Architecture
OF FIRST SOCIETIES

A Global Perspective

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WILEY

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Introduction

In 1901, a certain Reverend W. J. V. Saville visited an island off the coast of New Guinea to convert the inhabitants to Christianity. The book that he wrote about his efforts opens with the following words; "The first thing that strikes one upon entering a Mailu village is its orderly arrangement. The villages are built on one distinct and characteristic plan. Two rows of houses, running parallel to one another, take the curve, if any, of the high-water mark on the shore."[1] He goes on to describe in great detail the feasts, ceremonies, and other activities that take place between the rows of houses. Saville never seems to notice a rather glaring paradox. The same people whom he calls savages and who use "stone age tools" in harvesting their yams and taro plants are not only accomplished builders, but have a highly prescribed social and ritualistic worldview as defined by the layout of their settlements. The paradox is easily resolved, as any contemporary anthropologist will tell us, if we remove from the discussion any comparison with the modern world. That allows us to recognize that the orderliness of the Mailu shore-line settlement is not an anomaly, but dates back to the ancient origins of mankind. Organization of space is an integral aspect of human society, as fundamental as language and fire. A hundred thousand years ago, it may not have manifested itself in the archaeological record with quite the clarity of a Mailu village, but it cannot be dismissed that when humans first began to develop social groupings, spatial coherence in one way or another also became an attribute. This book is an attempt to capture that history within the bounds of our archaeological and anthropological knowledge.

In doing this, I tried to avoid some of the standard terms that one might encounter in such a text. Take for example, the word hunter-gatherer. Though widely used, it gained currency only in the 1970s against the backdrop of the United Nations War on Hunger and thus implies—quite falsely and pejoratively, as many anthropologists are now fully aware—that these people are obsessed with food acquisition. Food is just as important to ancient societies as it is to us, but so too are all the other activities that make us human. They will socialize, make huts, dance, cook, weave, and even relax. The image conjured up by the word hunter-gatherers also does a disservice to the affluence that many of these societies once had. The huge and geometrically complex mound of Poverty Point Louisiana, made up of approximately 238,000 cubic meters of fill, may have been made by so-called "hunter-gatherers," but hunting and gathering were certainly the least things on the minds of the people who built this astonishing edifice. The term "First Society" may also have some limitations, but at least it reminds us that we are always dealing with societies not with individuals. The expression is used in the book for the broad range of cultures that did not change or shift to agriculture. This resolute attachment to the natural world should not be seen as a failing on their part, for we have to remember that people lived without agriculture for over a million years. These people not only survived, they thrived; nor is the history of the First Society world quite over. A few First Society cultures remain, despite transformative onslaughts, as living reminders of our ancestry.

The first part, entitled *Beginnings,* tries to give a comprehensive overview of First Society attitudes to life, death, and social organization. The second part, *Transitions,* deals with the emergence of horticulture and agriculture and the rise of village worlds. It also introduces cattle-centric societies and the mobile cultures of the African and Asian deserts. Here we encounter a range of responses to First Society traditions from the cattle cultures, which tended to look down on their First Societies neighbors as well as on the agriculturalists with whom they traded, to the North American chiefdoms who, though adopting agriculture, remained closely associ-

ated with First Society norms. In this part of the book, the word "first" is used more metaphorically, indicating certain fundamental changes in the human social organization. Each of these firsts was a type of modernity that in one way or another, moved away from First Society norms.

In these discussions, I strive to avoid the standard perspective that places cities, empires and states at the apex of civilizational history. Many maps of Pre-Colombian America, for example, will show the territory of the Incas filled in with a color, while leaving the entire rest of South America blank as if it were not even populated. This tendency to privilege state-entities in our cartographic epistemologies does a great disservice to those parts of the world that developed chiefdom societies or where First Society people lived. From the point of view of "world civilizations" almost everything in this book takes place in the uncolored areas of most maps. This book tries to reverse that perspective. In fact, if one were to think of the map of the world as late as 1400 CE and take out the empires and urban cultures, I would venture to estimate that nine-tenths of the globe's land mass would remain, and of that, about a half was populated by thriving village communities and the other half by First Society people. Colonialism, modernization, and globalization have so radically reduced that territory that it is difficult for us to even imagine the intricate and powerful web of realities that not that long ago stretched across the globe.

To help with the challenge of envisioning that world, this book will emphasize larger territorial histories. In the process, it will try to bring architectural and spatial understandings into focus as far as our contemporary knowledge allows. This is done to some degree as a challenge to both archaeologists and anthropologists who rarely produce drawings that serve larger pedagogical purposes. A typical archaeological drawing will have a lot of information about the area inside of the small plot of the dig, but will have no information of any kind outside of the lines. Site drawings are made only to put an X on a map to indicate the location of the dig. And as to anthropologists, they rarely make drawings any more at all and often see architecture as a backdrop to cultural activities, rather than as something to be studied in and of itself.

