

Cultural Aspects of Housing: a Case of the Luo in Kisumu Town, Kenya

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Abstract

The creation of the built environment has not only been determined by physical and natural resources - there is often an underlying cultural value attached to creation of traditional spaces [1]. As culture varies from one community to another; so the cultural meaning and use of space will also be different. A community's identity will thus be formed in the way they build and more interestingly, the way they give meaning to their created spaces.

The Luo, Kenya's third largest ethnic group, have both functional and cultural meanings to spaces. The Luo homestead and hut layouts may at first sight have some semblance of spaces in other African communities. However, on further investigation one finds that the meanings attached to these spaces and the way they are used are specific to the Luo. From the 'grave to the cradle' a Luo uses space in a manner that identifies him as a Luo. From the level of the hut, through the homestead to the village, a Luo gives meaning to space like no other community does. When designing housing for a group such as this, is it not fundamental for architects and planners to understand the people and what space means to them in all aspects, culture not ignored?

This paper intends to illustrate how ignoring people's culture can inhibit sustainable use of newly created urban environments especially housing estates. Kisumu, a major urban centre in the heart of Luoland has a 'story' to tell of the conflicts between housing development and cultural practices that frustrate its efforts to have sustainable living environments. This paper captures this 'story' to further 'drum' in the fact that yes! we need to take into consideration the social, economic, physical, technological etc. aspects of the people to be housed, but **we should not ignore culture.**

1 Introduction

Culture is based on systems of laws, which manifest themselves in signs and symbols. When cultural change occurs, fluctuations between a progressive trend to change and a conservative

one to hold onto traditions may be evident. Within a culturally determined frame of reference, the relationship between symbol and object may change while the deeper meaning of this relationship remains the same [2]. Vernacular dwellings have been subjected to continuity and change, which have largely been misunderstood first, by those who attempt to study them and second, those who attempt to design spaces for people from vernacular environments.

Dwelling, is a process as well as an artifact. It is both the process of living at a location and the physical expression of doing so. The dwelling place is more than the structure, as the soul is more than the body that contains it. For untold millions of people the bond between themselves and their dwelling place transcends the physical limitations of their habitation. This double significance of dwelling, which has been rather elusive to many, encompasses the manifold cultural and material aspects of domestic living [1]

Towards the end of the 20th century, it was evident that the majority of the world's population still lived, worked and worshipped in vernacular buildings. About 800 million dwellings belong to this immense but largely unrecognised group of buildings [3]. Of these the majority that survive are mainly found in the rural areas of the 'Third World'. However, as urbanisation spreads in these areas, some vernacular communities become urbanised 'without notice'. As the urban area 'colonises' rural space, rural people also migrate to urban areas for various reasons. Urbanisation often comes in and spreads with a Western leaning, which is rather a contrast to vernacular culture. When urban values are superimposed over indigenous cultures and vice versa, conflicts tend to arise.

Housing the 'homeless' especially in urban areas has often been seen as a national responsibility. Attempts have been made to introduce foreign interventions to people who have adequately housed themselves in the past. Unfortunately, these attempts have usually been in the form of apartments or low-cost housing schemes. Such 'housing provision' rarely takes into account the culture of specific communities, and the mass produced dwelling hardly reflects the values of the families [1].

Kisumu, Kenya's third largest city and administrative headquarter of Nyanza province, is situated at the head of Lake Victoria in one of the most populous areas of the lake region. It is situated in the heart of Luoland and is thus predominantly inhabited by Luo people who have migrated from the hinterland to the city for various reasons. The city itself, due to population pressures has repeatedly extended its boundaries into the Luo hinterland to accommodate its growing urban population.

This dual process of rural migrants coming to the city and the city extending its boundaries into the rural area has resulted in interaction of traditional (rural) culture and modern (urban) culture. Rural populations move to the urban area with their rural culture ingrained in them. 'The villager can leave the village but the village in him never leaves', is a local saying that refers to difficulties rural migrants go through as they try to adapt to city life. The superimposition of rural culture on urban culture and vice versa often results in 'cultural shock' that is clearly manifested in the quality of the urban physical environment.

2 The Luo

Background: The Luo ethnic group lives on the eastern shores of Lake Victoria in the Western region of Kenya. Luo ancestors migrated from Southern Sudan, arriving in what is now Kenya in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries. The Luo livelihood system has traditionally involved three important elements: fishing, farming and livestock herding [4]. They are today Kenya's third largest ethnic group with a population of about four million.

