YOU ARE WHAT YOU BUILD: ARCHITECTURE AS
IDENTITY AMONG THE BAMILEKE OF WEST CAMEROON

DOMINIQUE MALAQUAIS

Among the Bamileke people, architecture plays a critical role in the construction of social identity. Human beings and their dwellings are linked in a symbiotic relation, at the heart of which stands one fundamental concern: the acquisition of status. In the following pages I address one aspect of this relation — the manner in which quests for social recognition, wealth and prestige are articulated in the ornamentation of men’s meeting houses. My analysis throughout focuses on one specific architectural element known as the “stomach of the house” and on the manner in which this element is associated with the human stomach — the seat of a man’s identity.

DOMINIQUE MALAQUAIS is an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Architecture at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, and is finishing a Ph.D., also at Columbia, in the Department of Art History and Archaeology.

Il ne suffit pas d’être quelqu’un;
it faut prouver que tu es en mesure d’être quelqu’un.
Il faut construire.

(It is not enough to be somebody; you must prove that you have what it takes to be who you are. You must build.)

These words were recorded in Bandjoun, a powerful Bamileke chieftaincy founded circa 1700 in the grasslands of West Cameroon. Spoken by an aide to the, or ruler, they summarize the Bamileke approach to architecture. By way of an ellipsis, they state a fundamental truth: for the people of Bandjoun, you are what you build.¹

The Bamileke enclave is one of the richest and most densely populated regions of Cameroon (FIG. 1). Located amid hills
Among the Bamileke, architecture and social identity go hand in hand. Those who seek titles within this eminently hierarchical society — those who wish to acquire status, economic advantage, or political power — are expected to follow a rigorous path. Early in life they must enter upon a program of rites de passage, payments, and gift-giving: a step-by-step process codified and overseen by a variety of interest groups within the community. These steps render possible, and at the same time sanction, an individual’s progress through the rungs of the hierarchy. For each step — for each rung on the ladder of social advancement — there is a structure (a type of building) or an architectural feature (a certain construction material or ornamental device). With each structure built and each element incorporated, status is gained. As they are raised in tandem, architecture and social identity flow into one another. Ultimately, they emerge as a single, unified entity.

Architecture and architect for the Bamileke are linked in a symbiotic relation at whose heart stands one fundamental concern: the acquisition of power. In particular, the link between man and structure hinges on one, key concept: a vision of houses as embodiments of the people who construct them. In the first section below I introduce this concept to provide a basic framework for the elaboration of my later hypotheses.

The questions addressed and ideas presented in this paper center around one type of edifice: the *shang* (FIG. 2). Buildings of this sort are best described as meeting houses or, in a more...
general sense, as sacred enclosures. Throughout the region, they grace the compounds of the elite. Built by and for men, in all but a few instances they are rigorously closed to women. The typical shang is a square structure (roughly six meters by six, though dimensions vary). Until the 1950s and 60s the materials of choice for the construction of its walls were raffia palm and adobe; today terra cotta and cement are also commonly employed (FIG. 3). Set atop an elaborate armature made of raffia poles and ties, one or several roofs crown the edifice. Towering cones of thatch or (more recently) sheet metal, they are visible from a great distance. A carved lintel, jambs, and threshold draw attention to the portal. Tall, slightly tapered pillars made of sculpted or incised wood complete the ensemble.

BODY PARTS: ANATOMY, ARCHITECTURE, AND THE QUEST FOR SOCIAL STATUS

Body and dwelling, in the Bamileke world, are perceived and function as coterminous entities. This bond finds its clearest expression in the realm of etymology. A comparison of words used to designate anatomical features and terms employed to identify architectural elements reveals that house and body share the same building blocks. Both are equipped with a head (tse), a mouth (shwe), and a stomach or abdomen (vam).

Over the past forty years ties between the human and built forms have been explored at some length, and in a variety of settings, by students of African architecture. In his now-famous conversations with the sage Ogotemméli, Marcel Griaule learned that among the Dogon of Mali a house is the replica of bodies living within it. In Batammaliba communities of Togo and Benin, Suzanne Blier has explored dwellings that function as mirror images of the men and women who build and inhabit them. Anthropocentric concerns in African architecture have been addressed also, as Blier notes, by Jean-Paul Lebeuf and Labelle Prussin.

Clearly, the links between house and body observed among the Bamileke exist within a matrix of cultures and ideas that extends far beyond the borders of West Cameroon. One fundamental consideration, however, differentiates the anthropomorphism we encounter in a Bamileke context from the ties that bind man and dwelling in other African settings. Among the peoples cited above, as in many communities south of the Sahara, architectural references to anatomical concerns focus on the body as a whole. As a general proposition, it can be said that the buildings studied by Griaule, Blier, Lebeuf, and Prussin represent the human form in toto. Dogon houses replicate the image of a man lying on his side: a complete, fully rendered body. So, too, the centerpiece of the Kotoko palace at Logone-Birni (North Cameroon) alludes to two entire figures. In Batammaliba architectural settings, the body is depicted in its every physical detail, from the fontanel to the jaw, solar plexus, knees, and joints.

Among the Bamileke the situation is different. Here the house does not represent the human form in its entirety. It does not function as an image, nor even as an abstracted rendition, of the body. Instead, it is a compendium of disparate parts (a head, a stomach, a mouth).