Archaeology in the last fifteen years has, of course, made huge strides in coming to terms with our ancient past, but in the process it is now beset by layers of terminological complexity that only an archaeologist would love. A time period that was once simply known as "the Stone Age," for example, is now chopped up into small time periods, usually, and obsessively, into threes—Early, Middle, and Late Paleolithic; Incipient, Initial, and Late Jōmon; Early, Middle, and Late Woodland; Early, Middle, and Late Bronze Age, with the Middle Bronze Age further subdivided into Middle Bronze Age I, II A, II B, II C, and so on—relating to ever more specific geographical and temporal entities. To not use these terms in this book might seem to fly in the face of archaeological expertise, but I would argue that teaching history is different from teaching archaeology. Although I have drawn on the latest archaeological information, I have not tried to shape the narrative so that it becomes little more than a primer to archaeology. There are other books that can do that.

Anthropology too has made huge strides in the last decades. A generation of researchers has emerged armed with increasingly, complex methodological tools. The word "primitive," which was used quite freely well into the late 1970s, is now, fortunately, universally rejected. They have also rethought attitudes regarding the use of words like "pre-history" and "pastoralism." And yet, the word hunter-gatherer, despite critiques, persists, as does the equally humiliating term "forager."

There are a few scholars who have struggled to overcome these various disciplinary problems. Their efforts are so remarkable in my view that they bear mentioning: Paul Memmott and his analysis of the architecture of the Australian aborigines; Werner E. Knuffel's analysis of the Bantu hut; Jean-Paul Bourdier and Trinh T. Minh-ha's study of African villages in Ghana and Burkina Faso; Alain Viaro's work on the house of the Nias; and Suzanne Preston Blier's analysis of the architecture of the Batammaliba. Peter Nabakov and Robert Easton's book, *Native American Architecture* (1989), and William Morgan's *Ancient Architecture of the Southwest* (1994) are also significant works. There are more, but not nearly as many as one would want, which means that hundreds of living cultures around the world have received little close scrutiny when it comes to their architectural expertise and their spatial and territorial under-

standings. No analytical drawings exist of the marvelous houses and towns of the Konso in Ethiopia, the Dinka of Sudan, or even of some of the structures in the Brazilian rainforest. The best drawings of the Native American mound structures in Ohio were made in the 1890s! At stake is not some romantic association with the lost past, but the need to claim the legitimacy of architecture and landscape as an epistemological descriptor of the ritual and social activities of First Societies.

Architectural discourses are, however, beset by their own problems. In the 1970s, when the concept of "primitive architecture" was drifting out of fashion, it was replaced by the word "shelter," and numerous books appeared with that word in the title. The problem is that a tipi of the Plains Indians is designed less as a shelter than as a cosmological diagram. The house I live in, by way of contrast, is most certainly not designed as a cosmological diagram and is in that sense much more a shelter than any tipi. So to use the word shelter is to disrespect the most critical aspect of the architecture of many First Societies.

Another term that is now solidly entrenched in the architectural literature is "vernacular." It arose in the 1970s and was meant to describe structures that were built by craft traditions rather than by architects. Vernacular may be fine to describe barns or industrial buildings of the modern era, but when it comes to traditional village architecture, it is an awkward term. A *vernaculum* was a slave quarter at the rear of a Roman villa. And though it was not intended, labeling a *shabono* in Brazil or a house by the Nias as "vernacular" puts it on the wrong side of the civilization divide. These are majestic structures as grand in their context as any palace in Mesopotamia, and to give them the nomenclature "vernacular" is a real shame. Needless to say, the words "shelter" and "vernacular," like "Stone Age," "primitive," and "hunter-gatherer" do not appear in this book.

This book cannot repair in any wholesale way the comprehension gap of how to address our ancient history. That discussion is more appropriate in the context of advanced historiography. But the book can at least begin to orient the student to a better understanding of the architecture and life of the First Peoples and of early agriculturalists. The book also tries to provide for the student a global perspective. By the word "global" I do not mean universals that transcend history, but rather the presence of historically determined communalities that stretch across regions and oceans. It is the *accumulation* of these histories across space and time that produces a global perspective of history. In that sense, although the book is broad in scope, it is not an encyclopedia. Rather it tries to provide a framework for learning and discussion.

I also tried to write this book with the idea that history is not something that happened and is over, but that continues on in various ways into the modern world. The history of the First Societies is *our* history, regardless of where we live on this globe. In that sense, I hope the book can open a classroom discussion about our modern age and its attitude to the past. Although modernity has escalated the terms of engagement with disastrous results for First Society people this book is not a lament. In fact, the entire book is built on the premise of history's dynamic force. To that end, the book operates transtemporally and transgeographically so that students can get a sense of the different and overlapping histories that are still operating around and even through our contemporary culture.

And finally, the GPS coordinates are given throughout the book, so that readers can study sites for themselves in the contemporary conditions. Some sites still exist undisturbed; others might be under parking lots, or in the middle of cities. There is a lesson even in that.

ENDNOTE

1. W. J. V. Saville, *In Unknown New Guinea* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1926), 30.