

# ARTICLES

## Localizing Fulbe Architecture

Mark Dike DeLancey, *DEPAUL UNIVERSITY*

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### ABSTRACT

*Fulbe architecture of the Adamawa Region, Cameroon, and the Fouta Djallon region, Guinea, bear many formal similarities. Fulbe in Cameroon often point to architectural form as a marker of ethnic identity. Scholars have also perceived ethnicity, as well as Islam, as central to analyzing Fulbe architecture, drawing upon a now-outdated understanding of pulaaku, or Fulbeness. Instead, the Fulbe should more appropriately be perceived, especially in the realm of permanent architecture, as extraordinarily adaptive. The focus on ethnicity and Islamic faith has in fact blinded scholars to the much stronger connections that can be drawn with local architectural traditions, irrespective of religion or ethnicity.*

Identifying and defining Fulbe architecture has proven a difficult task for African art historians. The Fulbe are a people commonly thought to have originated on the west coast of Africa, but who have spread widely

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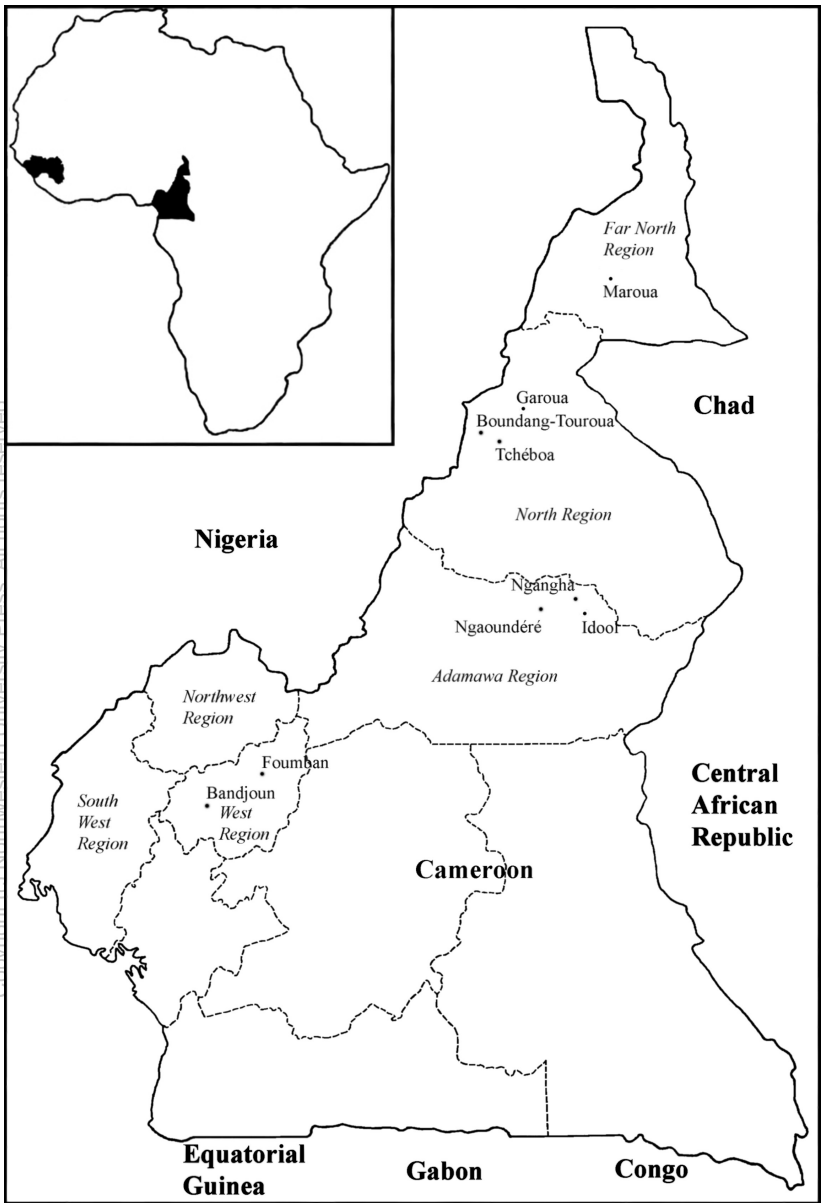
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across West and Central Africa.<sup>1</sup> They are closely associated with the raising of cattle, and have also played a central role in the spread of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the last three centuries. From the west coast, the Fulbe spread east across the continent over the centuries with the principle aim of locating new pastures for their cattle. In many places, groups of Fulbe have settled and at times come to rule over their adopted lands. Such is true in the Fouta Djallon region of Guinea, which saw the foundation of an Islamic state by Fulbe in the early eighteenth century. A century later, Fulbe in northern Cameroon formed a number of substates under the ultimate authority of the Sokoto Caliphate (figure 1).

The peregrinations and cultural changes experienced by the Fulbe over these past three centuries have raised the important question for architectural historians as to what, if anything, constitutes specifically Fulbe architecture? Two major points of view have developed regarding this question that were, in both cases, at odds with the prevailing contemporaneous scholarly notions of Fulbe identity. On the one hand, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars generally emphasized the unity of Fulbe identity, while those studying Fulbe art and architecture suggested the widespread Fulbe adoption of local architectural forms from surrounding populations wherever they settled. On the other hand, since the 1980s, the field of Fulbe studies has emphasized issues of culture change and distinctions in identity, as art historians espoused an essential unity of sedentary Fulbe architecture across the diaspora that is predicated on common values of pastoralism, a former nomadic life, and Islam.

This article argues that those studying Fulbe architecture must recognize the shift in Fulbe studies from an emphasis on a unitary identity to its malleability. It is not focused primarily on the debates over identity, but rather how those debates impact the study of architecture. The example of northern Cameroon will be employed to illustrate the pitfalls of an overemphasis on notions of cultural continuity across the Fulbe diaspora, and the absolute necessity of considering architectural expression in relation to its local context. Architecture commonly designated as Fulbe in Adamawa Region, Cameroon, is first compared in formal qualities to Fulbe architecture in the Fouta Djallon region of Guinea. The argument for architectural continuity will be placed in the context of both popular Fulbe and early scholarly discourses that emphasize a common Fulbe identity.

<sup>1</sup> Thierno Diallo, "Origine et migration des peuls avant le XIXe siècle," *Annales de la faculté des lettres et sciences humaines* 2 (1972): 168–74.



**Figure 1**

Map of Cameroon in relation to Guinea.

This orientation will be contrasted with the early literature on Fulbe architecture, which ironically focused on the acculturation of the Fulbe to their various local contexts. The shift to a more contextualized understanding of Fulbe identity formation in the 1980s provides an impetus for rejecting the notion of a specifically Fulbe architecture in Adamawa Region, Cameroon. Consideration of the architecture of neighboring ethnicities and regions will impress the distinctly local qualities of architecture built for or by Fulbe in this region, foregrounding the necessity of balancing potential ethnic or religious sources of architectural form with more immediately produced ones based on geography, climate, and political and sociocultural allegiances.

### *Fulbe Architecture in Adamawa and Fouta Djallon*

At first glance, the architecture of Adamawa Region, Cameroon, and the Fouta Djallon region, Guinea, bear many formal similarities. The strongest relationship can be drawn between elite residential and palace architecture in Adamawa and mosque architecture in Fouta Djallon. The elite architecture of Adamawa Region, and in particular of its capital Ngaoundéré, is immediately recognizable and unique in Cameroon. It is typified by a tall pointed roof topped with a small cap that reproduces the whole in miniature (figure 2). Roofs in this region, especially of elite architecture, are thatched with a particularly long, thin, and straight grass from the Adamawa plateau called *siiseeri* in Fulfulde. Thatched with cut bottom exposed, and bound at the head of the grass, the roofs possess a spectacularly smooth sloping surface. Within the palace of Ngaoundéré, the thatched roofs are all executed in this elegant manner.

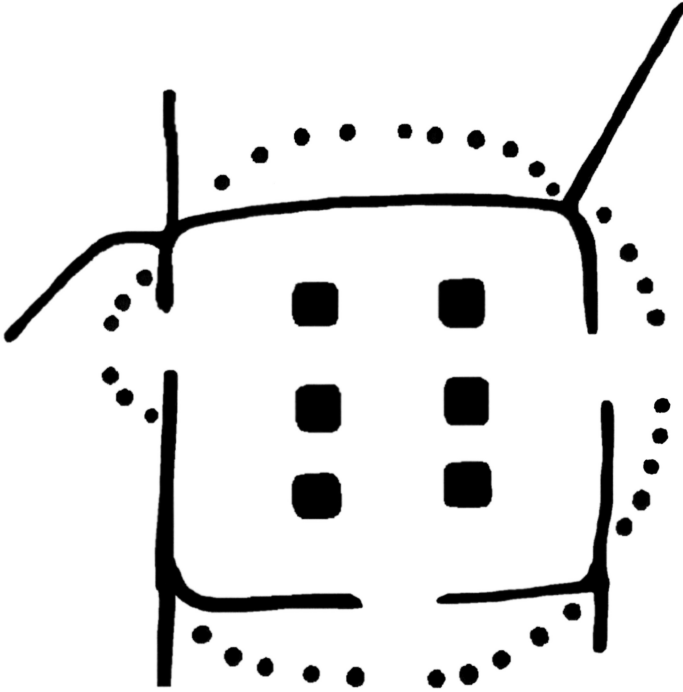
This sleek surface is in contrast to most houses, which, though possessing the same basic form, have a much rougher texture to the thatching as the grasses are attached by the sturdier cut base with the tufted head exposed (figure 4). The grass stems do not snap as easily when thatching in this manner and therefore require rethatching less often. Although this method of thatching sheds rain just as effectively as the smoother method, it is not nearly as aesthetically pleasing.

Functionally speaking, the cap provides added protection for the apex of the roof, but it is not absolutely necessary (figure 5). Mimicking the whole of the roof in miniature, it participates in a tradition widespread across northern Cameroon, and surrounding regions as well, of fitting the apex of the roof with an attractive finial, whether woven of grass or crowned with pottery.



**Figure 2**

Second building (*Jawleeru Njakmukon*) in the Palace of Ngaoundéré, west façade. Ngaoundéré, Cameroon. Photo by Mark D. DeLancey, 1996.



**Figure 3**

Second building (*Jaweleeeru Njakmukon*) in the Palace of Ngaoundéré, plan. Ngaoundéré, Cameroon. Drawing by Mark D. DeLancey.

The building beneath is typically constructed of courses of unbaked earth. The standard residential unit is circular in plan with the door as the only opening. Such circular plan structures may also be employed as entrances or distribution points to various quarters within a larger family compound, in which case the walls would be pierced by two or more portals. The walls are protected from sun and rain, an important consideration given the heavy rainy season on the Adamawa Plateau, by the extension of the roof to create broad eaves.