I have suggested that houses and the social identities of those who inhabit them are built in tandem. Here, this is made eminently clear. Head, stomach, and mouth — the building blocks of the house — are the building blocks also of status.
and social identity. In children and adults alike, all three are the focus for elaborate rites that serve to define a person's place within the community, to amplify his (or her) standing, and to validate newly acquired privileges. Each is adorned for public display — embellished with brilliantly colored caps, textiles, and pigments, so as to draw the eye. In carved representations of the human form, each is enlarged or otherwise enhanced.

Linked as one in the quest for status and power, the house and body are treated as if, indeed, they were one. Attention is lavished on the heads, stomachs, and mouths of buildings just as it is on the principal features of a person's anatomy. Each is a subject of aesthetic concern and serves as the focal point for rites centered on the acquisition of prestige.

Rather than address all three of the building blocks surveyed here, I have chosen to concentrate on one: the stomach. Encompassed within it are all of the fundamental themes that link anatomical and architectural form to the pursuit of social standing. My discussion of this all-important feature of body and house is divided into two parts. First, I consider the symbolic importance of the abdomen in human beings. In this setting, I focus on a ritual cycle that underlies all quests for status and stands at the root of all architectural endeavors. Second, I shift from body to house: from vam (the stomach) to vam pa' a (the stomach of the house). Here, I concentrate on form and meaning in shang ornamentation and address ceremonies held in the compounds of powerful men.

VAM: THE STOMACH AS SEAT OF IDENTITY

In Bandjoun as in other chiefdoms of the Bamileke region, the stomach is where social recognition begins. It is the focus of the very first rituals undergone by an individual, and it remains a subject of ceremonial concern throughout a person's life.

When first born, Bamileke children lack a social identity; they have yet to be defined as members of the community. In this sense, they are best described as empty vessels. This situation is remedied within a few days of a child's advent into the world. In a ceremony called for by parents and relatives, an enema is administered to the infant. The liquid that is injected into the body of the newborn is a sacred substance. It is made from a medicinal plant associated with the chiefdom's patron deity: Fo Todjom. Although the contents of the enema are eventually expelled by the body, Fo Todjom's medicine is thought to settle in the stomach. A fraction of the divine sponsor is thereby introduced into the child's body. In this manner babies are given a social identity. They are invested with, and so become repositories for, the essence of Bandjoun. This process is more than a symbolic exercise. It is a sine qua non. Those whose bodies do not contain Fo Todjom's medicine cannot be considered full-fledged citizens of Bandjoun, and are accordingly barred from seeking any form of status within the chiefdom.

As it is by way of the stomach that a child is first integrated into the community, it is through the stomach also that normative behavior is taught. Knowledge, in the Bamileke enclave, like economic and political power, is centralized: it is meant to be filtered, to be imparted through official channels. The young are acquainted early with this fundamental concept. The vehicle used to instruct them is a cluster of beliefs centered around the stomach. Those who ramper with knowledge that it is not their place to address or reveal, they learn, face a gruesome end: an abdomen that becomes distended, then swells and swells, until finally it bursts. The same fate, they are apprised, awaits people who subvert knowledge by using it in antisocial ways (in practices relating to sorcery, for instance) or providing false information in an official setting.

Citizens of Bandjoun are introduced to the concepts outlined above first within their families, then among their peers, in the context of activities ranging from play, for the very young, to carefully orchestrated group endeavors for those who are stronger and more mature. Participation is deemed essential, for therein lessons are learned and habits acquired that play a critical role in establishing a person as a full-fledged member of the community. Access is predicated on a series of rites, the first of which is the administration of Fo Todjom's enema. This initial ceremony is followed within a few weeks by a second rite de passage which also focuses on the abdomen and serves to reinforce the child's identity as a citizen of the chiefdom: the ritual interment of his (or her) umbilical cord.

The avowed purpose of both rites is to protect: to guard the young against sickness, accidents, and the envy of others. Also essential — and ultimately more significant — is the function that both fulfill as means of achieving status. In this regard, although they address children of both sexes, they play a far more important role in the lives of boys than girls, for status is first and foremost a male concern. We saw earlier that participation in the rites described above is a prerequisite for all who would take part in activities involving their peers, i.e., all those who wish to be recognized as full-fledged members of the society. The group endeavors of boys and girls are, in this regard, distinct. Unlike their female counterparts, who receive the fundamentals of their social education in informal, mostly domestic, settings, boys take
part in a highly structured socialization process centered around a complex system of age-grade associations. Participation in this system is obligatory and constitutes the first step in a life-long quest for social recognition. In this sense, it also constitutes the first step in a man’s lifelong involvement with architectural concerns.

Affiliation with an age-grade association leads, over several years, to membership in a variety of organizations: a pyramid of fratries, or initiation societies, known as *mke171*, which meet on a weekly basis in the *fo*’s compound. In order to obtain titles — to be recognized as a notable — a man must participate in the *mke171* system. No one individual (save the *fo*) can join all *mke171*, nor bear all titles. Many men belong to one, two, or even three fratries located within the lower echelons of the association hierarchy. Few belong to more. Fewer yet are members of Kemjie or Kwenjang, the two most exalted fratries. All men, however, aspire to take part in the *mke171* system, for with the recognition that it yields come a wide range of economic advantages.

