Space, Place and Meaning in Northern Riverain Sudan: Focus on the Determinants of House Form and Layout

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Abstract

This is a section of an on going study on 'Space, Place and Meaning in Northern Riverain Sudan'. This research eco-systemically identifies and analyses the spatial and physical features of settlements and buildings along the Nile Valley in Northern Sudan. The problem is articulated through the study of selected artifacts and inter-disciplinary interpretation is attempted. The intangible remains of the Funj, post-Funj eras are compared with the tangible remains of the Nubian and Christian eras.

The 'house' is seen to be a vital unit where the attitudes of a society are fully manifested, thus several of the themes investigated in the research revolve around the house, such as the symbolic relation between the house and the tomb, the influence of the cardinal directions on house layouts and reading people's attitudes to 'house' or 'habitation models' in local poetry, songs and sayings. It is found that spatial mappings of social themes are relatively unambiguous and that non-traditional symbols and practices are reconciled with the traditional in a never-ending symbiotic process. This skill has been important for the original inhabitants of the region as, due to the strategic location, they have always had to contend with new visitors, as peaceful migrants or invaders.

With the gradual arrival of the Arabs starting in 642 AD, new power relations emerged, which resulted in differences in gender-related sub-divisions and different social hierarchies. Yet, the spaces became more multi-functional when they were previously mono-functional. Also, surprisingly, there were less physical sub-divisions, which didn't correspond to the more elaborate social segmentation that emerged due to new socio-political dynamics. Barriers became social rather than physical. It could be argued that the reasons were economic or climatic. In archaeology, these are easily observable determinants of changes in house form. While the importance of economic factors is not undermined, it is seen that the impact of cultural change is more profound, yet least recognizable. That is why this study aims to focus on these aspects.

1   Introduction

Identification of the delimited context is attempted through a general review of literature where the recurring themes in the literature on the region are revealed and the material manifestations of the culture are identified. Through this a number of physical, spatial, ritualistic and linguistic artifacts are selected to elaborate on the themes. The term 'artifact' acquires a broader definition in this study and refers to both the tangible and the intangible. **Analysis** is the next stage where all of the above is then studied in the light of the main premise of the thesis and the accuracy of the assumptions is checked. **Interpretation** then forms the main body of the research where the results are co-related and a theory derived based on inter-disciplinary analysis concerning the question: what generates attitudes to space and place in the region?

Space is where 'things exist and move', **place** is 'how people inhabit space', **meaning** is 'acquired significance or importance', **artifact** is 'any cultural agent with the socio-cultural domain', and the term **eco-systemically** refers to the process of 'putting the artifact within a hierarchy of the total realm'. The meaning of house, or *bayt*, will be elaborated on below. This is seen to be one reading of many. It is a personal interpretation.

In the context under study, the physical house does not necessarily define respect or standing, actually the word ba*yt*, literally meaning house does not necessarily mean a physical structure. The nomadic background of the inhabitants of the area has influenced people's approach to life and the physical artifact is many times despised. Many house models express transience, movement and temporality. Internally and externally, the same space becomes a series of different settings. This ultimately impacts on the town/village layout where forms are less consolidated, more fragmented, when compared to the typical 'medina' layout of other Arab cities. Several houses create the courtyards spaces, rather than one family house surrounding a private courtyard.

Many attitudes to space correspond to other Muslim societies where a 'space' is only necessary for Hajj in Mecca. Sanctity may be embodied in a person praying or a group of people performing a ritual rather than a building. Many times this is reflected in other domains as the character of the space 'being' the activity/rite performed.

2   Social Structure and Spatial Articulation

2.1   Hierarchical Differentiation in the Physical Environment

Social structure represents the primary influence on the organizational configuration of domestic space at the level of the community and the individual house. At the micro level, architecturally undifferentiated functional loci, where life occurs as social and religious ritual and everyday activities, are contained within a single enclosed, semi-enclosed or open space. These loci are not necessarily separated.

It is generally believed that as societies become more complex their spaces become more segmented. This is not the case in Nubia, after the introduction of Islam, where space became less segmented and more multi purpose in character. It was more gender specific, in a fluid manner, as this changed depending on circumstances. Nomadic transient patterns are reflected at many levels in Sudanese towns and villages.

