



## Order in a Disordered World

The Bertha House (Western Ethiopia)

Alfredo González-Ruibal

**Abstract.** – The structuring of domestic space among the Bertha people of the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderland is described. The Bertha are one of the largest Nilo-Saharan groups currently living in Ethiopia, and they stretch out further west into Sudan. The overwhelming majority of the population lives in traditional round houses made with bamboo and straw. Despite their massive conversion to Islam, they still have a number of pre-Muslim practices, some of them clearly reflected on the use and organization of the house. The relevance of domestic space for ordering the world and its relationship to the body are stressed.  
[*Sudan-Ethiopia borderland, Bertha, Nilo-Saharan, domestic space*]

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### Introduction

Anthropologists have pointed out on several occasions the enormous symbolic relevance of houses, particularly in premodern communities. Houses are not a simple reflection of social values; instead, they play an active role in their materialization, fixation and reproduction. This is especially clear when it comes to notions of order. Houses, in this sense, act as an organizing structure that allows

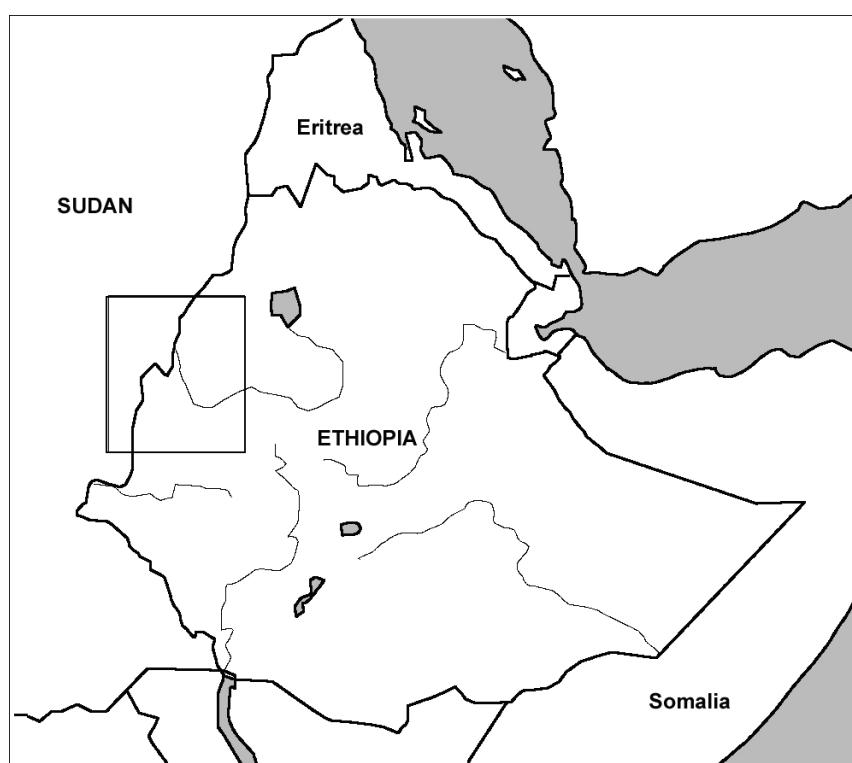
their occupants to sort out the world, to distinguish the domestic and the wild, death and life, female and male, clean and dirty by means of a few simple principles, such as in/out, right/left, up/down, and front/back (Bourdieu 1970: 746, 748). As Cunningham (1973: 204) states, “order concerns not just discrete ideas or symbols, but a system; and the system expresses both principles of classification and a value for classification per se, the definition of unity and difference.” In some cases, buildings can encapsulate very complex cosmological and mythological meanings, such as origin myths and genealogical information. Some of the best examples explored to date come from sub-Saharan Africa<sup>1</sup> and, meaningfully, the most complex cases of space organization come from equally complex societies: the Swahili and many Madagascar peoples (Betsileo, Sakalava, Merina) are paradigmatic. In this article, a house of an egalitarian group of slash-and-burn agriculturalists from western Ethiopia, the Bertha, is studied. The main issues that will be dealt with concern the regional variations of the Bertha house, the rituals surrounding the house, and the relevance of space and the human body for ordering the world.

Between 2001 and 2005, four archaeological and ethnoarchaeological fieldseasons were carried out in Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State, in western Ethiopia, along the Sudanese borderland (Map 1, Map 2), by the Department of Pre-

1 E.g., Feeley-Harnik 1980; Preston Blier 1987; Donley-Reid 1990; Beidelman 1991; Hahn 2000; etc.



**Map 1:** In grey, the territory occupied by the Bertha in Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State (Ethiopia), with indication of *weredas* (municipalities).



**Map 2:** The region in the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderland.



Fig. 1: A typical Bertha village: Shäläk'o Dabus (Asosa *wereda*).

history of the Complutense University of Madrid, under the direction of Víctor M. Fernández Martínez. During this work, ethnographic material was gathered by the author of this article, most of it related to the organization of domestic space among the Bertha, as well as to pottery production and distribution (González-Ruibal 2005).

The Bertha live in round huts, made of interwoven bamboo and covered with thatch, which form villages of a few hundred individuals (Fig. 1). The huts are loosely clustered in family compounds, which lack physical limits in rural areas but are endowed with bamboo fences in urban areas (the capitals of the *weredas*) (see González-Ruibal and Fernández Martínez 2003). The location of houses and compounds is mainly determined by kinship. A house, strictly speaking (that is, the place where an independent married couple lives), is labelled *shuli*. A group of houses (family compound) receives the Arabic name of *khosh*, which can also apply to the whole village, known with the Arabic word *hilla*, too.

### The Bertha and the Nilo-Saharan Peoples of the Sudan-Ethiopia Borderland

The Bertha, numbering 150,000 individuals, are the prevailing ethnic group in Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State, a region characterized by its complex ethnic mosaic. They speak a language belonging to the Nilo-Saharan family, which is a particular branch in itself. It is not possible to link it to the Komuz group (Bender 1994), that includes Gumuz and the Koman languages (Uduk, Komo, Kwama, Gwama, and maybe southern Mao). All these groups, along with the Maban, Ingessana, Shita, Hameg, northern Mao, and others are lumped together in the term “Pre-Nilotes,” proposed by the Italian colonial anthropologist Vinigi Grottanelli in the 1940s (Grottanelli 1948). Grottanelli distinguished the Nilotes (Nuer, Dinka, Shilluk, Azande, etc.) from the “Pre-Nilotes,” based on different linguistic and ethnographic criteria, such as the symbolic relevance of cattle and the existence of age groups among the Nilotes – both being absent

among the “Pre-Nilotes” –, and the existence of matrilineal elements, the use of bows and arrows, or the prevalence of slash-and-burn agriculture among the latter. It is worth noting that many Nilotes claim a shared common ancestry: the Nuer recognize a relationship with the Shilluk, Añuak, and Dinka, and the Shilluk recognize a relationship with the Nuer (Butt 1952: 23–25), whereas the “Pre-Nilotes” are always excluded.

The term “Pre-Nilote,” anyhow, is an unfortunate one. It establishes a dubious historical precedence for the Nilotes over some Nilo-Saharan borderland groups, a temporal relation that is extremely difficult to prove. On the other hand, even if that precedence is historically true, it turns these societies into a sort of living fossil, a prehistoric remain – an old anthropological tendency that has been strongly criticized (Fabian 1983). Some authors have shown the historical vicissitudes that these groups have suffered in the recent past as well as in the present, and how they have affected their culture (James 1979, 1988a, 1988b). Jędrej (1995) has proposed the term “deep rurals,” first applied to some West African communities, to account for their cultural resilience in a politically turbulent region. Nevertheless, although “Pre-Nilote” is not a good label, this does not mean that an actual cultural relationship among the Nilo-Saharan borderland peoples of Sudan and Ethiopia does not exist. As James (1988a: 270) writes “many elements recur among the Bertha, Koman peoples, Hill Burun, and Meban, though in different combinations and with different emphases in each community, and no doubt in the same community at different times.” In this article, the coincidences among the Bertha and other borderland peoples will be pointed out.