In order to gain access to and advance in the *mke171* system, a man must build. As noted in the introduction, for every grade within the social hierarchy — for every title and privilege earned — there is an architectural step to be taken. The path to notability and the program of architectural undertakings that this entails begins with a rite called *sing joigbua*. Best described as a proclamation, this ceremony marks the passage from age grade to *mke171*. Before his peers, in an elaborately staged event that takes place on the chiefancy’s marketplace, a man announces that it is his intent to seek a place in the society’s hierarchy of titles and privileges. With this, his ascent of the *mke171* ladder begins.

The first, official step in this ascent calls for an architectural statement: the construction of a structure known as *tampa171 nusin171*. As it is most commonly described, this is a simple edifice: a small, one-room house whose walls are made of raffia palm, covered, on the outside, with a thick coat of red earth. Typically, construction of the *tampa171 nusin171*, combined with payments to the *fo* and to designated notables, provides a man with his first *mke171* membership and, thereby, with his first title.

Thus, as the quest for social recognition commences, so does the architectural process. Inaugurated with the construction of a simple edifice, it culminates, for the few who eventually reach the apices of the hierarchy, in an elaborate, multi-structure compound patterned on the *fo*’s abode — the *tsa*.

From Fo Todjom’s enema to the creation of an architectural ensemble modeled on the *tsa* — from the very beginning of the socialization process to its ideal completion — the path is long and occasionally tortuous, but it is nonetheless clear. At all times it is shaped by the same fundamental concern: an all-consuming interest in and quest for social recognition. So, too, in its closing stages, precisely the same themes are articulated as in its opening moments. The focus that we encounter initially on the abdomen as a primary locus for the elaboration of social identity is echoed, and reiterated on a monumental scale, in the compounds of men who have reached the summits of the hierarchy.

The abodes of such men have as their centerpiece a type of building that I have already discussed briefly: the *shang*. Structures of this kind are frequently adorned with finely rendered decorative motifs. These designs are concentrated on the *vampa171* — the stomach of the building — and in vivid, eye-catching terms express ideas linked to the human abdomen as a primary seat of social identity.

**Vampa171: Power and Status Displayed in the Ornamentation of Shang Facades**

The abdomen, or stomach, of the house is its living area. The term *vampa171* designates this space and the four walls that enclose it. The designs with which we are concerned appear on the facade and occasionally on the inner walls of the *vampa171*.

I next present an analysis of these patterns: a reading of their form, meaning, and function. For purposes of clarity, and in order best to illustrate certain fundamental themes, throughout much of this analysis I focus on a single edifice: one specific and widely known *shang* (*FIG. 4*). A vast meeting house known as the *bon die* or *men*, this edifice is the centerpiece of the Bandjoun *tsa*. Crowned with an immense cone of thatch and framed on all sides by an enfilade of intricately carved pillars, it is a breathtaking structure, the finest example of Bamileke architecture extant today.

Like the compounds of most Bamileke rulers, the Bandjoun *tsa* has been ravaged by fire on a number of occasions. In the past century it has burned three times: in the late 1920s, in the early 1930s, and again in the late 1950s. First built in the nineteenth, or possibly even in the eighteenth, century (opinions on this subject vary greatly among the people of Bandjoun), the *bon die* was destroyed and subsequently rebuilt on each of these three occasions. Because very few photographs of the *tsa* were taken during the colonial period, it is exceedingly difficult to establish how much the ornamentation of the *bon die* was altered in each reconstruction. Several of the elders to whom I put this question hold that the structure as it stands today is an exact replica of its previous selves. While the few photographs...
available demonstrate that this response is an overstatement, it suggests that a significant effort was made to conserve key elements of the edifice's original form and ornamentation.

Today, on the principal (west) facade of the bon die, and again on its north wall, visitors encounter a host of decorative patterns (FIG. 5). These fall into two broad categories: large curvilinear designs painted in bold colors, and intricate rectilinear motifs rendered in two and three dimensions. The curvilinear patterns are associated primarily with women. Outside the context of architecture they appear in a variety of settings: domains in which women play a highly visible role. First and foremost among these, as we shall see, is the realm of scarification. The rectilinear patterns also seen on the bon die, in contrast, are associated first and foremost with men. They too are encountered elsewhere — most prominently on textiles known as dlimp.

While, in formal terms, the two genres of designs seen on the shang's facade belong to two different worlds (female and male), in thematic and symbolic terms they belong to a single domain: a universe centered almost exclusively on the ideas and aspirations of men. In spite of their disparate sexual affiliations, both allude to concepts that are of interest first and foremost to the male community: concepts that are at the root of what it means to be a man in Bamileke society. If this is the case, it is so because — like the shang itself — the architectural process, and in a broader sense the quest for status and power, are spheres closed to women. Women, in the Bamileke community, do not build or own houses. They do not have access to the initiation associations that meet at the tsa, and accordingly they do not participate in the construction program or the quest for titles that go hand in hand with membership in these organizations.12

This does not mean, however, that women are absent from the architectural process or from the quest for status by which it is motivated. Quite the contrary. The female community plays a critical role in these two domains. It is the fuel that makes them possible. Women are the workforce of the society. They, not men, cultivate the earth. The extraordinarily vital economy of the Bamileke region is a product of their labor.13 By planting and harvesting enough food both to fulfill basic needs at home and to allow participation in lucrative trade networks, they have, over the course of three and a half centuries, kindled the emergence and sustained the growth of the hundred or so chiefdoms that constitute the Bamileke enclave.