In more elaborate structures, such as in the palace of Ngaoundéré,



**Figure 4**

Binding grass thatching by the stem. Idool, Cameroon. Photo by Mark D. DeLancey, 2000.

building plans are often square or rectangular (figure 3). The walls, both exterior and interior, may be decorated with painted low relief geometric decoration. An earthen ceiling is supported from within by one or more stout earthen pillars, elements distinguishing the building type known as a *sooro*.<sup>2</sup> The earthen ceiling is only apparent from the interior, as are the pillars, since the thatched roof hides their existence on the exterior. The eaves extend almost to the ground, cloaking the entire building in deep shadows. The eaves are supported on wooden poles planted in a semicircular plan around each portal to create a porch. Thus the roof of what may be a square-plan building visually transforms the exterior into a subtly undulating conical form.

Elite residential architecture in the Fouta Djallon region of Guinea bears some formal similarities to that of Adamawa. As in Adamawa, residential structures are ordinarily circular in plan.<sup>3</sup> Wood poles may be ar-

<sup>2</sup> For a more in-depth look at the historical use of this building type in northern Cameroon, see Mark D. DeLancey, "The Spread of the Sooro: Symbols of Power in the Sokoto Caliphate," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 71, no. 2 (June 2012): 168–85.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Poujade, *Les cases décorées d'un chef du Fouta-Djiallo*. Documents d'ethnographie terrestre 1 (Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1948).



**Figure 5**

Roof cap with framework revealed. Ngaoundéré, Cameroon. Photo by Mark D. DeLancey, 2000.

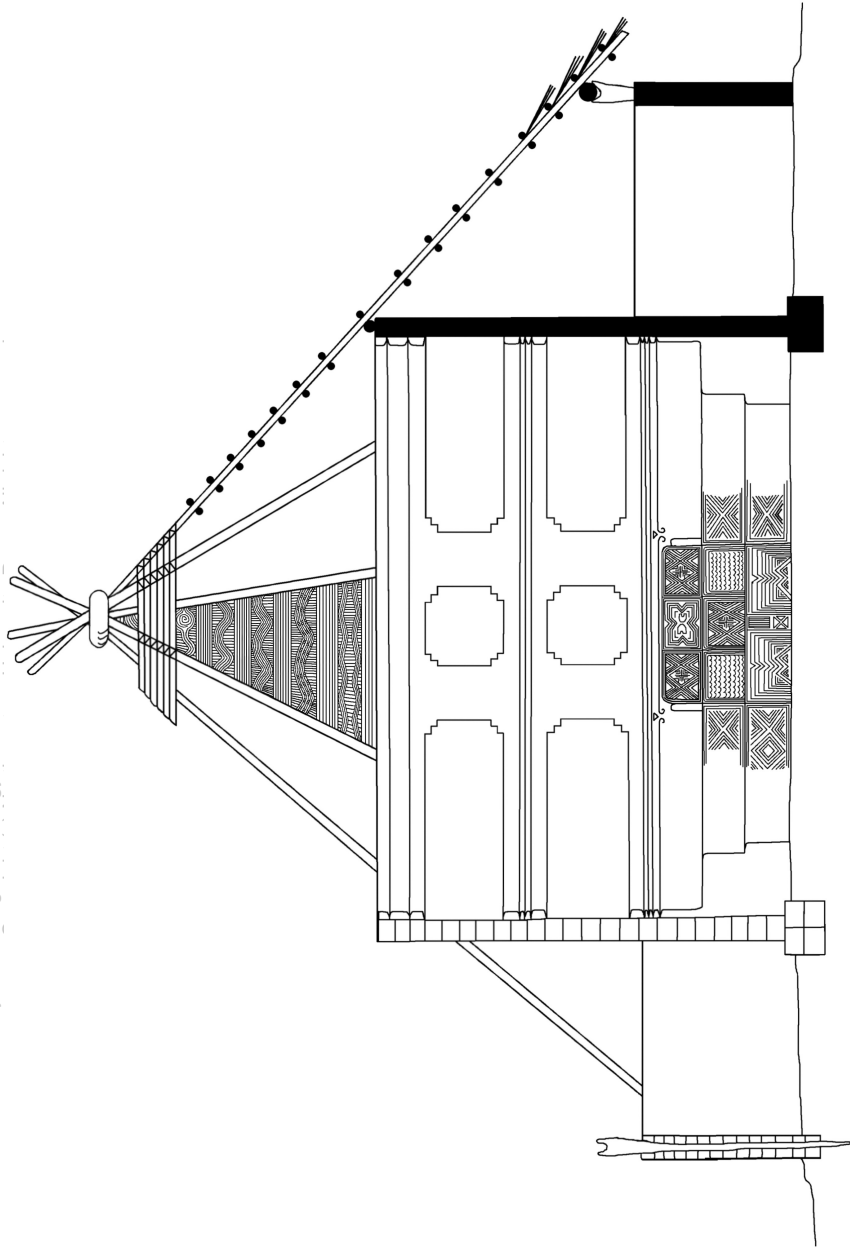
ranged in a circular fashion around the building to create a veranda. Long rafters converge above the center of the building and extend down over the walls of the building and the posts of the outer porch to create a conical form which is then thatched. Thus, the residential unit is composed of a conical thatched roof over a circular plan room (figure 6).

The walls and even the floors, beds, and other surfaces of an elite residence may be decorated with incised and painted geometric decoration. This decoration is more enveloping and of a more delicate character than the bold relief decoration usually seen on pillars and surrounding portals in Adamawa. The interior of the thatched roof, visible since there is no ceiling, may be decorated with horizontal rings of bound thatching arranged in straight or undulating lines around the interior circumference.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, and in common with the entrance to the palace of Ngaoundéré, mosque architecture in the Fouta Djallon is resolutely square in plan, based on the model of the Ka'ba as encouraged by the Maliki school of Islam

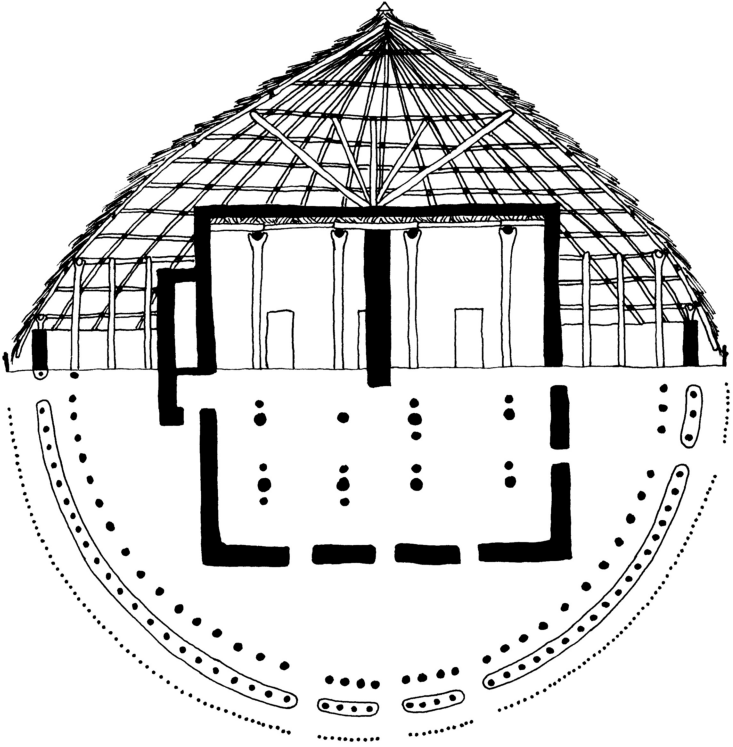
<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 16–31; P. Creac'h, "Notes sur l'art décoratif architectural Foula du haut Fouta-Djallon," in *Comptes rendus de la première conférence internationale des africanistes de l'ouest* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1951), 300–312.

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**Figure 6**

Section of a house. Dalaba, Guinea. Composite drawing by Mark D. DeLancey after Poujade, *Les Cases Décorées*, p. 8, fig. 1; p. 23, figs. 19 & 20; p. 28, fig. 31.



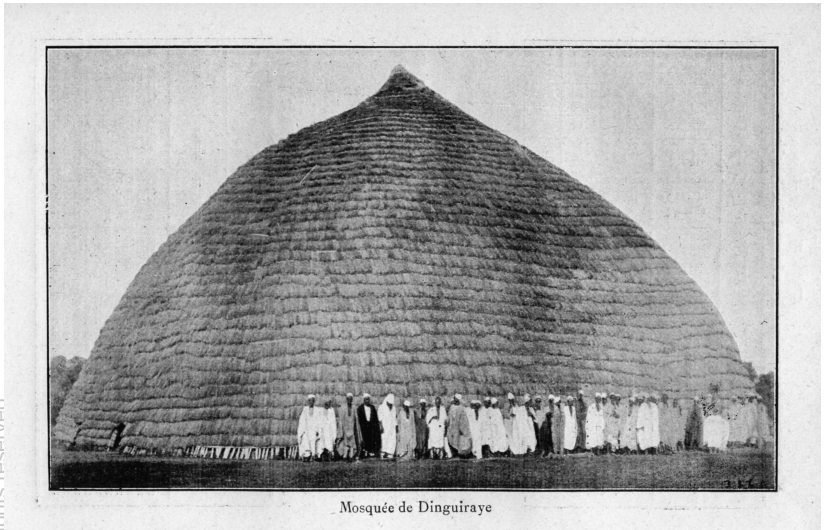
**Figure 7**

Friday Mosque of Dinguiraye, section. Plan by Mark D. DeLancey, after Prussin, *Hatumere*, p. 229, fig. 7.34b.

followed throughout West Africa.<sup>5</sup> The Friday Mosque of Dinguiraye, Guinea, is the largest and most spectacular example of this type (figures 7 and 8).

The plan employs triple entrances on the north, west, and south sides. A mihrab niche on the east side indicating the *qibla* completes the composition.

<sup>5</sup> Labelle Prussin, *Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 184, 187. It is difficult to compare like structures in both contexts. While mosques are documented in the Fouta Djallon, these historical monuments have largely been replaced in Adamawa by either French colonial examples, based on church architecture, or contemporary reinforced concrete examples borrowing from an international Islamic vocabulary.



**Figure 8**

Friday Mosque of Dinguiraye, Guinea, plan. Ca. 1900. Famechon, *Notice sur la Guinée Française*, p. 165.