In the African context, which holds true for the Luo, there is a belief that the material universe is the creation of God. God provides life, fertility, rain and other necessities needed to sustain life. There is also the belief that when God is unhappy with people's actions, He sends spirits to cause calamities such as epidemics, floods and famine [5]. It was thus the community's collective responsibility to ensure total adherence to customary laws to avoid God's wrath.

Like every culture, Luo culture embraces everything that contributes to their survival. This broadly comprises physical, social and economic factors, which are often interrelated and interdependent. Traditionally, men, women and children have had skills and competence to build their environments effectively with regard to the land, climate and resources they have at hand [1]. There is often an underlying cultural value attached to creation of these traditional environments. The Luo have functional and cultural meanings to layouts of spaces from the level of the unit (dwelling), through the homestead to the settlement.

Homestead layout: The home is spatially laid out in a specific way to serve both functional and cultural requirements. The homestead accommodates huts belonging to the larger family which consists of the man who is the head of the home, his wife (wives), and sons (unmarried and married). The homestead accommodates huts for two generations and thus grandsons do not build their huts in this compound. When they grow up, it signifies time for their fathers to establish new homes and thus the process continues. Other important elements within the homestead include the cattle kraal, granaries and the courtyard.

The circular, euphorbia hedged homestead has two gates, the main entrance which acts as the basic point of reference, and a minor one at the back. All the huts in the home are built around a common courtyard that they open into it. The main hut (1st wife's) is situated directly opposite the main gate. In a polygamous home, the 2nd wife's hut is then built next to the 1st wife's to the right; the 3rd wife to the left and so on. The sons also have a system whereby the 1st son (ideally 1st wife's 1st son) builds next to the gate on the right side, the 2nd on the left and so on. In a polygamous home, the man has a separate hut, which is usually in the middle of the homestead between the 1st wife's hut and the cattle kraal. See Figure 1 (annex 1).

The other elements also have their permanent positions within the home. The cattle kraal, due to the importance given to cattle, is located at the centre of the home where it receives maximum security. Each wife is to have one granary with the exception of the first wife who can have more. These granaries are located to the right of the owners' huts. Behind the man's hut is his granary whose contents are to be used during emergencies. The sons and their wives do not build granaries in this homestead and instead contribute and gain from the mothers' granaries. The courtyard is the family's main arena accommodating several activities such as working, sitting, entertaining, playing etc.[6]

Hut layout: The traditional hut is a one-roomed circular space that accommodates basic functions of sleeping, cooking and sitting; and other minor activities such as storage and small livestock keeping. These functions are however restricted to certain areas within the hut and cannot be interchanged. The sleeping space, for instance, is on the right, cooking area also on the right just after the sleeping area to keep the hut warm at night, and the sitting area is in the middle around the beer drinking centre point. On the left is the night space for small livestock and at the back the plinth for pot storage [6]. See Figure 2 (annex 2).

Types and sizes of huts: The 1st wife's hut is the largest in the home and the only one with a verandah. The other wives' huts are slightly smaller but accommodate all the activities found in the 1st wife's hut. The sons' huts are even smaller and are mainly used for sleeping except in cases where the son has married and built a second hut for his wife to cook in [6].

Construction of a hut: The materials used are those that are locally available and the community have skills to exploit and use. The walls are of mud and wattle plastered in mud /

cowdung mixture. The floors are of rammed earth also finished in mud / cowdung mix. The roof structure is in timber and is thatched with the grass available in the area. The hut has one door and two peepholes (windows), one next to fireplace to let out fumes from the fire, and the other in the opposite side next to the livestock sleeping area to let out animal odour.

The construction of a hut is a communal activity and everyone in the family and even neighbours have a role to play. The men excavate soil and mix it with water for the wall while women and children fetch water. The men also go out to cut required timber, dig up holes for the timber wall structure, fix both wall and roof structure and finally thatch roof. The women's main role is to fill in wattle with mud mix and after some days when the infill has cured, plaster it. Plastering the floor is also the women's responsibility. Seasonal roof maintenance is carried out by men as it is taboo for women to climb up the roof; while women do wall and floor re-plastering [6].

Cultural meaning of space: Underlying the basic spatial layouts are signs and symbols with associated meanings that make Luo space different from other circular ones in the region. The gates for instance have hidden symbolic meanings, which the community is well versed with. In-laws should not use the back gate. The main gate is used by all in life but in death the story changes. When the man and the wives die outside the home, their bodies are brought in through the main gate since they are 'permanent residents' of this home. The sons and other family members are brought in through a temporary opening made in the fence.

