H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tarikhu Farrar. *Building Technology and Settlement Planning in a West African Civilization: Precolonial Akan Cities and Towns.* Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996. xi + 217 pp. $89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7734-2262-9.

Reviewed by Eric Ross (Cartographer)
Published on H-Africa (August, 1997)

"The study of African history and culture has yet to achieve liberation from stereotypes and prejudices rooted in a colonialist and racist worldview" (p.. 195).

Tarikhu Farrar is intent on debunking the myths and refuting the presuppositions which continue to underpin contemporary research on African architecture. The existing corpus on African architecture includes works by architects and anthropologists. The author is mostly concerned with problems in the former category. As late as 1975, for instance, the prestigious Electra/Rizzoli coffee-table collection could unselfconsciously use the title *Primitive Architecture* for its volume relating to Africa, Native America, and Oceania.[1]

The term 'primitive' as applied to West African architecture translates into the presupposition that the circular house type (primitive) must precede the rectangular one (advanced), and that vegetable building material (primitive) precedes the use of clay (advanced). Concomitant to the notion of "primitive," according to Farrar, is the notion of "indigenous"; hence the circular form and vegetable construction are qualified as "indigenous" while the rectangular form and clay construction become "exogenous" elements which have to be explained in terms of "diffusion" from more "advanced" civilizations.

In order to refute these stereotypes, Farrar presents a study of precolonial (traditional) Akan urban settlements. The study opens with a review of theories about Akan architecture (Chapter Two). Next is a section on the structure and hierarchy of Akan cities and towns (Chapter Three). The center-peice of the book is a study of building technology based on original field work (Chapter Four), followed by a survey of data from other sources (Chapter Five). Finally, the conclusion (Chapter Six) offers a reconceptualization of the question of African urban form.

The emphasis of Farrar's research is on material culture and especially on technology, i.e., building materials and methods of construction. The Bono and, to a lesser extent, the Asante and Accra Plain tradions of Ghana are studied from the bottom up. That is to say that Farrar's original research consists of extensive interviews in the field (in Nkoransa Traditional Area, Brong-Ahafo Region, over several building seasons) with people actually involved in house-building today. Interviews were also conducted with elders who have knowledge of former building techniques.

Farrar confronts the data collected in the field with three additional sources of information: archeological (Kintampo, Bono Manso, Begho), documentary (descriptions of early European visitors) and oral (the vernacular oral histories–as opposed to the mythologies or royal narratives).

Emphasis is on domestic architecture and local know-how. In the transition from "traditional" to "modern," which has often led to the replacement of superior local materials with inferior imported ones (p. 110), Farrar laments the fact that the new construction methods and materials (cement blocks, sheet roofing) have destroyed local knowledge and skills without replacing them with anything of similar usefulness (p. 104).

The conclusions Farrar draws are the following. First, there is a strong continuity of building construction in Ghana since the neolithic period (the Kintampo culture, c. 1500-2000 BCE). "Timber and clay" construction is clearly attested at all periods where there is data and there are grounds for considering "coursed clay" construction (on stone foundation) to be just as ancient. In other words, there is little evidence to uphold the notion of "primitive" vegetable versus later "advanced" clay construction.

Secondly, on the evidence provided, there are no grounds for explaining Akan architecture as a synthesis of Sudanic (Muslim and therefore "advanced") traditions penetrating the forest culture ("primitive" and "indigenous"), as expounded by Prussin.[2] While contacts and borrowing are not ruled out, the evidence suggests that Akan building technologies evolved locally. The only ele-

ment of Akan architecture which Farrar ascribes without hestation to Muslim influence is the design of Kumasi's domestic toilets (p. 183).

The orientation of Farrar's study is in keeping with recent archeological thinking on the question of African urban traditions as exemplified by Connah.[3] Rather than the mostly futile search for the "origins" of African city and state formation (usually understood in terms of diffusion), emphasis has shifted to consideration of local resources and needs. Up until recently, the presupposition of the inherent inferiority and backwardness of Africa had hindered this line of investigation.

Students of African architecture will find Farrar's concluding chapter, "The Need for a Reconceptualization of African Settlement Forms and Building Technology," of interest. It presents a comparative study of the perceptions of European and African urban planning in Western historiography as revealed through, among other things, choice of vocabulary. For example, at what point do "wattle and daub huts" become "timber-frame, plastered cottages" (p. 194)?

Farrar demonstrates how the Akan term 'oman' (translated as "city-state") designates an entity which is in every way equivalent to the classical Greek term 'polis'. Furthermore, the dichotomy between "primitive" and "advanced" in Western academic literature is seen to rest mostly on: (a) the use of "hard" building materials (bake brick, stone), and (b) the construction of prestige buildings (temples, cathedrals). When the ordinary living conditions and habitations of the masses are considered, and when the political, social and economic functioning of entire cities and their hinterlands ("oman") are analyzed, the term 'primitive' can apply just as well to medieval Britain as to precolonial Ghana.

By concentrating exclusively on material culture, the author intentionally avoids discussion of cosmogony and the spiritual world which characterizes recent anthropological studies of West African architecture–see for instance Blier's work on the Batammaliba.[4] Likewise, the anomalous architecture of Asante fetish houses is not discussed by Farrar, though it it is an important feature in the work of his nemesis, Swithenbank.[5]

The title of the book is slightly misleading in that the section dealing with settlement planning is less developed than the section on building technology. The author relies less on original field work than on existing published sources.

In terms of its technical quality, Farrar's book does not live up to the standards of other publications, though I am not sure if ultimate responsibility for this lies with the author or the publisher. The illustrations of building techniques and settlement layouts are, at best, sketchy, and one begs to see photos or sketches of the different building types being discussed (mpapa-dan, tare-dan, etc.). Also, could some provision have been made to include the illustrations of settlement and habitation plans previously published in the works on Akan archeology, architecture and art history cited in the text (for example, Bowdich's 1819 map of Kumasi discussed on p. 68)? Without ready access to these figures the reader is left in something of a lurch.

One has only to compare Farrar's book to those of Ojo[6] and especially Moughtin[7] and Domian[8] to understand how effective illustrations can carry a text of this nature. Like the illustrations, the single map (p. iii) is woefully inadequate for the task of situating the phenomena under discussion. Without necessarily indulging in the lavishness which characterizes current French publications on African architecture,[9] surely some effort towards providing the reader with proper illustrations should be considered before any re-edition.

In the absence of an Akan architectural history–someting which Farrar states is impossible to write given the present state of research–what we now have is an excellent analysis of Akan building technology within a historical perspective.

Notes:

[1]. Guidoni, E., *Primitive Architecture*, Electra/Rizzoli, New York, 1975.

[2]. Prussin, L., *Hatumere*, University of California Press, 1986.

[3]. Connah, G., *African Civilizations*, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

[4]. Blier, S. P., *The Anatomy of Architecture*, University of Chicago Press, 1987.

[5]. Swithenbank, M., *Ashanti Fetish Houses*, Ghana Universities Press, 1969.

[6]. Ojo, G. J. A., *Yoruba Palaces*, London University Press, 1966.

[7]. Moughtin, J. C., *Hausa Architecture*, Ethnographica, London, 1985.

[8]. Domian, S., *Architecture soudanaise*, l'Harmattan, Paris, 1989.

[9]. See Sinou, A. *Porto-Novo*, Paranthese, Marseille, 1988, and *Le comptoir de Ouidah*, Karthala, Paris, 1995.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Eric Ross. Review of Farrar, Tarikhu, *Building Technology and Settlement Planning in a West African Civilization: Precolonial Akan Cities and Towns.* H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. August, 1997.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1213

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.