

Report from a Nigerian Village: Space, Culture and Materials in Bure Area

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SOMMARIO

Una buona parte dell'attenzione scientifica rivolta alle piccole comunità della Nigeria settentrionale è stata caratterizzata da interessi ed esigenze di tipo linguistico-descrittivo. Spesso (giustamente) dettate dallo stato di forte rischio d'estinzione delle lingue parlate da queste comunità, tali esigenze hanno declinato il fato dei gruppi linguistici minoritari senza operare una distinzione funzionale tra *comunità* e *comunità linguistica*. Venuto meno il fattore identitario rappresentato dalla lingua si scopre che a morire sono le lingue, non i villaggi, e che la socialità identitaria rimane viva attraverso il territorio. Questo contributo analizza la distribuzione degli spazi sociali e dei materiali impiegati nel villaggio di Bure, un insediamento rurale isolato a nord-est di Bauchi (Nigeria). I dati impiegati sono stati raccolti in una missione di terreno svolta tra marzo e giugno 2011.

1. Preliminaries

This article offers a descriptive approach to the study of spaces and materials in the village of Bure in northern Nigeria. No tarred road connects this small rural settlement to the closest towns - Soro, west of Bure on the Bauchi-Darazo road, and Kirfi, eastwards, a few kilometers from Alkaleri on the Bauchi-Gombe road. Unreached by power lines, plunged into the bush, Bure went through its isolation without keeping apart from the linguistic and cultural pressure exerted by Hausa and the Islamic system of belief. I will draw a brief profile of the village by taking into account linguistic, socio-cultural and architectonic features.

2. Bure area: setting, community and language

2.1 Setting

The village of Bure ($10^{\circ}31'26.87''\text{N}$ $10^{\circ}19'46.40''\text{E}$, Kirfi District, Kirfi Local Government Area) is located 50 kilometers north-east of Bauchi in northern Nigeria. Bure is home to about 500 people.

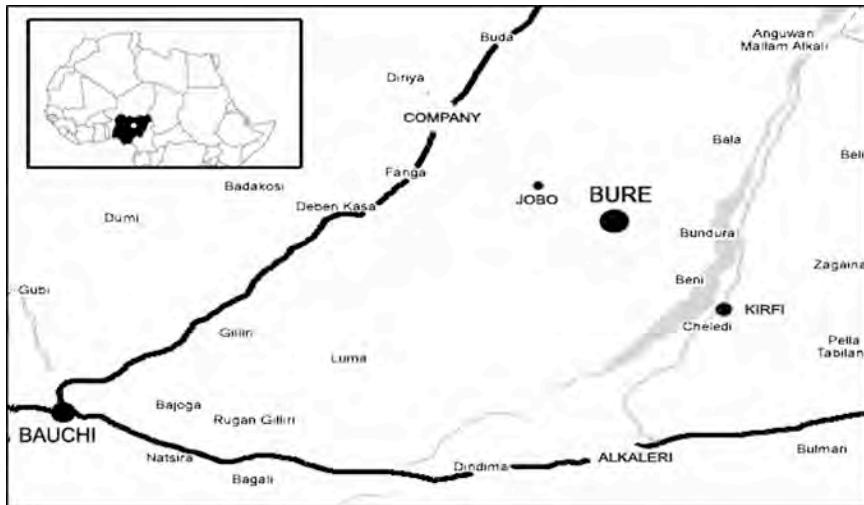
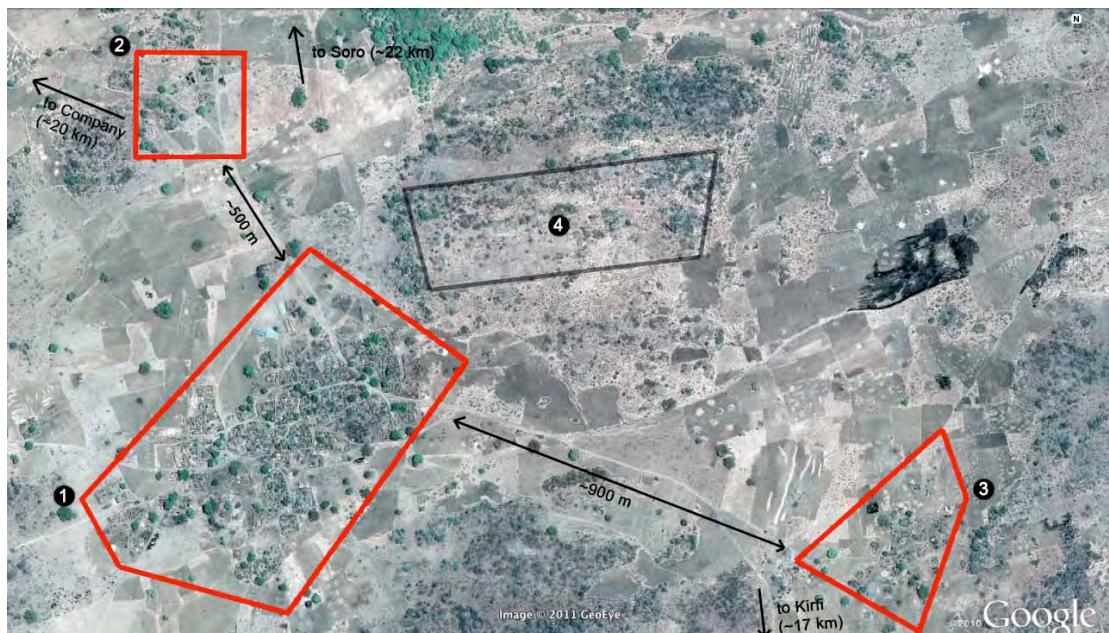


