You are where you build: Hierarchy, Inequality, and Equalitarianism in Mandara Highland Architecture

Melchisedek Chétima

Abstract: Ethnic groups living in the Mandara Mountains are assumed to be segmentary in structure, which is why scholarly literature portrays them as egalitarian societies. The configuration of the architectural landscape reveals a different reality. This article shows how the architectural landscapes of the Mandara Highlands are ideologically constructed to represent and legitimize hierarchies between clans and individuals. Physical entities appear as particular elements of social space, and as places socially constructed and tinged with ideologies. These fieldwork-based observations provide the foundation for interrogating the meaning of egalitarianism in African society.

Résumé: Les groupes ethniques vivant dans les Monts Mandara apparaissent comme des sociétés segmentaires de par leur structure sociale. C'est pourquoi la littérature scientifique les a dépeint comme des sociétés égalitaires. Cependant, la configuration du paysage architectural révèle une réalité très différente et met en lumière des phénomènes sociaux cachés. Cet article vise à montrer comment les paysages architecturaux des Monts Mandara sont idéologiquement construits pour représenter et légitimer les hiérarchies entre les clans et les individus. Entités physiques, certes, ils apparaissent comme des éléments particuliers de l'espace social et idéologiquement teintés. En tant qu'espaces construits, ils sont créés avec des pierres, du chaume et de l'argile ; mais comme `espace social', ils revêtent des significations qui concrétisent et rendent légitime l'accès inégal aux ressources politiques et sacrées. Ces observations portées sur la structure du paysage conduisent à une question fondamentale : les groupes sociaux vivant dans les Monts Mandara sont-ils des sociétés égalitaires ? Si la hiérarchie signifie l'existence d'inégalités entre les individus, il serait inapproprié de qualifier ces sociétés d'égalitaires tant on y constate l`existence des inégalités

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Melchisedek Chétima is a Senior Lecturer at the Higher Teacher Training College of the University of Maroua in Cameroun and a Gordon F. Henderson Fellow at the University of Ottawa. His research focuses on Ethnicity and Identity, Housing and Identity, Slavery and Memory, and on Material Culture. E-mail: chetimam@yahoo.fr

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d'accès aux ressources matérielles et aux positions sociales honorables. A partir de ces constats, cet article fait valoir l'argument qu'hiérarchie et égalité coexistent dans un même système, tant les accents égalitaires s'interpénètrent avec une recherche ostentatoire de prestige personnel, notamment à travers l'espace bâti.

Resumo: A estrutura dos grupos étnicos que habitam os Montes Mandara tem sido considerada como sendo segmentária, razão pela qual a literatura académica retrata estes grupos como sociedades igualitárias. No entanto, a configuração da paisagem arquitetónica indicia uma realidade diferente. O presente artigo explica de que modo as paisagens arquitetónicas das Terras Altas de Mandara são ideologicamente construídas para representar e legitimar as hierarquias entre clãs e indivíduos. As estruturas físicas constituem elementos específicos do espaço social e lugares socialmente construídos, eivados de ideologias. Resultantes de um trabalho de campo, as observações aqui reunidas lançam as bases para questionarmos o significado do igualitarismo na sociedade africana.

Keywords: Mandara Highlands; architectural landscape; egalitarian societies; identity formation; Hierarchies and Inequalities

Introduction

During an interview, Slagama, a participant in my research in the village of Udjila, invited me to follow him inside his compound. He wanted to show me some architectural characteristics that distinguish the homes of honorable people. We went through a series of three vestibules without any comments from my host, apart from his explanation that this is where he receives his visitors. But when we arrived in the "belly of the house," that is to say the space reserved for wives and granaries in the compound, Slagama did not hesitate to comment on each of the structures present. He gave details on the internal organization of the house, the movement of persons, and the place of each of the wives living in the compound. I counted a total of seven areas reserved for wives, each of them containing a bedroom, a kitchen, and two granaries. The position of the first wife was central, for it was around her that the others were settled. When I asked him why he had so many domains allotted to wives, his answer was matter-of-fact: "I have seven wives, and each one must have her own space."

When we finished surveying the inside, we went outside. My host invited me to climb the rock overlooking the house, from which it was possible to view the roofs of each structure rising from his compound. It was also possible to see houses as large as his own built upon surrounding mountaintops. Slagama explained why each of these houses, like his, was built on high ground. On the other hand, he pointed out some houses that, relative to his own, were not particularly well-situated. Of his neighbor's house, situated in an internal plateau, he commented: "It's a miserable house and his owner is a good-for-nothing who is unable to provide food for his family. I pity his wife and children." When I asked him how it is possible to

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recognize someone's place in the society through his house, Slagama replied with great enthusiasm:

> If you want to know the life and important people, don't do anything, just look at their houses. The higher and wider they are, the more distinguished are their owners. But if they are at the bottom, their occupants are common people. Living at the top is not given to anyone. You have to be a person of prestige. It's useless to build at the top when you cannot expose your wealth. That is why those who are in high places still have great and beautiful houses. These are people who come from noble families. (Interview, Slagama, Udjila, April 24, 2006)

From the guided tour of Slagama's compound emerge two main architectural features that highlight the reputation of a house and its owner: the number of the structures that make up the wives' domains, and the position of the compound on high ground. Several researchers who have worked in the Mandara Mountains have already underlined the role of the first aspect in individual social success (Chétima 2016; Lyons 1992; Hallaire 1991; Vincent 1991; Beek 1988; Seignobos 1982). By contrast, apart from the works of Diane Lyons (1996, 1992), no studies have examined the effects of the low versus high altitude placement of houses on the domestic space and identity formation.[1]

Although spatial analysis of architecture has not been applied to the Mandara region, the relationship between space and social status has been the subject of considerable investigation in the social sciences. Perhaps the best known among these is Henri Lefebvre's seminal work *The Production of Space* (1991). Lefebvre defines what he calls "absolute space" as "fragments of nature located at sites which were chosen for their intrinsic qualities (cave, mountain peak, and river)" (1989:239) to which one may attribute sense and meanings in order to transform them into social spaces. David Harvey (2001) goes further by claiming that space is never neutral in social matters. Rather, it always expresses a form of class or other social content, and is most often the focus of an intense social struggle. In the same avenue, many other authors (Ayobade 2017; Anton & Carmen 2016; Lien 2009; Goonewardena et al. 2008; Ranade 2007; Halford & Leonard 2006; Proshansky 1983) have highlighted the influence of space on social status as the result of a reciprocal interaction between people and their physical environment. People affect spaces, and the way spaces are affected influences how people see themselves. In this vein, Charis Anton and Lawrence Carmen (2016) and Deborah Pellow (2015) describe place not as a neutral element that would only express identity, but rather as an entity that greatly influences the very process of identity formation.