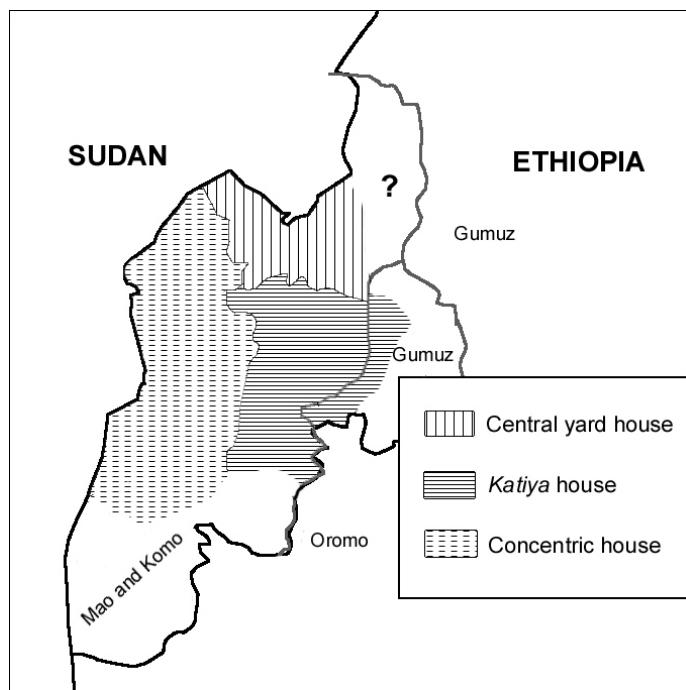
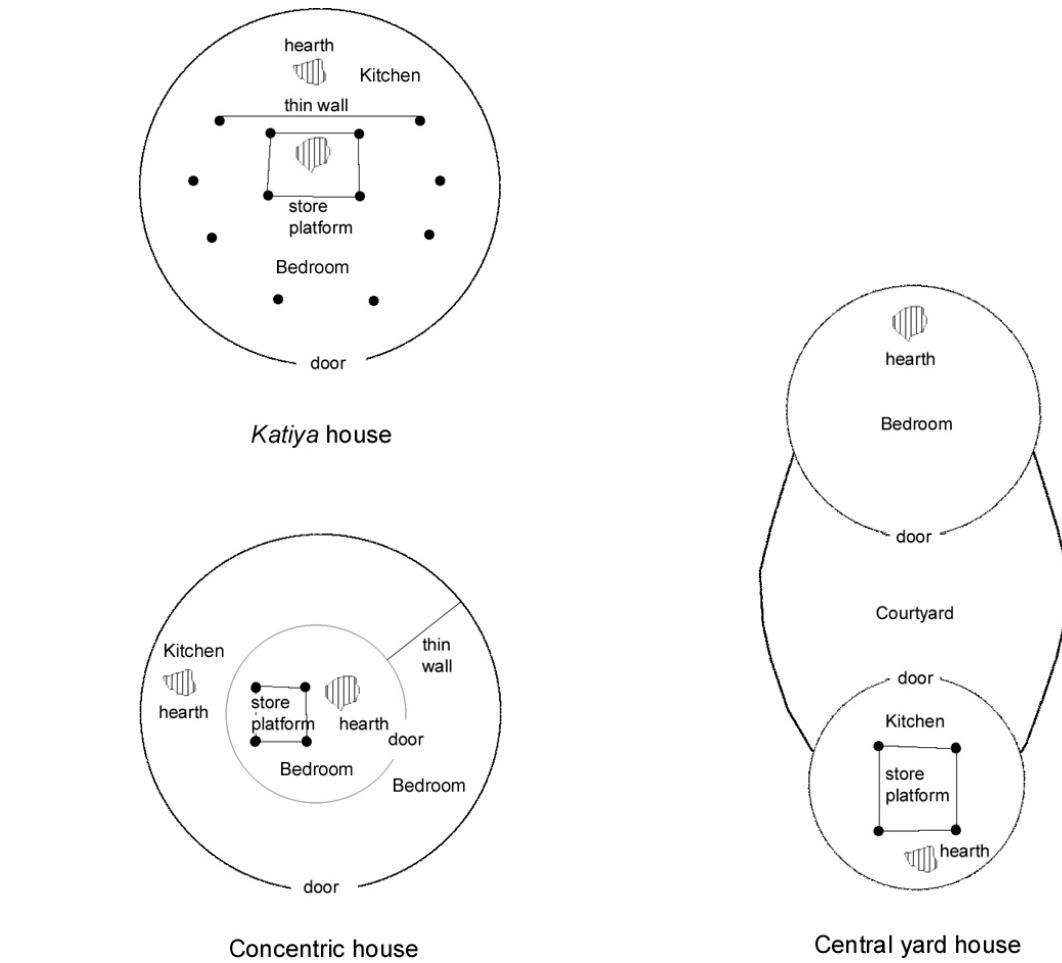
One of the main conditioning features of the social lives of the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderland peoples is the strain they have been subjected to for centuries. The frontier has been anything but static in the last two hundred years, a fact that bears negative implications for the local inhabitants. They have been raided, enslaved, and banished from their lands by their more powerful neighbors, the Sudanese Nilotes, the Arabs, and the Abyssinian empire (see James 1979, 1988a, 1988b; Jędrej 1995, 2004), since the Middle Ages. Some groups may have been completely erased due to the intensity of the slave raids, and many others, such as the Uduk, have been compelled to change their abodes many times to avoid annihilation (James 2002). These terrible experiences reached their highest momentum in the second half of the 19th century and again in the 1970s and 1980s. Slavery only disappeared in the 1940s, while the frontier between Sudan and

Ethiopia was not eventually fixed until 1902 (Abdussamad 2001). In the Sudanese case, the return to the evil days in the late 1970s was motivated by the Civil War, while in the Ethiopian case it was the resettlement of several thousand farmers from the highlands to the lowlands that caused great distress to the local indigenous communities – as well as the war between the communist government and its enemies.

Nevertheless, despite all the adversities and the chaos they have been hurled into so often, local communities have reconstructed their identities and the order of their world time and again with astonishing tenacity. The borderland life and the resistance to the encroachment of their neighbors have played an outstanding role in the configuration of their society and their conception of the world.

## The Bertha House and Its Regional Variations

As it has been said, the Bertha house – the main building where the parents and younger children sleep, cook, and eat – is known as *shuli*. Most Bertha compounds have very few structures: apart from the main house there is a granary (*luuba*), a raised drying platform (*adasa*), where sorghum is left to dry, and a stockyard for sheep and goats (*mada*). Sometimes small raised hen coops can also be seen. However, grain can be stored in the *shetab*, a platform inside the house, and animals can be kept in the outer ring. Besides, one can also build a hut for guests (*khalwa* or *shul bongoru*), and when a young boy enters adolescence, he usually builds a house for himself, called *shul gedu*, “boy’s house,” close to the parent’s *shuli*. Interestingly, *khalwa* is an Arabic word that means “being alone, in privacy,” usually implying the absence of women, and the Bertha *khalwa* is, in fact, a place where men alone socialize (talk, drink coffee). Nevertheless, the Arabic *khalwa* is at the same time a space of retirement, in which the adoration of God is exclusive, something that does not occur in the Bertha culture. In any case, this can be considered a structure of recent introduction in Benishangul. Finally, we can mention the *ay ketela*, the “place of circumcision,” also called *bet at-tahara* in Arabic, the “house of the circumcision specialist,” which is formally the same as any other house. It is remarkable that the Bertha do not have a proper name for the family compound: as it has been pointed out, they use the same term as for the whole village (*khosh* or *hilla*), and even that name is a borrowing from the Arabic. This underlines the strong degree of integration that exists between each particular family



**Fig. 2:** The three main house models and their distribution in Benishangul.

and the whole village, a proof of the strong collective values that prevail among the Bertha.

Even the most homogeneous communities allow a certain degree of variability in their architecture and organization of domestic space. The regional survey carried out in Benishangul allowed us to distinguish a substantial formal diversity in vernacular architecture, even if basic social principles applied everywhere. We can thus distinguish three models of main houses – *shuli* (Fig. 2):

– *Katiya* house: This appears in the central interior area of Benishangul (eastern Asosa *wereda* and Khomosha and Menge *weredas*). It is characterized by the prevalence of ample, open multifunctional buildings, endowed with a thin wall (*katiya*) that delimits a kitchen space at the back of the house, and several interior poles. Sometimes it has a narrow outer ring for keeping animals and storing things. It is very similar to the houses of other so-called “pre-Nilotic” communities in the area (Kwama, Gumuz, and southern Mao). This model existed among the southern Mao in the 1930s according to Grottanelli (1940: 163–165).

– Central yard house: This is located in the northern part of Benishangul (Gizen *wereda*). The kitchen and the living house occupy two different structures that are located one facing the other. The kitchen also works as a storehouse. Both buildings are joined by bamboo walls, delimiting a central yard, in which sometimes a granary is built. The doors of the houses are normally covered with mud and painted.

– Concentric house or Mayu house: This appears in the escarpment area (western Benishangul) and probably also in Sudan. It is characterized by large buildings with a smaller round structure inside. The outer ring hosts a kitchen and the children’s bedroom, whereas the inner space is occupied by the parents, a storage area and another kitchen. This model was already recorded by Marno (1874: 60, 74f., pl. 8) and later, in 1907, by British administrators (SAD: A2/126). In the 1950s, its existence among the Ganza is described by Davies (1960: 27) and we had the opportunity to see it among the northern Mao, around Bambasi, although it is difficult to ascertain whether this is their traditional hut or has been adopted from the neighbouring Bertha – the Mao have adopted different material traditions from their Bertha, Komo, and Oromo neighbors.

Finally, there is an area around Bambasi, in southern Bertha territory, where there is a strong ethnic mixture: We find Bertha belonging to the Fadasi subgroup, along with Mao, Kwama/Gwama (usually labelled Komo), Oromo, and Amhara. Although the concentric model seems to be quite

widespread, other housing solutions are found (we have left this area blank in the map).

Naturally, the homestead is more than the main house alone. We have to take into account the other ancillary structures. Unlike the design of the main houses, the appearance of the Bertha compound is basically the same all over Benishangul. Nonetheless, it is important to note that in the Mayu area and around towns compounds usually have more huts, while in rural and secluded areas multifunctional buildings prevail. When I asked in Obora (Menge) why they did not use the *katiya* house, they said that they build many smaller buildings instead. This segmentation and specialization of the space must be linked to important changes in Bertha society, leading towards a more complex social organization (see Kent 1990 for cross-cultural comparisons).

What is the rationale behind the diversity in house models? Geographical, social, and cultural principles are at play. The central yard model shows a striking resemblance with the Nilo-Saharan houses of the Sudanese borderland, specifically with Maban houses.<sup>2</sup> The Maban have small huts with mud-plastered doors, usually decorated with geometric designs. The kitchen usually occupies a different hut and all the structures in each compound are surrounded by a fence. The Ingessana, another Sudanese Nilo-Saharan group, have also doors plastered with mud and stockades that delimit the compounds. The huts are all facing a central yard (Jedrej 1995: Fig. 2; ill. 2). The vicinity of Sudan may explain the use of this layout among the northeastern Bertha, along with the greater presence of livestock (mainly goats), that may bother the residents of the compounds. The presence of domestic animals has been identified many times by different people in Benishangul (both Bertha and Gumuz) as the main reason to raise fences.