Fig. 1 - North-east Bauchi area

Bure area is made of three settlements whose locations are highlighted in figure 2. The village of Bure, which includes the market and the *gidan sarki* ('the Emir's house'), is highlighted in polygon (1), whereas (2) and (3) indicate two small settlements located approximately 500 meters north-west and 900 meters east from the center of the village respectively.



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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bure 2. Bure west, also called Jakkul 3. Bure east, also called Tudun Wada 4. Bure hill, known as Kilo (original settlement, now uninhabited) |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Pic. 1 - Bure area
(GoogleEarth image: Image©2011 GeoEye)

Two polling stations have been assigned to Bure: one in the village, near the Emir's house, and the other in Bure West, established for that part of population residing west of Bure in isolated compounds adjacent to the fields. The settlement highlighted in (3) seems to be something different: inhabited by a Christian minority, it is the newest and farthest (about 900 meters from Bure village) aggregation in the area. It belongs to Bure, but it does not have any administrative status. The area marked in (4) is the hill where Bure people settled before moving down (probably for farming and trading reasons) when "the white man showed up", as the elders say. On the hill, flat and rocky, are preserved the structures of a few stone-made buildings (see picture 6) as well as the palm and baobab trees that are inside what used to be the old Emir's palace. The region is relatively poor. As clearly shown in the satellite image above, the land is cultivated and farming is the main economic activity in the area. *Ma Bure* (Bure people in Bure language, singular is *no Bure*) farm beans, rice, millet, maize and Guinea corn. There is a small production of mangoes (destined for the most part to internal and areal markets) and guava fruits. Pasture and grazing are led by the Fulani component living in nearby Fulfulde-speaking settlements.

2.2 The Bure language

The original language of Bure is *Bubbure* (lit. 'mouth of Bure'), an Afro-Asiatic language (ISO code: 639-3 bvh) belonging to the West branch of the Chadic family. It is spoken by a very few speakers of great-grand parental generation: their number is not deemed to exceed 50 units. The language is critically endangered and, without classificatory euphemisms, can be considered nearly gone. Among the most indicative signs of linguistic endangerment and (unavoidable) forthcoming extinction, I will list the following (Brenzinger *et al.* 2003): (a) the language is used only in a very restricted set of domains and for a very few functions; (b) *Bubbure* is not used in any new domain; (c) there is no orthography available to the community; (d) the dominant language is the sole official language, while minority languages are neither recognized nor protected; and (e) the language is in process to be documented (Batic 2011a, 2011b), but no previous comprehensive description exists.¹ Most importantly, the community's attitude towards the loss of *Bubbure* is quite passive, if not indifferent. Almost *ma Bure* are Hausa mother-tongue speakers. A few elders are bilingual in *Bubbure* and Hausa. Some people do speak also Fulfulde.