The study of social status through building space is also notable in scholarly Africanist literature. In his conversations with the sage Ogotemmeli, Marcel Griaule (1954) reveals that among the Dogon of Mali, the architectural landscape is the replica of the bodies that live in it. The same argument is made by Suzanne Blier (1987), who postulates that built-up space among

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the Batammaliba of Benin is a mirror image of the men and women who build and live there. In the same vein, Christopher Gray argued, based on ethnographic research in Gabon, that the interaction between physical and social realities makes it possible to discern the relationship between building space, society, and identity (2002:20). The most insightful study undoubtedly comes from Dominique Malaquais, who reveals that the dwelling site among the Bamileke of Cameroon, where deference for the *Fô* (traditional chief) is a cardinal value, is the main factor shaping the region's architectural landscape, commanding the inner organization of the compounds of notables, and governing the movement of the people residing within them (2002:45–46).[2]

Following Malaquais (2002, 1994), I consider dwelling space as intimately linked to the quest for an ideal translated into images of a "good life." Rather than being a simple question of taste, domestic space serves to construct and express the identity of its inhabitants. As such, hierarchies between individuals are negotiated and socially constructed within domestic spaces (Pellow 2015; Ndjio 2009; Malaquais 2002). This article explores the perceptions of top and bottom related to houses in the Mandara Mountains. My focus on the social groups of the Mandara Mountains, however, brings into focus the role of architecture, not among societies hierarchically organized around traditional chieftaincies as among the Bamileke, but rather in what are generally termed segmentary societies. I read the Mandara region's architectural landscape to illuminate otherwise hidden social realities within these social groups commonly assumed to be "decentralized," "egalitarian," and "non-hierarchical." I argue that domestic space in this zone is one of the multiple arenas for the production of social relations, and proof of the individual's belonging to a high social status. In imagining themselves in relation to the top and the bottom on which their groups and compounds stand, Mandara mountaineers forge their ways of being-in-the-world. In this sense, they link certain elements of social status with place of residence, and leverage their building space, both inside and outside the compound, to establish and to maintain their social status. Outside, the architectural landscape, in particular the top/bottom dichotomy, reveals hierarchies within communities as well as the social status of religious authority and individuals. Inside, gender relations are expressed through a parallel top/bottom interpretation. Since the compound has one exposure upwards and another downward, the upper part is considered a men's domain, while the lower part is reserved for women and young children. In the sections that follow, I paint a picture of the study area before presenting the data obtained from the surveys carried out in the Mandara Mountains. I then show how these data reveal how a top/bottom dichotomy discloses the hierarchal order structuring relationships between clans as well as between individuals.

Context and Methodology

Located at the intersection between Nigeria and Cameroon, the Mandara Mountains form a complex and diverse ethnic and cultural mosaic (David

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2012; MacEachern 2012). There are more than twenty groups living in this zone of approximately only two thousand square kilometers (see Figure 1). These groups are not fixed; rather, individuals constantly transcend language barriers and cultural practices. In terms of social organization, political unity tends to be situated at the level of the village. The historical processes underlying the formation of this ethnic mosaic pose an enormous challenge to the methods used by archaeologists of the culture-history approach to determine the so-called "archaeological cultures" (Roberts & Linden 2011).

The *Montagnards* form a virilocal system, in which each community has its own set of patrilineal clans (David 2012; MacEachern 2002). As another village has different clans, patrilineal kinship is generally limited to the boundaries of the village. However, a system of adoption of aliens enables interactions with other social groups by allowing newcomers to enter local social structures (Hallaire 1991; Beek 1986). Clans are divided into lineages and contain a modal number varying between fifteen to thirty households. They usually occupy the same mountain, which will thus bear the name of the founding ancestor. The position of these compounds on the mountain generally respect the hierarchical relations between the members of a given lineage. Marriage is unconditionally virilocal. The bride leaves the village of her parents on her first marriage, or those of her previous husbands in any subsequent marriages (Lyons 1998; Beek 1986). Polygyny is the main feature of the Montagnards social life, with co-wives living in the same compound, each of them having her own bedroom, kitchen, and granaries (Chétima 2016; Lyons 1998; Vincent 1991), as per the description of Slagama's compound above. More than 40 percent of men I interviewed had more than one wife at the time of my fieldwork.

This high rate of polygyny is one of the factors explaining the high population density of the Mandara Mountains—up to 220 people per square kilometer—relative to that of the rest of the region of west Central Africa. Another reason can be traced to the history of Islamization and slave raiding in the region. From the fifteenth century, the expansion of the Islamized empires of the Borno, Bagirmi, and Wandala pushed populations to migrate as they fled from slave raids (Chétima & Gaimatakwan 2016; Chétima 2015; David 2014). Thus, for over half a millennium, the Mandara Mountains have served as a place of refuge. The almost complete occupation of this location seemed to ensure their safety, and they gladly welcomed foreigners within their groups so as to saturate space (Hallaire 1991; Beek 1986). Although it is difficult to quantify, the popularity of Mora's slave market (just below the mountains) gives the impression that a considerable number of Montagnards were sold into slavery. Jacques Lestringant (1964) asserts that it was the only truly flourishing trade in the nineteenth century in the region. Antoinette Hallaire (1965:58) also estimates that almost half of the population of Wandala was composed of slaves.

Before German occupation, competition for farmland and wives gave rise to an endemic conflict that pitted village against village in the region, but nevertheless did not prevent the development of commercial relationships

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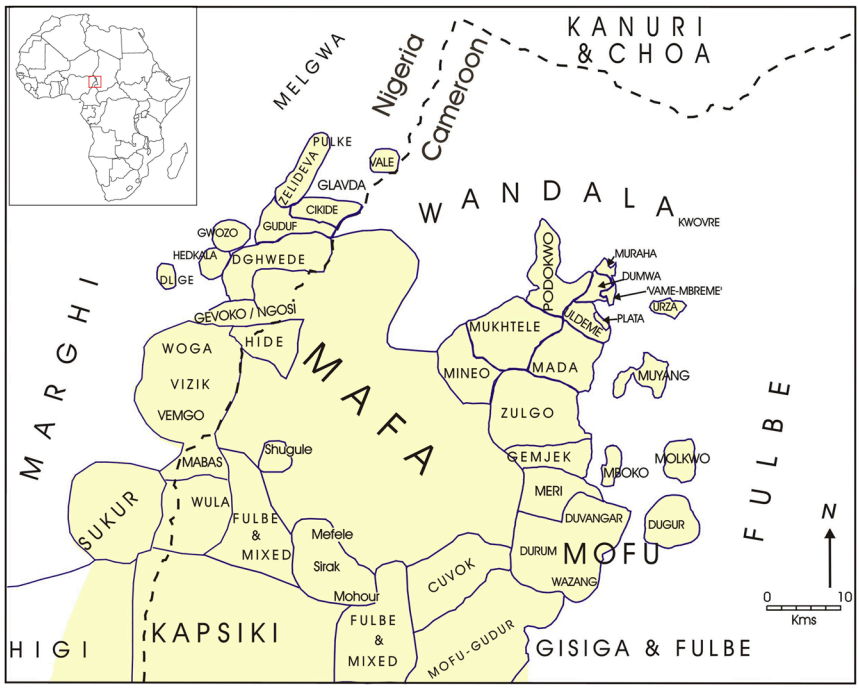
Figure 1. Ethnic Groups in and around the Mandara Mountains *(MacEachern 2002:198, used with permission).*