The door is a sign of entry as it is everywhere; but it is also a symbol of privacy, a point beyond which certain family members should not go. For instance, it is taboo for adolescent sons and daughters, to go past the door to their mothers' hut. The sacredness of the sleeping space is what keeps them away from the hut. When sons and daughters come to the mother for meals, the food will be given to them at the door. If she is not in, she will leave it in some special space above the door where it can be easily accessed without stepping into the hut.

The timber piece at the roof apex is an element found in most circular huts with conical roofs. The Luo apex, however, means more than a structural roof element. The space below it is also given significance as a spot for placing the important beer drinking pot with seating around it. When the man of the home dies, the roof apex pieces in all the wives' huts are removed to symbolise his demise. A visitor walking into the home should recognise the absence of the man of the home without asking. When the widows are remarried ('inherited'), new apex pieces are fixed to symbolise the presence of a 'new' man.

The system of placing activities and artifacts to the left and right stems from a cultural belief in the differences in function and strength between the two opposing wings; and is applied in the life of a Luo from 'cradle to grave'. The right is associated with strength and good luck while the left is regarded as weak and a sign of bad omen. Children are discouraged from being left-handed but when the habit persists to adulthood certain rites have to be performed. A left-handed man, for instance, will not establish a home the way other men do. He has to undergo traditional cleansing before a special kind of home establishment ceremony [6].

'Birth and death' of a homestead: The establishment of a new hut and home always go with traditional ceremonies that mark them as special occasions. These ceremonies are quite interesting but too elaborate to be included in this paper. These practices are what make the Luo home different from others. When does a Luo establish a home? When a son who has been staying in his father's home has married and had children (especially sons), he is qualified to move to his own home. Traditionally the 1st son should marry first and thus move to his home first. There are, however, certain stages in family life, which act as 'deadlines' for the sons' exit. For instance, his daughters cannot get married when he is still in the father's homestead. The sons are also not to build their huts and marry in the grandfathers' home.

A Luo homestead ideally 'dies' when all the sons have moved to their homes and the parents have aged and died. When the last parent dies, the homestead is not to be inhabited by anyone and is instead used as a farm after all the structures have collapsed. This space should only be reused for habitation by later generations who may not know those who lived on it. This practice was sustainable when the population was small and the area sparsely populated [6].

'Birth and death' of a hut: Huts, unlike the homestead are built for different purposes and for different members of the family. The first hut to be built in the home is the 1st wife's hut, which makes it the most important structure. In a polygamous home, the other wives' huts are built next or as they are married. The first hut in the home is customarily considered temporary and is to be replaced by another after some time. If the man or woman of the house dies before this second hut is built, one has to be constructed before burial takes place.

The 1st son's hut is built first if he is of age and this hut is used for sleeping by the other boys until he marries. When he marries, his hut ceases to be a bachelors quarter ('simba') and the next son is allowed to build. He is, however, to build another hut in the father's home to enable his wife to start cooking in her hut though this cannot still be done until the second son marries a wife to help the mother.

The Luo hut, like the homestead, ideally 'dies' when the owners die or move to another hut. A Luo hut is thus built to last one generation and should not be reused by the next. This clearly supports the 'temporariness' of the structures but contradicts the present use of more permanent materials. When a man and his wife die, their hut 'dies' with them and should not be used by anyone. When one moves from one hut to the next, for instance, a son moves from his father's home to start his own, the former hut is abandoned and left to deteriorate [6].

Death and space: The Luo respect their dead (future spirits) and thus have to accord them decent burial according to customary laws [7]. There are specific burial rites and sites for members of the family; for instance, the head of the home is buried in front of the first wife's. All the wives, including sons' wives are buried to the left of their huts. All sons still living within the home are buried on the right of their mothers' huts. Young girls are buried to the left of the mothers' huts while it is taboo to bury marriageable ones within the homestead [6].

3 Kisumu Town

Background: Kisumu is today just over 100 years old. When the Uganda Railway construction reached the eastern shores of Lake Victoria in 1901, a little settlement, named Port Florence by the colonial administration, begun and this marked the birth of Kisumu as a town. The town thus begun as a railway depot and first accommodated the railway team which consisted of surveyors, administrators, engineers and Asian labourers [8]. The development of Kisumu followed the same segregative pattern inherent in other colonial towns in terms of physical, economic, socio-cultural and political structures, both during colonial and post-colonial periods.

