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Kickapoo woman in front of her wigwam.

## *WOMEN'S TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE*

Human culture has been viewed by history as the product of "mankind's" efforts. Most of the events and achievements chosen for posterity as significant have been dominated and determined by males. However, there are histories other than those of modern post-industrial nation/states. In traditional societies, located in what is often called the Third World, women have played a crucial role in the formation of cultural features vital to human existence. One such area, not usually credited to women, is architecture. In traditional cultures, women are often the builders and owners of structures, providing shelter and creating the conditions for social interaction.

Although I will use the "ethnographic present" in most of this article, many of the traditional non-state societies in North America and Africa on which I focus here no longer exist, or no longer exist in their original forms. Their structures differ vastly from those of modern states. Some of these societies are small bands of gatherers and hunters, some are semi-nomadic peoples who seasonally follow herds, and others pursue a form of farming called horticulture, where the local economy is self-sufficient and women are frequently the farmers.

Initially victimized by colonization, virtually all those societies that remain are now undergoing "modernization." If we lose the histories of these cultures, we will

also lose an important part of the history of women's roles in world culture, for in societies whose traditions remain intact, the roles women play are central to their cultures—not on the sidelines, where our culture seems to wish us to be. In light of this, contemporary feminists' identification and re-creation of "women's culture" can be seen not just as a protest against oppression, but as a recognition of the arbitrary denigration of the history of women's activities. The discovery that architecture is a traditional woman's art opens up the possibility for a new understanding of our role in the formation of human culture.

### *Grass Houses*

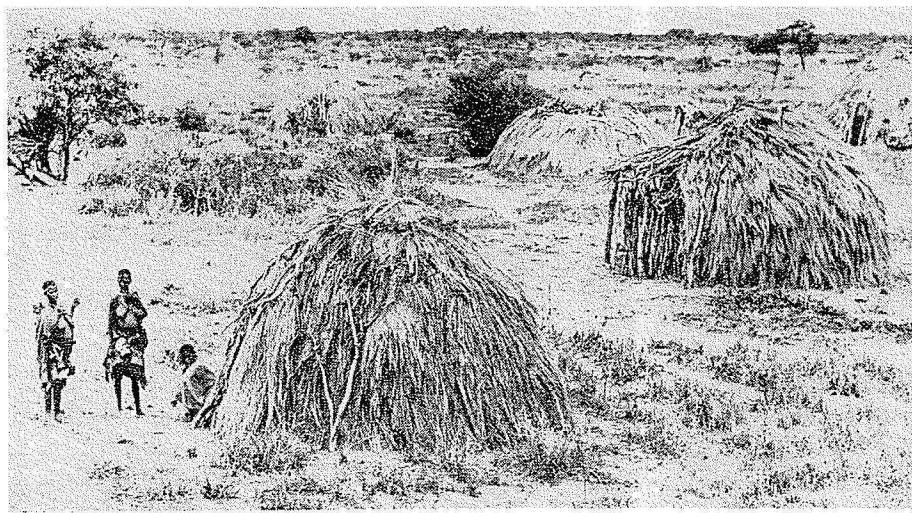
Societies of gatherers and hunters lived in small bands, constantly moving within a relatively large territory from which they foraged for plants and animals. These groups, which include the !Kung of the Kalahari Desert in Namibia and the BaMbuti (Pygmies) of central Africa's Ituri Forest, bands in the Sahara Desert, Algonkian and Athabascan groups in North America, are intriguing in their social harmony and their knowledgeable, non-exploitative interaction with their environments. Women and men regard each other as equals. Among the BaMbuti, hunting is a joint effort, men care for babies and women enter public discussions.<sup>1</sup>

In gathering societies women may pro-

vide up to eighty percent of the food and as an extension of their expertise in plants and fibers (with which they make nets), they are also the builders. The dwelling the women construct usually consists of a framework woven like an inverted loose basket, covered or thatched with available materials such as large leaves, bundles of grass or woven mats. These shelters share significant characteristics across cultures. They are round, ovoid or conical, with no edges or planes to interrupt the flow of space. Their size and shape maximizes physical and psychological contact among the dwellers. Anthropologists suggest that such human proximity is particularly conducive to intuitive and non-verbal communication, to the development of internalized cultural rhythms.<sup>2</sup> In our Western cultures, such tacit synchrony is usually found only in mother-infant relationships, a vestige of what was once the nature of communication between both sexes and all ages.

