

**Fig. 1: View of main street in Memni, Côte d'Ivoire, during age-grade festival, 1981. Photograph copyright M.B. Visonà**

## **Contributions by Art Historians to the Study of African Architecture<sup>1</sup>**

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Several years ago an art historian and I discussed our future research projects. I explained to her that my work on a book surveying the field of African art (Visonà et al., *A History of Art in Africa*, New York: 2000) had given me a new appreciation for the importance of African architecture, and I told her that I looked forward to exploring architectural themes. My colleague dampened my enthusiasm immediately when she pointed out the limitations of our training as art historians; she argued that African architectural history can be much more intelligently discussed by architects and architectural historians.

I still find many of her arguments convincing. As a scholar with no architectural training, I am unable to draw up the plan of a building, or to consult local building ordinances. I do not know the origins, or the costs, of construction materials. I thus have none of the practical skills so important to understanding the ways buildings are constructed. Thus while continuing to pursue my interest in the history of African architecture, even teaching courses on the subject, I have wondered whether I am actually qualified to evaluate the work of architects, builders, muralists, and town planners.<sup>2</sup>

Imagine, then, my surprise and delight to come across a major article on an architectural structure by Zoe Strother – the very scholar who had cautioned me against pursuing architectural history! It is titled “Architecture against the State: the Virtues of Impermanence in the *Kibulu* of Eastern Pende Chiefs in Center Africa” (in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 63:3, September 2004, 272-296). Dr. Strother cites the earliest description of the *kibulu*, the royal residence of the leaders of the eastern Pende of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, by an outside observer, and compares it to her own observations in the late 1980s. She thus documents its historical continuity during the last century. She also describes in detail the processes used to create the *kibulu*, some of which are intended to make the structure a potent source of symbolic meaning and supernatural power, and some of which allow the builders to experiment with striking aesthetic effects. She illustrates several of the carved panels and freestanding figures that have adorned some of the most famous *kibulu* doorways and rooftops. Her photographs and her narration of the building process reveal the artistic creativity and technical skills of the builders and allow us to experience a *kibulu* as an art form.

Other photographs, plans and diagrams - showing a *kibulu* and the enclosure shielding its entrance - allow Dr. Strother to demonstrate the organization of its space as a proper setting for the man who is both the protector of his community and the community’s representative to the ancestors. She links the *kibulu*’s layout to the often ambiguous role of the leader in Eastern Pende society. The article presents, in fact, a description of the social, economic and political roles of this architectural structure.

One could argue at this point that Zoe Strother has appropriated the methodologies of architectural historians when she explicates both the construction process of the *kibulu* and its structural features. And if Dr. Strother’s interest in the aesthetic embellishments and added sculptural elements of a *kibulu* seem particularly appropriate for an art historian, architectural histories of European buildings illustrate their carved ornamentation as a matter of course.

I am not qualified to assess Zoe Strother’s article as an architectural historical study. I am struck, however, by her ability to use her art historical interests to develop some intriguing insights here. She has been interested for some time in iconoclasm, the practice of destroying art objects and their images. It seems that her studies of the invention and suppression of Pende masquerades led her to examine Pende architecture in a new light. In this article she therefore examines the ephemeral nature of the *kibulu* (which leaders are required to construct of impermanent materials, and which leaders are

not allowed to repair or rebuild) as intentional obsolescence. Claiming that “the building is rigged to self-destruct”, and that “the decaying wreck of the chief’s house is orchestrated as an aesthetic experience”, she concludes that “to thwart the accumulation of coercive power in the hands of their chiefs, the Eastern Pende have turned architecture against the state”. She therefore demonstrates that “architectural impermanence (may be) a political strategy rather than a failure of materials”, and she explicitly challenges traditions that define architecture as monumental, permanent structures.