The arrival of the Arabs in the region and the following acculturation that took place had an impact on the way that people viewed the environment around them and how they intervened through buildings and space manipulation. Through the new power relations that became established the arrival of the Arabs also had an impact on the spatial arrangements within the home and on gender related subdivisions. In another context that was transformed through the arrival of the Arabs, Swahili houses on the east coast of Africa are subdivided into different areas for certain groups (E.g. freeborn men, female domestic slaves, locally born slaves, etc.). The house forms would be perceived in certain ways, some people respected and some stigmatized depending on the form of their house, which indicates their social status (Donley-Reid, 1990: 118).

It is believed that in the Sudanese context these hierarchical relationships between and the importance assigned to people were strongly present but not so evident in the physical sense and thus did not have the same impact on house designs after the arrival of the Arabs. It may be that due to more subdivisions previously that these hierarchies were more evident in house layouts- this still needs to be researched.

Within the house itself different loci had degrees of importance attached to them based on the functions that are related to them. Houses have been seen as models of society (Donley-Reid: 114). Houses are also seen to convey social structure from one generation to the other; they set up divisions and hierarchies that reinforce underlying principles of a culture. House layouts maintain the importance of certain people and thus maintain power structures within a community (Donley-Reid: 115). Power relations are important in designing and maintaining a particular built environment. And in a two-way process, architecture plays an active role in structuring social hierarchies and creating power strategies.

Both Donley-Reid (115) and Kent (1990: 129) believe that as societies become more complex their spaces become more segmented. In the region under study, space became less segmented and more multi purpose in character as well as more gender specific. In multi purpose areas more disparate functions take place. Architecturally undifferentiated activity loci were contained within a single enclosed, semi-enclosed or open space. The lack of many separate linguistic terms for specific loci could imply that the Sudanese do not systematically differentiate space according to function. Functional loci are not necessarily separated by partitions as in Euro-American cultures. Notice for example the word ba*yt*. The literal translation is house, yet it is used for room- a house could be one room where all the functions take place such as sleeping, cooking, eating, bathing, storage, etc. *Bayt* also refers to wife or family.

2.2   Social themes concerning gender roles

Social structure was transformed by the arrival of the new religion. New lifestyles were adopted and the equivalent of the *harem* established. This became even more evident after the invasion of the Turks. Women's roles were not only assigned to the home but they also came to have a very important function as the guardians of tradition. The table below is used as a starting point to identify gender differences.

Nature	Culture
Domestic	Public
Reproduction	Production
Female	Males

Table 1: From Vagenes (1998: 92)

Vagenes (92-93) refers to the discussion on whether the above table is a limited western construct. This debate is wider than the scope of this paper. For our purposes the table has been extended as follows:

Pagans	Muslims (according to some authors)
Home	Streets/public space, Markets (*suq*)
Shaykh's Gubba (Tomb) (ritual/miracles)	Mosques (*'ilm*/knowledge)
Fuqara (poor, religious man, religious healer)	*Hakim* (medical assistant- literally wise man) *Baseer* (traditional healer) *Imam* (prayer leader)
zar(spirits)	*zikr*(remembrance of *shaykhs* and prophet)
Informal gathering	Formal gathering
Hosh niswan (women's courtyard)	*Hosh rijal* (men's courtyard)
Rooms, *Tukul* (kitchen)	*Diwan* (size, dominance)
Rakooba (verandah)	
Social networks restricted to home, neighbours, relatives	Wider social networks
Gossip	Politics
House keeping/child rearing	Work outside home- breadwinners
Mujamalat (socialising)	*Wajibat* (duties)