At home — within the domestic unit — female labor provides men with the wherewithal to engage in the quest for titles and social success. Typically, a woman feeds her immediate family: her husband (who may also receive food from one or several other wives) and her children. Freed from the imposition of work in the fields, the man can focus on more remunerative pursuits, such as animal husbandry and trade. Often funded, at least in the initial stages, by goods or money stemming from his wives' labors, these activities in turn provide him with the resources to underwrite his quest for status.

Equally important in this context is the function that women fulfill as mothers. Women provide men with an all-important resource: children. Of particular interest in this regard are female offspring. As agricultural laborers, they create added wealth; as marriageable girls, they can be exchanged (for other women), used to build and cement alliances that play an important part in the quest for status, or presented to the fon in bids for social advancement.

FIGURE 4. (TOP) The bon die, centerpiece of the Bandjoun ruler's compound. (Photo by author, 1992. Copyright: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Photograph Study Collection, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.)

FIGURE 5. (ABOVE) Western facade of the bon die. Curvilinear designs appear, for the most part, immediately above the portal. Rectilinear motifs are seen to the viewer's right, on and above the small, house-like structure that projects outward from the facade. (Photo by author, 1992)
The work of women, in other words, is the foundation atop which the edifice of male social identity is built. It is the cornerstone of status and has traditionally served to bankroll the architectural process. The pivotal role that women play in this latter regard finds one of its most compelling expressions in the curvilinear motifs that grace the exterior of the bon die.

THE SCARIFIED BELLY

Among the motifs that adorn the ts’a’s principal meeting house, one in particular catches the eye (FIGS. 5,6). Shaped like a gourd, it dominates the facade. Outlined in rich black and gold hues against a background of meticulously joined raffia poles, it is repeated over and over again as part of an elaborate checkerboard pattern used to cap the edifice’s main portals.

This central, gourd-like motif is neither an abstraction nor a mere ornament. It is patterned in faithful detail on scarification marks that once adorned the bodies of Bamileke women. Once widespread, scarification is no longer practiced in the Bamileke region. In Bandjoun it was abolished during the reign of Fo Kamga II (r. 1925/26 — 1975). This reading of the patterns that appear on the bon die’s abdomen is founded on a study of photographs taken in the 1920s by a Frenchman named Bugniet, a series of female portraits shot in the “ethnographic” style of the day. Bugniet’s models wore short skirts tied at the hip. Cicatrix patterns covered their abdomens from pelvis to solar plexus, and on the bellies of several appeared designs identical to the gourd-shaped motifs on the bon die’s facade (FIG. 7). Also present on the stomachs of the subjects were disk-like patterns reminiscent of cart wheels. Atop these stood lozenges framed on either side by small concentric circles (FIG. 8). This configuration too is reproduced on the facade of the ts’a’s meeting house (FIG. 9).

Given the intimate links between house and body, shang construction and the labors of the female community, I suggest that the designs seen on the bon die bear not only a formal but also a thematic relation to the scarification marks photographed by Bugniet. Identical in form, they are also similar in meaning and symbolic content.

The discussion of formal ties between women’s scarification marks and architectural motifs presented here and the consideration of thematic links between these two art forms constitute the first attempt in print to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the designs at hand. While the bon die has been photographed and described on numerous occasions, and while scholars have shown considerable interest in its sculpted pillars, lintels, and jambs, relatively little attention has been focused on the patterns that adorn its facade. These designs have been looked upon primarily as decorative elements — as ornamental rather than meaningful devices.

Patterns like those that appear on the bodies of Bugniet’s models were etched into a woman’s flesh on three successive occasions: to prepare her for marriage; to identify her as a wife; and to celebrate the birth of her first children. Following the onset of menstruation, the first set of motifs was called for by her father to focus attention on her status as a potential bride. Following her betrothal, she was scarified a second time, on her husband’s request. A final cluster of designs was chiseled into her skin to mark the fulfillment of an all-important promise: the promise of fertility.

While the ostensible purpose of the scarification process may have been to mark turning points in a woman’s existence, I
believe its principal function was to highlight male concerns: matters of interest to those at whose behest the process was undertaken — matters, that is, of wealth and status. Much the same can be said of the designs that adorn the bon die. While they are patterned on motifs identified with women, they allude to purely male concerns — to questions of power, prestige, and economic advantage.

The occasions on which cheloid patterns were applied to the female body coincided not only with critical moments in a
woman’s life, but also (and more pertinent) with shifts in the way men thought of her. Puberty, marriage, childbirth: in general, these are the times at which a woman emerges most clearly as a source of male wealth — as a means for men to acquire goods, capital and, thereby, status. As an object to be exchanged in the context of marriage, she provides her father with funds and advantages of various sorts (the promise of a dowry, for example, or of services to be rendered in the future). As a wife and a mother, she labors for her husband as a producer of crops and offspring — the building blocks of prosperity. In each instance she acts as a tool in the male quest for social achievement. So, too, in each instance, her worth as an instrument of male success increases. As her status shifts from adolescent to bride to mother — from a potential to a proven source of wealth — she becomes more and more valuable: more and more useful as a means of access to power.