The *katiya* house, as it has been pointed out, is redolent of Komo and Gumuz structures, although the partition wall itself does not appear often among the latter. The Bertha state that they come from Sudan, where they played a prominent role in the famous Funj kingdom. As a matter of fact, many Funj traditions do resemble those still maintained or remembered by the Ethiopian Bertha – trumpet music, harvest rituals, the sacrifice of the king,<sup>3</sup> whereas the Bertha people of

2 We had the opportunity to see Maban houses in the refugee camp of Sherkole, where several thousand Sudanese (mainly Maban, Uduk, and Berta/Funj) are living.

3 Evans-Pritchard 1932: 60; Whitehead 1934: 217; Triulzi 1981b: 41–55.

Sudan are sometimes called Funj. Before they arrived in Ethiopia, other groups inhabited the region. According to Bertha traditions, these groups were probably the ancestors of the modern Komo and Mao (Triulzi 1981b: 23f.). Archaeology and ethnoarchaeology also prove the existence of communities probably belonging to what some linguists (Bender 1994) have called Komuz family (including Komo and Gumuz) prior to the arrival of the Bertha to the area. The pottery recovered in archaeological sites in Benishangul, dated between the 1st and the 17th century A.D., resembles that of the modern Komo and Gumuz (Fernández Martínez 2004), while the current pottery of the Komo and Gumuz shares many features, despite being separated by the Bertha (González-Ruibal 2005). The architecture of the Komo, Gumuz, southern Mao (Grottanelli 1940), and central Bertha is extremely similar. It is, thus, possible that the Bertha houses of the interior part of Benishangul follow the model that existed prior to their arrival to the area, that is, a widely shared “pre-Nilotic” house model. Particular types of scarifications, adornments, and other material elements, especially among women, in eastern Benishangul also bear strong resemblance to those of the Komuz peoples.

Finally, the more segmented model, the concentric house, seems to be structurally coherent with the more complex (unequal) social organization to be found in the western part of the region. It contrasts sharply with the open, multifunctional space of the *katiya* house. In the escarpment area, Islam is stronger and older than in other parts of Benishangul, and there is more ethnic and social diversity. The concentric house model allows a more hierarchical and rigid organization of domestic space (not only because of the two rings but also because of the partition walls that usually divide the outer ring), and also provides more intimacy, preventing outsiders from looking indoors. The Bertha who inhabit the escarpment belong to the Mayu group, perhaps meaning “there is [Arab blood] in” (Andreas Neudorf, pers. comm.). They are proud of their Sudanese ancestry and, as a matter of fact, their skin is lighter than that of the people from more interior lands in Benishangul. Most of them speak Arabic or mix it with Bertha. They are more orthodox Muslims (or so they claim) than other Bertha, and boast of their Sudanese connections (travellings, acquaintances, or family). They use the word Bertha as a pejorative denomination for darker-skinned and more traditional people. It has been written that the names of ethnic groups in the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderland do not label discrete cultural communities as much as “mark posi-

tions in a ranking of status and prestige . . . Ja’alyin, Watawit, Jabalwiin, Funj, Hamaj, Berta, and Burun, come to represent points on scales between urban and rural, Muslim and pagan, superior and inferior, and master and slave . . .” (Jędrzej 2004: 720). This is made obvious in the difference between the Mayu and the other Bertha. From a material point of view, the distinction in status is played out in the more elaborate and complex character of the Mayu houses, as compared to the rural Bertha.

Despite the considerable variety of house models, it is worth noting that externally Bertha houses are extremely similar all over Benishangul: the characteristic round structure of interwoven bamboo and, fundamentally, the four long poles that crown the roof (*shimbir*) make any Bertha house easily recognizable and conspicuous in the landscape, a fact that may not be without significance in an area inhabited by numerous ethnic groups, especially since the resettlement of highlanders in the 1980s.

## Elements for the History of Bertha Houses

A usual problem with many ethnographic descriptions of houses is the absence of time-depth. Despite being a very conservative element in any society, houses do evolve and change as social conditions and historical circumstances change. This is also clear in the Bertha case. Actually, there is nothing like “the” Bertha house, transcending time and space, but several ways of materializing similar notions of domestic space. Unfortunately, we only have information for the escarpment area, that is occupied by houses belonging to the concentric model. Significantly, all authors from the 19th century onwards mention this house as the prototypical Bertha house (e.g., Grottanelli 1948: 298), whereas it is completely unknown in most of Benishangul. This warns us against easy generalizations based on limited regional surveys. Our archaeological survey of the region (Fernández Martínez 2004) allowed us to discover many deserted Bertha villages from a few decades to a couple of centuries old.

According to local legends, after their arrival from Sudan (around the late 17th or early 18th century), the sedentarization of the Bertha led to internecine warfare and conflicts over the possession and distribution of the land (Triulzi 1981a). The situation was aggravated by the slave raids conducted by neighbouring communities, such as the Sudanese Shukriyya, Rufa’a and Baggara (McHugh 1994: 157), the Oromo, and the Bertha themselves (Abdussamad 2001). As a product of this unstable



**Fig. 3:** Remains of Bertha huts from ca. 19th century in the place of Al Medina (Khomosha *wereda*).

situation they decided to migrate to mountainous areas and to establish their villages in naturally protected places, usually high, rocky outcrops in hills and mountains, surrounded by steep cliffs. This dramatic locational change – from the Sudanese plains to the rough mountains of Ethiopia – must have had important social effects beyond the pure material conditions of life (Grottanelli 1948: 312). A description of these settlements is provided by Romolo Gessi Pasha (1892: 159f.):

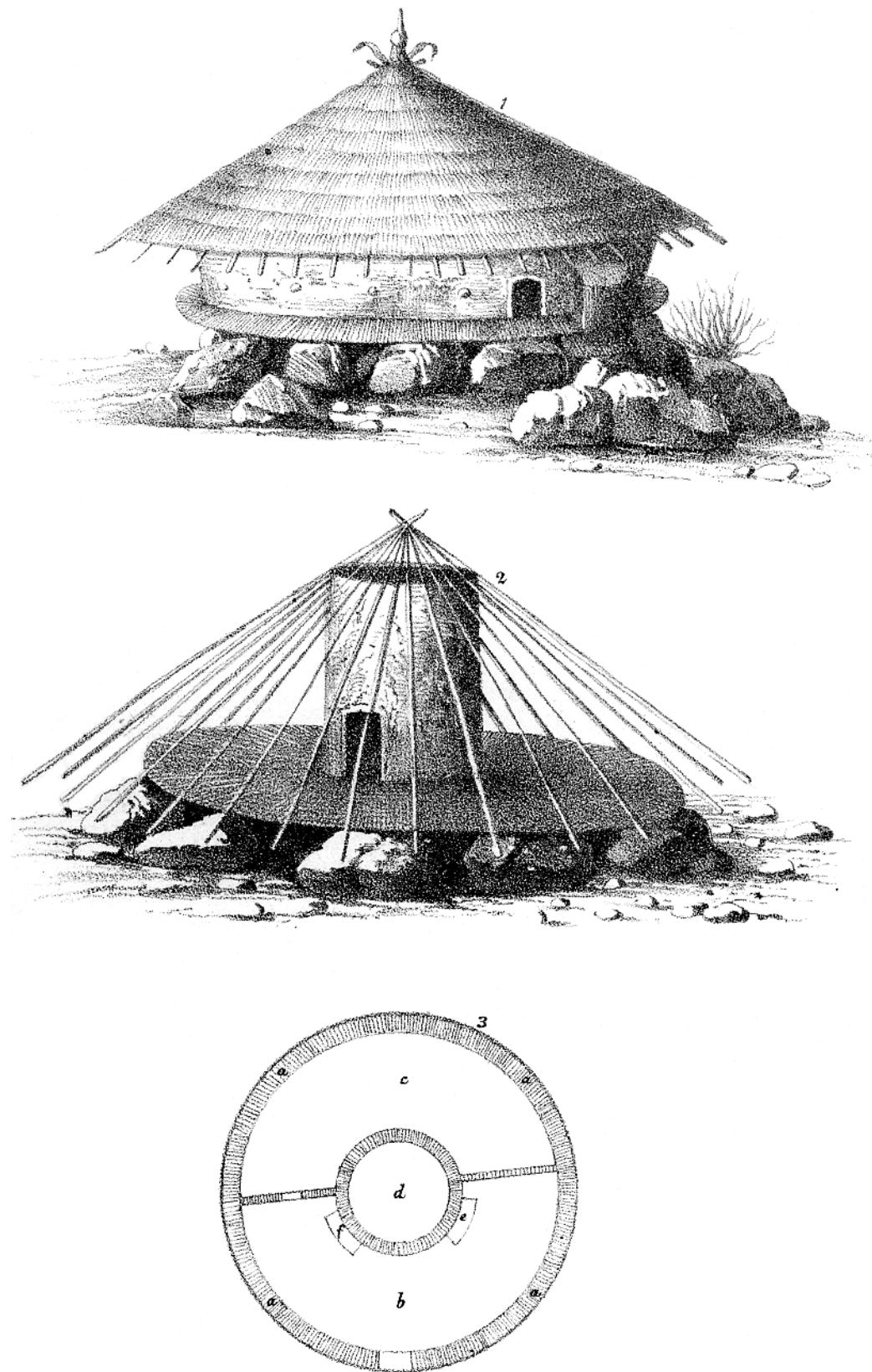
This mountain arrested our attention because, among the ravines between one mass and another, lay the houses or tukul of the poor savages, and the vast hollows of the whole mountain are filled by such huts; hence the name of the village, Agarò. And to think that at the foot of the mountain extends a plain on which such habitations might be built with more advantage! But the fear of an invasion by the natives of Tabi [Ingessana] caused the natives to prefer homes that differ little from an eagle's nest, rather than decent and comfortable houses.