A large central pillar, flanked by numerous smaller wood poles dividing the interior floor plan into rows and aisles, supports the earthen ceiling. The central pillar supports above it an upturned umbrella-like collection of wood poles radiating out and supporting a massive thatched domical roof that protects the earthen cube below. Such a support system for the roof is unnecessary in ordinary residential architecture due to the smaller space covered, but here it is required to prevent the rafters from bowing. The eaves extend down to a circle of short wood poles planted in a circular plan around the internal cube, cloaking the interior in deep, dark shadows much like the palace of Ngaoundéré. The mosque of Dinguiraye may therefore be characterized as a circular plan roof focused on the central pillar of a square-plan building. The persistence of the cone on cube paradigm halfway across the African continent seems from a purely formal point of view to lend credence to the theory of a pan-Fulbe architectural vocabulary.

### ***Identity and Roof Form***

The architectural historian is confronted with similar styles of architecture in Guinea and Cameroon, separated by some 1,700 miles. From



**Figure 9**

Man wearing an *mbuloore*. Guassanguel, Cameroon. Photo by Mark D. Delancey, 2000.

the perspective of a number of specifically Fulbe sources in Adamawa, there is little question that architecture is perceived as a marker of Fulbe identity, ultimately suggesting a connection with their brethren in the Fouta Djallon. On a number of occasions, Fulbe individuals in Adamawa proclaimed to me that the architectural finial is a public declaration of Fulbe identity by emulating the form of the pastoral hat known in Fulfulde as an *mbuloore* (figure 9). Like the roof finial in Ngaoundéré, the *mbuloore* covers and protects the head from the elements with a conical form created of grass fibers that comes to an emphatic point. As will ultimately be shown, however, such contemporary formulations of identity can be, and in this case are, built on objectively false presumptions.

The identification of roof cap with *mbuloore* and Fulbe identity draws upon a pride in animal husbandry, and a frequently nomadic past, that is a commonly cited element of Fulbe identity by the Fulbe themselves, as well as by researchers. The founding of Ngaoundéré, as with the rest of the polities of northern Cameroon, is traced locally to the influx of Fulbe in the early nineteenth century seeking out new pastures for their herds of cattle. A historic landmark near the center of the city is a large tree to

which the city's founder, Ardo Ndjobdi, is said to have tied his calf rope. The history of pastoralism and transhumance is commonly contrasted with the culture of the indigenous Mboum population conquered by the Fulbe and who were primarily sedentary agriculturalists. Similarly, anthropologist Catherine Ver Eecke reported that the herding staff, or *sauru*, is a visible sign of Fulbe identity in northern Nigeria, carried at all times whether currently engaged in herding or not. Moreover, she pointed out that settled Fulbe frequently own cattle herds as much to maintain a connection to their pastoral heritage as for financial or status purposes.<sup>6</sup> In both cases, visual imagery of animal husbandry was employed in defining Fulbe identity in contrast to the prevailing agriculturally based cultures of other local ethnicities.

This sense of the roof cap indicating Fulbe identity, however, also participates in a common shorthand in the architecture of northern Cameroon, whereby the roof finial serves to quickly and easily differentiate between groups. The role of architecture in identifying distinct groups may gain at least some impetus from the extraordinary diversity of cultures resident in the region. An example can be taken from the town of Tchéboa in North Region, about 121 miles northwest of Ngaoundéré. This town is predominantly composed of Fulbe and Bata, the Bata being the indigenous population who were conquered in the earlier nineteenth century by the Fulbe, much as were the Mboum in Ngaoundéré. A project operating since the 1980s to transplant individuals from the more desiccated Far North Region to take advantage of abundant arable land has resulted in an influx of new ethnic groups. These newcomers live together in a new neighborhood, set slightly apart from the old town. The maintenance and open declaration of distinct identities is readily apparent to even the casual observer. The houses of the old village, whether of Fulbe or Bata, are usually round with conical coverings. Most houses have a second layer of thatching stitched onto the apex of the cone to help protect this most vulnerable point. For more well-to-do households, a delicate woven netting decorates the conical roofs, on the interior and the exterior, as well as serving functionally to help hold the thatching on in the face of sometimes fierce winds (figures 10 and 11).

In contrast, the newcomers' neighborhood is dotted with slightly taller buildings with oblong cones topped with sharply pointed finials (figure

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Ver Eecke, "Pulaaku: Adamawa Fulbe Identity and Its Transformations" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1988), 63.



**Figure 10**

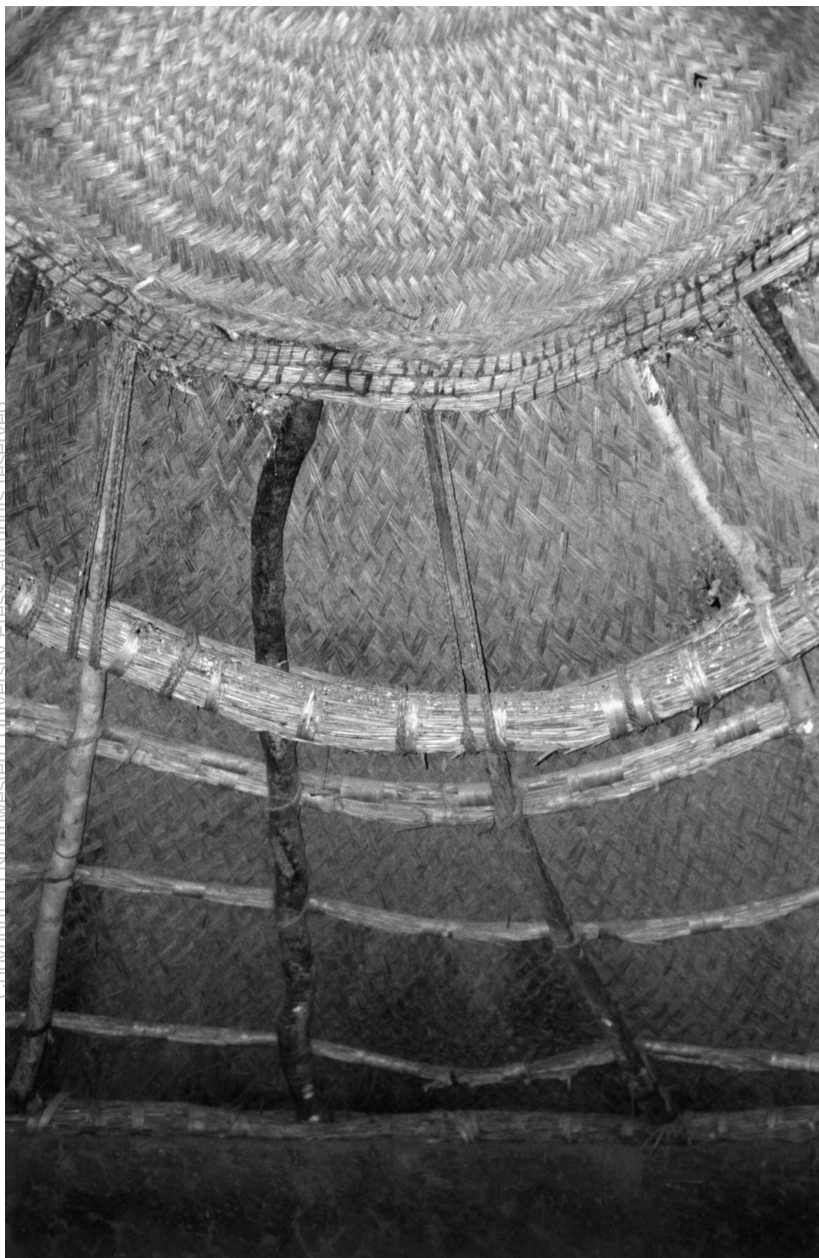
Thatched roof with woven netting at the apex. Tchéboa, Cameroon. Photo by Mark D. DeLancey, 2000.

12). Glaringly out of place in Tchéboa, these unusual roof forms are more common in the Far North Region, the point of origin of the immigrants. Thus, distinct forms of roofs, and most particularly the finials, serve to distinguish different identities in Tchéboa, much as it was suggested to me in Adamawa that conical roof finials referred to Fulbe identity by way of the *mbuloore*. That these identities are based exclusively on ethnicity rather than simply by geographic origin, however, is not clear.

### *Unitary Model of Fulbe Identity*

The similarity cited by residents of Ngaoundéré between roof-cap and pastoral Fulbe *mbuloore* resonates with similar observations by architectural historian Labelle Prussin in relation to Fulbe architecture in Fouta Djallon.<sup>7</sup> She suggests that the general conical form of the hat is emulated on a much larger scale by the forms of Fulbe roofs. Likewise, Prussin points out that

<sup>7</sup> Prussin, *Hatumere*, 82–83; Labelle Prussin, “Architectural Facets of Islam in the Futa-Djallon,” in *Islamic Art and Culture in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Karin Adahl (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Figura Nova Series 27, Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 1995), 44–46.



**Figure 11**

Interior of roof. Tchéboa, Cameroon. Photo by Mark D. DeLancey, 2000.



**Figure 12**

Building constructed in a style typical of the Far North Region. Tchéboaa, Cameroon. Photo by Mark D. DeLancey, 2000.

the circular framework woven into the inside of the hat is similar to the manner in which thatched roofs of that region are reinforced with internal rings. The points of the leather strapwork on the exterior of the *mbuloore* commonly define a four-pointed figure, recalling the square plan of the mosque of Dinguiraye. The combination of a cone with a four-pointed figure also recalls the uniting of these dichotomous forms in mosque architecture.

Prussin furthermore relates the geometric interlacing of the leather strapwork on the exterior to Islamic designs of mathematical and mystical origins, or *hatumere*, implying divine protection of the wearer. The term is a Fulfulde one that is derived from the Arabic *khatim*, or “seal.” These seals, found throughout the Islamic world, are based on esoteric knowledge of the spiritual power of specific phrases from the Qur’an, sacred names, numbers, and geometric designs. The synergistic effects of these abstract elements may be directed toward different ends, whether they be the attraction of love or success, the healing of illness, or a more general protective function.<sup>8</sup> While the acceptance by Islamic law of such esoteric pursuits varies in different periods and places in the Islamic world, there is little doubt that they have long held popular appeal and are widely employed in sub-Saharan Islamic cultures.