The scarification process served to mark a woman’s value as a source of wealth and to record the accrual of this value over time. Initially a blank slate, the female form underwent a cumulative transformation at the hands of men, a metamorphosis from which it emerged as the physical embodiment and the ultimate instrument of men’s social ambitions. The shang, as an architectural form, results from a similar process and functions in much the same manner. Like the body of a fully scarified woman, it is the product of a metamorphosis: it arises from a series of formal transformations, each of which reflects a change in status on the part of its owner.

Earlier we saw that the first step on the ladder of status calls for the erection of a type of building called a tami mai. Over time, as its owner’s wealth and prestige increase, this initial construction undergoes a host of formal and structural alterations. First, a pan is affixed to it — a veranda-like frontage made of neatly aligned raffia poles, which obscures the building’s original red-earth exterior. This addition touches the principal façade only. As time passes, a second (and in very rare cases a third) wall may also be provided with a new face. Following this, pillars are adjoined to the edifice; how many, whether they may be adorned, and in what manner are dictated by the owner’s status, and can accordingly change over time. At this juncture, too, a frame adorned with carved or incised (usually abstract) designs may be constructed to highlight the structure’s portal. So, too, if the owner chooses, a variety of decorative motifs can be applied to the façade. Over time, by way of incremental changes, the tami mai becomes a shang. Like a woman’s body, it is shaped and reshaped so that at all moments it can best reflect and serve the ambitions of its owner.16

Both a symbol and a tool, a woman’s scarified belly fulfilled two purposes. First, it demonstrated what a man had already achieved by displaying the wealth he possessed (the woman herself). Second, it hinted at what a man could yet accomplish by speaking of the riches he hoped to amass (in the form of crops, offspring, and — thanks to these two resources — additional women whom he might subsequently acquire as wives). Its purpose, in other words, was to advertise a man’s status and to evoke the status that he wished yet to acquire.

Precisely the same is true of the meeting houses built by men. At each stage in its evolution — and most prominently in its final, fully adorned, form — a shang functions both as an allusion to its owner’s status and as a means of highlighting his potential to attain greater status. Like the body of a young mother whose belly holds the promise of new life, it harbors the promise of wealth to come. By way of its form and the ornamentation of its van pa’ea, it alludes to new structures — new expressions and sources of power — which its owner may yet bring forth.17

THE CLOTHED BELLY

Not all men’s meeting houses are adorned with designs like those discussed in the previous pages. In the past curvilinear façade elaboration was far more common than it is today. The movement away from this genre of ornamentation, I believe, has been tied to shifts in the structure and organization of the Bamileke economy. With the emergence in the 1920s and 30s of new forms of wealth (the result of new developments in long-distance trading and the rise of new crops, such as coffee), and with changes wrought by Europe’s domination of Africa, the emerging in the 1920s and 30s of new forms of wealth (the result of new developments in long-distance trading and the rise of new crops, such as coffee), and with changes wrought by Europe’s domination of Africa, the manner in which men choose to represent themselves has undergone a vast transformation. Overt references to women as sources of wealth — allusions such as those encountered atop the portals of the bou die — have been replaced in many settings by references to men. These allusions focus less on the origins of a man’s prosperity than on his prosperity in and of itself. In this context, rectilinear design plays a central role.

Unlike their curvilinear counterparts, rectilinear patterns appear on almost all ceremonial structures built by notables. These rectilinear motifs and the tableaux they form on the façades of buildings are seen here to function as explicit references to male status: as emblems strategically deployed by men in bids for social recognition.

Rectilinear designs appear on both the exterior and the interior of men’s meeting houses. Most often, they are rendered in paint (fig. 10). Other media, however, are employed as well. For instance, the ties used to bind the multiple raffia poles which form the principal facade of a shang are commonly

FIGURE 11. (OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP LEFT) Detail of a shang facade. Compound of Ta Sa'a Foko, Dja quarter, Bandjoun. Ties used to bind the raffia poles that constitute the facade form an elegant geometric pattern. (Photo by author, 1992.)


FIGURE 13. (OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM RIGHT) Notable clothed in skirts made of duop. Farumeng quarter, Bandjoun. (Photo by author, 1992.)

bound in such a manner as to form elegant ensembles of geometric motifs (FIG. 11). On occasion, too, weavings or fine mats covered in patterns of this genre are attached to the walls of ceremonial structures (FIG. 12).

Earlier I suggested that the rectilinear motifs which appear in shang ornamentation replicate designs encountered on a genre of textile known as duop. This is a strip-woven cotton cloth. Employed throughout the grasslands, it is best known for the rich array of geometric designs that adorn its surface. Picked out in white against a solid indigo field, these motifs form a complex vocabulary of signs, each of which bears a name and is considered to represent one or several objects or ideas. Textiles of this sort, as we have seen, are owned and displayed primarily by men. Most commonly, they are cut into wide bands and sewn selvage-to selvage to form weighty tunics and pleated skirts. These are worn by notables, and by the fo himself, at important ceremonial events (FIG. 13).