and matrimonial ties (David 2012). Slave captures were sometimes made during these ethnic rivalries, and these slaves were sold at the Mora local market, or at the Borno and Sokoto international markets in Nigeria (Vaughan & Kirk-Greene 1995). In this context, protecting against unexpected slave raids was a key priority for Montagnards, and this need for security left an indelible mark on the local architectural landscape. Because the mountain peaks constituted ramparts against abductions, they became excellent sites for the building of houses. Villages such as Mogode (among the Podokwo), Zuelva (among the Muktele), and Sama (among the Uldeme) are built on mountain slopes. In contrast, the Montagnards did not populate the more easily accessible valleys and the inner plateaus.

It is therefore possible to situate the marked interest of the Montagnards for building at great heights in the historical context of the practice of slavery and internal wars. Not only did higher altitudes render the enemy's advance more difficult, it also gave inhabitants a better view over the plains, allowing them to alert the village population of movement toward the mountains. According to several informants, sentinels were maintained in strategic high locations to warn of movement toward the mountains. The higher the compounds were located, the less their inhabitants were likely to be the victims of attacks. Some writers have described the Montagnards

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as the "*refoulés*" (repelled, driven back), as people who had no choice but to cling to their heights to escape recurring raids (Seignobos 1982). Yet Montagnards view themselves not as victims but rather as resistors. The natural features of the environment, the presence of caves and protective walls, are often referenced in this discourse centered on the resistance. Today, in speaking about their landscape, Montagnards express a clear desire to get rid of the negative connotations of their servile past, replacing this identity with the more useful and positive memory of resistance (Chétima & Gaimatakwan 2016; Chétima 2015). Building high as the practice of a distinguished people can be read, then, as a form of repression of the memory of slavery.

Since French administrators undertook to abolish the slave trade when they assumed control of the League of Nations mandate after the First World War, the top/bottom dichotomy has continued to fuel local disputes over occupying the most prestigious positions. The "pacification" of the area in the beginning of the twentieth century was followed by authoritarian measures to bring Montagnards down onto the plain (Boutrais 1973). However, only those whose lives and social status were less invested in mountain-dwelling came down, particularly the social juniors who had little or no role in conducting religious rites and ceremonies (Seignobos 1982:81). The settlement on the plains continued to emphasize the dichotomy between the top and the bottom: the mountain came into stark relief as a humanized space, while the plain was considered a deserted and dangerous space. Indeed, Montagnards who stayed in the mountains showed contempt for their counterparts who descended to the plain. As I learned from many of my informants, people even performed songs castigating those whose topographical situation was at the bottom. On the other hand, many of the social juniors who settled in the plains migrated to big cities in order to work and to earn money. Being aware of their marginal position, they demonstrated their agency by returning in the mountains to build houses they called "modern," that is, rectangular and corrugated iron roofed houses. But they did not build such houses on the summit but rather on the lower sides of the mountains.

Most of the data presented in this article come from seven research trips conducted primarily among two ethnic groups (Podokwo and Muktele) between 2006 and 2017. These groups live on the northern slopes of the Mandara Mountains. As agricultural societies, they mainly grow millet and beans, which they store in granaries built inside the domestic space. In each group, I chose one locality as a site of observation and interviewing: Udjila among the Podokwo, and Zuelva among the Muktele. I have also conducted fieldwork in other societies such as the Mura and the Uldeme, and in some Montagnards mountains villages such as Godigong (at the Podokwo), Tala-Mokolo (at the Muktele), and Mora-Massif (at the Mura). In total, I conducted more than forty interviews with twenty-three people on the issue of domestic space and social status, as well as on other related topics. In my sample, I included informants with different social statuses

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(men, women, youth, and elders), and I asked them how social status might be associated with the places in which compounds are built. I also asked informants where structures for men, women, children, pubescent and/or marital sons, elders, and animals should be placed in a given compound. I used participant observation coupled with guided tours of the compound's interior and exterior spaces, as shown in Slagama's example. Participant observation was useful to foster an understanding of peoples' status in society by observing their interactions with relatives inside and outside the compound, especially during community work and religious ceremonies. Finally, I attended certain men's and women's meetings, which allowed me to better understand how social hierarchies are expressed through dwelling spaces.

You are where you Build

Ethnic groups living in the Mandara Mountains are assumed to be segmentary in structure, which is why the scholarly literature portrays them as egalitarian societies. Yet, the configuration of the architectural landscape reveals a very different reality by bringing certain hidden social phenomena to the surface. Montagnards have developed important metaphors through which the top and the bottom appear as the material inscription of social relations (Goonewardena et al. 2008). People in the Mandara Mountains give preference to spatial buildings that overemphasize the importance of high places over those at the bottom. This is because higher altitudes are seen to be beneficial to life, while lower places, unfit for life, appear as metaphors of sorcery, pollution, and death. High altitudes express the idea of purity, blessing, and virility; the plains and valleys, on the other hand, represent uninhabited areas which are frightening and intrinsically dangerous (Boutrais 1973:76). At the top, sacrifices are made to the ancestors of the clan, at the bottom, witchcraft and other antisocial acts are practiced (Douglas 1966).[3]

The closer to the summit, the more intense is the relationship between individuals and clan divinities; and the closer to the bottom of the valley, the more danger to human life. This is why trees and rocks that are the objects of a particular cult are multiplied as one moves toward the top of a mountain. While climbing the Zuelva massif of the Muktele with my informants, I was able to count seven rocks that were dedicated to a particular cult. The top of the Zueva's massif also shelters a rocky spur containing the sanctuary of the "mountain spirit." Among the Podokwo of Udjila, it is also at the top of the mountain that sacrifices are offered to the ancestors. The mountain of Mogode, the highest point of the Udjila massifs, houses two ritual sites: at the first one, annual sacrifices are performed as part of the agrarian rites, and at the second one, sacrifices for occasional events occur. The valleys, plains, and inner plateaus, in return, represent a different world, a place where witchcraft practices abound. The word "plain"—*vada* in podokwo language, which means "the bush"—in local languages, moreover, implies

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the idea of danger. It is a place devoid of men, peopled with foreigners and enemies of Montagnards. In many situations, I learned through interviews and participant observation that high places are considered superior and more valuable than low or default locations. This high/low dichotomy allows informants to explain and justify hierarchical relations between clans and lineages as well as between individuals within and outside of the compound.

