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Traditional Housing in African Cities
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HOUSES IN ZARIA, IBADAN, AND MARRAKECH

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The history of utopias has shown that model settlements have never made model societies; but there is at least a sporting chance that model societies might generate model settlements.

Duccio A. Tu

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Contents

Acknowledgements .................................................
Foreword ........................................................ M. G. Smith
Preface ................................................................. x
List of Tables, Plans, and Diagrams ......................... x
Introduction .......................................................xxx

PART I  ZARIA

Chapter 1  Context ..................................................
Chapter 2  Land Tenure and Land Use in Zaria Walled City ....
Chapter 3  Demography ...........................................
Chapter 4  Domestic Groupings and the House .................
Chapter 5  Occupation and Income ............................
Chapter 6  Production, Cost, and Financing of Houses in Zaria Walled City ........................................

PART II  IBADAN

Chapter 7  Context ..................................................
Chapter 8  Land Tenure and Land Use in the Older Parts of Ibadan ......................................................... 1
Chapter 9  Demography ............................................ 1
Chapter 10 Domestic Groupings and the House ................ 1
Chapter 11 Occupation and Income .......................... 1
I wish to dedicate this book to my teacher Professor Duccio A. Turin whose tragic and untimely death in 1976 was a great loss for all who worked with him and benefited from his advice and friendship.

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Foreword

As the author of this pioneer study rightly observes, ‘Traditional urban houses have hitherto received very little attention, yet they provide shelter for the overwhelming majority of the urban population in Africa and Asia’. Archaeologists, of course, give special attention in their excavations to the sites, layouts, and sizes of settlements, ground plans of their monumental buildings, and particularly to the forms and details of human dwellings in cities, towns and lesser population centres which provide the most abundant and revealing stores of evidence for many earlier civilizations. To archaeologists, such information as they can glean on and from the scale, layout, orientation, modes, and materials of construction, patterns and durations of occupancy and patterns of daily use in the homesteads of earlier populations, often provides the most decisive clues to interpretations of data drawn from other sectors of cultural activity such as tombs and monuments, temples, city walls, moats, palaces, town plans and irrigation works. Despite their relatively humble character, data drawn from human habitations normally provide more reliable guidance to the interests, orientations, social organization, economic activities, aesthetic standards, technical capacities, and religious concepts of a people than more elaborate monuments that glorify their rulers and noble dead. Nor should this evoke surprise, since habitations are among the first truly human creations, and embody the resources, technical knowledge, and skills, the central ideas and values that organize the
would have devoted special attention to the systematic study of housing patterns and practices in pre-industrial societies. However, despite L. H. Morgan's early impressive demonstration of the potential value of such studies, anthropologists have usually been content to dismiss the topic with perfunctory photographs and ground plans of typical dwellings, and perhaps a brief account of prevailing patterns of construction and use. More systematic study of the domestic architecture of simpler societies is a rather recent development which so far owes more to the efforts of architects, town planners, and others with specialist training and interest in human settlements and construction than to social and cultural anthropologists. The various volumes edited by Paul Oliver illustrate this nicely. Most contemporary anthropological accounts of housing and house styles in exotic pre-industrial cultures illustrate the predominantly semiotic interests and goals of their authors. Under such influences, social and cultural anthropologists seem to regard dwellings and other types of construction as primarily of interest because of their symbolic character and significance. From such perspectives, a house is readily perceived as a code to be cracked by a semiotic analysis which will no doubt display a deep structure that integrates and coordinates the redundant symbolic contrast sets which together order and constitute the house. Now clearly, all human dwellings must embody and reflect the symbolism that pervades the culture of those who constructed and occupy them; but such expression occurs within limits set by the materials and techniques of construction, the affluence, number, and rank of the occupants, the location, layout, and size of the building, and similar mundane but relevant factors. These material constraints are necessarily sufficient to ensure that dwellings, though laden with symbolic purposes and meanings, must first fulfill certain practical requirements as suitable homes, before serving as vehicles for symbolism. These limiting conditions and functions should therefore be particularly important objects of ethnographic documentation and analysis in order properly to contextualize and illuminate the symbolic motivations and patterns that inform and overlay the house itself. Unfortunately it is precisely in this respect that anthropological studies of housing in pre-industrial societies have been most systematically incomplete, perhaps because ethnographers have generally assumed that the additional knowledge and insights into a people's society and culture to be gleaned from comprehensive studies of a systematic sample of their traditional dwellings would not adequately repay the considerable efforts such studies require.