2.3 Community, hausaization and identity

Ma Bure tend to consider themselves as Hausa. "I am a Hausa man from Bure and my people are *Burawa*".² so Abubakar, my host in the village, the Emir's first grand-son. Even if now there is no evident relationship between the former language of Bure and the ethnic identity of its people, things used to be quite different in the past. Andrew Haruna reports that the people trace their origins to three different areas, hence the distinction of three different clans (Haruna 2000:234). The elders Haruna worked with narrated the story of three hunters who, in search for game, met under a promontory

¹ Nevertheless, a few linguists came in contact with the language and worked on it on different levels producing either unpublished or published material. These scholars are: Rudolf Leger, Bernard Caron and Andrew Haruna (1993, 1996, 2000).

² Hausa word for Bure people.

called Sàuyà. The three original groups (represented in oral history by the three hunters) spoke different languages: the first two groups came from a relatively close Chadic speaking area, whereas the third one migrated from the south, probably speaking a Jukun (Benue-Congo) language. *Bubbure*, the language of Bure, became the language of these three groups:

“[...] the Bubburè language = ‘let us die together’³ (which is neither the language of the three groups) emerged as lingua franca. The group from Sânwà was named, Bàadaa = “chief of the hunters” and the one from Yaga was named Kùle = “blacksmith”, and was in charge of producing hunting tools for the community. The third group which is from Kola (of Jukunoid origin) was named Kolo = “Chief priest of spiritual worship” [...] My informants recalled that at a certain point in time (a period of about 8 kings ago), the members of the other two clans (Bàadaa and Kùle) lost their powers and prestige when they took wives from the neighbouring ethnic groups (Hausa/Fulani)” (Haruna 2000:234)

At a certain point in the past the local belief system was replaced by Islam. Even if we do not know when this happened, it is reasonable to think that the shift from a traditional to an Islamic system took place in recent time (that is not many decades ago).⁴ The disappearance of local religion from the experiential world of the community as well as from the lexicon employed to describe it may be associated with a more general process of shift and loss that affected this specific geographical area over an indeterminate period of time. For example, other significant cultural domains involved in such a process are war and brewery. These domains witnessed a reduction of experiential content (that is, war and brewery-related actions lost importance in solving conflicts and beverage tradition respectively) and, as a consequence, a weakening of the lexicon. When the experience is not performed over a long period of time, the language might lose memory of it. What does happen when a community abandons bilingualism to adopt (or accept) the *lingua franca* as its sole language? Two different scenarios are possible: if the lexical stock of the vehicular language includes culture-related terms common both to the vehicular and the local language, then these terms are more likely to survive and be used; on the contrary, if culture-related items (e.g. terms referring to specific objects, ceremonies, practices, etc.) belonging to the local language are totally unknown to the vehicular language, then those lexical items are doomed to disappear. The table below clarifies the two different scenarios:

³ But the etymology for Bubbure seems to be quite different: *bùyéé* ‘mouth’ + *Búrèè* ‘Bure’ = *bùbbúrèè*, lit. mouth of Bure.

⁴ That is what may be suggested by the comparison with other communities of northern Nigeria which, and for different reasons, kept alive their ties between culture, language and identity.

1 st scenario: WAR		2 nd scenario: BREWERY	
Hausa	Bubbure	Hausa	Bubbure
Terms are present	Terms are present	Terms are partly present, but culturally inactive	Terms are present
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • war is a common experience; • war-related terms coexist in both languages; <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bubbure war-related terms will coexist with the respective Hausa terms for a certain period of time. There will be a progressive lexical weakening due to the pressure exerted by Hausa. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • brewery is not a common experience; • the adoption of Hausa as <i>lingua franca</i> goes along with a process of cultural hausaization; • brewery tradition has been abandoned by many Hausa speaking communities; <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bubbure brewery-related terms disappeared during the very first stage of the shift from bilingualism to monolingualism. Only basic term are remembered (e.g. beer). 	

Table 1. - War and brewery in Bubbure: linguistic and cultural outcomes

Then, we could also contemplate the case in which the vehicular language is adopted as a culture-independent tool. To be realistic, this scenario must be understood in a context of, let's say, pure vehicularity - that is a situation where the *lingua franca* fulfills a demand for communication in extra-domestic context and does not exert a pressure so strong to put at risk the life of local languages. Another condition to be added to this third scenario is a *cultural differential* between the cultural area where the *lingua franca* started spreading and the target areas. Such a differential can be defined by (ideal) oppositions. Table 2 synthesizes this case:

3 rd Scenario		
	Vehicular language	Local language
Sociolinguistic features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the language is spoken as a first language by people who feel to belong to the Islamic community; • the language is perceived as 'Islamic'; • the vehicular language is productive only in a few restricted domains; <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the religious reference point in the community is not Islam; • the local language is used in domestic as well extra-domestic contexts; • the language is not endangered;
Outcome		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Culture-oriented terms are not endangered; (b) Vehicular language does not represent the main threat to linguistic vitality.