Architectural Landscapes and Clannish Hierarchies

During my fieldwork, I observed that the hierarchies between the clans and the lineages are very often expressed through the top and bottom positions. In the past, the different clans engaged themselves in real conflicts to occupy high altitudes. In Udjila, for example, the Kəlahəŋa clan is known to be one of the first inhabitants in the region. In so doing, they settled on the peak on some massifs such as Mogode, Mehe and Slala-Məndaha. But the Kəlahəŋa will be dispossessed of their summits after a conflict with the people of udjila during which they were defeated. Local narratives argue that after their defeat, most of the Kəlahəŋa people were pushed north, especially to the mafa and muktele territories. Those who stayed behind were hunted in the inner plateaus surrounding the different massifs of Udjila. The descendants of these families are still mocked, particularly through songs, which recall their marginal position both topographically and socially.

At the Podokwo of Tala-Tabara, oral traditions report that before the Cabana settlement, the massifs were first occupied by the Valawa people. The later will be defeated by the Cabana during an arduous conflict and will be hunted out of the territory. During their flight to the west, the Valawa will face another clan, the Zlaya, and will make war on them and defeat them. The Zlaya will be obliged to leave their mountains and to seek refuge on the Udjila plateaus, but unfortunately, the Uzləgaya will hunt them there again.

In these conflicts and micro-migrations that have marked the history of ethnic groups (see Juillerat 1971:79), the winners almost always settled at the high altitude, while the vanquished were forced to conquer another mountain peaks or to settle at the lower part of the country. This is, for example, noticed among the Podokwo of Slalawa, where the winners lineages have systematically colonized the highest elevated territories as a result of real conflicts with rival clans (Boutrais 1973:35). Oral traditions recall that when the different segments of the slalawa clan arrived in the region, the territories were occupied by two important clans namely the Cabana and the Ouvada. The Cabana where more numerous and had systematically occupied all the summits, forcing the Ouvada to settle at the massifs located much more in the west.[4] The various slalawa clans, such as the Vawa, the Muguzla and the Mbərza will settle in the inner plateaus insofar as they arrived late in the massifs. As such, those clamming to be autochthonous, in particular the Cabana and the Ouvada, regularly mistreated them.

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Figure 2. View of the Architectural Landscapes of the Mandara Mountains ***(Photograph taken by the Author at Gousda, April 2014)***

Informants mentioned, among other abuses, the capture of women and children to sell them to the Wandala, the theft of cattle, the destruction of crops, the disembowelment of pregnant women, etc.

Other examples gathered elsewhere show how clans use this "architectural governmentality" (Ndjio 2009) to highlight their preeminence over other clans. In the village of Tazang among the Mada, an interviewee named Gigla told me about the case of a clan that arrived later to settle in the Mada area, coming from a neighboring ethnic group. To mark their status as aliens and newcomers, the people of this clan occupy the foothills of a mountain, and are described contemptuously by the term *mejechek*, meaning literally "those from below." This mocking attitude is also found in a song reported by Antoinette Hallaire (1991) among the Goudé of Maboudji, where they celebrate the beauty of the Dzougourma village located at the base of their massif. However, after praising its beauty and the hard work of its inhabitants, the song concludes with a mocking tone: "There is something wrong with Dzougourma, to go there, one must go down as from an attic." Hallaire (1991:49) also reports that among the Kapsiki of Sir, the young people from the upper neighborhood routinely address gibes to their comrades in lower neighborhoods, especially during the festive ceremonies, to mock their situation at the bottom of the slope.

The use of space by a particular clan to mark its hold on rival social groups is often coupled with the exercise of supra-family religious functions

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that take place on the heights. These religious functions consist of celebration of the local religious festivals and the inauguration of the agricultural calendar. For example, among the Podokwo of Talla-Dabara, oral traditions report that the Slalawa, when settled in the mountains, were welcomed by the Cabana, who allowed them to occupy the lower part of their mountains. But at the same time, the Cabana compelled the newcomers to observe their religious feasts and agricultural calendar. However, when they became more numerous, the Slalawa provoked a conflict with their "hosts," defeated them, and drove them from the summits in order to settle in their place. They also inaugurated new festivals and a new agrarian calendar to which, in turn, the Cabana were made to submit. The overthrow of the spatial order was then, needless to say, supplemented by a reversal of the religious order, because as much as living high up appears indispensable to symbolically link the top to the hegemony, religious festivals are also an important element to solidify preeminence over other groups.

In the same vein, a person from another clan cannot start an agricultural activity without an order being given by the members of the preeminent clan. Those who refuse to abide by such principles are simply accused of witchcraft, which sometimes forces them to leave the village to find another place to live. However, attempts to overthrow the political order within the same lineage were not a rare phenomenon. Jeanne-Françoise Vincent (1991) reports an illustrative case among the Mofu of Wazang, where a "prince" was deposed in the 1930s in favor of one of his brothers. Not wanting to swear allegiance to the new leader, this prince decided to leave the village to settle on the mountain-island of Ngwahutsey, which was hitherto uninhabited. To mark his autonomy from the Wazang group, he inaugurated his own agricultural calendar and fixed the dates of his principal festivals, especially that of the feast of the bull (locally named the *maray*). This was important because presiding over feasts and sacrifices at the top of his own mountain was synonymous with autonomy.

It is in the context of this traditional conception of space that one can understand why in the past, high or elevated settings were always densely populated while low or default places (valleys, plains, and internal plateaus) were left vacant. The importance of the top has, in this situation, given rise to real inter-clan conflicts around mountain summits. Oral traditions collected in Udjila mention that upon their arrival, the founders of the clan first settled on the foothills of *Slala-Məndaha*, because the summits were already occupied by indigenous people, such as the Uzləgaya, the Kəlahəŋa, and the Shakala. The people of Udjila, having become more numerous, provoked conflicts with these indigenous groups, which they defeated in order to occupy their sites. Although not all were expelled from the territory, nevertheless the autochthonous groups had to leave the mountain ridges to establish themselves in the foothills, topographically and symbolically marking the loss of their supremacy.

