of the archaeological data. Schmidt (1983; 2014) has been an early proponent of the importance of community inclusion in Africa, especially Tanzania, in answering archaeological questions that focus on identity and social roles. His research has played a key role in raising community engagement as an active investigative tool of ethnoarchaeological research and decolonizing archaeological practice in Africa. Schmidt (2014) also raises the important issue of how

archaeology can impact the everyday life of local communities and the importance of oral traditions in understanding the values and significance of built environment. Community engagement with indigenous and local communities is already part of the archaeological practice in numerous Western contexts, such as in North America where Native American communities are a key stakeholder in archaeological investigations. In these cases, archaeologists often pushed by government regulations, learned to engage with local communities as equal partners (Kusimba 2017; Nicholas et al. 2008; Nicholas 2010; Pereiria Campos and Heinsen Planella, this volume). As a result, the inclusion of diverse narratives and a more public approach has improved the ways archaeological and anthropological projects are designed, executed and disseminated (Ataley 2012; Schmidt 2014; Moser et al. 2002; McKinnon et al. 2014).

In Africa, unfortunately, community-inclusive approaches such as just described are still the exception rather than the norm. Local communities who are an essential stakeholder of architectural and archaeological research are often not included, even though community collaboration is crucial for understanding not only the building process, but also the values communities embed in buildings, and the craftsperson's social role within the community (Dalton 2017; Fodde 2009; Lorenzon and Sadozai 2018; Morris and Blier 2004). The author's ethnoarchaeological and community project at the site of Tell Timai, Egypt, carried out within the University of Hawaii at Manoa excavation project, aimed at including local communities in the archeological process with a shared focus in better understanding the construction process, while increasing awareness and preservation of the archaeological site among the local community (Lorenzon and Zermani 2016). The project targeted two specific types of audience: children through a bilingual book and a series of educational initiatives, and members of the community through an earthen architectural preservation project that directly involved local

expertise and knowledge (Lorenzon and Zermani 2016). The need for overcoming the disenfranchisement of most local communities from their local heritage is one of the biggest challenges for community engagement, as it impacts not only the everyday protection of archaeological heritage but also the preservation of skills and expertise within local communities, which belong to the intangible heritage domains (Hanna 2013; Ikram 2013).

In the course of the Timai project, local knowledge of earthen architectural practices and techniques was invaluable not only for its ability to improve our academic knowledge, but also for its role in bridging local community and experts and creating a better understanding on how the whole community, women and men, participate to some degree in the construction process. For instance, members of the Tell Timai community described in detail the process of earthen plaster production and application, which included more steps than is usually assumed by archaeologists. The builders revealed that an important step is to include incisions of the first plaster layer to guarantee more grip to the successive coatings, which we were unaware of. This is a concrete example of the importance of integrating local knowledge in archaeological projects. In this case this step was added to the earthen conservation practices in Timai and it was possible to finally explain the perpendicular incision found on historical plaster recovered at the site. The benefits of community engagement so far encountered are numerous and have included a developing sense of ownership of the heritage by the local community and better understanding of the archaeological evidence and its history in connection to the local population, especially regarding earthen architectural practices (Figure 2.3).

Although the project so far has met with positive feedback, the lack of diversity in gender participation is perceived as one of the few shortcomings. The project has involved only a limited number of female adults (i.e. one woman as compared to eight men). However, one of

the future aims is to extend the targeted audience to include a more gender-balanced population, with specific earthen architectural workshops targeted to women, where they can feel more empowered to share their knowledge and expertise regarding their role in the building process. This difficulty demonstrates the need for long term bridge building and trust building within the community, which could not be achieved in the short timeframe of one excavation season.

Future Perspectives

The project from Timai together with the other case studies described above demonstrate the ways in which community engaged-research relies on a more equitable sharing of knowledge regarding the reconstruction of the past, for instance documenting how the architectural process is often a community activity that includes both men and women in the process (Boivin 2008; Joshi 2011; Prussin 1974; Dalton 2017; Blier 1981; van Vuuren 2008a; Odiava 2008). This provides archaeologists focusing on earthen architecture in Africa with new insights and new approaches to overcome the previous limitations regarding the inclusions of gender narratives in the creation of historical architecture. Through the inclusion of local communities who possess unique knowledge and expertise as active agents of the construction process, archaeologists can develop a more holistic interpretation that utilizes a multi-vocal narrative and framework for interpreting the past.

The built environment plays a critical role in the life of past and present communities as the artificial, human-made landscape, in which interactions take place, peoples' beliefs and values are tangibly represented, and as a space for industriousness and creativity. The case studies discussed in this chapter highlight two important points of theoretical progress in the

development of a more inclusive discipline. First are the different ways in which postcolonial theories have impacted the analysis of architecture, especially the inclusion of gender and ethnoarchaeological studies, by exposing the existence of a persistent bias in building archaeology that rarely acknowledges the role of the female workforce in the architectural process. This preconceived notion plays a significant role in the archaeologists' understanding of the archaeological record and it is at the origin of subsequent misconception in the analysis of the built environment. Second, building archaeology as a discipline can assist in overcoming fixed Western perspectives not only by incorporating postcolonial theories, but also by including multiple viewpoints from academics and indigenous communities, integrating local histories, and largely decolonizing the discipline. By reevaluating the archaeological data through these lenses, we can better understand the role of diverse individuals in architecture, especially women (Blier 1981; Dalton 2017; Elcheikh 2018). Such an undertaking is particularly relevant at the current socio-cultural moment, as there is an urgent need for a more gender-inclusive narrative in creating and managing archaeological projects that can positively impact local communities (Elcheikh 2018; Humphris and Bradshaw 2017).

The African case studies presented here are a representative example of reevaluating archaeological and ethnographical data to provide a more holistic interpretation of the built environment. The primary goal is to bring agency back to the overlooked part of the communities, who often play an active role in the architectural process. Not only that, communities—together with archaeologists—are the stewards of intangible and tangible heritage, and they are entitled to have an active voice in its preservation and representation. Architectural remains have an important role in the archaeological contexts, but they are also an active subject of interest for local communities' agency, therefore there must be a participatory

component in any archaeological study to bridge different perspectives (Moser et al. 2002; Lorenzon and Zermani 2016; Schmidt and Pikirayi 2016; Kusimba 2017). Finally, building archaeology should aim at displaying two main functions, academic and civic, this latter voicing communities' perspectives as participant stakeholders.

Figures

Figure 2.1. Plaster layered by the women in the Amara community (Photograph by Matthew Dalton, Amara West Research Project. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).

Figure 2.2. Wall painting with Zaalenga and Wanzagesi, Sirigu, Ghana, March 9, 2013. (Photo courtesy of Brittany Sheldon).

Figure 2.3. Mudbrick manufacturing in Egypt, Tell Timai (Photo: M. Lorenzon)

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