Tab. 2 - Vehicularity and linguistic strength

Since the main goal of these scenarios was to exemplify the loss of culture-oriented lexical items as a consequence of cultural change and assimilation, I will not go further into this discussion. Establishing what determined the predisposition of Bure to linguistic and cultural assimilation is a hard task. The fact of being isolated - or perhaps the fact of not being sufficiently isolated -, the limited number of speakers in

the monolingual stage, the necessity to adhere to a new state of things (from hunting and gathering to farming, new trades, etc.), all this may have played a role in determining identity modulation.

3. Social space in Bure

Referred to the context of a small Nigerian village, the expression ‘social space’ should be understood as a *designated place* where people gather and interact even for reasons other than mere socialization. I formulate this working definition to draw a distinction between such places and all the unrestricted area of the village, that is the area whose access is not limited by social conventions or property rights.

The main social places are listed as follows:

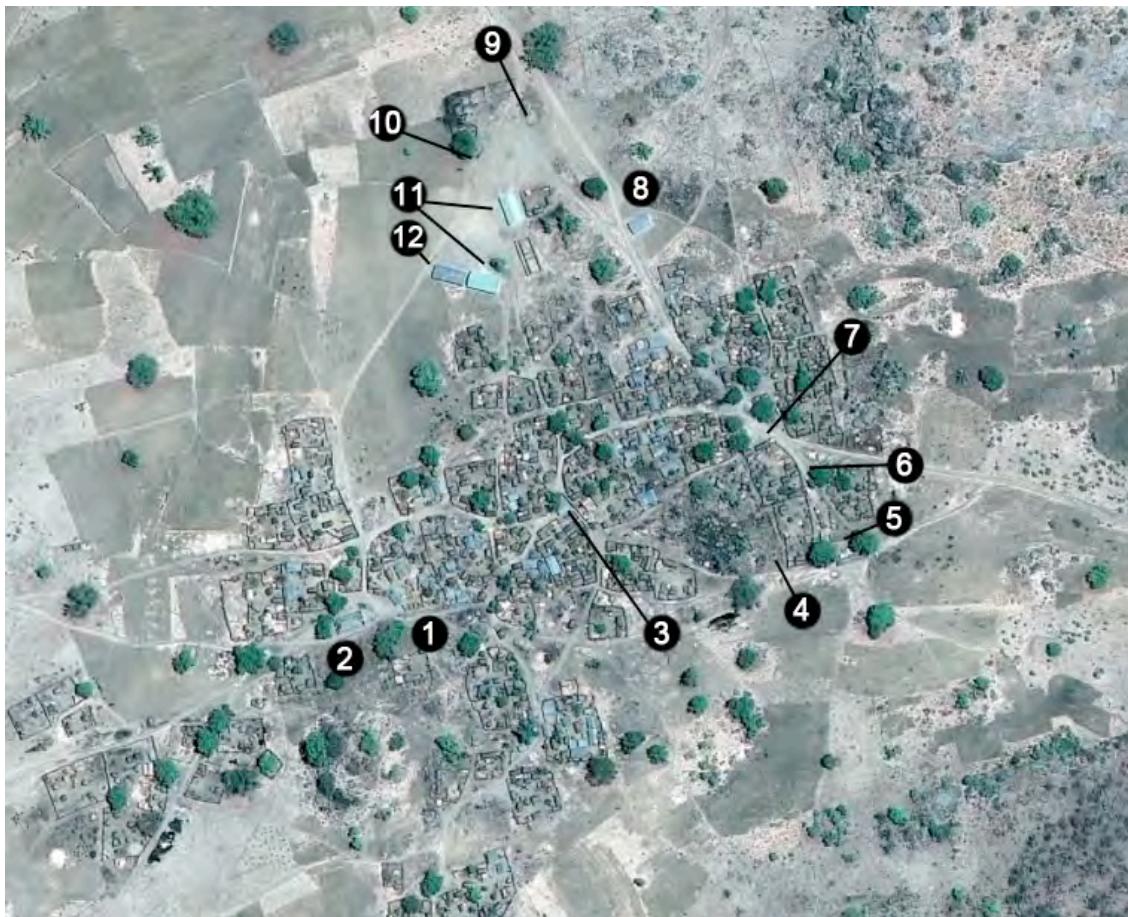
- (a) market: market stalls liven up once a week during market day which in Bure is on Tuesday. The market attracts people from the neighbouring villages. *Ma Bure* do not use this area for any particular purposes during the rest of the week. The only spot presenting a constant activity is the butcher stall located at the north-eastern corner of the market.
- (b) shops area: this area is the heart of the village. Shops are arranged around a clearing whose function is quite similar to that of an European square. *Ma Bure* use to gather here on market day, on Friday after *sallar Jumma'a*, the congregational prayer, and in any other occasion of particular interest to the community. Different kind of products are sold in the shops: food items, medicines, fabric, pesticides, pure water,⁵ etc. These items are usually bought by the trader at the central market in Bauchi. The merchandise is carried from Bauchi to Company⁶ by car or mini-van, then from Company to Bure by 4WD vehicle. A few shops use to deal in items not found in other stalls, such as pineapples (bought in Soro, on the Bauchi-Darazo-Maiduguri road) or cola nuts (regularly bought in Kano).
- (c) laundry point and well: young women and children meet here when coming to fill their buckets or do the laundry.