A freudian theorist might suggest that the organic nature of gatherers' dwellings is a cultural extension of the biophysical environment of the womb. But in fact, these shelters can be extremely open and unwomblike. They include unsheltered areas where the work of the household, such as plaiting mats and scraping skins,

takes place. The house life overflows into outdoor space, allowing the activities of its inhabitants to expand. Many gatherers' dwellings are easily adaptable, and when not easily expanded (as in the hemispherical *scherms* of the !Kung) there is flexibility as to who inhabits them. Children do not have to sleep with their parents, and can either stay with their grandparents or make camp with other children of the same sex at either end of the settlement.<sup>3</sup> Thus the gatherers' house is not a structure enforcing family isolation, but serves as a shelter of great social fluidity.



!Kung gatherers and *scherms*.

In these mobile cultures land is not individually owned and no dwelling is permanent. Women possess the building *know-how* rather than the actual structures, which they may erect collectively. The building activity may be almost ritualized, as the "performer" sets into motion a body of traditional knowledge shared with other women:

Now she squatted down making her own home, driving the saplings into the ground with sharp thrusts, each time in exactly the same place, so that they went deeper and deeper. When she had completed a circle she stood up and deftly bent the fito over her head, twisting them together and twining smaller saplings across forming a lattice framework. Then she took the leaves we had collected and slit the stalks toward the end, like clothespins, hooking two or three of them together. When she had enough she started hanging them on the framework like tiles, overlapping each other and forming a waterproof covering. There were leaves left over when she had finished, so she let other women take them for their houses.<sup>4</sup>

The dwelling in the gathering culture is

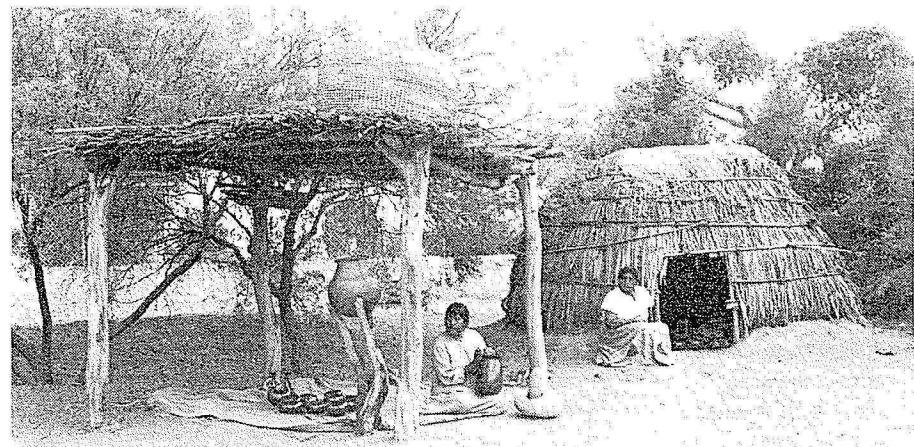
the focal point of women's creative activities. Since it is usually constructed from materials that can be replaced from available natural sources, it also binds society to its natural environment.

#### Desert Dwellings, Wigwams and Tipis

Semi-nomadic peoples live some part of the year in relatively permanent camps when an adequate food supply is available—wild plants, such as the wild rice of the Great Lakes region, or those provided by temporary cultivation. Some semi-nomadic peoples follow herds of wild or

of the grass house remained essential. For semi-nomadic desert dwellers, such as the Pima and Papago of the American Southwest, the convenient raw materials for building might still be plant fibers, particularly where the women were highly skilled basketweavers and had developed ways of weaving fibers into other forms, such as cotton cloth or yucca-fiber sandals. Up until the twentieth century the Pima were dispersed in the winter and settlements were occupied only for a few months during a short growing season. The women built structures that mingled the style of mobile peoples with that of the ancient Southwest Pueblos. Their houses were grass but the interiors were slightly below ground. Sometimes earth was used to anchor the lower portion of the exterior wall, a feature which perhaps explains the evolution of the earth lodges built by the Navaho and by the Mandan further north.