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Architectural Landscapes and Interpersonal Relations

If the dialectic between the top and the bottom reveals the hierarchies between clans and lineages, it also governs interpersonal relations within the clan and the village. In this sense, the building of a compound in a dominant position reflects the social importance of an individual, observable by the breadth of his compound, the abundance of his crops, and the large number of his wives. From my own observations, it appears that all the compounds built on the summit ridges were by far wider and contained more structures than those built at lower elevations. There are indeed smaller compounds built on top, but informants' explanations of such compounds concern local religious practices. One reason is related to the use by women of the evil powers, out of jealousy or because of the excessive abuse of male authority (Chétima 2016; Lyons 1998). A second reason is linked to the irresponsibility of the head of the family with regard to the immediate ancestors of his lineage (for example, refusal to make sacrifices and to offer libations in particular). In the two villages visited, the traditional leader's compounds were situated at the top, thus expressing their supremacy and prestige. Summits being the privileged places of communication between men and the powers of the afterlife, it is also naturally there that the religious leaders who assist the head of the village in his religious functions dwell. The compounds of prestigious men, more modest than those of the traditional and religious leaders, were also situated at the top to create and bolster their reputations. Eminently aware of the symbolism of space in social advancement, individuals have often fought a sort of battle for the conquest of the summits in order to establish their dwellings (Hallaire 1991, Seignobos 1982). To illustrate this point, we should revisit the historical tradition of the settling of the Udjila clan in the mountains.

When the people of Udjila defeated the autochthonous populations, several clan leaders, as stated earlier, moved upward and settled on the summit ridges. However, Guləve, who was then the leader of the clan, remained in the foothills to preside over the clan rites that took place there. After his death, the dignitaries of the clan split the leader's religious and political duties and designated two of his children, Dəgura and Zhaŋa, to exercise them. The first conducted religious rites, and the second held the political role. Dəgura remained on the foothills of *Slala-Məndaha* while Zhaŋa settled on the highest summit of Udjila, namely the Mogode highland (see Figure 3). A myth explains the reasons for the construction of the chief's compound there:

> One day, while it was raining in the night, people heard a great noise coming from the sky, like a landslide. Everyone was frightened because they wondered what had happened and what was to come. In the early morning, a few elders went up the hill of Mogode and saw a stone fallen from the sky. It bellowed. Surprised with fear, they consulted a diviner to know what it meant. He told them that the stone could be both an object of blessing and a curse. To remove the curse, he advised them to build the chief's compound next to the stone. (Interviews, Udjila, February–March 2007)

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Figure 3. Mogode Massif, site of the Udjila Clan ***(Photograph taken by the Author at Udjila, May 2013)***

This narrative emphasizes the benefit that the village could obtain by building the clan leader's compound near the mythical stone, masking any other social and identity reasons. However, in explaining the myth, informants added that it was inappropriate to see the clan leader at the bottom while the lineage leaders (who were lower in the hierarchy) were at the top. By establishing the leader's residence on a summit side, there is a desire to symbolize his pre-eminence over others. As a symbol of supremacy, the chief's compound is an essential aspect of his rule. As such, it must be built on the highest part of the mountain so that, visible in the distance, it can symbolically demonstrate his dominance. When the chief's compound was built on the hill of Mogode, other members of the royal family joined him and built their compounds beneath.

Earlier I mentioned colonial measures taken to force all Montagnards traditional leaders to settle in the plains (see Boutrais 1973). Most of them occupied plains compounds built with the help of the colonial authorities. This was the case with the Podokwo-Centre and Podokwo-Nord cantons. Informants pointed out that these canton chiefs could, however, exercise authority only over those who settled in the plains. Those who remained in the mountains no longer submitted to their authority, for power cannot be imagined and exercised from below. In order to preserve their right over those who remained in the mountains, some canton chiefs opted for a double residence, with the main one on the mountain and the second one

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on the plain (Chétima 2017). Others, after ruling for a time from below, returned to settle again in their mountain's compounds. This is, for instance, the case of Menegue of Zuelva who, in the context of the colonial injunction to settle on the plain, had a compound built at the bottom of the mountain. But he remained there only a few years, first of all because of the conflicts that regularly occurred with the Wandala of Kerawa, and secondly because of the erosion of his authority over the lineage leaders who remained in the mountains. As I learned from informants, these lineage leaders used to complain and wonder: "how can someone who lives at the bottom command those who are at the top?" In other words, there is an incompatibility between living at the bottom and being a chief.

Other relevant examples are found in other societies of the Mandara Mountains. Among the Uldeme, for example, the Sama village (which means heaven) is to this day occupied by a "rainmaker," even though his clan has long since surrendered its traditional authority to the Mendjeling. Because he performs important ritual functions, his concession has remained perched on top of the mountain while newcomers have chased away other members of his clan. The story of Maboudji among the Goude is also revealing in this respect (Hallaire 1991). The founder of the village settled at the top of the interfluve, at the place called Nomaboudji, which means "the head of Maboudji." The Mokezina, who arrived later, created a village called Dzougourma at the bottom of a valley. With the support of the Fulani people, the Mokezina succeeded in seizing the village, but the new leader remained in Dzougourma, which amazed the inhabitants of Nomaboudji. In fact, they found it abnormal that a leader living at the bottom of the valley could rule those dwelling at the top. Finally, the Mokezina were forced to build the new leader's compound near Nomaboudji, respecting the normative architectural system.

Architectural Landscapes and Gender Relations

Finally, the relationship between the top and the bottom reveals hierarchical relations inside the compound. During my fieldwork, I observed that the compound was always organized into two domains (or neighborhoods, according to local terminology): the husband's neighborhood and the wives' neighborhood (see Figure 4). While the man's neighborhood has an upward inclination, the wives' tends to slope downwards (Chétima 2010). A terrace separates the two neighborhoods, so that the man's situation overlooks that of the wives. It is through a staircase of stones that one enters the wives' domain, once one has crossed that of the husband. It is uncommon to find women in the structures of the upper part, just as it is rare to meet men inside the space reserved for women. When I met women in the upper part of the compound, they were less willing to talk to me, insofar as this is a site reserved for men. In turn, when the interview took place within the domestic space, very few women refused to be interviewed. The reason is that the inside of the compound, that is to say, its lower part, is considered to