⁵ Plastic sachets of filtered water (500 or 600 milliliters) sold for 5 Naira per unit (≈ 0.022 EUR, mid-market rates: 2011-10-27 09:37 UTC).

⁶ A village grown around a leprosarium known as Company Kuturu (*kuturu* ‘leper’ in Hausa). Now the village is referred to simply as Company.

(d) school:

many families do not send their boys and girls to school. Nevertheless, the area get extremely lively in the evening when football matches are played and young people gather under the school veranda to chat and play cards.



1. Emir's compound	7. Shops area
2. New mosque	8. Hospital
3. Old mosque	9. Well
4. Slaughter platform	10. Laundry place
5. Market stalls	11. New primary school
6. Butcher's place	12. Old primary school

Pic. 3 - Bure

(e) mosque:

Bure has three mosques: the newest, built with concrete bricks, is located near the Emir's house. A tree opposite the structure with a loudspeaker placed at its top functions as a minaret. The other two mosques, erected in mud-brick and straw covered, are located in the center of the village and in the market area respectively.

(f) Emir's house:

the house of the Emir (that is, the chief of Bure) plays a special role in the life of the village. Strangers pay respect to the chief when entering the village, usually by greeting and offering him a small gift (bread, fruits, cola nuts, etc.). In the occasion of political rallies, the candidates use to start campaigning in the village by visiting the Emir and dancing in front of his house. Besides, the polling station assigned to Bure during the elections is located in the entrance of the Emir's compound.



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|----|------------------------|
| 1. | Hospital |
| 2. | Primary school |
| 3. | Well and laundry point |