Dr. Strother’s article is part of an impressive body of architectural histories (and analyses of architectural forms) written by art historians. These include works as varied as H.M. Cole’s studies of the Igbo shrines (*Mbari: Art and Life among the Owerri Igbo*, Bloomington, 1982), and Marilyn Heldman’s articles on the churches of Lalibela (see M. Heldman et. al., *African Zion. The Sacred Art of Ethiopia*, New Haven: 1993). Perhaps the most influential of these art historians is Suzanne Blier, whose students (such as Steven Nelson, Gary van Wyk, and Dominique Malaquais) have made important contributions as well. Her prize-winning book, *The Anatomy of Architecture: Ontology and Metaphor in Batammaliba Architectural Expression* (Cambridge: 1987), is based upon her fieldwork among a small population living in northeastern Togo and northwestern Rep. of Benin. She persuasively argues that the Batammaliba find close analogies between the human body (and the human being) and the house, and that these analogies are based upon beliefs concerning the creation of mankind, the origin of the Batammaliba, and the birth, maturity and death of the individual man or woman. She ties specific marks upon the surfaces of the buildings, and specific features embedded in their interior spaces, to the divine beings who regulate the Batammaliba world. Dr. Blier thus reveals deep layers of multiple meanings in a single type of art work- in this case, an architectural work rather than a statue or a masquerade costume.

These groundbreaking studies have encouraged me, despite my initial reservations, to delve into my own fieldwork notes to learn more about the architecture of Lagoon communities in Cote d’Ivoire. I had originally visited dozens of these small but distinct populations, all of whom claim relationships with the Asante, Baule, Fante, and other Akan cultures, in order to document their portable art objects. Lagoon towns are all fairly close to Abidjan, the cosmopolitan capital of Côte d’Ivoire, and most of their older structures (once decorated with reliefs and painted images) have been replaced by newer houses. At first only cement tombs, and the churches built for congregations following the prophet William Wade Harris, seemed to be distinctive and worthy of art historical study. But when I began to see links between town plans and Lagoon ceremonial life, I realized that the basic form of the community was similar throughout the Lagoon region. All have a central “main street”, and one or more parallel side streets, long arteries crossed by alleys or lanes separating individual compounds. I realized that this symmetrical, segmented format was not, as I had supposed, the result of French planning, for it predated the colonial period. I also found that the plan was not dictated by the landscape, for while many Lagoon communities are built upon a ridge or along the banks of a Lagoon, others are on round hills or flatland. Instead, the plans were closely related to the age-grade festivals celebrated throughout the Lagoons region.

“Age-grades” is the anthropological term for *fokwe* or *fakui*, a term used in this region of Côte d’Ivoire to refer to a basic social unit of these matrilineal societies. Every child in a Lagoon community is assigned membership in a “generation”. Sometimes this is determined by their date of birth, but usually it is determined by their father’s age-grade status. Each generation must pass through a series of initiations as it moves from “child” to “warrior” to “leader” to “elder”. Leadership positions within the generation are assigned on the basis of individual character and individual wealth, although leading families are expected to provide a high proportion of the group’s “generals” or “presidents”. The families (usually matri-clans) often form small neighborhoods on either side of the central street.

The most dramatic of the ceremonies performed by a generation are the contests pitting the age-grade of young warriors against the age-grade of community leaders who are their immediate superiors. They take the form of a procession up and down the main street, the long central axis, of the town (Figure 1). The day or night before the ceremony is held, the mothers of younger generation perform a raucous ritual intended to cleanse the street of invisible traps and dangers. Leaders chosen by each sub-set of the generation (sons who are the first-born, second-born, etc.) then line up at one end of town, wearing their most elegant clothing and ancestral gold (Figure 2). Before them, in loose formation, each sub-set begins to push forward. In the past the younger generation was physically opposed by the older age-grade, but today the new generation only encounters resistance from the hidden supernatural forces launched by their opponents. In one community the battle lines were marked by a series of bamboo poles carried by a row of warriors at the vanguard of each sub-set (Figure 3). As they fight their way down the street, the warriors carry drums (Figure 4), and large wooden statues representing their strength and ferocity. New challenges and new support are encountered by the group as it passes the neighborhood of each matri-clan.

The town plans I had seen as simple and straightforward thus were sophisticated stages for the physical, psychological and religious conflicts channeled into community governance. The central street itself is an image of the age-grade system itself. One of the words for “generation” is “rope”, and an elder told me that the community is made of opposing but interwoven patrilineal teams, just as a rope is made of braided strands. Separate neighborhoods (and separate matri-clans) are joined together to train, test and celebrate each succeeding generation.

Now, my own research into the spatial structure of Lagoon villages does not reveal any tangible creations as aesthetically satisfying as an Eastern Pende *kibulu* or a Batammaliba dwelling. Yet, just as the art historical research of Zoe Strother and Suzanne Blier led them to study architectural themes, my own studies led me to question the spatial as well as the temporal settings for displays of Lagoon arts. As an art historian, I may not be equipped to document the full range of Lagoon architecture, but I believe that my interest in Lagoon artistic experience as a whole allows me to raise interesting questions – perhaps ones that someday an architect or an architectural historian may answer more fully.