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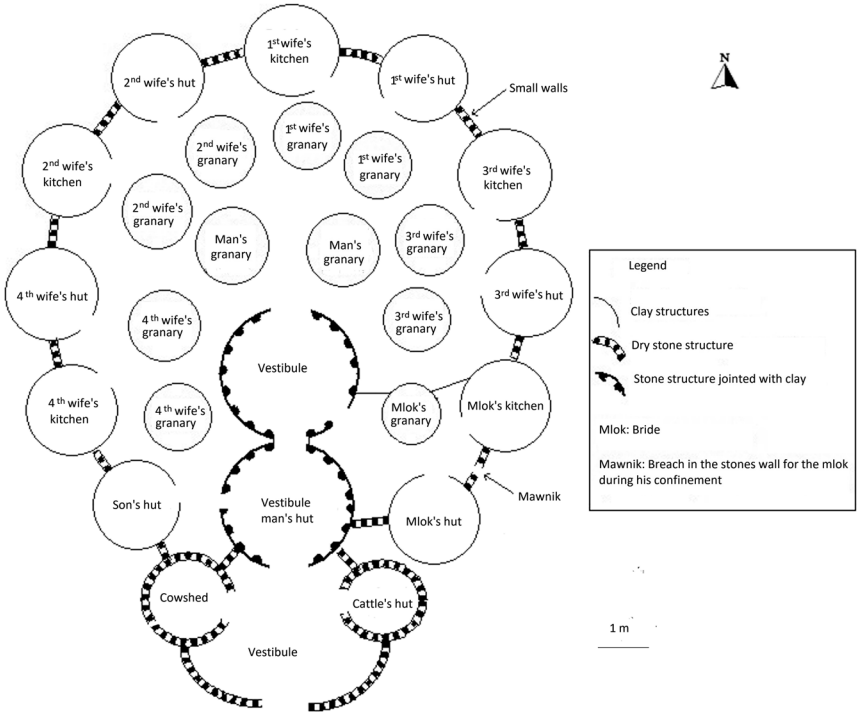
Figure 4. Plan of the Muktele compound in Baldama *(schema realized by the Author, March 2017)*



be their space. All the interviews with men took place essentially at the entrance, which is also the highest part of the compound. When I had to visit the inside, most of men informants recommended me to their wives inside of the domestic space.

The gender relations represented in architectural landscapes give meaning to daily practices and interactions. Men carry out most of their daily activities in the upper part, or under the shed at the entrance of the compound. If they are inside, their presence remains limited to the upper part, especially in rooms such as the vestibule, stables, and enclosures where they watch over the cattle. It is also in the upper part that they sleep, have sex with their wives, eat, and drink beer with male guests. Women, on the other hand, give birth, sleep and eat with their young children, prepare food, brew millet beer, make pottery, weave ropes, eat, and drink in the kitchen or in their dwelling. Even outside the compound, men literally conduct their activities in positions that are above those of women, reproducing the perception of their social superiority (see also Lyons 1998). Curiously, the same spatial order is respected in women's assemblies that I attended. The most upstream positions are occupied by older women, while the youngest women, and those who did not have children, live further down.

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Throughout their life cycle, men and women move differently across building space, producing an association of man with the top and the woman with the bottom. All children, male and female, are conceived in the upper side of the compound, but they are born and grow up in the lower part, where they sleep and eat with their mothers. However, by the age of approximately ten, male children move to the upper part to join their fathers and other already-pubescent sons. From the time of this move, their presence in the lower part is rare. On his first marriage, the man moves to his own compound, often built near and below the family compound. There, he reproduces these spatial practices, that is to say, he settles in the upper part of his compound, carries out the main activities and receives his guests there. Inversely, his wives occupy the lower part. On the other hand, girls' cycle of life through the building space is quite different. Certainly, like boys, they are conceived in the upper part, and they are born, live, and eat with their mothers in the "belly of the house." However, unlike boys, they remain in the lower part until their marriage (Lyons 1992). Moreover, they move to the compounds of their respective husbands, and continue to live there in the back of the compound, that is to say in its lower part.

If the interior is associated with women, it is the man who controls the whole compound, and who is its external representative. Moreover, the status of a man is only validated when he builds his own compound in which he can materialize his superior position in relation to his wives. Even in the households of those whose social status is lower than that of other men in the village, the inner order always reproduces the dominant position of the men in relation to women. It is, therefore, remarkable that the opposition between the husband's neighborhood and that of the wives exactly mirrors the opposition between the top and the bottom. This dialectic affects all movements and activities within the compound. It prevails during ceremonies (baptism of a child, annual sacrifice to ancestors, funerals, etc.), bringing together members of the household (Lyons 1998). The men always sit in the upper part, and the women meet in the lowest part of the compound.

In death too, the heads of families lie in graves placed at the entrance to their compounds, in other words, at the highest point. This is because for the Montagnards, a man having lived well joins the ancestors at his death, and consequently, he has preeminence over the living. On the other hand, the graves of honorable women are kept away from the living space of the mountain, and are located in the internal plateaus. This same fortune is reserved for what the Montagnards call the "bad dead," that is to say, stillbirths, children, and young people who have died without leaving descendants. The outcasts and those who are punished by ordeal for wrongdoing (theft, adultery, or witchcraft) are also buried in the plains and the internal plateaus. This shows that, in the Mandara Highlands, the hierarchy of the sexes and the hierarchy of ages, although conceptually distinct, are difficult to separate in everyday practice (Gelber 1986). Indeed, gender relations are often part of a more inclusive inequality system including the predominance of older men over younger men as well as over women (Collier 1988).

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Egalitarian Societies Questioned

This article demonstrates how the Mandara Highlands' architectural landscapes are ideologically constructed to represent and legitimize hierarchies between clans and individuals. Physical entities, of course, they appear as particular elements of social space, and as places socially constructed and tinged with ideologies (Ndjio 2009). As building space, they are created with stones, stubble and clay; but as "social space," they assign meanings through negotiation and struggle, reifying and legitimizing unequal access to political and sacred resources (Smith & David 1995). Considering how people relate to their architectural landscapes can therefore contribute to the understanding of how identity formation is expressed in this particular zone. However, this is not to argue that Montagnards' identity can only be achieved through a focus on the building space, but that a focus on this aspect of community can reveal how they are able to negotiate their connections to place and to other people through daily practice. In imagining themselves in relation to the top and the bottom on which their groups and compounds stand, Montagnards shape their ways of being-in-the-world. It is obvious that they prefer the top to the bottom insofar as having a compound on the top is the means of social control.