Population growth: Kisumu's population during the colonial period was quite low as the town housed Europeans and Asians only. Africans were restricted to the 'native reserves' and were not considered part of the town's population. After independence in 1963, the ban on African movement was lifted resulting in an exodus of people to the towns. The population figures begun to escalate and today, Kisumu's population is estimated at 700,000 [9].

Physical growth: The physical coverage of the town minimally increased during colonial period, as the rate of European population growth was low. It is important to note that any land acquired by the authorities then, resulted in the displacement of Africans as the different cultures present were to be segregated. This way, cultural conflicts were greatly minimised.

The influx of people from the reserves after independence thus resulted, not only in the town's population exploding, but also an increase in the physical area.

In 1967, the municipal council felt the need for more municipal land for development of housing and community facilities. In 1972, the boundary was officially extended and the town area increased to 417 km² [8]. The town is currently in the process of being upgraded to a city, meaning its boundaries will be further extended to arrive at an area commensurate with city status. It is, however, important to note that whenever these boundary extensions are made, the urban (modern) extends into the rural (traditional).

Housing in Kisumu: During the early colonial period, the town only housed the Europeans and Asians and because this controlled population was rather small, there was adequate housing and the British planning system used had a chance of being effective. The populous Africans as mentioned before were traditionally housing themselves in their natural environment, the 'native reserves'. Further into the period, the colonial authorities realised that there was need to house some Africans, especially those working in various sectors within the town. Low cost housing estates with little rooms and shared facilities were thus gradually built for them, introducing them to the urban experience.

With independence came the population exodus from the rural areas and high demand for housing. The authorities put up more housing estates at a pace that could not cope with the immigration rate. The 'Luo came to town' and as the town physically grew, the 'town went to the Luo'. This converse interaction between the Luo and Kisumu Town has led to conflicts between Luo traditional settlement patterns and urban housing development regulations. It is important to note that the master plans in use today are still based on the British comprehensive planning system and physical planning regulations. By-laws are also largely of British origin and thus have minimal relevance to the Kenyan context.

4 The Luo in Kisumu Town

Culture is perceived as a dynamic and ever changing process. However, in every process of change, be it externally or internally driven, positive or negative, rapid or slow, there is often an element of continuity of certain aspects of culture. This results in superimposition of one culture onto another and thus interaction of the old and new culture [10]. The Luo 'way of doing things' has drastically changed especially during the last century. This change has, however, taken place in different forms and at different speeds in different parts of Luoland. The differences are also inherent between the Luo in rural areas and the more exposed (or is it pressurised) ones in urban areas.

The Luo ways of building have changed and it is rather difficult to find a true traditional homestead in Luoland today. However, there remains a strong presence of elements of the pre-colonial traditional building methods. The left-right dichotomy of allocating activities and artefacts has for instance, largely been followed to date. The house may be larger, even having several rooms but the sleeping space (bedroom) has remained on the right, the cooking at the back towards the right and the living room at the centre. The layout at homestead level has also basically remained unchanged in terms of location of wives' and sons' huts. Features like the man's hut (especially in a monogamous home) have been done away with while the important cattle kraal has largely shifted to the back. New elements like toilets and bathroom and separate kitchens have been introduced [11].

There has, however, been a different kind of change in the section of Luoland that Kisumu has been growing into and amongst the Luo who have moved from the rural areas to live and work in the town. Apart from the general changes, this area has been abruptly turned from rural to urban and its residents have had to contend with this drastic change. Urban regulations have been imposed on this area and residents are expected to adhere to these new

laws. Due to the marked differences between the two cultures, conflicts arise and these consequently affect both the Luo culture and the manner in which Kisumu develops.

Walking through these urban settlements which also double up as informal / traditional settlements, the conflicts 'shout so loud' before one even talks with the residents. The most striking and gravest is the presence of graveyards in practically every home. The Luo belief in the spirits of the dead is still so strong that whether their homes are in a rural or urban environment, they have to bury their dead in their homes – ancestral land. The town has a large, accessible and affordable cemetery but the facility is under-utilised because of this never-dying custom. This is a complete contradiction of urban regulations concerning burial in this town and I could safely say anywhere in the world [6].

The idea of the homestead with members of a family building their houses around a common courtyard has survived as much as the urban authorities would like to have one house per plot. The father still builds his house opposite the main gate and has his sons on the wings according to custom. All this is done without seeking the necessary building approvals from the urban authorities, as they are aware they are contravening the regulations. The housing areas thus continue to grow without the control required for residential environments [6].

