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THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF ARCHITECTURE *From Cameroon to Paris: Mousgoum Architecture in and out of Africa.* By Steven Nelson. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Pp. xiv+247. \$50 (isbn 978-0-226-57183-6).

KERSTIN PINTHER

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THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF ARCHITECTURE

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From Cameroon to Paris: Mousgoum Architecture in and out of Africa. By STEVEN NELSON. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Pp. xiv + 247. \$50 (ISBN 978-0-226-57183-6).

KEY WORDS: Cameroon, Chad, architecture, arts.

Without having read a single line, readers will get an idea of the wealth of material and the innovative approach of this book: numerous illustrations refer to

¹ Claire Robertson and Martin Klein (eds.), *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1983).

the overall topic of this work by Steven Nelson, Assistant Professor of African and African American Art History at the University of California, Los Angeles. More than 100, mainly black-and-white, images – including (historical) photographs, sketches and drawings, a film still from the Hollywood movie *Road to Zanzibar* (1941), maps, postcards of French world fairs, colonial exhibitions and posters of Cameroon Airlines – all attest to the presence of the so-called *teleuk* (pl. *teleukakay*) in various contexts. In his insightful study, the author explores the many histories and the interrelated discourses of the domed house, originally fashioned entirely from mud and grass by specialized masons of the Mousgoum peoples of Chad and Cameroon. Based upon many months of fieldwork in Cameroon (mainly in Pouss) and Chad, and a shorter visit to Japan, as well as on the interpretation of a remarkable, huge collection of different archival sources and materials, Nelson's study not only digs deep into the history of migration and the imagination of the Teleukakay in the course of almost one century. His work also can be read as a case study of the ways in which architecture functions as a template for the representation of self and non-self.

With this appealing new way of looking at the built environment (only comparable to the well-known study on the global bungalow and its various local implications conducted by Anthony King in the 1980s), Nelson makes a substantial contribution to the long neglected field of architectural anthropology, which has only slowly been gaining wider attention again within research addressing the questions of space and material culture. Apart from the outstanding work by Suzanne Preston Blier on the *Anatomy of Architecture* (1987) among the Batammaliban, there are only few recent works on architecture in the field of African studies: Dominique Malaquais's *Architecture, pouvoir et dissidence au Cameroun* (2002), for example, emphasizes the fact that architecture is foremost a political phenomenon and argues for a subaltern approach to Bamilékés' royal architecture. Ikem Stanley Okoye and the author of the book under review share not only their strong interest in exploring the ideological (mis-)recognitions evoked and produced by architecture, but also their interest in the constitutive role of images in the building process.

From Cameroon to Paris, based on the author's Harvard doctoral thesis, consists of an introduction, four core thematic chapters and an afterword. Parts of Chapters 3 and 4 were published elsewhere in an earlier version. Chapter 1 provides the backdrop for the following discussion of the radical changes in meaning the *teleuk* experienced, from its near disappearance in the 1930s up to its recent resurgence, by outlining the historic Mousgoum architecture and its interrelations with the social and economic structure and certain aesthetic devices of the Mousgoum peoples. Chapter two explores the way the *teleuk* is perceived and represented in the travelogues of Heinrich Barth, Olive McLeod and André Gide. In order to depict the contradictory, yet intermingling, projections and ambiguities at work in Western notions of the *teleuk*, Nelson investigates each travel account at length, taking into consideration the author's personal history. Barth, for example, considered the dome to be of strange beauty and perfection, but (in keeping with well-known stereotypes) finally regarded it 'as an architectonic repository containing traces of a more civilized time' (p. 61). Under the title *A Pineapple in Paris*, the third chapter discusses how the *teleuk*, adapted and appropriated by a French architect, Léon Fichet, for the French Equatorial Africa complex, became the epitome of West African architecture during the International Colonial Exhibition (1931); in the end, however, this hybrid architecture proved to be nothing more than a reproduction of the French self. Chapter 4 takes the reader back to Cameroon, where – influenced by the local population, tourists, the French association Patrimoine sans Frontières and official representatives of the Cameroon

government – the *teleukakay* have experienced a cultural revival since the 1990s. By highlighting the Mousgoum's adoption of Gide's famous description of the *teleuk* as a 'classical' built form, Nelson again successfully demonstrates how the exchange between different notions and reinterpretations of the *teleuk* functions in the interaction between Africa and the West.

In essence, this book provides an important impulse for further studies in the field of anthropology of architecture. Although the strength of the book lies in its multi-sited approach at the intersection of various meanings of the *teleuk*, as opposed to the studies, as prevalent up until today, of the built environment of one single ethnic group, it is all the more regrettable that, in spite of numerous important theoretical and stimulating references to the theory of art and architecture, Nelson missed the opportunity to provide a more general theoretical framework – such as, for example, in Kopytoff's (1986) cultural biography of things or Steven Cairn's (2004) thoughts on migrancy and architecture.

University of Munich

KERSTIN PINTHER