Table 2: Gender roles and domains

The above must not be taken too strictly. Many times roles shift and domains become transient and fluid. Women appear to be more subservient actors in this whole process. Yet, Vagenes (182) refers to them as 'disguised actors'. They actually play a major role in day-to-day decisions and the functioning of a community within the set structures.
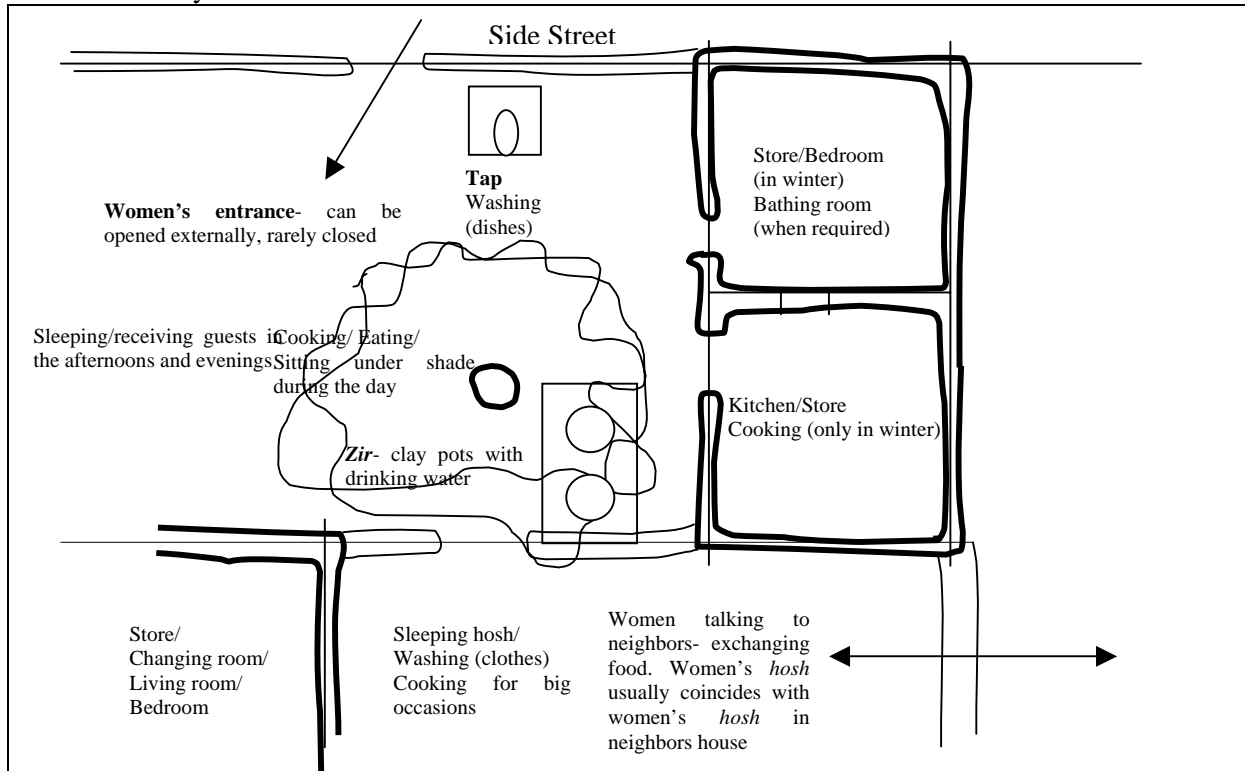

Figure 1: Indoor Rooms/Outdoor Rooms

The *daywan* is *bayt alrojal* (men's house), and the rest of the house is *bayt alniswan*. (*Bayt* is house, *rojal* men, *niswan* women). When the word b*ayt* is mentioned it can be understood as the women's domains within the house. This is probably due to the fact that this is the center of their world whereas the public spaces are the domain of men. Thus, the *daywan*, even though it is within the house, has a more public than private function.