Another feature of grass houses is the tensile flexibility of the structure, which was later developed into the tent form. In the desert or plains it might be adjusted or even formed in relationship to wind patterns; the walls might be opened, or closed tightly, to adapt to the wide range of temperatures characteristic of these environments. The tent consists of a framework over which a tight covering is stretched; it may be low and rounded or



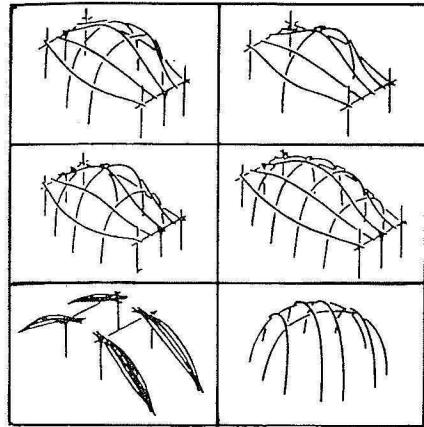
Pima women and house. (Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation.)

domestic animals part of the year and spend the rest gathering and hunting, or trading. These societies are not sedentary because they or their animals must range for some proportion of their food and the basics for making material goods. Generally they inhabit arid desert lands or plains choked with grasses, where farming is difficult.

The architecture of such semi-nomads grew out of forms developed within gathering societies. Certain structural features

tall and conical, but either shape, with its flexible covering, is perfectly adaptable. Tents also differ from grass houses in that the coverings, and sometimes the frames, are carried with the band as it moves. All the components of such tents, including those of the Tuareg, Algonkian wigwams and Plains tribes' tipis, are made by women—exterior and interior walls, floor coverings and frames. There is a traditional basic form, but the tent is by no means standardized. In each society wom-

en have created subtle variations on the frame or the arrangement of tent flaps for ventilation. In the arid Atlas Mountains of North Africa, Tuareg women weave and embroider wool coverings for their tents. The frame has a number of possible shapes, demonstrating the interplay between individual choice and cultural tradition.



Tuareg tent and structural variations. (From Nicolaisen.)

Algonkian-speaking groups, originally inhabiting much of the Eastern United States, were pushed west to the Great Lakes region after the white invasion. They hunted, gathered, fished, collected maple sugar, gathered wild rice, and had gardens. Some, like the Kickapoo, constructed wigwams of frames covered by mats. Others, including the Ojibwa, constructed conical tents covered with thin sheets of birch bark sewed together with small roots until long enough to cover the sides. Ojibwa women cut the poles for the frames and made colorful mats from reeds to cover the walls, and to serve as carpets, beds and sofas. Softening, bleaching and dyeing these reeds was a complicated process. The completed mats were carried from site to site. Early white observers were greatly impressed with the women's strength, as shown by this comment from 1855:

It may be easily supposed that these squaws, owing to their performing all the work of joiners, carpenters and masons have blistered hands. In fact, their hands are much harder to

the touch than those of the men; and indeed their entire muscular system is far more developed and they are proportionately stronger in the arm.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the tipi-builders of the Great Plains were responsible for all aspects of the construction of their dwellings. They developed one of the most striking forms in women's vernacular architecture. The Plains societies were mobile; they moved from winter hunting camps to large summer ceremonial villages and the women carried not only the skin coverings and interior liners, but the poles with which the tipi was erected as well. These were hard to find on the Plains, and made a useful sled (*travois*) for carrying household property and people over long distances.

When more permanent materials were used for making dwellings, women often cooperated in their manufacture. In making an ordinary tipi, the owner scraped and tanned the hides from which the cover would be made, frequently using treasured tools which she had inherited from the women of her family. Then a female specialist was called in to cut and fit the skins, and neighbors gathered to

but the traditional sacred designs and high standards of work are still rigorously adhered to.