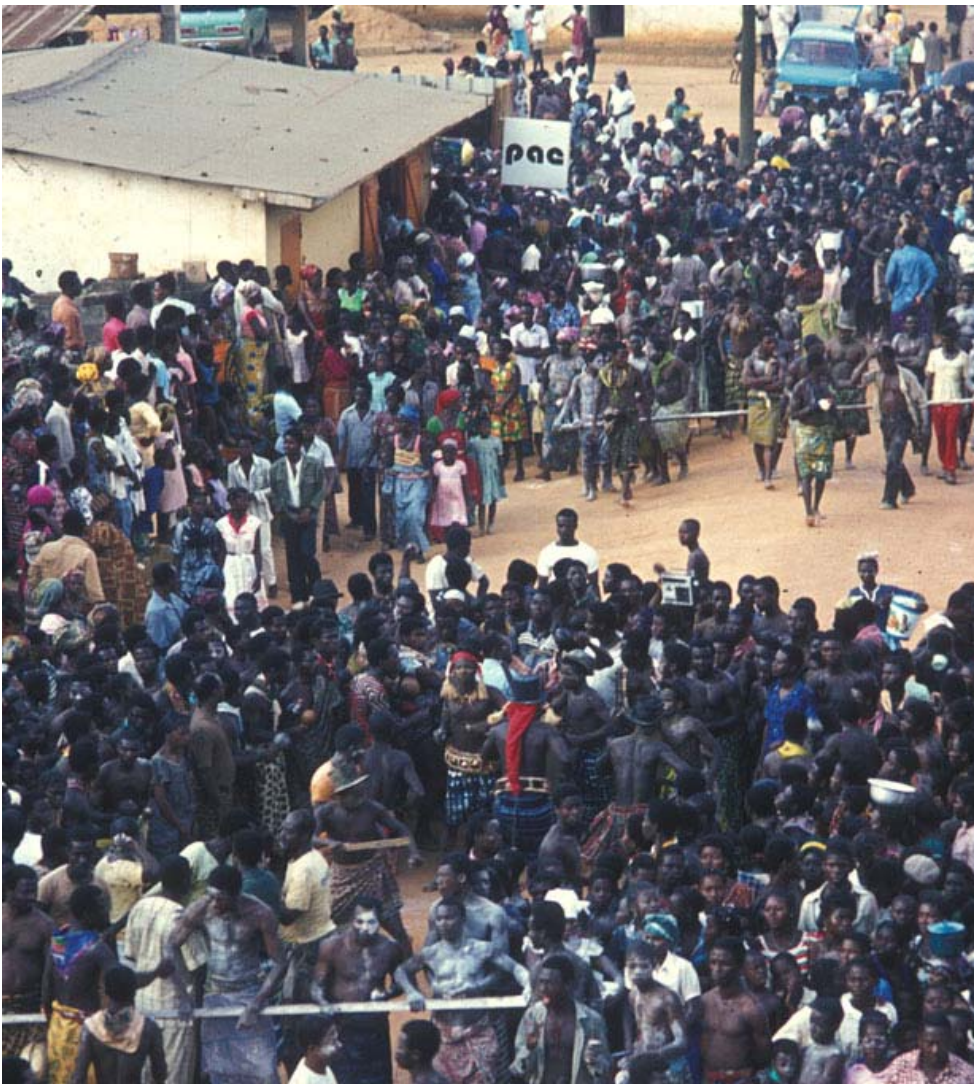
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<sup>1</sup> Some portions of the original version of this paper needed to be cut for the presentation in Kumase due to time constraints. This version restores some of those passages.

<sup>2</sup> In the discussion, Ikem Okoye (who is both an architect and an art historian) took issue with my lack of confidence. He pointed out, quite rightly, that a substantial number of art historians have contributed to the field of African architectural history. I thus mention more of these in the text above.



**Fig. 2. Leaders of age-grade at a ceremony in Ahoutoue, Côte d'Ivoire, 1981. Photograph copyright M.B. Visonà.**



**Fig. 3. Age grades fighting their way along the main street of Memni, Côte d'Ivoire, 1981.  
Photograph copyright M.B. Visonà**



**Fig. 4. Drums being carried and played by an age-grade during a festival, Ahoutou, Côte d'Ivoire, 1981. Photograph copyright M.B. Visonà**