These mountainous places were occupied by particular Bertha clans that, after their descent to the plains in the 20th century, gave their name to the area: S'alenger near Asosa, Satojo near Menge, and Gashue near Kubri Hamsa, for example (cf. also Triulzi 1981b: 24, 31). A similar process was attested by James (1979: 25) among the Uduk: "With conditions of greater general security, these larger communities have become fragmented and the component birth-groups have now spread out into dispersed hamlets. But in the neighbourhood

of each hill, hamlets are still identified as the people of ..." The organization of the space at these elevations was adapted to their irregular and rocky surfaces. Granaries and houses were constructed over big boulders and flat areas; there are some slight terracing works, and houses and other structures were built on top of stone pillars (Fig. 3).

The drawings and descriptions of the first European travellers in the area, such as Cailliaud (1826–27), Marno (1874), Schuver (James et al. 1996: 39<sup>4</sup>), and Gessi Pasha (1892: 165), and the photographs taken by the British colonial authorities in the Sudan in the late 19th and early 20th century (SAD: A2/126) permit a reconstruction of the appearance of the early Bertha settlements and their huts. One of Cailliaud's engravings shows a Bertha village in a rocky hillock (Agady, maybe Gessi Pasha's Agarò) attacked by Turks (Cailliaud 1826–27/II: pl. 2). There seems to be unfenced clusters of huts, comprising residential structures, granaries, and stockyards. The buildings are distributed among the rocks and trees as in Gessi Pasha's description. This layout is very similar to that of modern Bertha villages, the only difference being the flat land in which the settlements are nowadays established. Schuver stated that "the Berta homesteads are mostly better con-

<sup>4</sup> James et al. (1996) also reproduce some engravings of other 19th-century travellers mentioned here (Gessi Pasha, Marno, and Cailliaud).



**Fig. 4:** A typical Bertha hut of the 19th century, raised on a platform. The indoor structure is the same as that of the modern concentric or Mayu houses (after Marno 1874: pl. 8).

structed than those of the sedentary Arabs of the Blue Nile plain and many are built on a raised platform, supported by a number of granitic fragments" (James et al. 1996: 39) (Fig. 4). As late as the 1950s, Davies (1960: 25) recorded the existence of raised houses among the so-called Hill Beru, probably related to the Bertha. However, he says that mountain settlements – and, therefore, their particular architecture – were much more common before the 1950s. Houses on raised platforms probably disappeared in the 1950s, with the descent to the plains: The even surface of the flatlands made raised structures superfluous. The platform of the Bertha house, which was so characteristic in the 19th and early 20th century, however, has survived in big collective granaries (*luuba*) (González-Ruibal and Fernández Martínez 2003: fig. 12) and also in the aforementioned *shetab*, which is a platform for storing grain and tools that can adopt the shape of a round hut.

The organization of the space indoors in the time of Ernst Marno and Juan María Schuver is similar to that still in use among the Mayu Bertha. According to Schuver, houses had

a round and strong tower of mudplastered bamboo in the centre, the interior of the tower forming a granary and general magazine, while the space between the tower and the outer wall, forming a circular gallery, is occupied by the family (James et al. 1996: 39).

As we will see below, the organization of the space indoors is slightly more complex than Schuver thought, although the description is accurate in its overall details. The more thorough description comes from Marno (1874: 75f.), who visited Benishangul a few years before Schuver, in 1869:

Their shape is the same [as the Sudanese huts], cylindrical with a conic roof, but the execution shows much more accuracy, carefulness, and I would almost say, comfort. These huts are not erected directly over the ground, but in order to have an even surface, which is not granted by a steep and sloping terrain, often covered with big and small boulders, as well as to drain off the water during the rainy season, they are raised several feet over the ground.

Some of the available larger boulders are used, or, when these are not enough, a bigger number of them is brought; sometimes, however, tree trunks are used, strongly thrust into the earth, so that the floor is raised around 2 feet over the ground and the water has free outlet underneath. On top of this base strong tree trunks are then set in an annular and radial way; over this, reeds are tightly tied and covered by a layer of earth 3–4 inches thick. At the center, a higher cylinder, made of interwoven reeds and covered with mud, is mounted and forms the interior of the hut ...

The cylindrical room indoors has a door in the opposite direction of the external one. The ring-shaped room is frequently divided with partition walls. The hearth and the bed places are elevations along the walls. One or more skins are laid over the bed places, since the easier and more practical *anqareb* [Sudanese bed] is only possessed by the nobles [Vornehmen].

The description matches quite well the actual Bertha house in the Mayu area, except for the fact that houses are no longer supported on top of boulders or trunks. It is remarkable that the interior and the exterior doors have different orientations, a fact that is still prevalent today, and that allows for a greater intimacy and isolation of the inner structure (the one occupied by the parents and where the most valuable things are stored) and also protection against evil spirits. We have not seen raised beds at all among the Bertha nor among any other Nilo-Saharan group of Ethiopia. On the contrary, they are quite frequent among the Amhara and Oromo (*madabi*), who lack *anqareb*, and also among the Nilotc Maban.

Indoor space seems to have been very conservative: the concentric house model in western Benishangul was in full use in the mid-19th century and still prevails in the Mayu area. Meaningfully, when Audun Hamis, the doctor-diviner (*yeri*) of Asosa, was asked if this house model was recent, he said very emphatically that, on the contrary, it was extremely old (*qadim*, *qadim!*). The same reaction to this question was recorded in the Kurmuk area. Most probably, however, the more archaic indoor layout in Benishangul is that of the eastern interior part, due to its striking resemblance to Gumuz and Kwama architecture. It can be hypothesized that the model was borrowed from the Komuz populations chased away after the occupation of the region, while the concentric house was brought from the Sudan – Gessi Pasha (1892: 289) offers an image of a hut on a raised platform from southern Sudan, similar to those depicted by Marno in the Bertha country. It is not amazing that architecture has suffered greater morphological and external changes than indoor domestic space. Usually, the most relevant cultural principles are inscribed indoors and many meanings, due to the simplicity of their structuration (up/down, right/left, front/back), can be applied to different structures without losing effectiveness. As we will see, the actual shape of the house is less important than the semantization to which it is subjected and this has probably not changed much in the last 200 years.

## Building a House

Before building a house, many Bertha decide to consult a ritual specialist (*yeri*), to find out whether the place is propitious or not. This custom was probably very widespread in the past but it is now fading away, due to the progressive generalization of more orthodox Muslim beliefs and the paucity of diviners. The relevance of this practice, however, might be underestimated due to the unwillingness of the Bertha to admit that they resort to traditional rituals.

There are two main ways a *yeri* can get to know whether a place is adequate to build a house or not. One of them consists in lighting a fire of ebony or a wood called *bibi*. The fate of the chosen place is discovered by observing and interpreting the flames. This ritual, called *shaygur*, was recorded by Alessandro Triulzi in 1972 (Triulzi 1981b: 26) and its current existence was revealed to us by Ramadan Talow, the *yeri* from Menge. Divination through fire is well attested among other Nilo-Saharan groups in the area, such as the Uduk (James 1979: 216–219), whose concept of *yari* has been borrowed from the Bertha, and the Burun<sup>5</sup> (Mostyn 1921: 209).

Another rite involves the use of cowrie shells (*hudu*) or, more rarely, seeds (a kind of bean, most probably castor). The *yeri* throws seven shells<sup>6</sup> or seeds to the ground and depending on the way they are displayed he decides whether it is propitious to build a house in the selected place or not (Fig. 5). Ideally, six out of the seven shells must be aligned in a row; if they fell at random, without any apparent order, the *yeri* can try again. If the result is the same, the place where the house was planned to be built has to be abandoned. On the contrary, if the location is propitious, he thrusts a bamboo stick into the ground, in the exact place where the cowries were thrown, and two other sticks in the place where the house is to be built. This practice of divination with cowries has also been noted for the Komo (James 1988a: 275). For the purposes of divination, small polished stones – small quartz pebbles as among the Nuba (Seligman and Seligman 1932: 404) – can also be used, in combination with cowries or seeds. These are called *bele ro* (rain stones or thunder stones) in Bertha and are well-known among other Nilo-Saharan communities, such as the Juo, Acholi (Butt 1952: 89f.), Lotuko,

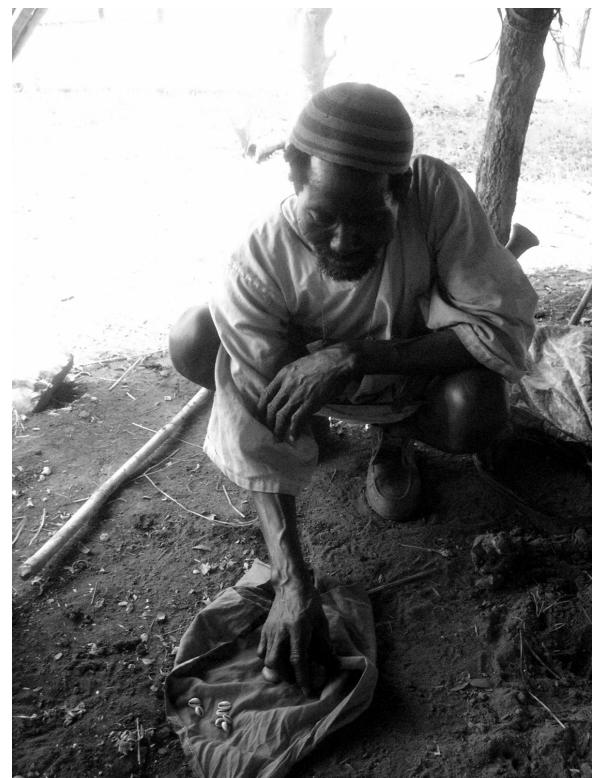


Fig. 5: Ramadan Talow foreseeing the future with the help of cowries (Menge).

Nuba, Uduk (Seligman and Seligman 1932: 327, 398f., 440f.), and Maban (Wedderburn-Maxwell 1936: 183). Among the Bertha, their use is not constrained to rainmaking, as their name might lead one to suppose, but to divination in general. Having thrown the *hudu*, the *yeri* looks at the stones to interpret their meaning and then decides whether the chosen location of the house is favourable or not. Divination played a significant role among the Bertha; and even today, many people do not build a house, go to the market, embark on a travel, or undertake any important task without consulting the *yeri*.