The Quillers' Society met when a woman of the community had vowed to undertake a project. An older woman held the society's medicine bundle, filled with objects of spiritual power, and with the vower, performed the rituals necessary for the work to begin and end. She would instruct the younger woman in needlework and the society's ceremonies; then the entire group started work together. Afterwards the woman who had vowed the task continued alone, although she could consult with society members whenever a problem arose.

Men and children were not allowed to touch or see the work until it was completed, when members of the society displayed the piece to the public. Following a feast, the women whose work was on view became a member of the society, one of the most respected institutions of her world. Among the Cheyenne a woman's achievements in decorative craft were valued as highly as a man's deeds in war. Moreover, the Quillers' Society:

... was spoken of as being similar in

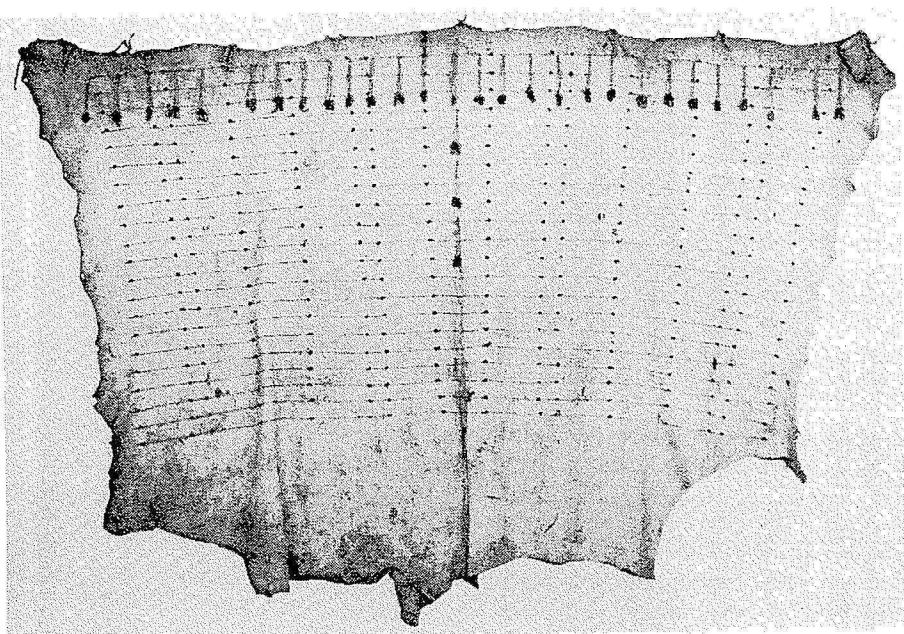


Southern Cheyenne woman erecting a tipi. (Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation.)

help stitch them together with sinew.

Making a tipi could also fulfill a sacred function. Plains women formed special associations, notably the Cheyenne Quillers' Society, for the ceremonial decoration of tipis and their interior walls with dyed porcupine or bird quills. More recently these tipis have been made from canvas and decorated with glass beads,

conception and attitudes to the Sacred Arrows [most sacred Cheyenne men's society], one very important difference in behavior may be noted. During the four-day arrow ceremony no talking, joking, or laughing was allowed in camp. The making of the sacred beading was attended by a good deal of joking, teasing, and fun. While the cere-



Cheyenne tipi wall, corn-husk embroidery and beadwork.

monial character of the work was recognized, it interfered in no way with the social pleasure of the occasion.<sup>6</sup>

#### Female Farmers

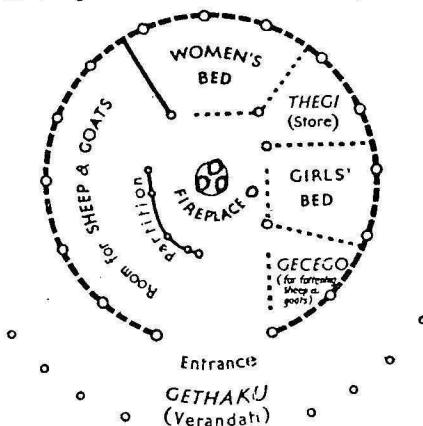
When societies obtain their food predominantly from horticulture, it is practical for the people to settle in more permanent villages close to their fields. Jobs are traditionally assigned to one sex or another. Sometimes men and women cultivate different crops and even speak different languages.