Pic. 4 - Hospital, well and laundry point

4. Materials and buildings

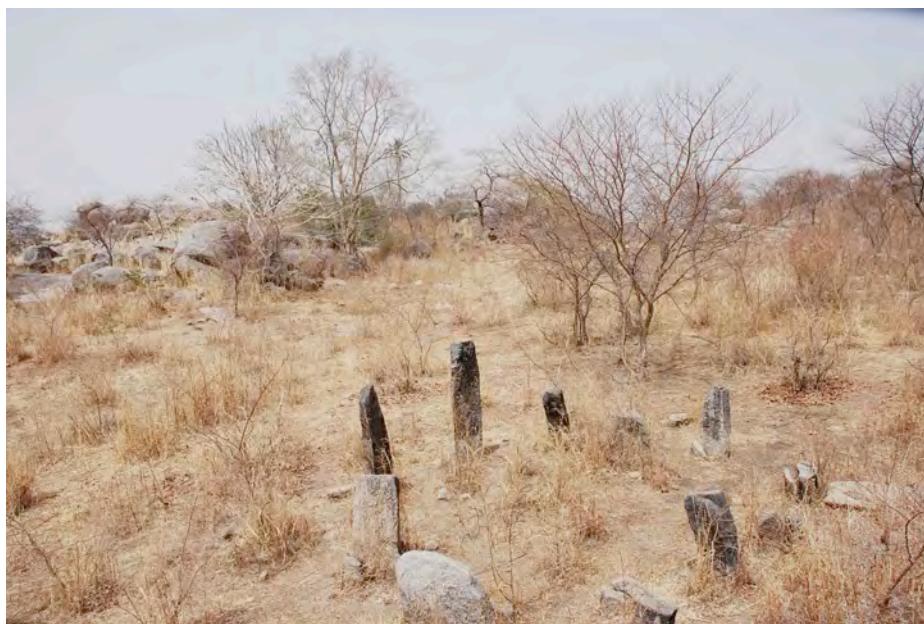
4.1 The hill

The hill dominating the village is a flat and rocky promontory visited by goats and *Ma Bure* looking either for a good view or network connection for their mobile phones. This hill - designated with the Hausa word *dutse* ‘rock’ - is the site where *Ma Bure* lived until the “white man showed up” (as the elders are used to say) and represents the closest link to their past. Unfortunately, not many remains are left. As testimony of this past there are the palm tree inside what used to be the king’s palace (picture 5) and some menhir-like structures (picture 6) whose original function is no longer remembered by the elders of the village.

These structures consist of 10-11 menhir-like rough stones driven into the ground forming an irregular circle. The limited number of buildings of this kind and their small size suggest a different use from that of a simple room. Among the hypothesis we could formulate there is the possibility that such constructions were erected to store food (may be small amounts of food surpluses)⁷ or as shrines functional to the pre-Islamic belief.



Pic. 5 - The baobab and palm trees on the hill



Pic. 6 - Menhir-like circle on the hill

⁷ “Until recently, the people claimed to be hunters and food-gatherers” (Haruna 2000:232).

Apart from those structures, several stones can be found scattered throughout the hill. Questioned about their use, the elders explain that they were employed to draw the huts' perimeter.

4.2 Traditional buildings

Bure traditional buildings as they exist now downhill share an architectural pattern which is found throughout northern Nigeria.

The prototypical house is a compound made up by several elements. It is surrounded by a fence (sometimes by a low mud-brick wall) and includes different units detached or adjoining from each other. Those units are: (a) entrance room, (b) bedrooms (individual rooms for wives and, if possible, for unmarried young men), (c) kitchen, (d) granary (one or more than one), and (e) bath.

- (a) entrance room: it is the main access to the house and the place where guests (neighbours, friends, strangers, etc.) announce their arrival. It has two open passages (one communicating with the street and the other with the inner of the compound) but no window, can be circular or square in plan and can be used for temporary storage.
- (b) bedroom: square in plan, bedrooms have a closeable door and a window. The structure is made of mud and straw. Sometimes concrete is used to pave the ground and/or the doorstop.
- (c) kitchen: kitchens are characterized by a circular plan; they have an entrance, no door and one small square window for ventilation (see picture 9). Cooking is usually carried out outdoors and the kitchen is mainly used when either the rain or the wind (e.g. during the harmattan season) hinder the preparation of the food.
- (d) granary: this structure is used as a depot to store the harvest. It has a circular plan and a door to keep away sheep and other animals (see picture 8). Its diameter slightly increases towards the top where, at about four-fifths of its total height, it decreases again assuming the shape of a truncated cone. The top is surmounted by a radial wooden cover. This kind of structure is quite strong and, if regularly plastered with mud, can last for many years.
- (e) bath: the bath is an open space surrounded by a fence located at the back of the room⁸ or in one of the corners of the compound.

⁸ In fact, *bayan ëaki*, the Hausa expression used to designate the bath/toilets, literally means 'back of room'.

Roofs are made of straw. This material works as a good heat isolator and is usually preferred to metal sheets. Metal sheets imply an important economic effort by the family, but has two advantages: (a) their employment guarantees a waterproof solution for houses, kitchens and granaries, and (b) it is not necessary to replace them every year before or at the start of the rainy season. The main disadvantage of metal roofs is that room temperatures can reach uncomfortable values in the dry season, making the heat almost unbearable during the day.

Picture 7 shows a possible distribution of structures and materials in a traditional compound.



1.	Metal roof	5.	Deposits/granaries
2.	Entrance	6.	Recently thatched roof
3.	Mud-brick unit	7.	Bath
4.	Straw	8.	Fence

Pic. 7 - Traditional compound



Pic. 8 - A rumbu, the traditional granary

In the following picture some Emir's relatives are re-building a kitchen collapsed during the rainy season.



- | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Grinding | 5. Preparing the bricks by compacting the mixture |
| 2. Watering | 6, 7, 8. Building |
| 3. Mixing the earth with straw | |
| 4. Making the mixture homogenous | |

Pic. 9 - Building a kitchen

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