As in most traditional societies, the construction of a house is an important social event among the Bertha. Once the place and date have been selected, family and neighbours have to cooperate in the construction of a house, at least the main one – granaries, stockyards, guest houses, etc. are usually built by the owners alone. Reroofing is usually carried out by the community, too. The name of the collective work among the Bertha is *maha* or *amaha*,<sup>7</sup> which can be applied to any other kind of

5 A blanket term that comprises Uduk, Komo, Hill Burun, Maban, etc.

6 The number seven has religious significance for the Bertha. It also appears in other rituals (see below).

7 The Bertha always add the Arabic article *al-* to all the substantives. Sometimes it is not easy to know if a substantive begins with *a-* or if *a-* refers to the article.



**Fig. 6:** Thatching a house through the *amaha*. Keshaf (Khomosha wereda).

activity carried out by members of different houses such as agricultural labor. As work parties often do, the *maha* serves as a means of reinforcing community ties and as a levelling mechanism. There are a number of Bertha proverbs that underline the importance of neighbors: "When your neighbor dies, it is you who will be questioned about it," "You have to love your neighbors more than you love your parents," etc. As a compensation for the work, the house's head has to invite everyone who provides labor to beer, sugar, and coffee and, after the house has been inaugurated, to the meat of the goat or chicken that have been ritually sacrificed. Music is sometimes played during the work parties. Traditional Bertha instruments are the long calabash trumpets of different sizes (*wasa*), bamboo flutes (*zumbara*), and horns (*buluy*). Similar work parties are attested among other neighbouring Nilo-Saharan groups, such as the Gumuz – who apparently lack a specific name for *maha* –, northern Mao – who call it *maka* –, and Ingessana (Jędrzej 1995: 27). The construction of a house usually takes a whole day, from dawn till dusk. Smaller details, such as plastering, additional partition walls, or outer rings are normally carried out by the family alone, and, in fact, it is not unusual to see people living for months in an unfinished house. Women prepare food and drinks, but they are deprived of any other participation in the construction of the house – unless they are widows. Therefore, men have to cut construction materials: wood, bamboo (*gagu*), and straw (*ñera*) – although transportation to the village

is most often done by women; men also (usually elders) must prepare flat strips of bamboo with axes, knives, and wooden hammers, which have not changed since Marno (1874: pl. 7, 17) visited the area; and men are in charge of the construction or replacement of the roof, too (Fig. 6).

The Bertha are an egalitarian group, despite being considered as hierarchical by their even more egalitarian neighbours. They had chiefs called *agur*, sometimes translated as "king" (Triulzi 1981b: 27). The informations collected by early travellers in Benishangul also reinforced the idea of an area ruled by paramount chiefs or *sheikhs* (cf. Whitehead 1934). The real power of these rulers was probably quite limited, at least in the rural areas. Equality is clearly negotiated in house-building. Until very recently, the Bertha houses were completely undecorated (Grottanelli 1948: 316) and lacked any other symbol of distinction. Even today, painted or engraved decorations are more a children's or youngsters' entertainment than a way of enhancing or distinguishing the house. Size is never a way of displaying status either. The fact that houses are collectively built also precludes the possibility of using them for purposes of social distinction or for accruing wealth or power. The Bertha divide their huts by function (main house, unmarried boy's house, guest house) but also by size. Depending on the number of cubits (1 cubit =  $\pm 50$  cm) or double cubits (*kind*), they call them – in growing order – *sitasi* (6 cubits or 3 double cubits), *subai* (7), *tumani* (8),



**Fig. 7:** Building an external ring to enlarge a kitchen and transforming it in a main house. Gundul (Asosa).

*ushari* (10), *atnasharawi* (12), *arbatasharawi* (14), *sitasharawi* (16). The number of variants (seven) is probably not casual, given the symbolic relevance of this number among the Bertha. Usually, the largest structures are used as guest houses (*khalwa*), and their size depends upon the number of family members that have to be sheltered in case of weddings, funerals, or other relevant events. The smaller buildings host unmarried boys or kitchens. Houses can grow as families grow. They are living beings in perpetual transformation: an outer ring may be added if children are born, or it might be removed if it is deemed no longer necessary – because of a boy's coming of age or the marriage of a girl. Sometimes, the owner of the house decides to build a new building and the old one is reused as a storehouse or stall. Sometimes it is simply left to decay, after recycling some materials. The concentric house model is the most flexible of all and, thus, the one most subject to changes (Fig. 7). Between 2002 and 2005 I had the occasion to observe the transformation of Gundul, a small quarter of Asosa, parallel to the transformation of its inhabitants' life (deaths, weddings, migration). In a sense, Bertha houses and compounds are never finished, they are continually evolving; they have their particular lives which are intimately intertwined with those of their inhabitants – for a similar perspective see Moore (1986: 91–98). Once again, this flexible house model is structurally coherent with the society of the area, since the people in the escarpment have more dynamic and fluid existences – travel-

ling, changing of residence, and social upgrading are easier – than those inhabiting the more remote interior lands of Benishangul.

The two main reasons to found a new house are a boy's coming of age and marriage. Once a child reaches adolescence (around 12 years old), he usually builds a new hut for himself. For the construction of this small hut, he receives no aid. It is not a real emancipation, since the boy still depends on his parents for his sustenance: only the house with two hearths (one for cooking and one for preparing coffee and for warmth) is a real house, and the boy's house has only one.

Collective work occurs when a married couple needs a new family house – an independent main house. However, the new home is not built immediately after marriage. After the wedding, the husband has to go to the village of his wife's parents, where he will reside in his father-in-law's compound and work for him – a custom found among other neighbouring groups, such as the Ingessana (Jędrej 1995: 22, 27; 2004: 719), where it is called *kalam* (maybe related to the Arabic *karama*). This situation usually lasts a year, but it may take longer (up to four years), depending on the needs of the bride's family. If there are no sons to help the father, the son-in-law must help him longer. This is probably a remnant of matrilineal traditions, as has been observed among other neighbouring Nilo-Saharan groups (James 1979). A groom must usually build a temporary house in his prospective father-in-law's compound before the wedding.

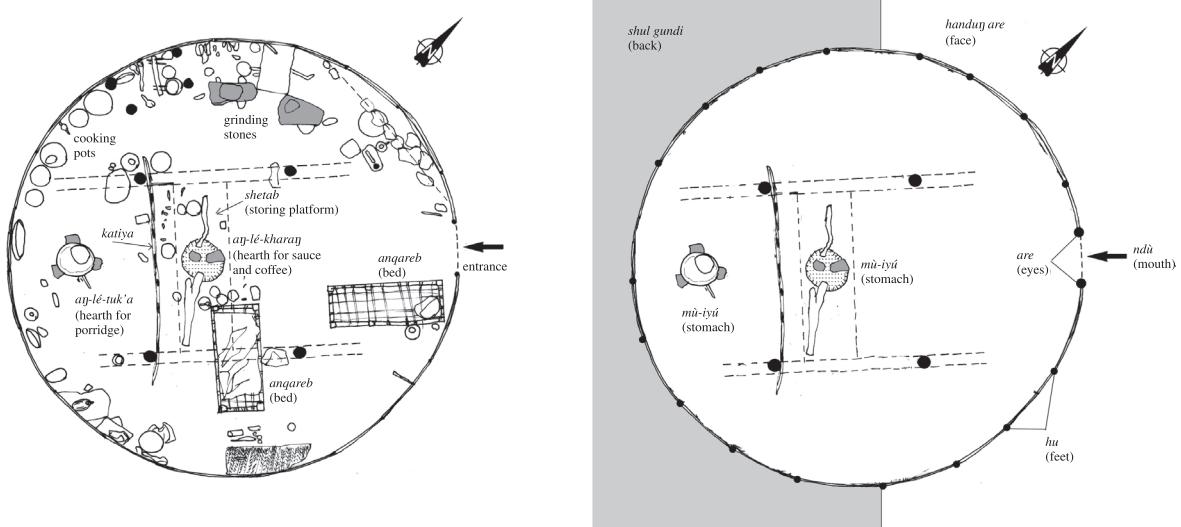


Fig. 8: Organization of the space in a *katiya* house. Isa Muhammad's home (Fulederu, Asosa *wereda*).

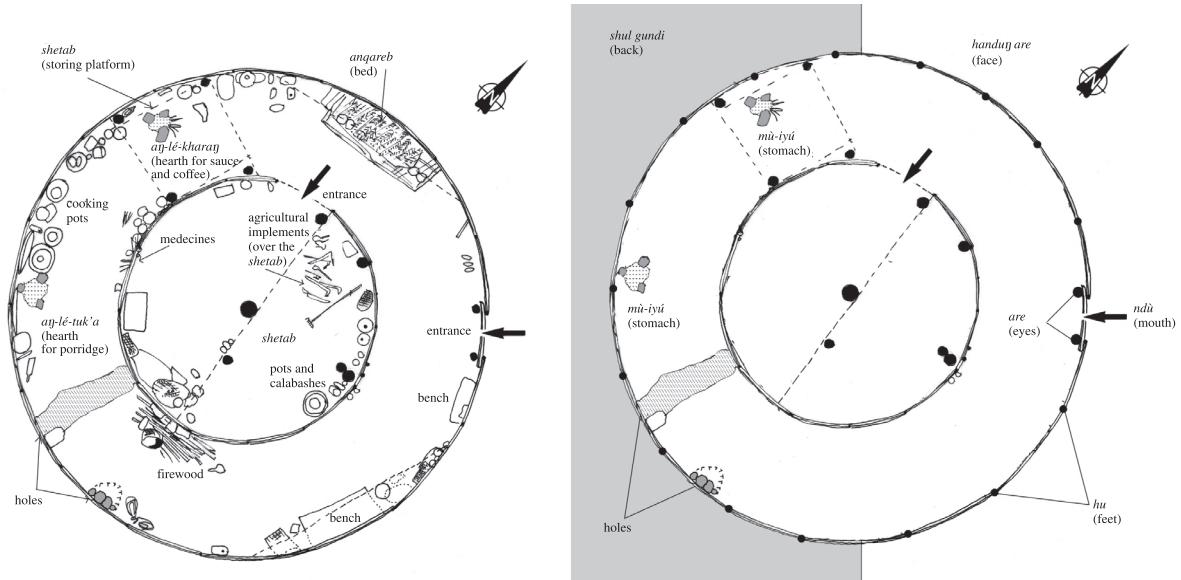


Fig. 9: The organization of the space in a concentric house. Audun Hamis' home (Gundul, Asosa).