This observation leads to a fundamental question: are the social groups living in the Mandara Highlands "egalitarian societies"? Generally speaking, an egalitarian society is a society in which every individual has equal status, and in which no one surpasses another (Boehm 2001). This question is all the more necessary since the data analyzed here show the futility of denying the existence of some structures of power. Yet, as has been pointed out, many scholars have tended to characterize, rightly or wrongly, social groups in this zone as egalitarian and acephalous (Hallaire 1991:45; De Colombel 1986:16–22; Pontié 1984; Richard 1977:78; Juillerat 1971:75–78). Montagnards' social structures do take on decentralized appearances as they are centered on the family. As MacEachern points out, heads of households keep and control access to their compounds and fields directly (2002:202). They are also responsible for the rituals they practice for establishing intimate relationships with their immediate ancestors, and they do so individualistically. While there are leaders at the clan and lineage level, they hold more religious than political authority, and they have no coercive power over the heads of households placed under their religious authority (David et al., 1991:184). From this point of view, one may conclude that they are societies in which social stratification is almost absent.

But the absence of social stratification does not mean a lack of hierarchies and inequalities. Social stratification implies that a society is divided into institutionalized categories of groups, classes, or castes, and that these categories are ranked (Press Kerbo 2009; Flanagan 1989), which is clearly not the case for all the Montagnards societies. On the other hand, if hierarchy means the existence of inequalities between people (Press Kerbo 2009), it would be inappropriate to define these societies as acephalous or egalitarian,

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as inequalities in access to material resources and to honorable social positions do exist. Moreover, hierarchy and equality seem to coexist within the same system, insofar as the egalitarian accents noted by the scholars mentioned above were already combined with an ostentatious exhibition of ambition and personal prestige, which hardly correspond to the usual definition of an egalitarian society. Individualistic logic was reflected, for example, by comparisons between clans, between individuals belonging to the same clan, as well as between individuals belonging to different clans. The concern for social distinction was undoubtedly related to the chiefs of clans and lineage leaders who, in the eyes of ordinary people, display the most accomplished degree in architecture and reflect the highest level of wealth and economic success. However, in speeches as well as in practice, people are more likely to focus on achievement than on ascription. In fact, traditional leaders are in many ways people of enviable status, and their compounds are wide in addition to being constructed at altitude. However, they themselves have to confirm their position by a series of personal achievements or else risk social disqualification. It is in this context that polygyny serves as the main factor that guarantees and maintains a man's social success, which is in turn expressed through the number of thatched roofs rising from the women's domain in the compound.

It is important to notice that personal distinctiveness that people aspire to is fundamentally opposite to what is found in the West. If in the West, self-realization and relationality are often considered as opposing entities (see Piot 1996), they are seen as two facets of the same reality in the Mandara Mountains. Like the Kabre of Togo studied by Piot (1996), people work to achieve personal distinctiveness here through both self-realization and relationality. As Charles Piot (1996:43) postulates, social relations and the entanglement of one with others constitute both the source and the end of social action. In this avenue, people do not define the community against the individual; instead, they place the quest for personal distinctiveness in their relational worlds "by creating a self that is both distinctive and relational" (Piot 1996:43). Thus, while relationships with others mark social life within these societies, it is equally true that individuals constantly work to achieve certain skills that can distinguish them from others.[5]

In light of all these elements, societies like those inhabiting the Mandara Highlands must be seen as entangled in complex social systems working at different scales, from the family unit to the regional level. These systems are by no means anarchic, to the extent that politico-ritual authority, without being coercive, is conferred to specialists at different social and territorial levels (MacEachern 2002). The status of these leaders comes most often from their particular relationship with supernatural powers. For example, the Podokwo people attribute supernatural powers over the rain and the wind to the chief of the Slalawa clan. It is said that he holds "stones of water" in his residence that he handles every year in order to give rain to his people and beyond. Established on a rocky escarpment, his compound is said also to contain the sanctuary of the "spirit of the rock," which gives him an essential position *vis-à-vis* his subjects. Vincent (1991) has devoted a two-volume

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monograph to the interdependence of political and religious power and the symbolism of political discourse among the Mufu of Duvangar, Durum, and Wazang. The power of these so-called "princes" was, on the one hand, based on the control of a numerically important clan, and on the other hand, intimately linked to power over the forces of nature and especially over the rain (Vincent 1991:142), and such control of natural forces was the basis for the relationship of inequality between them and their subjects. The Mofu-Diamare princes were considered to be symbolically young, fertile like the earth and the rain, and dreadful like the leopard (Vincent 1991). Smith and David (1995), furthermore, wrote an article on the practice of power through architectural space in Sukur, a village situated on the Nigerian slope of the Mandara Mountains. They demonstrated that the principal residence of the *xidi* (traditional chief) is a pivotal element of the social landscape, and constitutes an original discourse on power and social practices.

Moreover, by considering these societies as egalitarian or, alternatively, "acephalous" (see Daanaa 1994; Hawthorne 2001; Hubbell 2001; Klein 2001), scholars have overlooked the unequal relations between the sexes, which, however, seem obvious when considering the architectural landscapes (Roscoe 2009; Massey 1994; Leacock 1992). As has been shown, not only are gender inequalities evident in the practices of everyday life, they are also symbolically created, maintained, and expressed through the built environment, in which women occupy the low areas and men the high ones. Moreover, women in some of these societies are portrayed as "intimate strangers" and are also considered to have the potential to be witches.[6] According to Lyons (1992), this double representation is at the origin of the use of less durable materials in the construction of their structures, compared to those of men, which are built from permanent materials such as stone. Lyons (1998) also hypothesizes that this dual perception is a means for men to limit women's access to key resources, including land and inheritance. Should we then conclude that Montagnards women lack agency?

The evidence presented here suggests that women are far from passive pawns whom men manipulate to achieve their goals of social success. According to Anthony Giddens' concept of power (1989), there is always a dialectical relationship between those who hold power and those who submit to it. While men possess and inherit all that is socially useful, women underpin this male success through their work and their role in the production of goods and the reproduction of people. This is the reason why Montagnards consider the "belly of the house" as the place where the social status of man is built (Chétima 2016). However, because they are aware of their importance in men's social success, women actively manipulate representations of themselves as "witches" and "intimate strangers" to restrict male power and ensure their own autonomy. In this avenue, they are regularly inclined to divorce, either to contest the arrival of a new co-wife, or to avoid abuses of male authority. In a recent article (Chétima 2016), I showed how these female divorces significantly limit, if not totally destroy, the reputation of their husbands in their society. Thus, while it is certain that men control resources by excluding

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women, the latter actively participate in objectifying negative perceptions for their own benefit, thus demonstrating their agency in patrilineal groups.