The parallel which I draw here between geometric facade ornamentation and duop design is based in part on data provided by several artists whom I interviewed in Bandjoun. Of
particular interest is information offered by Ladislas Taffe Mogue, a painter and sculptor responsible for significant portions of the bon die’s two- and three-dimensional adornment. Concerning a vast ensemble of rectilinear designs that appears within the bon die, Taffe states the following:

Here and in other parts of the shang I have reproduced the designs seen on traditional dance outfits (skirts like those described above). I included these designs to indicate that only notables can enter here: only men who are entitled to wear outfits such as these.

As the foregoing suggests, duop is widely recognized as a signifier of status. Indeed, throughout the Bamileke region, it is identified as the symbol par excellence of social success. Its prestige in this regard hinges on two fundamental concerns: its value as a commodity and the intimate links that it bears to the fo.

Duop is an expensive item, available only to those who have considerable resources. Indeed, it is so valuable that in the past it was used as a form of currency in transactions between rulers. Its high cost reflects the manner in which it is produced: by way of a time-consuming, multiple-stage, and labor-intensive process involving a succession of highly trained specialists.

Central to its value is also the fact that its manufacture is bound to an extensive and lucrative long-distance trade network, a web of commercial ties that links Bandjoun (where the cloths are designed and sold) to the northernmost region of Cameroon some 1,000 kilometers away (where the cotton of which they are made is acquired and dyed).

In the context of this network, duop is closely associated with other goods bought or sold in Garoua and Maroua, two important Muslim commercial centers. From its association with these goods, all of which play an important part in the Bamileke economy, duop garners added value and prestige. In this respect, one commodity in particular is worthy of note, for, by virtue of its association with it, duop accrues considerable worth. This is the kola nut. Produced in Bandjoun and sold in large quantities on marketplaces in the North, it is a crop that has brought great wealth both to the rulers of Bandjoun and to a small group of ambitious men closely linked to the tiu.

The fact that duop once functioned as a form of currency and that it is associated with one of the Bamileke region’s most valuable crops is reflected in its ornamentation. One of the motifs most commonly encountered on the surfaces of indigo cloth is a cross of sorts known as nda pe njeshe. This is commonly read as the abstracted image of a kola nut. At the same time it is said by some to depict cowrie shells, an important form of currency in the grasslands in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Most of the designs used in the ornamentation of duop refer to the fo. Among these is the nkate ogo motif, which depicts the scales on a crocodile’s back and alludes to both the might and the wisdom of the ruler. This is commonly paired with a second pattern, called ntue-gop, which has the same meaning. The emphasis encountered here on designs linked to the fo
reflects the fact that *duop* production and distribution until quite recently were under the ruler's control (as was the kola nut trade to which it is intimately linked).

Most importantly, references to the *fo* underscore the fact that the right to own and display *duop* is a privilege granted by him and him alone. Just as men must seek from the *fo* permission to build certain types of architectural structures, to enter certain initiation associations, and to hold certain titles, they also must seek from him the license to wear *duop* and to display its designs on the facades of their meeting houses.

When a man appears in public dressed in *duop*, or when he commissions an artist to apply *duop* designs to the facade of his *shang*, he does so with a carefully defined objective. His purpose is to advertise his status in the most effective manner possible: by way of references to the *fo*. For, wherever they are seen, the rectilinear designs that adorn *duop* provide tangible evidence of a link to the ruler.

The preceding analysis suggests, as did our examination of scarification motifs, that in bids for social advancement body and house are used in precisely the same manner. Both are wrapped in images drawn from the vocabulary of *duop* ornamentation, sheathed in identical allusions to power and authority. The *shang*, like its owner, is clothed in *duop*.

That men's meeting houses are perceived by the Bamileke as being clothed in *duop* is reflected in the terms employed by artists to describe the process of painting designs onto a facade. Ladislas Taffe, in this context, commonly uses the French word *habiller* ("to dress"). By the same token, he speaks of painting bands of rectilinear motifs along the edge of the *bon die*’s ceiling as "hemming" ("comme on bordo les bouts d’une chemise").

In some instances, the meeting houses of prestigious men are quite literally clothed in *duop*. Following the death of its owner, a *shang* is sometimes swathed in lengths of indigo cloth. Thick folds of material are attached to its pillars with the help of a rope or raffia pole. The effect is striking. Seen from a distance, the deceased man's meeting house appears to be wrapped in a vast blue and white skirt (FIG. 14).

Not only structures—edifices proper—but also architectural elements that play an important role in the spatial articulation of a compound are adorned in this manner. Within architectural complexes belonging to powerful men indigo cloth is commonly draped over hedges and fences on important ceremonial occasions. In this manner public spaces are defined and enhanced. The compound's main walkways and plazas, where dances and processions take place, may be draped in lengths of cloth that identify them as loci resonant with their owner's status and power. A notable who adorns his compound with *duop* in this manner does so in emulation of the *tsa*. He patterns himself on a tradition of long standing: a custom whereby, in preparation for important events (enthronements, burials, lavish dances called *tso*) meter upon meter of blue and white fabric are draped across the ruler's architectural complex—along its principal alley (the *kutsa*) and on the circumference of its marketplace (or *sim dzemto*), where impressive masquerade performances are held (FIG. 15).
Men who seek to emulate the *tsa* by wrapping their compounds in *duop* do so not only to underscore and advertise their links to the ruler, but also to draw attention to their social ambitions. We have seen that the architectural path to notability culminates, ideally, in ownership of a compound patterned as closely as possible on the *tsa*. By “dressing” his compound so that it resembles the ruler’s, a notable underlines his desire—or, better yet, his ambition—to reach the apices of the social hierarchy.