### Front and Back – Space and Body

As in most architectural traditions, the Bertha house is a structuring structure (Donley-Reid 1990) and, as it is often the case in vernacular housing, this structuring nature is played out through anthropomorphic metaphors (Preston Blier 1987). Each part of the Bertha house is related to a member of the body: the roof is the head, (*shul*) *alú*. The hearth is the stomach (*mù-iyú* or *shul-iyú*), but we have to bear in mind that for the Bertha the stomach is very similar to the heart and the brain in our own percep-

tion of the body. The door is the mouth, *ndù* (which also means “Bertha language”: Bender 1989: 271). The poles that flank the door are the eyes, (*shul*) *are*, a term which also means “face.” The rest of the poles that support the house are the feet (*shul*) *huu* (or *khu*; Andersen 1995: 50), although the inner poles are called *shiba* (which also means “wings”). Finally, as with the Batammaliba house (Preston

8 Lists of Bertha vocabulary, containing these words and variants, can be found in Cerulli (1947), Triulzi et al. (1976), and Bender (1989).

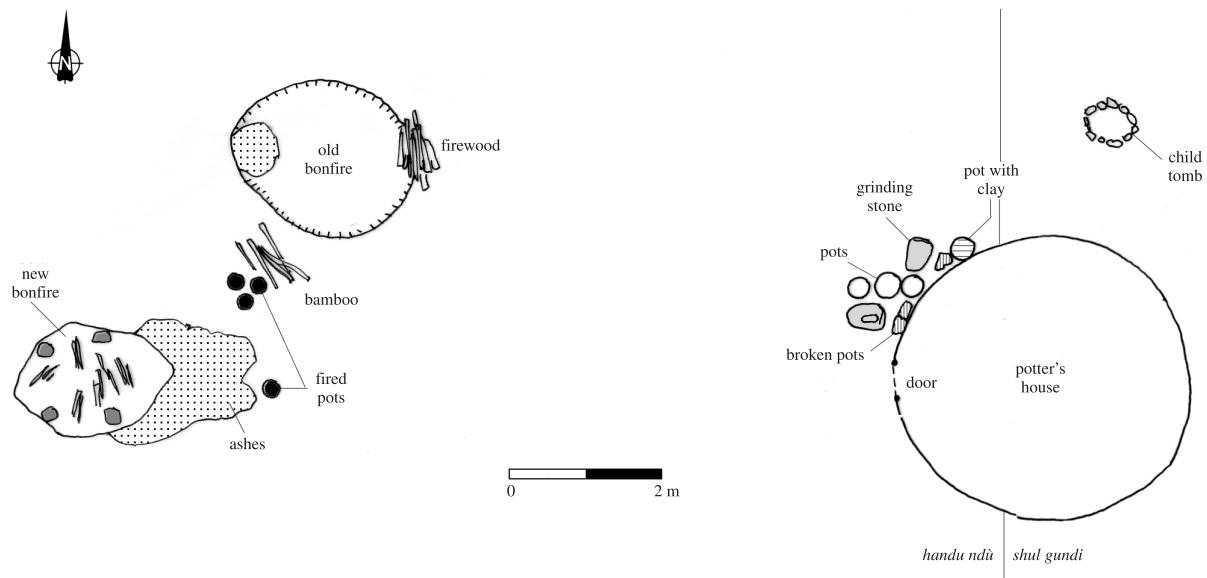


Fig. 10: The organization of the space around a potter's house. Obora (Menge wereda).

Blier 1987), we can say that Bertha houses perform physiological functions: they eat when they receive foundational sacrifices and blood is spilled at the mouth/door; they urinate through a hole (*darawa*); and they can fall ill with evil spirits. The spatial metaphor of the body, that has been attested all over the region, has to be related with the wider symbolic organization of house space. The moral attributes assigned to indoor and outdoor space among the Bertha, as we will see, derive from the body orientation, the senses, and the physical processes, a phenomenon recorded among many groups that has been masterfully described for the Kaguru by Beidelman (1991: 459).

Irrespective of the specific model, every house can be divided into two main areas: the front and the back (Fig. 8, Fig. 9). A similar distinction might be found among other neighboring groups, such as the Uduk, whose houses face the rest of the community and align their back to the bushland (James 1979: 15). In the Bertha house, the front is where the eyes (*are*) and mouth (*ndù*) of the home are located and all the space immediately in front of the hut is named *handu are* or *handu ndù*. Triulzi et al. (1976) recorded [tha]-*shul-ndù* for the frontal space (house's mouth). Both eyes and mouth occupy a frontal position in the human body and, moreover, they are – along with the ears – the main organs for communication and socialization. The eyes, in particular, are related to wisdom and knowledge: *are p'adiya* (lit. "eye-strong") means "wisdom" or "wise" (cf. Bender 1989: 304).

Therefore, it is in the front of the house where most activities are carried out: it is there where people (especially women) gather to have a talk, children play, men make mats and baskets and carve wood, women produce pottery (Fig. 10), and it is the locale where our interviews took place. When there is *amaha* to build a hut or rethatch a roof, people gather in front of the house to drink and take food. The *handu are* is also where most things are stored or simply left leaning on the wall: drying pots, mats, baskets, calabashes, stools, animals. The majority of the activities, artefacts, and compound buildings are within eyesight from the door of the main living house. Besides, it is the cleanest space of the village, since maintenance activities (sweeping) are carried out there at least twice a day. From a religious point of view, the front is where people pray and a series of traditional sacrifices occur. For example, when a couple gets married, they have to stay closed in a house for a week. Food and drink are brought from outside. After this period, a goat is sacrificed in front of the house and husband and wife have to jump over the dead animal seven times – again, the number has ritual relevance.<sup>9</sup> This rite – called with the Arabic word

9 The sacred stone of Bela Shangul, the most important religious locale for the Bertha, had to be circumambulated seven times counterclockwise by the kings in investiture rites for the fertility and prosperity of the whole land and people (Seligman and Seligman 1932: 428f.). Seven grains of coffee are burnt in certain healing ceremonies by the *yeri*. After somebody dies, there are seven days of mourning.

*karama* (meaning “religious offering”) – may take place after they arrive to the husband’s village and finish the construction of their new house. This is necessary to avoid evil spirits, propitiate a happy married life, and have prosperity. The front of the hut is smeared with the blood of a goat or two chickens that are slaughtered to celebrate the inauguration of a new home, a custom also described among the Gumuz. Rainmaking rites take place in front of the ritual specialist’s house (*yeri*): a branch of *wera* (an aromatic tree) is stuck into the ground and water from the river is spilled around it, while the *yeri* asks God to give rain to the village.

The rear space around the house is called *shul gundi*, the house’s back. No activities take place here and, therefore, this space is usually empty of people and artefacts. Only animals are sometimes seen sleeping in the shadow provided by the roof. In the place diametrically opposed to the door a pit (*dabulsi* or *bule soko*) is dug out to throw the rubbish away – the earth extracted from the pit is used for plastering the hut’s wall. The place for urinating and defecating (sometimes a kind of latrines) is also located behind the residence. Meaningfully, the back space is where miscarried fetuses, newborns, and babies less than three months old are buried (other ages were given – one year, one month, but most people seem to agree on three months). Tombs are located very close to the house wall. Children older than that are given burial in the cemetery, located in the forest. Babies’ tombs are formally very similar to those of adult people: an oval-shaped earth tumulus, delimited with stones. The name (*dirsha*) is the same in both cases, it also applies to the cemetery and it means “sleeping” as well. Death is a very polluting thing. Children and adults’ clothes have to be thoroughly washed in the river after their owners’ death and cemeteries are located considerably far away from the villages (around one kilometer). Resemblances can be found among other borderland Nilo-Saharan peoples: the Ingessana, for example, bury their children beneath the kitchen’s floor (Jedrej 1995: 100), at the back of the hut, and the Uduk place tombs behind the house, the space in front of the door being used to bury the placenta after giving birth (James 1988a: 217). The Bertha think that babies have to be buried very close to the house because they belong to the inside of the home, not to the outside (as adults do). Going outside would make them easy prey of evil spirits. The same is thought of menstruating women: they also belong to the inside and cannot go out of the house if they do not want to suffer the attack of evil. Indoors, then, is the space of the weak, of those more liable to

pollution, and the house is regarded as a stronghold against evil. The interior of the house (the stomach) is, at the same time, a weak space, one that has to be protected against violence, evil, and disease. This is probably one of the reasons why visitors have to leave their spears at the door before entering the house. Some rites related to the exorcism of the evil spirits that can inhabit a home are celebrated in the back of the hut: two chicken or a goat are slaughtered when an evil-infested house is going to be rethatched or destroyed. Also, when a new roof is built, the thatch from the old roof is burnt at the back of the house, because it is dirty, and it is thought that it can pass on diseases.

It is therefore clear that the front space is related to life, cleanliness, work, and socialization. The back space, on the contrary, is where those individuals who have not been socialized are buried, where no activities take place, where rubbish is thrown away; an area linked to death, disease, and dirt – corroborating Douglas’ statement that “where there is dirt, there is system” (2002: 44). It is interesting to note the widespread link existing between death and dirt in many sub-Saharan societies (e.g., Moore 1986: 102f.). The symbolic organization that has been delineated is also constructed indoors – a space called *thantha* in Bertha (Fig. 11), as opposed to the outside spaces of the *shul gundi* and the *handu* *are*.