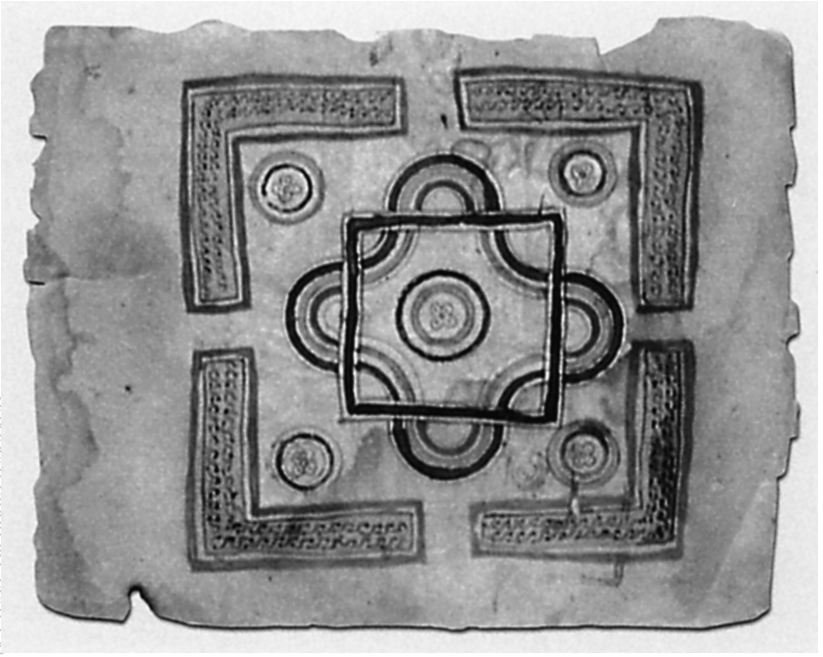
In her groundbreaking study *Hatumere*, Prussin identifies these esoteric seals as the unifying template for Islamic design across West Africa.<sup>9</sup> These two-dimensional geometric designs were expanded into the third dimension to create protected environments for habitation and sacred spaces for prayer. As such, the same principles applicable to the intersection of architectural design with *mbuloore* in the Fouta Djallon should theoretically also be applicable to Adamawa. Like the Fouta Djallon examples, the smooth-flowing conical roofs of palace architecture in Ngaoundéré hide an earthen cube beneath (figure 3).

Prussin asserts that the Friday Mosque of Dinguiraye, Guinea, built by the family of the legendary conqueror El Hadj Umar, is based upon a *hatumere* that he purportedly left as a plan (figure 13).<sup>10</sup> The *hatumere* defines a square with openings on four sides, while the corners and center are emblazoned with circular designs. The center is given particular at-

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, René Bravmann, “God’s Secrets: Shaped in Silence,” in *African Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1983), 31–45; David Owusu-Ansah, “Prayer, Amulets, and Healing,” in *The History of Islam in Africa*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 477–88.

<sup>9</sup> Prussin, *Hatumere*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 225–29.



**Figure 13**

*Hatumere* purportedly created by El Hadj Umar and employed as an architectural plan for constructing the Friday Mosque of Dinguiraye, Guinea. Photo by Labelle Prussin, 1979–80.

attention by surrounding it with a quatrefoil and superimposed square. The mosque of Dinguiraye likewise follows a square plan with a central pillar, much as the cone and brim of the *mbuloore* hide within the leather strap-work a four-pointed figure focused on the central vertical axis of the hat. The internal square and quatrefoil of the *hatumere* may be conceived as the umbrella-like supports radiating out from the central focus. The triple entrances on three sides and the mihrab niche on the fourth replicate the four openings of the *hatumere*. Thus, *mbuloore* may be related to mosque or palace by reference to the *hatumere*, with Islam and Fulbe ethnicity as the glue that holds all three together.

Fulbe popular histories in northern Cameroon directly connect Adamawa to the Fouta Djallon. In a history of the Fulbe polities of Maroua and Pette in the Far North Region, Cameroon, historian Eldridge Mohammadou recorded an account that the Wolarbe, the principal clan in Adamawa and more

particularly the clan that founded and continues to rule Ngaoundéré, originated from one of the four boys, representing the four originating Fulbe clans, born to Sidi Uqba bin Nafi` (622–685 CE) and Mbajjou Manga, the daughter of a local ruler in Fouta Djallon.<sup>11</sup> Sidi Uqba, a general of the early Islamic empire, commenced the conquest of North Africa in 670 CE and founded an important mosque in Kairouan, Tunisia. In the account recorded by Mohammadou, the Wolarbe are declared to have ruled from Timbo, considered both the political and religious capital of the Fulbe confederacy in the Fouta Djallon, from whence they eventually migrated to Adamawa. This tale, moreover, relates the Wolarbe closely to the clan of Modibo Adama who founded the emirate of Adamawa in 1809, under which all the substates of northern Cameroon were incorporated into the Sokoto Caliphate. Modibo Adama hailed from the Ba'en clan, which is said to originate from the same son of Sidi Uqba as the Wolarbe. Thus, one might postulate that the architectural similarity between the Fouta Djallon and Adamawa is indicative of the common clan affiliation of the two populations, the role of that clan in political and religious leadership in both regions, and a sense of their direct historical connection.

The history recorded by Mohammadou gives an account for the origination of Adamawa Fulbe in the Fouta Djallon as an Islamic people. Related tales tracing the Fulbe to Sidi Uqba have also been recorded across the Fulbe diaspora by numerous authors.<sup>12</sup> These legends argue, in a sort of shorthand, for perceiving the Fulbe as one people, despite their many wanderings and shifts in lifestyles; some becoming rulers of far-flung empires, others tending their cattle over long-distance seasonal migrations, and still others settling to farm the land. Other Islamic groups across Af-

<sup>11</sup> Eldridge Mohammadou, *L'histoire des Peuls feroobe du Diamaré: Maroua et Pette*. Les traditions historiques des Peuls dans l'Adamaoua 1 (Niamey: Centre regional de documentation pour la tradition orale, 1970), 146–49. For a similar history, see Eldridge Mohammadou, *Ray ou Rey-Bouba: Les Yillaga de la Bénoué*. Traditions historiques des Foulbé de l'Adamâwa (Garoua: Musée dynamique du Nord-Cameroun, ONAREST, 1979), 137.

<sup>12</sup> Derrick J. Stenning, *Savannah Nomads: A Study of the Wodaabe Pastoral Fulani of Western Bornu Province, Northern Region, Nigeria* (London: International African Institute by the Oxford University Press, 1959), 18–20. Competing origin stories also trace the Fulbe to an origin in one way or another derived from cattle. Marguerite Dupire, *Peuls nomads: Etude descriptive des Wodaabe du Sahel Nigérien*. Travaux et mémoires de l'institut d'ethnologie, Université de Paris 64 (Paris: Institut d'ethnologie, Musée de l'Homme, 1962), 29–37; Amadou Hampate Ba and Germaine Dieterlen, *Koumen: Texte initiatique des pasteurs Peul*. Cahiers de l'Homme, N.S. 1 (Paris: Mouton, 1961), 29.

rica likewise claim descent from Sidi Uqba or from Bilal, the Ethiopian slave who was one of the earliest converts to Islam and served as muezzin for the Prophet Muhammad's budding community.<sup>13</sup> This story, and others like it, should not be understood as a factual accounting of Fulbe origins, but rather as an example of the common manner in which Islamized populations of Africa have linked themselves with the larger Islamic world.

In the early twentieth century, the unitary conception of Fulbe identity across the continent was accepted not just in popular Fulbe discourse, but also in scholarly discourse. Linguist Anneke Breedveld and anthropologist Mirjam De Bruijn, among others, trace this early scholarly emphasis on a unitary identity to the initial colonial encounter and the European perception of the Muslim Fulbe ruling organized states as an elite race derived from non-African roots.<sup>14</sup> I would add the key role of Islam in this perception, as Europeans were familiar with this religion and perceived monotheism as indicative of a superior intellect. The greater esteem in which the colonial powers held Islamic populations did not go unnoticed by the Fulbe and other African populations, and the expanded role that Islam has played in Fulbe identity in the twentieth century may be in part a politically astute reaction to this prejudice. At the same time, it should be pointed out that the identification of ethnic groups was part of a larger colonial project of distinguishing "tribes," seen as hermetically sealed cultural environments.

<sup>13</sup> David C. Conrad, "Blind Man Meets Prophet: Oral Tradition, Islam, and Funé Identity," in *Status and Identity in West Africa: Nyamakalaw of Mande*, ed. David C. Conrad and Barbara E. Frank (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 86–132; David C. Conrad, "Islam in the Oral Traditions of Mali: Bilali and Surakata," *Journal of African History* 26 (1985): 33–49. Connections drawn through other figures, historical or mythical, may be found in the following sources: P. F. de Moraes Farias, "Pilgrimages to 'Pagan' Mecca in Mandenka Stories of Origin Reported from Mali and Guinea-Conakry," in *Discourse and Its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts*, ed. Karen Barber and P. F. de Moraes Farias (Birmingham: Center for West African Studies, 1989), 152–70; P. F. de Moraes Faria, "'Yoruba Origins' Revisited by Muslims: An Interview with the Arokin of Oyo and a Reading of the Asl Qaba'il Yuruba of Al-Hajj Adam al-Iluri," in *Self-Assertion and Brokerage: Early Cultural Nationalism in West Africa*. Birmingham University African Studies Series 2 (Birmingham: Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, 1990), 121–22; R. S. O'Fahey, "Islam, State, and Society in Dar Fur," in *Conversion to Islam*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), 192–93; Yusuf Fadl Hasan, "The Umayyad Genealogy of the Funj," *Sudan Notes and Records* 46 (1965): 27–32.

<sup>14</sup> Anneke Breedveld and Madame Mirjam De Bruijn, "L'image des Fulbe: Analyse critique de la construction du concept de pulaaku," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 36, no. 144 (1996): 793–95.

The “tribe” was defined by a single language proper only to it, and likewise a single material and artistic language producing what Sidney Kasfir has termed the “One Tribe One Style” paradigm of African art history. She traces the widespread scholarly acceptance of the coincidence of ethnicity and artistic style to William Fagg who considered the two clearest indicators of tribal identity to be language and material culture.<sup>15</sup>

Prussin’s defining of distinct styles of Islamic art along ethnic lines, Manding, Fulbe, and Asante, follows in this model. While Islam is depicted as the force that ties all together, permitting exchange between systems, the specific character of each is derived from its unique pre-Islamic culture. The opening paragraph of the chapter on the Fulbe diaspora broadly defines the key elements for understanding the uniqueness of that ethnicity’s visual culture:

Fulbe-speaking peoples have been moving across a once-fertile Sahara for several millennia, populating areas as far west as the banks of the Sénégal River. Wherever they were and wherever they went they carried with them a strong sense of cultural identity grounded in an emotional attachment to the virtues of a nomadic life-style. Fulbe cosmologies and myths of origin continue to reflect this attachment to transhumance and to a previous matrilineal inheritance system, and the iconography of nomadism persists to this day, despite sedentarization and their rise to power in several parts of West Africa.<sup>16</sup>

She further indicates that the origins of Fulbe architecture lie in a confluence between the nomadic domical tent and the use of the dome in Islamic North Africa and Egypt, conveyed through the geometry employed in the creation of *hatumere*.