The urban estates developed by the authorities for modern living are also not used as per design. The residents, who are predominantly Luo and cut across all income groups, often treat these formal housing spaces like the traditional ones. They come from the village with the traditional culture so ingrained in them that even in a different environment, the attitudinal behaviour does not change [6].

Walking through many of them, one notices haphazard extensions built out of all sorts of materials in practically every other compound. You will notice cows, goats, sheep and chicken wandering around in places without any pastures. You will notice euphorbia hedges hidden behind other fences. The environment looks rather strange considering or imagining what the estate looked like before these extensions were put up. Before talking to a resident, it is difficult to understand why the environment should be so abused [6].

Talking to one lady resident with two extensions on her small plot, I found out that for her, a home is a home whether rural or urban. She lives and works in town, she has sons who are grown up and cannot stay in her house anymore so she builds them houses (rooms), the first son on the right and the second on the left. The elder son moves to work in a distant town, mother feels she needs to fix a gate but she cannot do this in the absence of the son - it is against tradition. She waits until the son gets back, they have a little traditional ceremony and the gate is fixed [6]. There were many similar stories from other residents explaining why they change the housing environment and do not use it the way the designers and owners would have wanted it used. The question is: did the designers and planners know who they were designing for? Of course they did not know and did not care to.

5 Conclusions

There is little to be argued over the significance of vernacular architecture to designers of formal architecture, of the quality of the forms, the use of materials, or the expression of the structure. Nor is there any question that many indigenous buildings have great quality as forms or spaces and simple beauty in their relationships [12]. Underlying most of these spaces and relationships is the cultural meaning attributed to them. The Luo case clearly illustrates how fundamental these cultural meanings are and how resistant they can be to change.

Professionals in the built environment have been more concerned with the physical environment, which seems easier to grasp, and have ended up ignoring the social which involves knowing the culture of the people they design for. There is urgent need for architects

and planners to be aware, as much as is possible, of the complexities of social structures and value systems that tie the bonds between mankind and his buildings [13]

It is unfortunate that no discipline exists for the study of vernacular architecture. Were it to emerge it would probably combine elements of both architecture and anthropology. This dual character has possibly accounted for the limited number of comparative research studies in the field, for anthropological enquiry is not a tradition in architectural training, and an understanding of architectural principles has never been viewed as an important aspect of the training in anthropology. The lack of a common language means that there are very few cases where interdisciplinary teams study specific dwellings and settlements to bring their various skills to bear upon the subject, leading to a unified collective study [1].

The crucial message is that changes to urbanisation should be flexible and responsive. Such changes should not be concentrated on urban form alone, but should also combine policies related to economics and social and environmental issues as well as attitudinal changes [13]. We have managed fairly well to address the physical aspects, is it not time to take the socio-cultural concerns head on? We may eventually encourage the expression of group identity through symbols in vernacular architecture, rather than repressing it on grounds of taste, by-laws or planning regulations [15].