One design which appears on most *duop* owned by notables underscores this point. Known as *ndukwu bom* (“ladder”), this motif, according to Jean-Paul Nottte, “functions as a symbolic reference to ascension. It alludes to [the concept of] hierarchy and renders in tangible form the various levels or rungs of initiation [in the *ndukwu* system].” Clearly and succinctly, it sums up the meaning and the function of *duop* as a tool in the quest for status and wealth.

**CONCLUSION**

The data and hypotheses presented above lead to a single, overarching conclusion. In the hands of men, scarification patterns and *duop* designs function in precisely the same manner. Formally unlike one another, rendered in different media, associated at first glance with distinct sectors of the community and disparate concerns, they nonetheless function as one. The focus and catalyst for their joint action is the center of a man’s being: his abdomen. He represents this, writ large and on a monumental scale, through the medium of architecture.

Throughout this paper, we have focused on the social identity of notables and on the manner in which this is fashioned by way of the architectural process. It remains for us to see how others address the built environment: how men of little means and no titles look upon the construction of social identity, and how they are affected by its demands. While these matters are beyond the scope of the present essay, a few remarks on the subject are in order and serve to bring our discussion to a close.

Patterened on an example set by the *fo* — the community’s most powerful and wealthiest man — the construction of meeting houses is not an endeavor that all (or even most) can undertake. Indeed, the means required to erect a *shang* and to adorn its facade are the province of an exclusive few. *Duop* patterns grace the facades only of men whose wealth is considerable; so, too, in the past, scarification designs were applied only to the bodies of women linked to powerful notables. Soo Tengowa Gérard, one of Bandjoun’s oldest and most distinguished textile designers, holds that one of the main purposes served by these designs was to identify the daughters and wives of prominent men as persons inaccessible to all but a very restricted circle of individuals. So too, Ladislas Taffe holds that *duop* patterns are painted onto facades to identify certain buildings as reserved enclaves, inaccessible to all but a small and specifically defined group of men.

As the foregoing indicates, and as the preceding discussion has sought to show, the architectural path to notability is a narrow one. In many respects it is a gauntlet, for it excludes more often than it includes. Still, it draws many aspiring travelers.

Men of all incomes and backgrounds attempt to enter upon it, enticed by the promise of grandiose structures modelled on the *bo die*. They come to it lured by the pledge that you are what you build, and that, through the architectural process, you can become one with the *fo*.

In this light, the architectural process comes to the fore as a powerful tool of social organization. It emerges as a forceful means of conditioning attitudes and behavior: as a model, or a heuristic device, that actively shapes and directs patterns of thought and social intercourse.

**REFERENCE NOTES**

1. The information and hypotheses presented in this paper stem for the most part from research undertaken during an extended period of residency in Bandjoun in 1992. This research was facilitated by a two-year fellowship from the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts. I would like to take this opportunity to thank H.M. Ngnie Kangva Joseph, the *fo* of Bandjoun, for making my work possible and for providing me with invaluable assistance. I wish also to thank several friends and colleagues to whom I am deeply indebted. First among these are Victor Kousam Loko, who assisted me in and greatly enriched every aspect of my work; Father Ernest Mbiwa, who offered me shelter, friendship, and advice throughout my stay; and Martheun and Odile Dorme, to whom I owe more gratitude than words can express. Many thanks too are due, in Bandjoun, to Messrs. Pierre Tuedom, Alphonse Fongue, Tabue Forso,
and Tabue Fossouo, who generously agreed to guide me in my research and to answer my many questions. Closer to home, for their advice and encouragement, hearty thanks go to Drs. Suzanne Blier, Christraud Geary, and Anne Allen; to Virginia Lee Webb for her assistance in matters photographic; and to Bart Legum, my editor, critic, and husband.

2. Until the 1960s niafo palm (Euphorbia balsamifera) occupied a central place in the social, political, and economic organization of the Bamileke community. Highly versatile, it was employed not only in architectural settings, but also in a wide variety of other contexts, ranging from weaving to pottery and salt conservation. Until quite recently the cultivation, use, and sale of niafo were heavily regulated by the D.* Considerable emphasis was placed on centralized control of palm plantations, for (as its multiple uses suggest) the niafo plant was a valuable commodity. Strict laws served to enforce the ruler’s power in this regard. See Kengne, “Les relations commerciales entre Njdo (Bandjoun) et les régions voisines des origines à 1925” (Master’s thesis, Université de Yaoundé, 1988), pp. 71, 75, 79.