It must be kept in mind that this was but one chapter in a larger project that employed Islam as a unifying force, bringing together a number of visual traditions in particular through the *hatumere*. Such an approach bears resemblance to other works, such as René Bravmann’s *African Islam*, which sought to understand artistic commonalities derived from Islam across African visual traditions.<sup>17</sup> The focus on finding commonalities

<sup>15</sup> Sidney Kasfir, “One Tribe, One Style? Paradigms in the Historiography of African Art,” *History in Africa* 11 (1984): 171–72.

<sup>16</sup> Prussin, *Hatumere*, 198.

<sup>17</sup> René A. Bravmann, *African Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1983).

in Islamic visual traditions in Africa was understandable considering that until the work of scholars such as Prussin and Bravmann, the role of Islam in sub-Saharan African art had been largely ignored. African art history having been founded primarily around the production of figural sculpture and masquerade, the presence of Islam seemingly wiped away all visual culture that defined the field as originally constituted. As African art historians tended to ignore Islamic cultures south of the Sahara, so too did Islamic art historians ignore them for being too African. Thus, scholars such as Prussin and Bravmann filled in the gap that had remained at the overlap of two fields of art history. One may, nevertheless, argue that the search for such commonalities presented the danger of relying too heavily on Islam as a source.

A similar critique of the uniformity of Islamic art and architecture has recently been leveled at that field by art historian Gülru Necipoglu. She has argued that the field of Islamic art history has imposed an artificial unity on the extraordinary diversity of visual cultures considered within its purview, accounting for variety in terms of “timeless ethno-national categories.”<sup>18</sup> Where the study of Islamic and African art and architecture have overlapped, it would appear that many of the pitfalls of both have been united, producing the mirage of a unified Fulbe tradition spanning West and Central Africa based on ethnicity and Islam.

### *Diversity of Fulbe Identity*

Prussin’s approach relies heavily on models popular until the 1980s that defined Fulbe identity primarily through language, nomadism, pastoralism, and Islam. The source of these unifying characteristics was thought to lie in *pulaaku*, the code of conduct often glossed as “Fulbe-ness.” Anthropologist Elisabeth Boesen traces the conception of *pulaaku* as the fulcrum of Fulbe identity to Marguerite Dupire and Derrick J. Stenning, who wrote seminal studies on the Wodaabe Fulbe in Niger and northern Nigeria.<sup>19</sup> This code was defined in varying ways by different authors, including

<sup>18</sup> Gülru Necipoglu, “The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (June 2012): 4.

<sup>19</sup> Elisabeth Boesen, “Pulaaku: Sur la foulanéité,” in *Figures peules*, ed. Roger Botte, Jean Boutrais, and Jean Schmitz, Collection Hommes et Sociétés (Paris: Karthala, 1999), 84–85; Dupire, *Peuls nomads*, 1962; Stenning, *Savannah Nomads*, 1959.

values such as reserve, intelligence, respect, and patience.<sup>20</sup> The variation in the specific values mentioned from one Fulbe group to another, though largely ignored in these early studies, suggests that there are in fact distinctions in various Fulbe identities. As an example, sociologist Victor Azarya indicated that the nomadism to which Prussin declares the Fulbe to be emotionally attached is not a central value. Many Fulbe communities are in fact sedentary and have been for long periods of time. Azarya emphasizes that one must distinguish between ideas of nomadism and much more broadly valued pastoralism, as the two do not necessarily go hand in hand.<sup>21</sup> Anthropologist Angelo Maliki Bonfiglioli clarifies that the Wodaabe of Niger, often considered the archetype of the nomadic Fulbe, in reality resorted to a nomadic life in response to a number of pressures only in the late nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Prior to that period, they practiced a sedentary form of agro-pastoralism. Pastoralism, on the other hand, is seen as central enough to Fulbe identity that Christian Dupuy claimed the ability to trace the early widespread presence of Fulbe across the Sahel as early as the first century BCE from rock paintings of spear-bearing individuals in relation to cattle.<sup>23</sup>

Beginning in the 1980s, many scholars shifted focus from *pulaaku* as a single code to a reference point that is negotiated in individual situations at times to distinguish between Fulbe and neighboring groups, and at other times to distinguish between Fulbe groups themselves.<sup>24</sup> The discussions of Fulbe identity in the 1980s in general tended toward the conclusion that while there were certain elements that tied the Fulbe together across the diaspora, such as a cultural focus on cattle and use of Fulfulde language, local identities usually superseded these commonalities in everyday life.

<sup>20</sup> Breedveld and De Bruijn, "L'image des Fulbe," 796; Ver Eecke, *Pulaaku*, 52–66.

<sup>21</sup> Victor Azarya, "Sedentarization and Ethnic Identity among the Fulbe," in *Unity and Diversity of a People: The Search for Fulbe Identity*, ed. Paul K. Eguchi and Victor Azarya, Senri Ethnological Studies 35 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 1993), 41.

<sup>22</sup> Angelo Maliki Bonfiglioli, *Dudal: Histoire de famille et histoire de troupeau chez un groupe de Wodaabe du Niger* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 87–112.

<sup>23</sup> Christian Dupuy, "Les apports de l'archéologie et de l'ethnologie à la connaissance de l'histoire ancienne des Peuls," in *Figures peules*, ed. Roger Botte, Jean Boutrais, and Jean Schmitz, 53–72.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Burnham, *The Politics of Cultural Difference in Northern Cameroon* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996); Nikolaus Schareika, "Pulaaku in Action: Words at Work in Wodaabe Clan Politics," *Ethnology* 49, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 207–27.

Indeed, regional differences are at times so apparent that some authors have argued that it makes little sense to speak of a single Fulbe people.<sup>25</sup>

It would seem that while some core elements of what it means to be Fulbe may persist, at times even being overemphasized to clearly delineate ethnic boundaries, a massive acculturation occurs everywhere that Fulbe move or settle. This is true of Adamawa as much as other areas across Africa. In terms of language, the Fulfulde of Adamawa Region incorporates significant Hausa vocabulary, as well as Mboum and other local languages. A popular characterization of this linguistic acculturation is commonly quoted in northern Cameroon: Fulfulde arrived in Maroua (in the Far North Region) in good health, fell sick in Garoua (in North Region), and died in Ngaoundéré (in Adamawa Region).

By the 1990s, *pulaaku* as a code of social mores was reconceptualized as contingent on specific exigencies to an extent that it makes little sense to attempt to define it as a single concept. *Pulaaku* was perceived as something that was formed through lived experience, rather than an ideal to which one did or did not subscribe.<sup>26</sup> In order to study *pulaaku*, it would not suffice to comprehend the verbal presentation of the concept, but rather it must be experientially apprehended as practiced. Specific local circumstances or situations were found to foreground particular aspects of Fulbe identity. In northern Cameroon, Islam became one of the aspects that historically distinguished the Fulbe as flag-bearers of the Sokoto Caliphate.<sup>27</sup> Somewhat ironically, this commonly expressed aspect of *pulaaku* is employed to distinguish the Fulbe conquerors not only from the indigenous population, but also from those Fulbe, known as Mbororo, who maintained a transhumant pastoral life. The Mbororo were, and still are, looked down upon as uncouth, simple, untrustworthy, and lax in their command of Islam, if not outright pagan. As with more recent research

<sup>25</sup> See especially Paul K. Eguchi and Victor Azarya, eds., *Unity and Diversity of a People: The Search for Fulbe Identity*, Senri Ethnological Studies 35 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 1993). The articles in this text all address the issue of Fulbe identity, some arguing for a common identity and some against. The malleability of Fulbe identity across the diaspora and over time is an important subject of many of these essays. Likewise, a collection of essays by the participants in the GRÉFUL (Groupe d'études comparatives des sociétés peules) gatherings of scholars in France also dwells on issues of Fulbe identity: Roger Botte, Jean Boutrais, and Jean Schmitz, eds., *Figures peules*, Collection Hommes et Sociétés (Paris: Karthala, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Boesen, "Pulaaku"; Shareika, "Pulaaku in Action," 207–27.

<sup>27</sup> Burnham, *Politics of Cultural Difference*, 48–53.

on Fulbe identity in general, one would expect a similar interest in local permutations and negotiations of what constitutes Fulbe architecture, if indeed any such thing can be defined in a particular locale.

Boesen has broached such an approach with respect to nomadic Fulbe visual culture of the Wodaabe of Niger. She draws attention to the essentially consumerist orientation of the Wodaabe, who have quite willingly incorporated aspects in particular of Tuareg culture as well as select industrial products. She determines that modern products that essentially fulfill culturally predefined needs that the Wodaabe are unable or unwilling to satisfy with their own labor are most widely adopted.<sup>28</sup> In Adamawa and elsewhere, the adoption of local architecture by sedentary Fulbe, particularly when fashioned by hired local labor, exemplifies a similar mode of adoption to that of the Wodaabe.

### *Adopting Architecture*

In terms of the arts, some elements, such as the *mbuloore*, may be maintained, though perhaps filtered through local visual traditions. Barbara Frank expresses the false identification in the Malian context of specific forms with specific cultures by suggesting that the profession of the patron or identity of the artist may be just as key to understanding its references. She takes the example of the *mbuloore*, stating that it is “usually identified in museum records as Fulani and worn by Fula and other herdsmen out in the hot sun, [but that it] may just as easily have been adorned by a Dogon or Bamana leatherworker as a Fula one.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise, one may find other ethnicities performing a similar pastoral occupation wearing the *mbuloore*. Thus, what has been characterized as a clear referent to Fulbe identity is in reality a nexus of cultural intersections in its design, creation, and employment.

Other art forms such as permanent architecture, for which semi-nomadic pastoral Fulbe had no immediate precedent, might be borrowed wholesale. This corresponds to a central theory of Victor Azarya’s comparative study of Fulbe in Guinea, Nigeria, and Cameroon.<sup>30</sup> In those areas such as

<sup>28</sup> Elisabeth Boesen, “Gleaming like the Sun: Values in Wodaabe Material Culture,” *Africa* 78, no. 4 (2008), 583–86.

<sup>29</sup> Barbara E. Frank, *Mande Potters and Leatherworkers: Art and Heritage in West Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1998), 150.