Even space within the village might also be divided along sex lines, and the architecture reflects and affects sex-specialized tasks. Women generally dominate cultivation but building tasks are specified and divided according to sex. In much of Africa the characteristic building form is round, with a gabled and thatched roof and walls made of wattle and daub. Each component is made separately by men or women. Male and female tasks vary from society to society. Among the Kikuyu of Kenya, men construct the walls and women the roof. After the men finish their work, they go to the feast celebrating the house building. They goad the women, calling them "slow chameleons" who will miss the feast if they don't hurry. The women, who are working on the thatching, typically respond in chorus:

You men, you lack the most important art in building, namely thatching. A wall and an empty roof cannot protect you from heavy rain nor from the burning sun. It is our careful thatching that makes the hut worth living. We are not chameleons but

*nyoni ya nyagathanga* [small songbirds known for their beautiful nests].<sup>7</sup>

Separation of the sexes does not necessarily serve as a foundation for male domination. Cultural practices that encourage one sex to feel communal solidarity and to express itself in opposition to the other seem to yield much autonomy to both men and women as groups, indicated by the development of separate economic, social or ritual spheres outside of the activities that demand the involvement of both sexes. The position of women is particularly strong in matrilineal societies, where they are leaders of clans and owners of the fields, of harvest, food storage and dwellings. The longhouse of the Iroquois-speaking tribes of North America, built until the mid-nineteenth century, was controlled by women, and was a remarkable example of communal living. The longhouse served as the center of Iroquois social life. Ritual perfor-

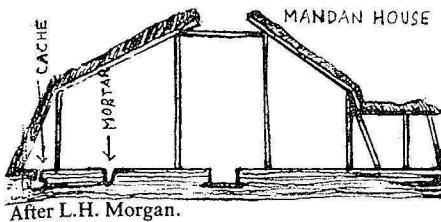


Floor plan, Kikuyu women's quarters. (From Kenyatta.)

mances took place there and it was both dwelling and workplace for the many families of the clan to whom it belonged. By controlling the longhouse and the food stores, women played a vital part in the political affairs of the tribes.<sup>8</sup> Through manipulation of supplies they could encourage or prevent war parties. The senior women, who controlled the longhouse, also played an important role in social policy decisions. They appointed spokesmen for the clan in village and tribal councils, and they could also "remove the horns," that is, remove those spokesmen from office if they did not do their job according to the women's interests. The longhouse stood as a symbol of the society at large; the confederation of the Iroquois tribes recognized the significance of this woman-owned institution by naming themselves The League of the Longhouse.

There are few matrilineal cultivating societies remaining in the world. One of their striking characteristics was that they were subsistence societies—that is, no wealth was accumulated from year to year. Although the source of food and the type of settlement differed, they shared this feature with the gathering peoples mentioned earlier. The change from subsistence society to one in which it is possible to accumulate wealth frequently comes with the addition of livestock or herd animals to horticultural life. Such a change in process was observed in the early nineteenth century among the Mandan, a cultivating society living on the North American Plains. Basically, the Mandan lived two life styles. The matrilineal one dominated the life of the village, where women were the farmers and owned and built the houses; the second was patrilineal, occurring during the summer months, when some of the women tended the fields, while most of the men and a few women went into the Plains to hunt buffalo. This resulted in an important division of economic tasks and calendars—the women living by an older agricultural calendar, and the men by the seasonal migration of the buffalo herds.

In the Mandan village, the lodges the women constructed were admirably suited to the climate of the Great Plains. They may have originated as structures like those of the Pima. Walls of willow saplings and brush and a final layer of earth were erected over a wooden frame. The walls were built quite thick and the lodges were cool in summer and warm in winter. Quite possibly these were the prototypes for the sod houses built by pioneers settling in the Plains in the nineteenth century.