3. Renald Engard has noted similar semantic links between the house and body in Bafut, a chiefly located northwest of Bandjoun. See his “Bringing the Outside In: Commensality and Incorporation in Bafut Myth, Ritual, Art, and Social Organization” (Diss., Indiana University, 1986), pp. 385, 392, 393 et al. While it does not belong to the Bamileke enclave, Bafut, like many other communities, shares basic structures and cultural traits with Bandjoun and its neighbors. Whether the data presented in this paper, and the hypotheses drawn from these, are also echoed in Bafut remains to be seen.


10. Gebi! iskum sa? (May my stomach swell!) With this oath, a man swears that he is innocent of a crime; that he has not broken the communal trust. With these words he proclaims an essential fact about himself: that he is a law-abiding member of the community (an appropriate repository for its sacred essence), and accordingly that he merits a place in its social hierarchy.

11. Charles-Henri Prudelies de Lastou has described this role at length in studies regarding the Bamileke chieftainship of Bangwa, which lies some thirty kilometers to the south of Bandjoun. In this regard the reader may refer to Prudelies’ doctoral thesis, “Le choympu du langage dans une chefferie bamileke” (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1985), pp. 149 et seq., and to a 1991 publication based on this, entitled Ethnopsychanalyse en pays bamileke (Paris: EPEL, pp. 58–61).

12. There is one exception to this rule. One woman — the mafai (pl. monafo) — is entitled to build and own architectural structures and, in a few specific cases, to participate in the activities of initiation associations at the fe. She may possess a shung and wear deep cloth. Mafai differ from other women in one, fundamental respect: chosen from among the mothers and sisters of chiefs to fulfill a political role as representatives of the fe, they are treated in most official respects as if they were men.

13. The Bamileke region is the agricultural heart of Cameroon: the source of most of the fruits and vegetables sold on marketplaces in the principal cities of Douala and Yaoundé. In this context, Bandjoun plays an important role; it is known as one of the region’s greatest centers of production and trade.

14. Additional evidence that an intimate link between scarification and architectural ornamentation exists in the Bamileke realm is to be found in the writings of Émile Buisson, a French administrator who was stationed in West Cameroon during the 1920s. In a 1931 article, Buisson notes that, while traveling through the Bamileke region, he encountered men who bore on their abdomens cicatrix motifs modeled after architectural elements. Thus, in the small chiefdom of Bamorko he met a man whose stomach was adorned with the image of a chieftain portal: an abstracted rendition of a shung door complete with carved jamb designs. See Buisson, “Le tatouages bamileke,” Togo-Cameroun (1931), pp. 112.

15. Ibid., pp. 108, 111.

16. Not all men’s houses are built in exactly this manner. Instead of transforming a single building — seeing it through each of the stages that lead from tam bili to shung — some men choose to build several different structures: one for each separate stage of the process. Since the advent of European-style materials and methods, others (most often very wealthy men) have abandoned the processual approach to construction in favor of more rapid results; they build their ceremonial enclaves in a single undertaking. Even in cases such as these, however, the underlying concept of cumulative growth is retained. It is alluded to in the structure and the spatial organization of buildings, which, despite the use of new materials, continue to include important elements like a tam and pillars. Cumulative growth is also reflected in the fact that permission to build must still be sought in a piecemeal fashion: item by item, as if this were still a process taking place in discrete stages.

17. The metaphorical link drawn here between the pregnant bellies of women and the abdomen of the shung finds substantiation in the writings of Jean-Paul Notue. See “La symbolique des arts bamileke: approche historique et anthropologique” (Diss., Université de Paris I, 1988), Vol. II, p. 376. While he does not discuss in detail the designs that adorn the tam, Notue identifies in passing the gourd-like motifs that crown its portals as references to fertility. In this regard, see also S.D. Djache Nzefa, “Les chefferies bamileke dans la loi du modernisme” (end of studies project, École d’Architecture de Nantes, 1993), pp. 31 et seq. Of interest as well is a brief discussion in Engard concerning allusions to women in Bafut architectural terminology (“Bringing the Outside in,” 1986, p. 393).

18. The cotton used to manufacture shung is grown, spun, and woven in North Cameroon. Following transport to the grasslands, it is brought to Bandjoun, the Bamileke region’s foremost center of indigo textile production. There, in the form of a plain white cloth known as kongbump, it is acquired by male artists. Equipped with fine pieces of wood or raffia palm dipped in brown liquid, they transform the material by inscribing on its surface a series of interconnected geometric designs. The patterns created in this manner are then oversewn with raffia fiber. Following this initial series of steps, the textiles travel to the North snow; there they are dyed in indigo pits owned and operated by Muslim artisans. After drying, they are returned once again to Bandjoun. At this point the oversewing is removed. Impervious to the indigo dye in which the cloths have been immersed, the raffia fiber has protected the designs atop which it was sewn; following a last series of adjustments at the hands of their designer, the motifs drawn on the surface of the textile emerge as bright white signs inscribed against a solid background of deep blue color.

Now, finally complete, the cloths can be sold on one of Bandjoun’s three principal marketplaces. For additional information on the manner in which shung cloth is produced, readers are referred to V. and A. Lamb, As Cameroon: Weaving-Tissage (Roxford, U.K.: Roxford Books, 1981), pp. 30–49.


20. Ibid., p. 392.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., p. 393.