<sup>30</sup> Victor Azarya, *Aristocrats Facing Change: The Fulbe in Guinea, Nigeria, and Cameroon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

Guinea and Cameroon where the Fulbe created a political system largely *ex novo*, their culture has been vigorously maintained and elements of it have been adopted by the local population. In cases such as northern Nigeria, where the Fulbe inherited preexisting state structures, they acculturated so completely that it became difficult to distinguish Fulbe from non-Fulbe. This model could be more nuanced, for even the state structures that the Fulbe introduced in some areas must be understood as having been adopted from elsewhere. In the case of Adamawa, which so far as is known was previously composed of a large number of small-scale polities, the Fulbe set up new state structures based on the model of the Sokoto Caliphate of northern Nigeria, into which northern Cameroon was integrated in the early nineteenth century. The Sokoto Caliphate's political system was in turn a combination of prior Hausa structures with models drawn from the early Islamic Caliphate. At the same time, the previously nomadic Fulbe in Adamawa adopted local architecture and other cultural elements for which they had no precedents in their own culture.

Azarya's general concept of the Fulbe at times adopting novel cultural features from local populations was by no means a recent one, but simply one that was laid aside for some time. As early as 1906, J. Machat in writing about the Fouta Djallon region of Guinea explained that settled Fulbe frequently adopt elements of the sedentary cultures among whom they take up residence.<sup>31</sup> This idea of cultural adoption is in tension with the more generalized early twentieth-century perception of a common Fulbe identity. More specifically relating to architecture, the 1952 publication *L'habitat au Cameroun* presented the research of seven French architects who visited the country with the aim of understanding the local architecture and gaining insights for the development of culturally and climatically appropriate modern architecture. The result was an extraordinary collection of drawings and photographs, accompanied by a horribly paternalistic text. For northern Cameroon, a strict division was drawn between the mountains and the plains, with an entirely separate section for the Fulbe. The peoples of the mountains, so-called *montagnards*, were described as picturesque, yet unhygienic, noble-savage types who had resisted outside influences whether of Fulbe or European origin. The peoples of the plains, on the other hand, were perceived to have largely capitulated to Fulbe culture after a century of slave raids and conquests. The Fulbe were portrayed

<sup>31</sup> J. Machat, *Guinée française: Les rivières du sud et le Fouta Djallon: Géographie physique et civilisations indigènes* (Paris: Augustin Challamel, 1906), 274.

as militant conquerors who reside largely in the cities. The architecture of the Fulbe was described essentially as adopted from the local populations wherever they settled, much as suggested by Machat for the Fouta Djallon.<sup>32</sup> The nature of this borrowing, however, was never defined very well either in the text or in the images.

The view of the Fulbe as cultural borrowers was echoed only fifteen years later by art historian and anthropologist Jacqueline Delange who referred to the Fulbe as “fundamentally borrowers of techniques” in whose culture, “borrowing itself has its own philosophy.”<sup>33</sup> Delange furthermore mused that the geometric designs decorating Fulbe architecture of the Fouta Djallon are of Islamic origin. She asserts, however, that the Islamic-derived decoration should in fact be ascribed to the Mande artists who created it, rather than to the Fulbe who commissioned the work. Similarly, she points out that the Fulbe adopted earthen architecture for reasons of prestige and comfort from local populations in Mali, Burkina Faso, and northern Cameroon.<sup>34</sup> Like the authors of *L’habitat au Cameroun*, Delange gave little in the way of specific examples that might demonstrate this borrowing either in text or in image. Delange’s statement that borrowing is a philosophy of its own for the Fulbe, despite the paucity of examples furnished, was nevertheless quite insightful.

The division between mountains and plains put forth in *L’habitat au Cameroun* was picked up in the later writings of geographer Christian Seignobos, who conflates the two categories with those of pagan *montagnards* and Fulbe.<sup>35</sup> His published work stresses the distinctiveness of *montagnard* models from those of the Fulbe, encouraging a harder-edged definition of ethnicity and architectural style. Non-Fulbe peoples who live on the plains are dealt with by Seignobos, but are understood simply as permutations of *montagnards*. The artificiality of the distinction is most apparent when treating the architecture of peoples who completely surround predominantly Fulbe settlements, yet the central Fulbe settlements are ignored. Such is the case, for example, with his brief treat-

<sup>32</sup> *L’habitat au Cameroun* (Paris: Publications de la recherche scientifique outre-mer; Editions de l’union française, 1952), 59.

<sup>33</sup> Jacqueline Delange, *The Art and Peoples of Black Africa* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974), 140–41. The original French edition was published in 1967.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 144–45.

<sup>35</sup> In particular, see Christian Seignobos, *Nord Cameroun: Montagnes et hautes terres*, Collection architectures traditionnelles (Roquevaire, France: Editions parenthèses, 1982).

ment of Di'pi, Mboum, and Gbaya architecture of Adamawa, while ignoring the Fulbe-dominated city of Ngaoundéré entirely.<sup>36</sup> The Fulbe were left for a second volume, *Plaines du Nord-Cameroun*, which was unfortunately never published. Seignobos's description of his intentions is telling, however, of his theoretical dependency on the earlier work of *L'habitat au Cameroun*. He states that the intended second volume will present a more impoverished catalog of types, just as the ethnic profile is radically simplified. He goes on to say, however, that it is in the capitals of the Islamic states that one finds the most acculturation and architectural changes that have produced contemporary architectural models.<sup>37</sup> This declaration directly echoes the stated *raison d'être* of *L'habitat au Cameroun*.

One of the most recent works on Fulbe architecture, though outside of Cameroon, is by architect Jean-Paul Bourdier and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha.<sup>38</sup> Their book includes a chapter, along with two visual essays, on Fulbe architecture in a broader study of Senegalese architecture. On the one hand, the authors acknowledge, in both text and images, the diversity of traditions even within one nation. On the other hand, through an overreliance on the works of Fulbe scholar Ahmadou Hampaté Ba as the sole interpretative lens, they reimpose a unity of interpretation upon what is clearly a diverse visual tradition. This restrictive lens amounts to an essentialist focus on the pastoral nomadic existence that is commonly considered the font of Fulbe culture, as explicitly affirmed by the authors, and just as explicitly contradicted by Bonfiglioli. More permanent architecture is treated, however, toward the end of the chapter in which the authors briefly examine the intersection of Fulbe architecture with that of their Malinke, Jaxanke, Soninke, and Tukolor neighbors. One is left with a lack of clarity regarding the orientation of the authors with respect to the issue of defining what exactly constitutes Fulbe architecture.

In the rather undeveloped literature on Fulbe architecture, it becomes clear that most who wrote on the subject generally recognized a diversity

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 169–81.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>38</sup> *Drawn from African Dwellings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 22–71, 116–29. There are also two chapters on the architecture of the Tokolor, considered by many as part of the larger Fulbe culture. *Ibid.*, 72–115, 134–83.

of architectural forms across the many areas that the Fulbe settled. As a result of shifts from transhumant to sedentary life, the temporary shelter of the nomad was discarded in favor of more permanent structures. That said, other explanations, including ethnic specialization in particular sectors of production, intermarriage, slavery, the environment, and still other factors must be considered as possibly responsible for the adoption of architectural forms by the Fulbe. In any case, the diversity of styles represented in these permanent structures points to the adoption of local forms rather than a basis in nomadic, pastoral, Islamic, or even particularly Fulbe values that might produce greater uniformity across the diaspora.

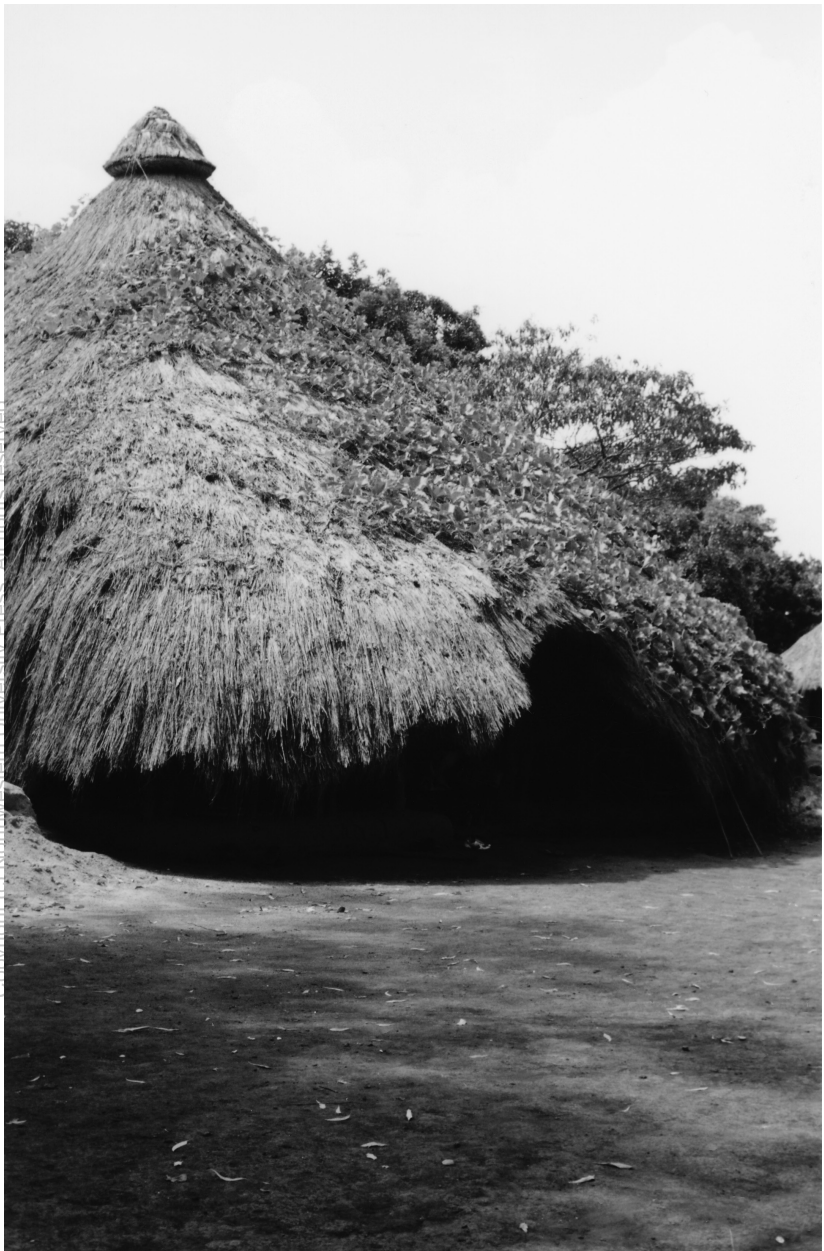
### *Northern Cameroonian Architecture of the Fulbe*

Refocusing attention from the Fulbe diaspora and the glue that is Islam to the local context suggests that there is in fact little that can be defined as specifically Fulbe or necessarily Islamic about Fulbe architecture in northern Cameroon, beyond perhaps the obvious necessities of a mosque. The roofing system used in Adamawa, while similar in some respects to that of the Fouta Djallon, also conforms closely to techniques seen among other populations of Cameroon. At the Mboum palace of Ngangha, 25 miles northeast of Ngaoundéré, the roof of the cubical entrance building is roughly conical, much like that of the palace of Ngaoundéré (figure 14). In climbing up into the roof, I discovered that it was supported by an internal pyramidal reinforcing framework fastened to the outer pyramidal armature (figure 15).<sup>39</sup> Such a reinforcing framework would prevent bowing of the roof, helping it to maintain its general form. The outer pyramidal form, as at Ngaoundéré, is softened into a rounded form on the exterior with thatching and the use of porches.