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Annex 1

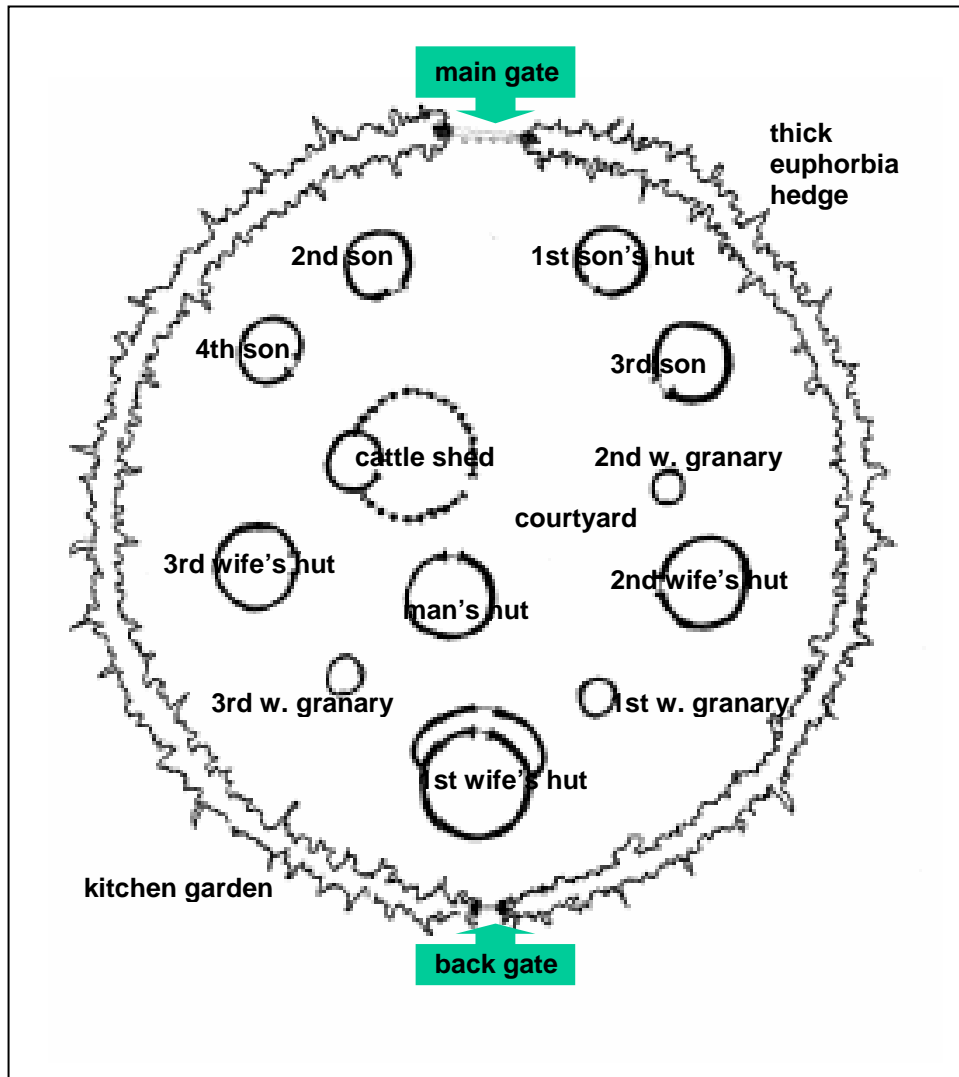


Figure 1: Luo traditional homestead layout

Annex 2

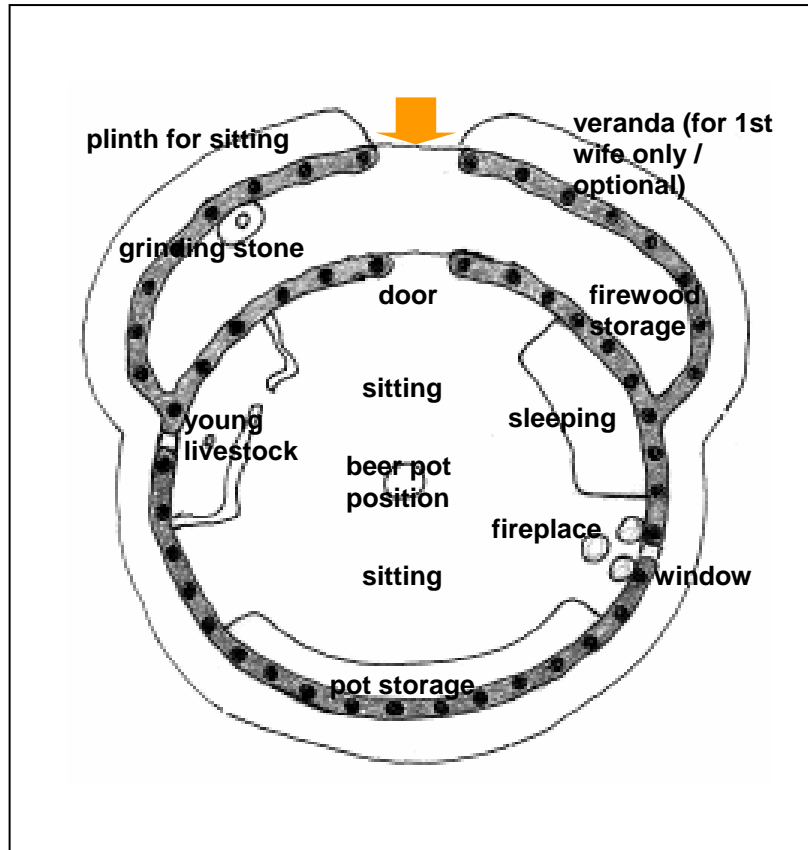


Figure 2: Luo Traditional Hut Layout