The front part of the house is where people sleep, guests are received, and tea, coffee, and sauce (*kharaj*) are prepared in one of the two *mū-iyú* (hearts) the house has. Guests are entertained near the entrance, usually to the left, while the right is ordinarily reserved for sleeping (only for children in the case of the concentric house). These different activity areas do not have specific names: thus, the sleeping area is called *ay-dirsh-lá*<sup>10</sup> (place [for] sleeping), and the same can be applied to the space where food or sauce is prepared (*ay-lé-tuk’á*, in the back, and *ay-lé-kharaj*, in the front, respectively). It is a remarkable fact that the Bertha have the same name for time and place: thus, *ay-dirsh-lá* may be translated as “the place for sleeping,” but also as “the time of sleeping.” Each activity has its place and simultaneously its specific time.

The back part is where food, basically porridge (*tuk’á*), is cooked and beer (*bas’á*) brewed (Fig. 12). This back part is most often physically separated. In the case of the central yard model, the kitchen occupies a completely different building; in the concentric house model, the cooking area

10 The suffix *-lá* is used in Bertha when there is no specified subject (Andersen 1995: 46).



**Fig. 11:** The interior of a kitchen in a central yard house. Note the store platform and the raised mud hearth to the wall (similar to those described by Ernst Marno). Surroundings of Gizen (Gizen wereda).



**Fig. 12:** Beer pots (*awar* and *is'u*) behind the partition wall (*katiya*).

is located in the outer ring, diametrically opposed to the entrance and concealed by the central structure; in the *katiya* house, finally, the back is clearly separated by a partition wall of bamboo and mud (*katiya*). When asked about the need of a *katiya*, people say that they do not want strangers to see the women preparing porridge. Only the women of the house are allowed in the space behind the *katiya*. The back is, again, a dirty space: fermentation (of food and beer) takes place here and the

majority of the pots are stored and used in this area. It is worth noting that the process of fermentation – and the pottery in which it occurs – is symbolically related to death and ancestralization in some African cultures (David 1992: 193). Interestingly, among the neighbouring Komo, the tradition existed of burying the entrails of a deceased person beneath the beer pots, at the back of the house (James 1988a: 361), while the rest of the body was deposited on the platform (the Bertha *shetab*) over



**Fig. 13:** Medicines, charms, and magical objects behind the inner ring of Audun Hamis' house (Gundul, Asosa).

the hearth, to be slowly dried by the smoke. Meaningfully, raw food (as opposed to fermented food) is not stored in the back space, but in the front space, over the *shetab*, or it is hanged on the walls.

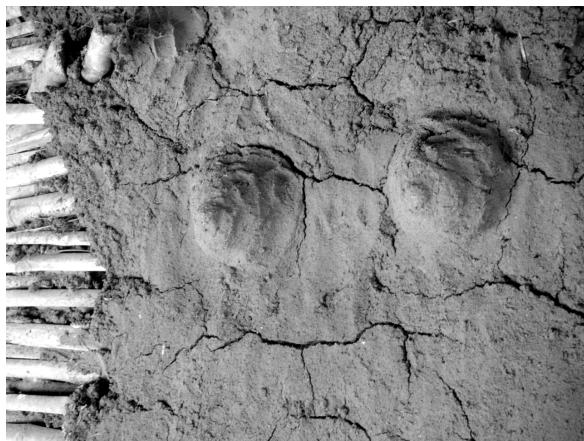
The back of the house, among the Bertha, is polluted due to other reasons: There is a hole (*darawa*) in the rear that connects the interior and the outside. When women are menstruating, they are confined indoors and they must urinate in the *darawa* and wash in the same place for seven days after menstruation, to avoid polluting the house and falling ill. Cooking is forbidden for them. After sexual intercourse, the couple must wash their sexual organs with water in the *darawa* hole, too. Sexual activities, then, put the house at risk of pollution: dirtiness has to be expelled. Also, sex is a risky activity, inconceivable outside the protection of the house – sex in the forest is equated to prostitution. Recently married couples are especially prone to suffer the pollution derived from sex, that is why they are kept closed inside their new home for seven days after arriving at their village. In the huts belonging to the doctor-diviner (*yeri*) Audun Hamis in Gundul (Asosa), charms and medicines were prepared and stored at the back of the buildings (Fig. 13). One of his houses, now abandoned, had a sort of containers moulded on the mud of the wall, where medicines were made (Fig. 14). When asked about where is the place where women usually give birth, people say that can be anywhere. In fact, women crawl and move all over the place, inside and outside, until



**Fig. 14:** Place to prepare medicines at the back of Audun Hamis' secondary hut.

they finally bear a child. This might be surprising, since giving birth might be considered a dirty, polluting activity, in which blood and other physiological materials are involved. If childbearing is not spatially constrained, as all other activities are, it might be explained for its mixed character, being at the same time related to dirt, blood, and life.

As opposed to the back part of the house, the front is accessible and open to strangers and neighbours, who sit on mats or *anqareb* near the door and take tea or coffee, made on the front hearth. In the concentric house model, it is in the front part where children sleep. In some villages, at least in the es-



**Fig. 15:** Breasts moulded on a wall in Dul Shetale (Kurmuk wereda).

carpment area (Asosa, Kurmuk), in houses where a young woman is going to get married, women's breasts are moulded on the plaster of the wall, near the entrance, in order to favour a propitious marriage and to celebrate fertility (Fig. 15).

Due to this open character of the front space, and because it is there where the house's mouth is located, it is a dangerous area, a margin and an orifice through which evil spirits and diseases can seize the home (Douglas 2002: 150). To avoid that, people protect the entrance with different charms and amulets: feathers, corn, egg shells, and papers with Koranic verses. The latter are prepared by a ritual specialist called *feki*, who, as in other Muslim countries (*fakī, fiki*), is anyone known for piety and knowledge of the Koran (McHugh 1994: 17). The parallelism between humans and houses is made explicit by the fact that people protect their bodies by tying leather sheaths (*heyab*) with similar Koranic charms around their necks or forearms. Jędrzej (2004: 724) notes among the Ingessana a similar anxiety "structured in the spatial terms of the persistent invasion of their territory, localities, and homesteads, and even their bodies, by malignant external agencies which must be repeatedly identified, extracted, and driven off." Similarly, evil spirits haunt Bertha bodies and houses so that they have to be protected or, once illness has made prey of the body or the house, they have to be cured by extracting the evil. All apotropaic devices are situated in the frontal area of the house (*handuj are*), including those that protect against the evil spirit of thunder (*ro*). To avoid evil eye, the Bertha thrust a long and thin bamboo pole into the ground near the house or in the house's roof and crown it with a root, a broken *jebena* (coffee pot), or calabash (*abadi*). Specifically against thunders

are horns or skulls of buffalos and other animals, preferably wild animals (but also sheep, horses) (Fig. 16). Ernst Marno wrote that he saw human skulls hanging on the roofs of Bertha houses.<sup>11</sup> People fear that a bad *geri* may cast a thunder upon their house. It is not necessary to have the help of a *geri* to prepare these apotropaic devices: anybody can make a protective standard. They can be also placed in granaries and cultivated fields, to protect the crop. Evil spirits are also frightened by throwing millet and corn grains against the walls of the house after the harvest. Besides providing protection, it also brings prosperity to the home.



**Fig. 16:** A horn against the spirit of thunder (*ro*). Abramo (Asosa wereda).

Despite all precautions, a house, as a human body, can fall ill with an ancestral evil spirit (*shuman*). These spirits are inherited and one can only cast them off with the help of a *geri*, who sees them in dreams and is then able to throw them out. The Ingessana, too, call their doctor-diviners (*kai*) to heal an evil-possessed homestead (Jędrzej 1995: 52).

<sup>11</sup> "Es ist Sitte der Bertat, die Schädel von Verbrechern oder erschlagenen Feinden auf Bäumen oder Tukulspitzen aufzustecken, welche Sitte auch von Russegger erwähnt wird" (Marno 1874: 62).

One of the methods a *yeri* has to heal a home is to remove the evil spirit and to throw it to another place, where it will be condemned to reside. The new abode may be a tree, another house, or a granary. Ramadan Talow, the *yeri* from Menge, told us that he had trapped a *shuman* in a granary close to his house in Keshaf, while in Menge another *shuman* was compelled to reside in a big old tree in the outskirts of the settlement and one more in a house where some old women lived. No one else was allowed inside this hut, as it was thought that anybody, apart from those old women, would die if she or he tried to get into the house – which is always well-closed. Fires have to be lit for the *shuman* and water must be brought in calabashes in order to appease them and keep them at bay. Another way of getting the spirits out of the house involves the use of a riverine tree called *s'aba*. The *yeri* dips a branch of *s'aba* in water and then shakes the branch at the hut for an hour at sunrise. If the ritual has no effect, he brings a goat inside the house, orders the oldest man in the house to cut a piece from both of the goat's ears, and drives the animal out. The pieces of ear are thrown to the ground and later swept outside the house. In the same fashion, bodies are cured by extracting the evil inside: one of the methods involves the use of a horn (usually from a buffalo) that is applied to the part of the body that is sick. The doctor-diviner sucks through the horn and then cuts the lump away, freeing the evil spirit.

A very dangerous moment for the health of the house and that of its inhabitants is the replacing of the roof. When the roof is dismantled, the outside and the inside are perilously mixed; the interior of the house, the stomach (*mù-iyú*), is a fragile area, as the human stomach is. Many diseases are thought to affect the stomach, among them one caused by a particular *shuman*: the *obe*. The presence of the *yeri* is needed to scare the evil spirits away. Two chicken or a goat must be sacrificed behind the house.