The principles employed at Ngangha and Ngaoundéré are also similar to those used in the architecture of the Cameroon Grasslands to the southwest, despite differing materials. The Grasslands covers areas of the Northwest, Southwest, and West Regions of Cameroon. It is home to numerous kingdoms, none of which are Fulbe and with Islam a predominant faith only in Bamum. At Bandjoun, as exemplified by both a woman's

<sup>39</sup> It should be noted that this internal framework is distinct from that shown in a cutaway diagram of the same building by Seignobos. Seignobos, *Nord Cameroun*, 179.

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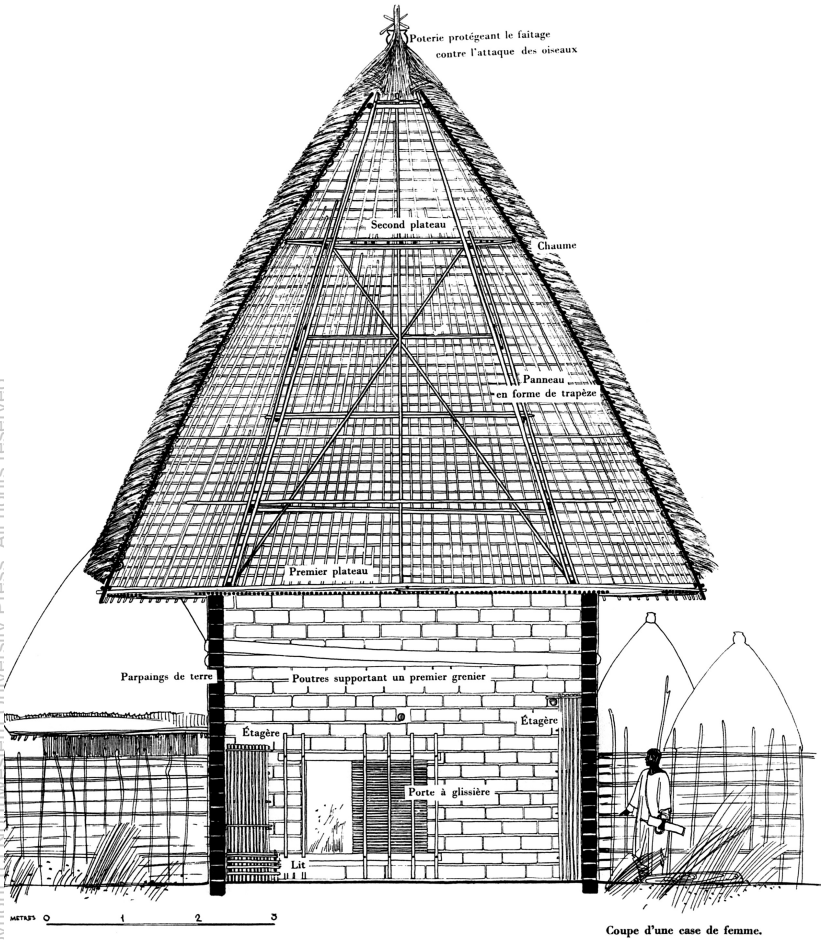


**Figure 14**  
Palace, entrance. Ngangha, Cameroon. Photo by Mark D. DeLancey, 2000.



**Figure 15**

Palace, internal reinforcing framework of the roof of the entrance. Ngangha, Cameroon. Photo by Mark D. DeLancey, 2000.



**Figure 16**

Section of a woman's residence showing the internal roof support system. *L'habitat au Cameroun*, p. 84. Reproduced with the permission of L'Institut de Recherche pour le Développement.

residence and the grand council chamber in the palace, a cubical room is covered by a circular ceiling, itself surmounted by a pyramidal framework (figures 16 and 17). A second disc, similar to but smaller than the ceiling, is added near the top of the pyramidal framework. An external conical framework is then bound to the internal form at the levels of the



**Figure 17**

Palace, Council chamber, Bandjoun, Cameroon. Photo by Mark D. DeLancey, 1996.

ceiling, disc, and apex. Finally thatching is added to create the finished, rain-resistant roof.<sup>40</sup> This system is very similar to, though perhaps more sophisticated than, that observed at Ngangha.

Ironically, the upturned umbrella-like support structure seen in Fouta Djallon, while not employed in Adamawa, is also used in the Grasslands architectural tradition.<sup>41</sup> There is little to directly connect the use of such internal roof supports in the Grasslands to the Fouta Djallon either in terms of ethnicity or religion. Instead, its use is best considered as one logical means of supporting the tall and acutely slanted roofs employed in response to the heavy rainfall experienced in these locales.

Common environmental factors may be at least partly responsible for perceived similarities between Adamawa, the Grasslands, and the Fouta Djallon. These three areas are characterized by mountainous topography, with relatively heavy rainfall in both areas. Rainfall in the Fouta Djallon, depending on the specific location, ranges from 60 to 100 inches

<sup>40</sup> *L'habitat*, 79–87.

<sup>41</sup> Wolfgang Lauber, *Palaces and Compounds in the Grasslands of Cameroon* (Stuttgart: Karl Krämer Verlag, 1990), 26.

annually, primarily between June and September.<sup>42</sup> The same average rainfall is recorded for the Cameroon Grasslands. While less, the area around Ngaoundéré also receives significant rainfall amounting to approximately 59 inches annually between April and October. This amount is twice the annual rainfall of the low-lying Far North Region, where buildings may lack a thatched roof altogether.<sup>43</sup> Thus, one environmentally deterministic interpretation for the heavy thatching and extensive eaves in the Fouta Djallon, Adamawa, and the Grasslands may be as a means of protection from the rain, and in particular to avoid erosion of the unbaked earthen walls.

The interior supports of the ceilings differ between northern Cameroon and the Fouta Djallon. While there may be a number of supports for Fouta Djallon structures, the central one is stressed with increased size and decoration. It is this pillar which supports the upturned umbrella form that helps to maintain the integrity of the roof. In contrast, Adamawa structures of a similar grandeur feature rows of pillars, normally four or six, leading back from the entrance. No one pillar is emphasized more than the other and none specifically carries the roof above.<sup>44</sup>

Likewise, the external supports of the eaves differ between the two regions, and result in a more uniformly conical roof in the Fouta Djallon. To create the eaves in Adamawa, a series of wood posts, longer in the center and decreasing in height toward the ends, are placed in a semicircular plan before the façade (figure 18). Thatching is then extended from the surface of the roof over the framework to cover a small porch in front of the wall (figure 19). It is this supplementary extension of the roofline that gives the architecture of Ngaoundéré its gentle undulation as one moves around the structure. These roofs, built by the Fulbe as well as Mboum and others, differ significantly in plan and surface quality from the roofs of structures in the Fouta Djallon, which feature an entire circle of stakes around the cubical core and hence a more regular conical form.

<sup>42</sup> Harold D. Nelson et. al., *Area Handbook for Guinea* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 47.

<sup>43</sup> Harold D. Nelson et. al., *Area Handbook for the United Republic of Cameroon* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 44–46.

<sup>44</sup> This is in contrast with the palace of Bandjoun, where the roof of the main communal structure is supported by a single large pillar. This pillar serves as a metaphor for the ruler as fulcrum for the kingdom. See Dominique Malaquais, “Constructing Power: Architecture, Landscape, and the Design of Space in a Chieftaincy of the Bamileke Highlands” (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, New York, 1997), 90–93.

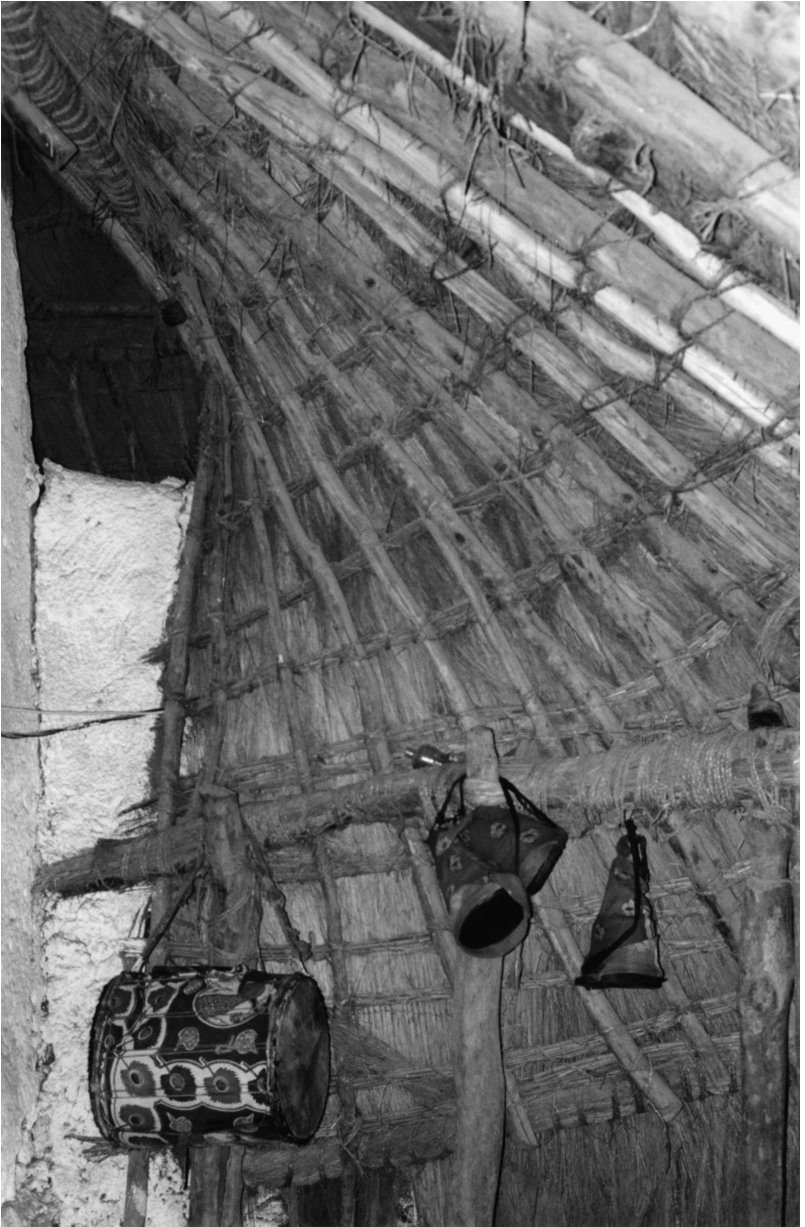


**Figure 18**

Framework for the porch of a Mboum residence. Mbang-Mboum, Cameroon. Photo by Mark D. DeLancey, 2000.