Houses are built by men, yet inhabited mainly by women as they spend the most time in them and carry out most activities within the confines of their own house or the houses of relatives, neighbors, friends. That is including social rituals. Women maintain the daily rhythm of life. Men's areas of habitation extend beyond the boundaries of the house to include the mosque, the streets and the public spaces. Various social groups may use the same place but at different times (Donley-Reid: 115), thus the *daywan* for example can be used by the women during the times that the men are away or during occasions when the men may use the street or a neighboring house.
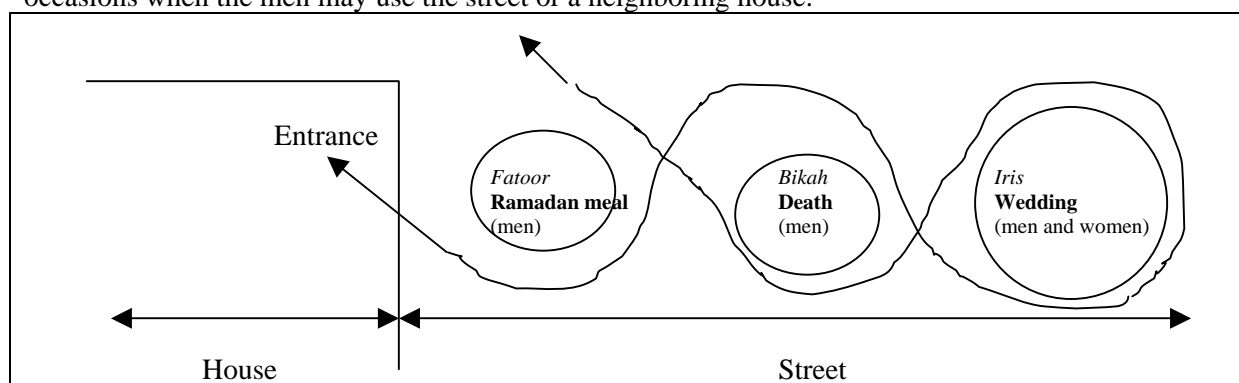

Figure 2: The same space becomes a series of different settings

2.3   The issue of privacy and the individuals' use of space

The contrast between "micro" personal/parameters with "macro" social/shared ones is seen to be less evident in that context. Vagenes explains how the Hadendawa, of eastern Sudan, are never alone. Silence is seen as an indication of psychological problems and solitude is unnatural and unhealthy. This attitude is very similar to the riverain communities. Spatially, public and private zones are difficult to identify. The male and female zones are accessible to all males or females in the community most times of the day. This means that women's domains, for example, though restricted to certain areas, during certain times of the day, can be seen as being extended to include the women's domains in all the neighboring houses in a settlement.

2.4   Time and space as structuring elements in place making

As mentioned above, an important theme is related to the times of the day and the linked activities. Time and space are seen as equally important structuring elements. In traditional agricultural societies the day starts early, due to the extreme heat. The men would leave the house after morning prayers at sunrise. They would return at noon for a siesta and lunch and leave again for their work after the sun cools late afternoon. After sunset prayers was the time for socialising. The courtyards are prepared swept, sprayed with water and the '*angaribs* (traditional wooden beds) and *biroush* (palm leaf mats) are brought out and people find relief in the coolness after the harshness of the day.

> *Fajr-duqush* (dawn) prayers
> *Sabah* (morning) tea
> *Duha* (late morning) work time

Gayloola duhr (noon-afternoon) siesta- prayers- lunch
Asr/ duhriya (late afternoon) work time
Maghrib (sunset) prayers, tea
Isha (evening) prayers, meal and end of activities

As seen above, female space is extended when men are away. Thus, time acquires spatial significance. The *daywan* becomes the domain of women at certain times, when the man is supposed to be working outside the house. For a man to be there at those times is unacceptable.
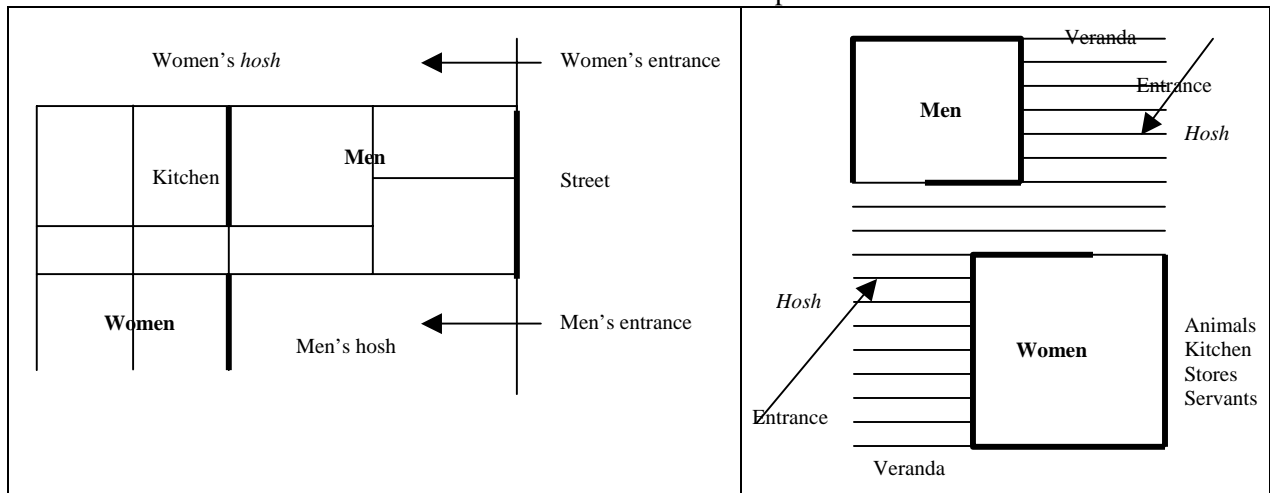
Figure 3: Men's domains towards the streets and the Women's domains further back: A modern interpretation in a Khartoum house.