The present volume neatly demonstrates the error of such an assumption, and advances our knowledge of the cultures and domestic organization of the three populations with which it deals, namely, the Hausa-Fulani of Zaria, the Yoruba of Ibadan, and the Berber of Marrakech, separately and together, by the careful comparison which identifies their differences and what they have in common. At the same time, and perhaps most importantly, Friedrich Schwerdtfeger, in this long overdue and path-breaking work, demonstrates and applies a fully developed methodology for detailed study of relationships between the forms of housing and the forms of domestic organization in urban centres of pre-industrial cultures of widely differing history, economy, ecology, and demographic structure. To complete his investigation of these relationships, Dr Schwerdtfeger examines systematically the relationships between the occupations and incomes of household and family heads and their expenditures on house repair and construction, together with the occasions, purposes and frequencies of such outlays. Systematic study of the distribution and use of living space within dwellings is complemented by detailed attention to the technology, raw materials, finance, and organization of the local construction industry in each of the cities studied. In these and other respects, Dr Schwerdtfeger's monograph brilliantly realizes the aims and standards set for all students of urban housing and settlement by the remarkable scholar whose teaching inspired much of the present work, the late Professor Duccio Turin.
them, or the responses to formally open situations of choice of those people who rightly or wrongly feel that alternative forms of accommodation, including imported Western models, are beyond their economic reach, or otherwise inappropriate and unsuitable for them. Such freedom of individual choice between traditional and other kinds of dwelling presupposes relatively free access to land required for building sites and to the skills and resources required for construction of traditional homes. To an extraordinary degree, these requisites were normatively and operationally fulfilled in traditional Hausa society, illustrated in this volume by the city of Zaria in northern Nigeria. At the other extreme, in the following comparison, lies the southern Moroccan city of Marrakech, whose population, at least in the old city, the medina, occupies ‘permanent’ buildings in the densely congested medieval quarter. Predictably, newcomers to Marrakech, young adults from the country or from other towns seeking work and fortune, sometimes singly, sometimes in couples, are obliged to rent accommodation, often at rates they can ill afford and in overcrowded buildings. Among contemporary Hausa, parallel patterns occur in Kano, the much larger metropolitan city situated a hundred miles north of Zaria, which was formerly the major terminus in the central Sudan for the Saharan caravan trade. Zaria, however, with lower levels of congestion, rental, tenancy, and overcrowding, was a decade or so ago still sufficiently spacious to sustain traditional Hausa patterns of settlement, land tenure, and domestic architecture.

At Ibadan, the largest Yoruba city and the most populous black African township, both the style of housing and the pattern of domestic organization differ radically from those at Marrakech and Zaria. There, compounds are normally the typical and most inclusive homesteads. They are relatively permanent structures with little interior open space. Each compound accommodates several agnatically linked family units, and is normally administered by its oldest resident male member in the agnic line, who as compound head is responsible to the town authorities, ancestors, and future generations for the welfare of all within it. In short, Yoruba compounds house patrilineages or patrilineal segments of wider units. In consequence, each Yoruba compound accommodates a plurality of families which are often polygynous, linked to one another by the agnatic relations of their senior male members. Ideally these families are aligned serially in an order of seniority which corresponds to the birth order of their male heads. Being exogamous, Yoruba patrilineages recruit wives for their members from other descent groups. Thereby they engage in an unavoidable complex of relations with one another through which women are exchanged and move to live with their husbands in the latter’s patrilineal compounds. Thus, unlike those at Zaria and Marrakech, all adult women in Yoruba compounds are necessarily descended from males with whom their husbands have no agnic ties. The Yoruba compound accordingly houses an exogamous corporate group, and its sections are occupied by domestic units whose status and rights of occupancy derive from their leading male members, themselves members of one or other of the senior generations of the agnic group.

At Marrakech and Zaria, by contrast, though patriliney predominates as a principle for the affiliation of successive generations, exogamous corporate lineages are absent. Instead, at Marrakech, where polygyny, though legitimate, is relatively infrequent, individual elementary families prevail and often, as is normally the case in tenant households, these have no kinship ties to other units in the building or compound. At Zaria city, by contrast, in 1968 rental of domestic accommodation was still very rare; and there most compounds contained the families of two or more agnatically linked adult males. However, following Islamic norms and Arabic models, the Hausa of Zaria had long ago rejected exogamy and corporate lineages as basic conditions of their social organization. Indeed, without exception, by 1960 Hausa descent lines and groups were, while patrilineal, not exogamous, and few operated as corporate groups. Instead, as the author demonstrates, the composition of Hausa households typically reflected various stages in the developmental cycle of the agnic extended families which formed, established and occupied them.

Thus, while modally Muslim like the citizens of Zaria and Marrakech, the Yoruba of Ibadan differed radically in their domestic organization as a function of their organization in corporate exogamous viriloc al patrilineages which formed the framework of their domestic life. These lineages were also the basic units of the Yoruba city-states, since each participated in the administration of its chieftdom through its lineage hierarchy and its compound heads, having one or more titles with executive positions and advisory duties appropriated to it in the rank order of state officials. Accordingly the Yoruba compound was both an externally indivisible and presumptively indissoluble corporate unit, and an essential element in the patrilineally based constitution of these Yoruba chief-
In consequence, Yoruba compounds tended to show an identical basic form and framework, being based on sets of adult males whose common agnatic descent furnished their inner organization and moral unity. One consequence of this which has often puzzled students of Islam is the apparent indifference of Yoruba household arrangements to the usual Muslim concern for privacy that prescribes differing degrees of seclusion or purdah for wives, as illustrated at Zaria and Marrakech. Evidently, these Middle Eastern or Arabic rules of wife seclusion are irrelevant in the context of exogamous corporate patrilineal households like those of the Yoruba. For, unless specifically authorized by kinship norms, under such circumstances the most heinous possible crime is adultery with the wife of a pattrkinsman, and above all, one living in the same compound. This being so, there is no reason for women to be secluded within the compound, since they are guaranteed protection by the basic kinship rules that constitute Yoruba patrilineages. Moreover, such freedom as Yoruba women enjoy within their homes is an essential condition for the freedom which they exercise outside them, in their varied roles in the economic, religious, and other spheres of public social life.

As this brief comparison indicates, this richly documented study enables us to raise and consider many stimulating questions concerning domiciles and household arrangements which have hitherto received little attention, due primarily to lack of detailed studies of indigenous systems of traditional housing in exotic cultures. In this regard the present monograph is primarily an exploration into important but neglected territory; and in this respect, as also in the thoroughness of its design and execution, this investigation of housing patterns and practice in southern Morocco, Yorubaland, and Hausaland, follows worthily in the tradition of the author's predecessors and compatriots, Heinrich Barth and Gustav Nachtigal, who so fully and vividly recorded the cultures and histories of the then little-known peoples of the Sahara and Sudan.

M. G. SMITH

Notes and references