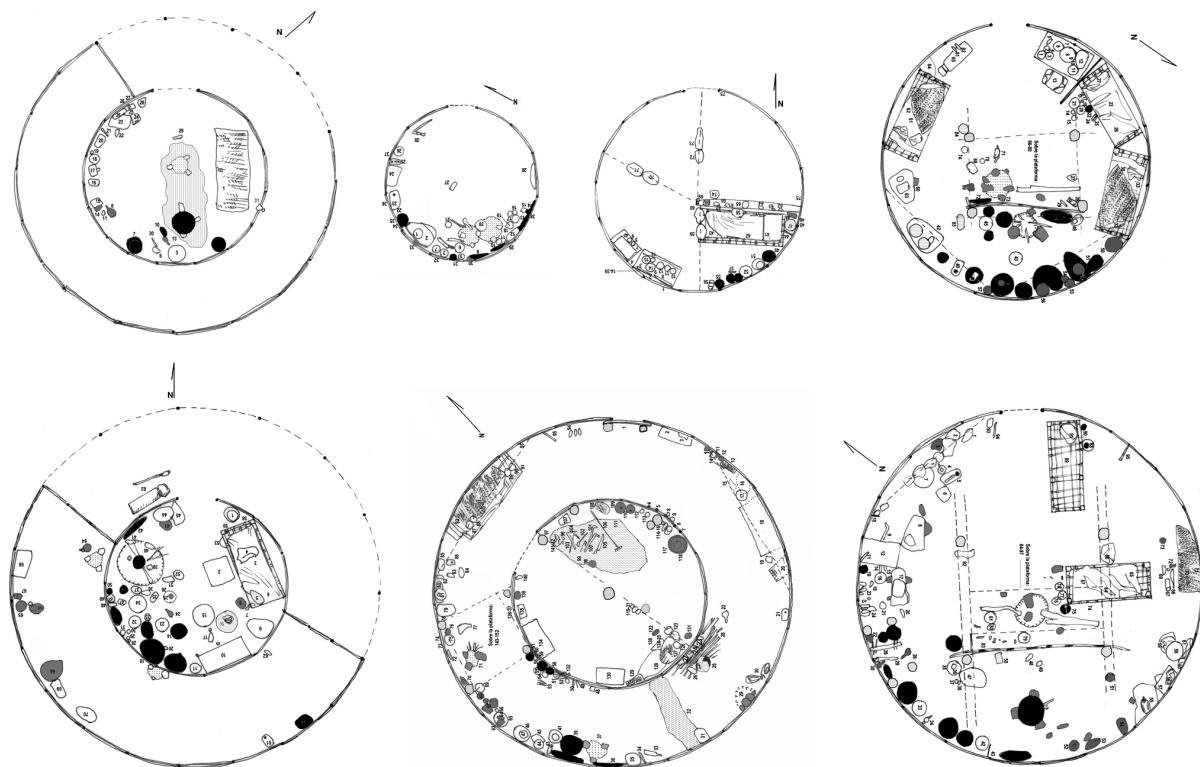
This organization of the Bertha house and the relevance of the front/back dichotomy and its related meanings may be considered a common sense division, but other ethnographic examples prove that wrong: in the Kabyle house, for example, the front wall of the house is that of the darkness, sleep, and death (Bourdieu 1970: 740f.), just the opposite of the Bertha, Gumuz, or Uduk. In other cases, the division between up/down, north/south, or right/left is more important than front and back.<sup>12</sup> The concern with this dichotomy seems to be widespread

among the borderland Nilo-Saharan. The Gumuz have two opposing doors with different meanings in their houses: the back one is used for polluting activities, such as bringing meat for cooking (Geremew 2005), while the front one is reserved for elders and guests. The Kwama divide the space in two halves (front: *tazini it'a* and back: *tatgola*), similar to those of the Bertha hut; and the Uduk, as it has been pointed out, distinguish between the face (towards the village) and the back (towards the wild) in their homes. The necessity of clearly demarcating the front and the back is taken beyond the house: Bertha tombs, which are oval in shape, always have two stelae, one at the front and one at the back – but only one of them receives incense offerings.

As opposed to other African traditions, the gendered division of the domestic space does not seem to play a paramount role among the Bertha. Male and female spaces inside the house are not as well-marked as in other groups. The division affects parents and children (a fact also attested among the Kwama), dwellers and guests (a division related with the dichotomy outside/inside), and, finally, men and women. The fact that women are more strongly related to the back of the house, where food and beer processing takes place, fits well with the Bertha division between front and back. Women are more prone to pollution and, therefore, they are symbolically linked to the dark, dirty rear. However, women do occupy all other parts of the house – men, on the contrary, rarely enter the space beyond the *katiya* or behind the inner ring. It is also true that the guest house is only for men: no women can go in and take coffee and chat with men, no matter if they are close kin. However, this is probably a recent Islamic-influenced custom, as shown by the fact that the Bertha almost always employ the Arabic name (*khalwa*). And even in that case, it is not properly speaking a gendered division of the house (*shuli*) but a specific building within the compound, which does not appear in every homestead (small compounds usually lack this hut). Similarly, the orientation of the house does not seem to play a relevant role. In some villages (Gundul in Asosa, Obora in Menge), houses are said to be oriented towards the north or south, never to the east or west. Nonetheless, while some people attribute this rule to the Koran, others attribute it to the direction of the wind. Finally, in many villages, houses seem to be randomly oriented and people deny any relevance to orientation.

Ordering of the domestic space is not an abstract task that can be easily verbalized as such. The Bertha do not rationalize the organization of

12 E.g., Cunningham 1973; Feeley-Harnik 1980; Donley-Reid 1990.



**Fig. 17:** Distribution of pottery (black marks) in different Bertha houses (*katiya* and concentric houses). There is a substantially greater number of pots in rural areas than in peri-urban areas, and spatial order is also more rigid in the countryside than in towns.

the space as it has been done here. But at the same time, the dichotomy front/back that has been described is not a product of the anthropologist's mind. It is something that works in practice: it is a generative spatial praxis that orders the Bertha world and makes sense of it. Bourdieu (1990: 96) says that "The Kabyle woman setting up her loom is not performing an act of cosmogony; she is simply setting up her loom to weave cloth intended to serve a technical function. It so happens that, given the symbolic equipment available to her for practically thinking her own practice – in particular her language, which constantly refers her back to the logic of ploughing – she can only think what she is doing in the enchanted, that is to say, mystified, form that spiritualism, thirsty for eternal mysteries, finds so enchanting." Equally, a Bertha woman is not thinking that she is performing an activity structurally related to death and dirt when she is brewing beer or porridge at the back of the house. Bertha domestic space is organized according to a practical logic "able to organize all thoughts, perceptions and actions by means of a few generative principles, which are closely interrelated and constitute a practically integrated whole," whose whole economy is "based on the principle of the economy of

logic" (Bourdieu 1990: 86). This practical character of the symbolic system is especially obvious when it comes to the order of things inside the house. As we have seen, the Bertha home is not characterized by many physical divisions, especially the *katiya* model. However, irrespective of the presence or absence of partition walls, objects appear time and again in the same locations, because "they have to be there," as the Bertha put it. The *awar* for storing beer leans against the back of the house, the beds are located near the entrance, the hearth for porridge is hidden at the back, and clothes hang on the front (Fig. 17). Despite the impression of disorder and mess that houses and their environments convey when one gets inside, and despite the diversity of indoor solutions that conceal the structure, things are always carefully distributed in space according to an underlying far-reaching logic that confers each being (dead or alive, human or thing) a place in the world.

### Concluding Remarks

The fact that all houses in Benishangul, despite their variability, are ruled by similar symbolic prin-

ciples shows the flexibility of Bertha material culture and architecture in particular. This flexibility and adaptability is matched by other cultural elements as in the neighboring borderland groups. The ability that Gumuz and Uduk show, for example, to absorb strangers in their own communities (James 1988b: 138) and that of the Bertha themselves, as shown by their miscegenation with Arab traders, may be equated to a similar capacity to assimilate different material traditions and reshape them to their own cultural praxis. Thus, the *katiya* house was probably adopted by the Bertha after their arrival in Ethiopia, while the concentric model was most likely brought from Sudan. However, this ability goes parallel to an attitude of resistance and cultural conservatism, equally derived from the turbulent conditions of the Sudanese-Ethiopian borderland. Maintaining the order of domestic space is fundamental for the reproduction and preservation of the social order, as shown by the repetition of the same basic spatial principles that govern movement and activities all over Benishangul, irrespective of the specific house or compound model in which one dwells. Locality, as Apparudai (1996: 179) has pointed out, is something that, far from given, must be maintained carefully against various kinds of odds. This is especially true in places as dynamic, mutable, and troubled as the borderlands between states. From this point of view, the Bertha house is a nice example of those “technolog[ies] of localization” (Appadurai 1996: 180) that help to resist social desintegration.

The Bertha have a strong concern with order, maybe because of a long historic experience of disorder and political instability. The best metaphor of this concern is the Bela Shangul, the sacred stone of Shangul, a polished sphere that reposes in amazing balance on top of a small pillar, in a remote mountain around Menge. The fall of this sphere – the breaking of its fragile equilibrium – is thought to bring all kind of calamities and disgraces to the Bertha (Triulzi 1981b). A similar necessity of keeping order is expressed in the apotropaic devices that guard the entrance to the Bertha houses (the inside and the outside must not be mixed, the mixture leading to illness and death) and in the clear distinction between front and back. Spatial order, thus, may be considered a way of maintaining locality, achieving and perpetuating cultural coherence and symbolically resisting troubling situations (slave trade and invasions until the 1930s, war and expropriation in the 1970s and 1990s). All that can be attained through a very simple and flexible – and therefore effective – system. Bertha concern with order in the domestic space, therefore, would be

reflecting a wider concern with order in a world continuously threatened by chaos.

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