The commonly espoused ethnic specificity of the roof cap in Adamawa presents similar questions. If the roof cap were primarily a symbol of Fulbe ethnicity, then one would expect to find it solely on Fulbe roofs. Such is emphatically not the case, however, as the Mboum, Diʔi, and other ethnicities in the region all build steeply pitched roofs with roof caps, given the means. One could argue that this represents the general Fulbeization of the population, a process which has indeed been documented in northern Cameroon identity politics, but I would argue that the roof cap is too prevalent to make this case. Instead, its geographical specificity to Ngaoundéré and its environs, rather than a Fulbe identity, suggests a primary denotation of local rather than ethnic identity.

On a local level, the identification of this style of architecture specifically with the Fulbe, or even a category that one could call Fulbe architecture, is quickly disputed by the historically indigenous Mboum and Diʔi populations. The Mboum ruler, or *bellaka*, of Mbang-Mboum, 22 miles northeast of Ngaoundéré, asked me when I queried him about the Fulbe palace of Ngaoundéré if I had ever seen Fulbe architecture. Had I seen their little grass huts, clearly referring to the frame tents of semi-nomadic Fulbe? He affirmed his belief that the Fulbe do not truly have architecture,



**Figure 19**

Palace, eaves of the west porch of the second building (*Jawleeru Njakmukon*).  
Ngaoundéré, Cameroon. Photo by Mark D. DeLancey, 2000.

but rather that it is the Mboum who built the palace of Ngaoundéré for them. Similarly, a Mboum servant of the ruler of Ngaoundéré and his friends angrily rejected the title of the 1978 doctoral dissertation of geographer André Gondolo that I showed them entitled *Ngaoundéré: Evolution of a Fulbe City*.<sup>45</sup> Instead, they insisted that Ngaoundéré is a Mboum city in which the Fulbe were permitted to settle.

In fact, the official charged with all construction at the palace of Ngaoundéré is the Kaygama Mboum, or Mboum representative at court. The workforce for construction and repairs within the palace is chosen from among the Mboum population. The majority of the inhabitants of the palace—wives, concubines, servants, and guards—are of Mboum ethnicity. The language of the palace is by and large Mboum and the buildings are referred to by Mboum names. The ruler himself is historically required to be of the royal family on his father's side, but to have a Mboum mother.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, both Fulbe and Mboum readily acknowledge that the site of Ngaoundéré was formerly the location of a Mboum capital, and that the Fulbe were initially invited to settle there by the Mboum ruler. The name Ngaoundéré itself is a compound Mboum term meaning “Mountain of the Navel,” referencing the unusually shaped mountain below which the city was established.

The roof cap clearly does not serve to distinguish ethnicity in Adamawa Region. In addition, it is absent outside of that specific area, even where dominated by the same Fulbe clan. The town of Boundang-Touroua, located 130 miles northwest of Ngaoundéré and only 15 miles west of Tchéboa, illustrates this lack of continuity. Boundang-Touroua, like its proximate neighbor, is populated largely by Bata and Fulbe from the Wollarbe clan. The town was founded by the Wollarbe in the late eighteenth century and remained an important capital city until Ngaoundéré was founded in approximately 1835. Thereafter, Boundang-Touroua was reduced to a provincial town under the control of Ngaoundéré, and governed by a branch of Ngaoundéré's royal family, until the two were administratively separated by the German colonial regime in 1914. Despite

<sup>45</sup> André Gondolo, *N'Gaoundéré: Evolution d'une ville peul* (Ph.D. dissertation, Université de Rouen, 1978).

<sup>46</sup> In actual practice, the rule that a ruler's mother be Mboum is not always followed, though she is always from one of the indigenous non-Fulbe groups. Anthropologist Ketil Fred Hansen briefly discusses this issue in his doctoral dissertation. *The Historical Construction of a Political Culture in Ngaoundere, Northern Cameroon*, Faculty of Arts 81 (Oslo: University of Oslo, 2000), 96.

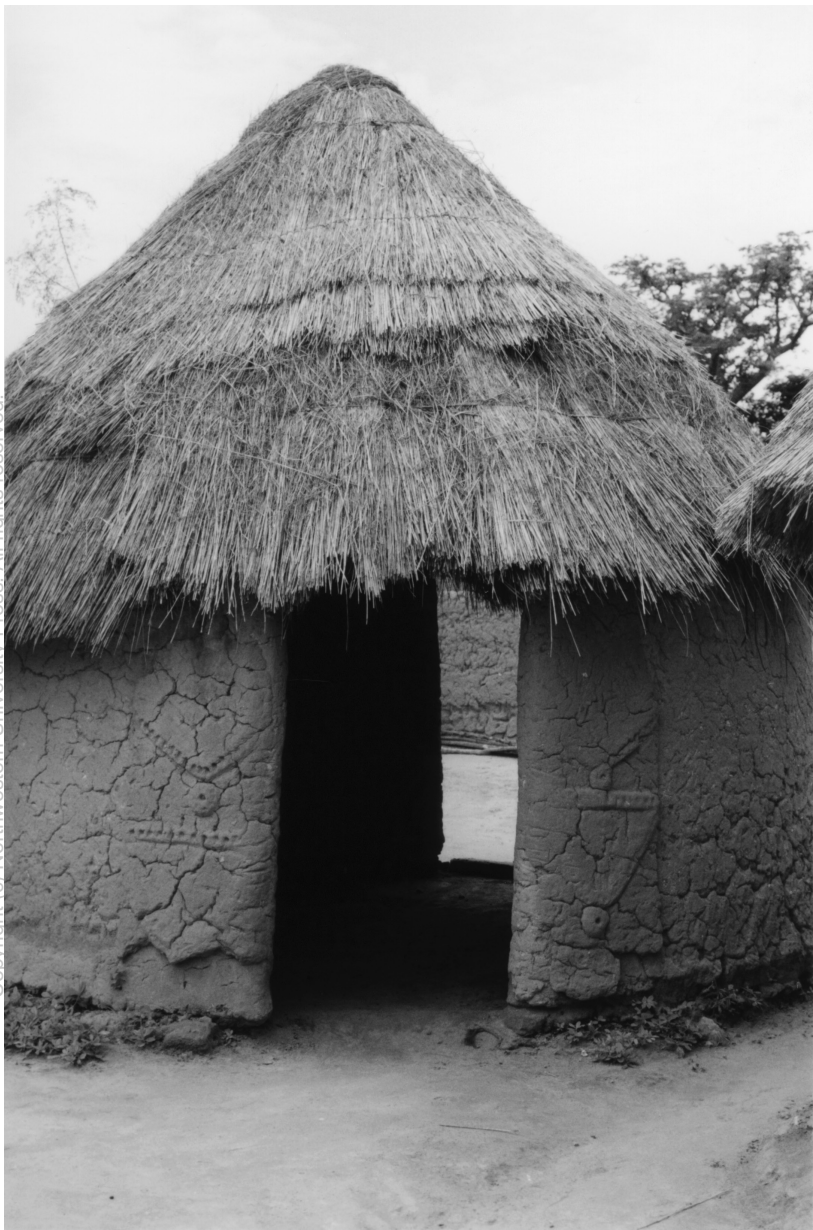
the common clan affiliation and direct historical connection, the forms of roofs in Boundang-Touroua are quite distinct from those of Ngaoundéré, and bear a greater similarity to those at Tchéboa (figures 20 and 10). Thus, the roof cap and particular form of roofs of elite architecture in Ngaoundéré and surrounding areas must be understood as a signifier of local identity irrespective of ethnicity.

### *Conclusion*

In a field such as African architecture that is so diverse, it is appealing and necessary to find broader convergences. Scholars have suggested that Islam and common ethnicity can provide some of that long-distance cohesion across the Fulbe diaspora. In focusing exclusively on these elements, however, both art-producing populations as well as scholars may be complicit. For the Fulbe of Adamawa, stressing pan-Fulbe and Islamic identities, and in particular relationships with the Fouta Djallon, may be a modern strategy of differentiation on a local level in a struggle for government recognition. This is a struggle that commenced in the colonial era when Islamic groups were considered more evolved and thus more capable of governing both themselves and surrounding non-Islamic groups. It is a struggle which has persisted into the postcolonial era, as has been documented for the Far North Region.<sup>47</sup>

For scholars, common ethnicity and religious background would seemingly provide the explanation for the appearance of similar forms at opposite ends of the Fulbe diaspora. Yet scholars must beware of jumping to the conclusion of a direct relationship based simply on formal similarities, just as they must not allow the presence of a common ethnicity or religion across broad distances to blind them to crosscurrents with other cultures, which may or may not be Islamic, on a local level. Ethnic and religious categories may well bear less meaning than local identities, or may constitute more recent reinterpretations under shifting political and sociocultural forces. In the specific case of Cameroon, Islam and the Fulbe presence are important factors that have led scholars to rigidly divide the north of the country from the south, and to subdivide the north into Fulbe and non-Fulbe. This rigid

<sup>47</sup> Diane Lyons, "The Politics of House Shape: Round vs. Rectilinear in Northern Cameroon," *Antiquity* 70, no. 268 (June 1996): 364–67; Kees Schilder, *Quest for Self-Esteem: State, Islam, and Mundang Ethnicity in Northern Cameroon*, Research Series 1994/3 (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 1994).



**Figure 20**

Entrance to a residence. Boundang-Touroua, Cameroon. Photo by Mark D. DeLancey, 2000.

division was imposed on the basis of a preexisting colonial-era supposition, rather than on actual cultural evidence. The consideration of local cultures and identities within which differences in ethnic identities and religious persuasion may occur provides a means by which one can begin to connect the different provinces of Cameroon which have until now been considered so divorced. Building an inclusive local history of architecture is a necessity in combatting the often artificial divisions invoked, or provoked, in the colonial period that continue to haunt the present.

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