Figure 4: A typical pattern in house design: Many times the barriers are visual and social rather than physical.

2.5 Symbolic relationship between burial and dwelling

There is a relationship between the way that people bury their dead and the way that they inhabit space. It is possible to understanding the one by studying the other. The way that communities react to death and burial is a significant indicator of how they react to life. The same is true for the region as the way that people are buried reflects their outlook on life, which also reflects on the way they intervene in the environment.

In this region, the way that the body is prepared for burial, how the grave is prepared and how the final prayers are preformed (according to the Muslim faith) seem to have influenced the way that the community views the world as a whole. And it could be seen as reflecting on the way society operates and how that is manifest physically. The grave is dug and a rough mud brick vault is built over the corpus, before the pit is filled with earth again. People are buried lying on their right side with their faces towards the east. The simplicity of the ceremony is key to the beliefs of the religion. The body is wrapped in white cotton cloth; a silk wrap is sometimes kept in the house and used to take the body to the burial place. It is then removed and kept for another death.

Graveyards do not seem to have the same symbolic significance as in other societies. The dead person has moved on: there is no elaborate ceremony. It is immediate, quick and simple. What is quite elaborate is the mourning process that could previously last for up to forty days.
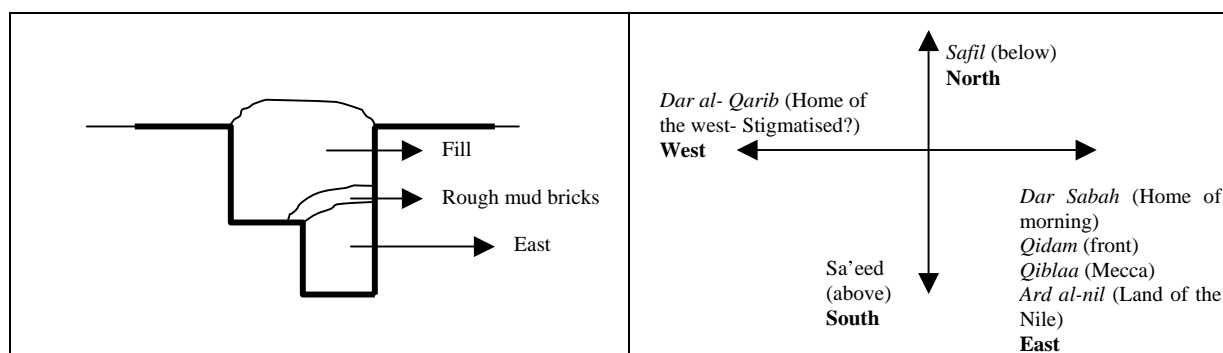
Figure 5: A typical grave   **Figure 6**: The cardinal directions

2.6   The cardinal directions play a role in spatial perception

The east is referred to as *dar sabah* (Gasim, 1985: 658)*, Qidam-* the front. This implies the Q*ibla* (direction of Mecca) and not the exact eastern direction. This is related, not only to the direction of the rising sun, but also the direction of Mecca. *Dar Sabah* also refers to the land of the Nile, which is also referred to as the 'land of the morning', *bilad sabah* (ibid). The west is seen to be the rear, *dar al qarib.* Spatial ordering with reference to the cardinal directions was gradually lost. It is preferred that the house be oriented towards the east. Due to the more complex design of houses and the implications of formal planning, this was progressively lost in practice. Toilets are oriented towards a neutral axis. North is *safil* (below), while south is *sa'eed* (above). This probably originates from the flow of the river. Anything that people want to be blessed will be done while the person is facing east, such as *jirtig* (wedding ritual) or *hinna* (decoration with henna) of the bridegroom.