After L.H. Morgan.

If the Mandan had survived the epidemic of smallpox which destroyed the tribe in 1840, it is possible that they would have become patrilineal, giving up cultivation altogether to pursue the buffalo as other Plains tribes did. In patrilineal societies, as we have seen with the Cheyenne, the woman's position is secure when she continues to control important cultural or economic features. Frequently these two spheres are connected, as in societies where women have a specialized architecture for their own activities. The Igbo society in Nigeria is patrilineal, but with the exception of the yam, all produce is considered women's property; they sell anything left over from feeding their families, becoming successful traders. A century ago, when this marketing activity was increasing, the women also began to construct ritual sanctuaries in groves outside the villages. Called *mbayo* houses, these were maintained by a cult of the earth goddess Ala, and were decorated with male and female symbols and erotic figures.

In patrilineal societies women may have certain economic powers; if so, they usually own their own houses within the compounds of their husbands' families. But when men control agriculture and herding, or have access to a modern cash market, the domicile and all public buildings fall totally under male control. Men erect the structures; if they are dwellings, women may decorate the walls. In Mediterranean villages in Spain, Greece and the Balkans, and in Islamic villages of the

Near East and Africa, woman is associated with the domicile as its caretaker, not as its owner. The isolation of women in the home is, of course, a function of wealth. In poorer cultures the woman may be forced to work for the family's survival, but in most places, she is *supposed* to remain in the home. In Spain, she decorates her house with whitewash as a symbol of purity—both of the domicile and of its keeper. When a woman's life is relegated to the private sphere of society, her significance in the culture appears merely symbolic. She is a possession to be protected. In Berber villages, she weaves inside her husband's house; the loom is not considered *her* tool, but a symbol of male protection. Sitting behind it, she is shielded from the door and from the street life that lies beyond it.<sup>9</sup> Thus women are isolated from the world of confrontation, conversation and public interaction.

With the advent of industrialism and the wage economy in any society, separation of home life from public work becomes firmly entrenched. The many roles of women are reduced to motherhood and housekeeping. The number of craftswomen, artists, businesswomen and builders decrease. Separation of home from business premises makes it more difficult for women to share in a work world dominated by men. Machine-made products limit the type of paid work that can be done in the household. Control over the design and construction of buildings passes into the hands of "professionals." Women's creativity is confined to planning interiors and obtaining or making interior decorations according to mass-produced guides like women's magazines.

Ironically, this vestige of woman's importance as architect and builder is used against her when psychology and popular belief insist that women are "by nature"

oriented to interiors, and interiors alone. The home, as the exclusive province of women, has become a significant cultural image on many levels—almost an archetypal reflection of the privatization of women's lives and the resulting obsession with house/home. So now we paint, write, sculpt our houses; so far, too few of us are creating architecture.<sup>10</sup> In learning more about the options available to women in other cultures, we become more conscious of our own untapped potential.

1. Colin Turnbull, *The Forest People* (New York: Natural History Library, 1962), pp. 156-157.
2. Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), Chap. 5, *passim*.
3. Patricia Draper, "Ikung Women," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), p. 94.
4. Turnbull, pp. 59-60.
5. J.G. Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Wandering Round Lake Superior* (London, 1860), p. 4.
6. Alice Marriott, "The Trade Guild of Southern Cheyenne Women," *Bulletin of Oklahoma Anthropological Society* (April 1956), p. 24.
7. Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, Reprint of original 1938 edition (New York: AMS Press, 1976), pp. 80-81.
8. Judith K. Brown, "Iroquois Women: An Ethnographic Note," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, pp. 235-251.
9. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Berber House, or the World Reversed," excerpted in *Rules and Meanings*, ed. Mary Douglas (Baltimore: Penguin, 1973), p. 100.
10. Two recently published books have begun the documentation of women in architecture: Doris Cole, *From Tipi to Skyscraper: A History of Women in Architecture* (Boston: i press, 1973) and Susana Torre, ed., *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1977).

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