Current transformations of the architectural landscape related to the emergence of a new group of actors, the "nouveaux riches," are now afoot in the Mandara Mountains. The Montagnards use this term to refer to urban migrants who are returning to build "modern" houses. The unique nature of these houses is based on two elements: the rectangular form and the sheet metal roof. What made this style of construction more valuable is that they were the Wandala and the colonial masters' styles.[7] In fact, colonial administrators had, in many cases, pitted the Wandala against the Montagnards (Chétima 2016; Boutrais 1973:69), by designating the former as more civilized than the latter. The Montagnards' use of rectangular buildings was, in this context, a strategy to blur visual differences between their houses and those of the Wandala (Lyons 1996:364). As symbols of modernity and newness, they make their owner a distinguished and respected man, whether built higher or lower on the mountain. Moreover, and unlike the old elite, these "nouveaux riches" have massively chosen to build on flat land, especially in the mountain's internal plateaus. In this way, they have inaugurated a new art of building, which, from one year to another, is transforming the local architectural landscapes (Chétima 2018). More than that, it reverses, to their advantage, the cosmology of space: the low no longer represents the place of danger and witchcraft, but rather, has become the site of modernity.

The "nouveaux riches" in question are, for the most part, former socially marginalized persons. In the 1960s and 1970s, local state authorities took measures to bring all the Montagnards down to the plains (see Boutrais 1973). However, only those with a lesser social standing came down, especially the youngest, who were less important in the conduct of religious rites and ceremonies (Seignobos 1982). Lesser clans and lineages also settled in the plains. For example, the village of Godigong-Domayo owes its foundation to the people of the Uzləgaya clan, who were driven back from their peaks by the people of Udjila. They are still referred to as *kəda*, which means "dog" in the Podokwo language. Today, the Godigong-Domayo have become a symbol of modernity, as urban migrants from the Uzləgaya clan have invested in the construction of rectangular and sheet metal roofed houses. By doing so, migrants engage in what Michel Foucault calls "counter conduct" (1990:9); their houses are not just merely a symbol of their social success (Chétima 2018); they express also their dissidence (Malaquais 2002) or what Foucault theorized as "tacit political statements" (Foucault 1997:72). They sound like a "hidden transcription of the resistance" (Scott 1990) against traditional order.

Needless to say, the migrants' houses constitute a revenge of the "*maccubè*" (slave in Fulfulde), of the "*meere'en*" ("people under nothing" in Fulfulde) or of the "*kəda*" (dogs in Podokwo language), whose families failed to climb the social ladder. By doubling the traditional elite by what Arjun Appadurai (1996) calls a tournament of values, the "nouveaux riches" are therefore gradually imposing the low as a site of modernity and newness, but at the same time, their architectural practices reveal the "limits of consensus" (Duncan 1976:392)

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regarding the symbolic significance of landscapes. If members of the traditional elite continue to see their large compounds at high altitude as a sign of an enviable status, urban migrants, and more generally young people, perceive them as the memory of old-fashioned houses, and praise them only as part of tourism strategies. At the same time, although the "nouveaux riches" see their new houses from below as proof that they are fashionable, their houses arouse both suspicion and reluctance among the traditional elite.

In conclusion, we must see groups like those inhabiting the Mandara Highlands as societies in which the potential for hierarchy exists (Kopytoff I987:35–37), even though it is more or less expressed (Smith & David 1995:442). Not only has the concept of egalitarian societies long ignored the inequalities of access to economic, political, and sacred resources, it also seems inadequate to understand the current mode of construction inaugurated by the Montagnards "nouveaux riches," and the competitions between urban migrants to own the biggest and most beautiful houses. Furthermore, the architectural landscape must be seen not as a passive receptacle but rather as a true agent of socialization (Giddens 1984). Nor is it neutral: its influence results from the existence of differentiations and inequalities that are visible through it. It is also the final result of the choice of a human group as to its social organization (Smith & David 1995). Moreover, as Delitz points it out, building spaces and architectural artefacts are "used to divide individuals, both spatially and visually, within a given society and, furthermore, impose a relationship between society and nature" (2018:38). As such, they actively establish specific relationships between individuals, and between individuals and their living space; they affect peoples, their way of living and thinking, and needless to say, their social behavior, to the point of altering them, hence the relevance of the saying: "show me where you built your house and I will tell you what is your place in society."

Because they are the material form of societies, architectural landscapes are not outside of social interaction between individuals. Rather they are a way in which a set of social practices is constituted, put in place, and transformed (Delitz 2018). In this context, building space ceases to be a setting in which people express their identity and becomes instead an integral part of it; it ceases to be a language of silence in the sense of Edward Hall (1959), becoming to varying degrees a nurturing or disputing social order.

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Notes

1. However, empirical examples demonstrating the link between space and identity are reported in some works, such as that of Smith and David (1995), Hallaire (1991), and Vincent (1991).
2. This influence of the site in the articulation of individual identity leads Malaquais to metaphorically argue that "you are what you built" (Malaquais 1994).
3. In some Bamileke societies of the Western part of Cameroon, the top and bottom also dictate the behavior of individuals within the compound (Ndjio 2009; Malaquais 2002, 1994). The difference is that among the Bamileke, the representation of space is totally the opposite of what is observed in the Mandara Mountains. In this region, the idea of impurity, pollution, and decay is associated with the top and the idea of purity, youth and growth to the bottom (Malaquais 2002:44). Thus, in any assembling, observed Malaquais (2002:46), the important men always sat at the bottom, that is to say, closest, even symbolically, to the lower part of the complex.
4. Here again the settlement on the massif proceeds from a symbolic reading of space, inasmuch as the east had the preeminence over the west. Podokwo's and Mura informants argued that even in the tomb, men were buried on the side with the face turned towards the sunrise, while women were rather buried on the side with the face turned towards the sunset.
5. In an article focusing on the Kabre of Togo—also considered as egalitarian society—Charles Piot (1996:42) states that what Kabre seek to achieve is a sense of selfhood that could mark them as distinctive from others. So, contrary to what one might think, Kabre attach great value to someone's unique personal characteristics and competencies. For example, making others laugh, playing with words and speaking in parables, handling a musical instrument, knowing dancing and singing, are highly valued and could set an individual off from others (Piot 1996:42). In the same line, holders of special mystical powers, such as the diviner with exceptional powers of clairvoyance, the responsible of rituals performed on behalf of the entire community, or the herbalists with extensive knowledge in traditional medicine, are all considered as distinctive from others.
6. There exists in Mura society a set of social practices which present women as mobile, potential witches, and as intimate strangers in the marital home. These social practices are used by men to exclude women from the control fields, inheritance and houses. Women in turn use the fear of men that they may act as witches to prevent themselves from husbands' abuse of authority (see Lyons 1998 for more details).
7. The Wandala are members of a Muslim kingdom known as "Wandala" or "Mandara" who, during the pre-colonial period, exerted a variable control over the peoples of the northern Mandara Mountains (see MacEachern 2012 for more details).

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