2.7   The Courtyards, the Streets and the Public Spaces

The majority of functions are performed outdoors and the courtyards and streets become 'outdoor rooms' while built areas are used mostly for storage or sleeping during the short winter season. Makeshift structures and arrangements are the norm for different social functions such as *zar, bikkah* or weddings. Makeshift kitchens are also an important feature as cooking space is shifted from internal to external spaces. The buildings and surrounding courtyards fulfill their function of providing living space for all the different activities within the house in a suitable environment in terms of the dust and the heat that characterise the climate. Traditional rituals are not necessarily accommodated for but rather are contained in an open space that remains empty after the people have dispersed. These kinds of habitation patterns are made possible by the climate. It also represents a memory of cultural traits of the spatial freedom of mobility of the nomads (Kazimee and McQuillan 2002; p.28). Similar to other Muslim contexts the courtyard plays a central role in daily life, not only in the home but also in public buildings. Nomadic patterns are still evident at all levels as well as traditional sedentary patterns of life. Kazimee and McQuillan (23) in Afghanistan, describe this as 'co-existing modes of living'.

Nomadic rotation, what Kazimee and McQuillan (25) call circular 'migration' within the courtyard relates to diurnal rotation. It creates a spatial order related to time and orientation. The house is a microcosm of other spaces and public buildings where the same cycles take place. These rhythms and movement from internal to external space and between different parts of the external spaces reflect formal and informal gatherings throughout the day. Daily, seasonal and social cycles influence the way that the outdoor spaces surrounding a house are used. This includes the street areas as well. This again follows a familiar pattern in Islamic cities, where the public space is well utilized.
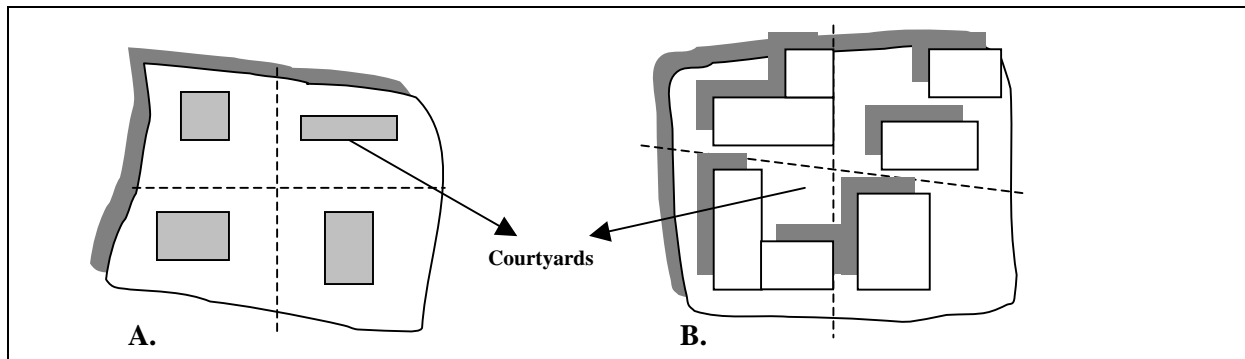
Figure 7: A. is a typical medina layout where each private courtyard is surrounded by a family house. **B.** is the situation in many parts of Sudan where high densities are maintained yet houses are less consolidated, more fragmented. In both cases the residential units are not easily identified and precedence is given to the houses rather than the roads.

3. Conclusions

Barriers between men/women domains are visual or social rather than physical. Many times the distinction between men and women domains dissolves, especially during major occasions like *eid* (religious festival) or *iris* (wedding). This is especially so for close relatives. The distinction between domains is loose and rudimentary. Previously, mono-functional loci are seen as an indication of habitation models based on permanence. More transient models reflect, not only nomadic practices of movement and temporality, but also an attitude based on less concern for worldly possessions and wealth as life itself was viewed as temporary, transitional stage. The impact of cultural practice not only influences the individual house, but the layout of the whole settlement making it a distinctly Sudanese interpretation of the conventional building practices in other Muslim contexts.

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