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## **Social Construction and the Invisible Gender Roles in Talensi House Construction**

### **Abstract:**

*»Women do not build«, is a Talensi saying that is known to the young and the old of both sexes. Is there any truth in this saying? Or can a building be constructed by men only? Gender is a basic structuring principle for Talensi activities including house construction. However, some gendered roles are socially more visible and acknowledged than others. Gender is used here to refer to the socially, culturally, psychologically and historically constructed identities that the Talensi perceive as male and female. The society has accordingly defined roles for men and women in house construction. This paper examines gender perspectives among the Talensi of Tengzug in indigenous house construction. Who does what on the basis of biological, cultural, social and historical experiences? The methods used in gathering data included interviewing a cross section of people of both sexes, differing ages and social status. Ethnographic data was collected by personal observation and participation in gendered activities. The research found adequate evidence to show that both sexes and gender groups contribute substantially to house construction. Men are responsible for the erection of building structures and roofing while women do the plastering and flooring. It also shows that the invisibility of women in Talensi indigenous house construction is set and guided by local cultural norms and practices that are underpinned by a patrilineal system of inheritance. A critical examination of the total building experiences of the Talensi society shows that women do build.*

*Keywords: Gender, Gender Roles, House Construction, Season, Labour*

## **Zu Gesellschaftsstruktur und unsichtbaren Geschlechterrollen im Hausbau der Talensi**

### **Zusammenfassung:**

*»Frauen bauen nicht«, besagt ein Sprichwort der Talensi, das Jung und Alt beiderlei Geschlechts wohlbekannt ist. Enthält dieses Sprichwort ein Körnchen Wahrheit? Kann ein Gebäude überhaupt ausschließlich von Männern errichtet werden? Geschlecht ist ein grundlegendes Strukturierungsprinzip bei allen Aktivitäten der Talensi einschließlich des Hausbaues. Allerdings sind einige geschlechtsbezogene Rollen sozial sichtbarer und anerkannter als andere. Geschlecht (gender) wird hier verwendet, um auf die sozial, kulturell, psychologisch und historisch konstruierten Identitäten Bezug zu nehmen, mit denen die Talensi*

*Männer und Frauen wahrnehmen. Entsprechend hat die Gesellschaft spezifische Rollen für Männer und Frauen beim Hausbau vorgesehen. Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht die Geschlechterperspektiven der Talensi von Tengzug beim Bau traditioneller Häuser. Wer tut was auf der Grundlage von biologischen, kulturellen, sozialen und historischen Erfahrungen? Die Methodologie bei der Datenerhebung umfasste Interviews mit einem Querschnitt der Bevölkerung, d. h. mit Personen beiderlei Geschlechts, unterschiedlichen Alters sowie verschiedenem sozialen Status. Weiter wurden ethnographische Daten durch teilnehmende Beobachtung von geschlechtsbezogenen Aktivitäten gesammelt. Die Untersuchung konnte zeigen, dass beide Geschlechter substantiell zum Hausbau beitragen. Männer sind verantwortlich für das Errichten des Gebäudegrundgerüsts sowie des Dachs, während Frauen das Verputzen und die Herrichtung des Fußbodens übernehmen. Die Studie verdeutlichte weiterhin, dass die ›Unsichtbarkeit‹ von Frauen beim Errichten traditioneller Häuser der Talensi von lokalen kulturellen Normen und Praktiken bestimmt wird, die wiederum durch ein patrilineales Erbschaftssystem gestützt werden. Eine kritische Prüfung aller mit dem Bauen zusammenhängenden Praktiken der Talensi zeigt, dass Frauen bauen.*

*Schlüsselwörter: Gender, Geschlechterrollen, Hausbau, Jahreszeiten, Arbeit/Arbeitskräfte*

## **Introduction**

In July 2006 and January 2007, ethnographic research was conducted at Tengzug in the Tong Hills in the Upper East Region of Ghana to investigate the construction of Talensi indigenous houses and the gender roles involved. The traditional houses of the Talensi are circular with flat-roof although in recent years there has been the introduction of rectangular forms (Figure 1–2). The buildings are constructed with mud (a mixture of earth and water). Neighbouring villages in the Kassena-Nankani district in the Upper East Region have similar circular structures (Fiedermutz-Laun 2005, 252). In the process of constructing houses, for human habitation or for animals, the labour of men, women and children is crucial at stages such as the acquisition of raw materials, the actual construction and their completion. In spite of this, the traditional Talensi idea of house construction is perceived as solely a male activity. The contribution and involvement of women is not considered at any point as a building activity. Hence, their saying »it is men that build houses«.

Men build and own houses. This element of the lack of cultural association of women with house construction prompted the need for this research. It has been proved by this research that women are intensively involved in all the processes of house construction. Talensi house building is a complex activity divided into segments that are performed by different genders.



Fig. 1: A circular Talensi compound. Photo by E. Nyarko.



Fig. 2: Flat roofing of a Talensi compound. Photo by author.

### Study Area and Historical Background

Tengzug is a Talensi community in the Upper East Region of Ghana (Fig. 3). The region is bounded in the north by the Republic of Burkina Faso, in the west by Upper West Region, in the south by the Northern Region and in the east by the Republic of Togo. It covers an area of 8842 square kilometers with Bolgatanga as its capital. The land of the Talensi is relatively flat with a few hills to the East and southeast. Tengzug is situated in the savanna grassland and Sahel geographic zones of Ghana. It lies 17 km southeast of

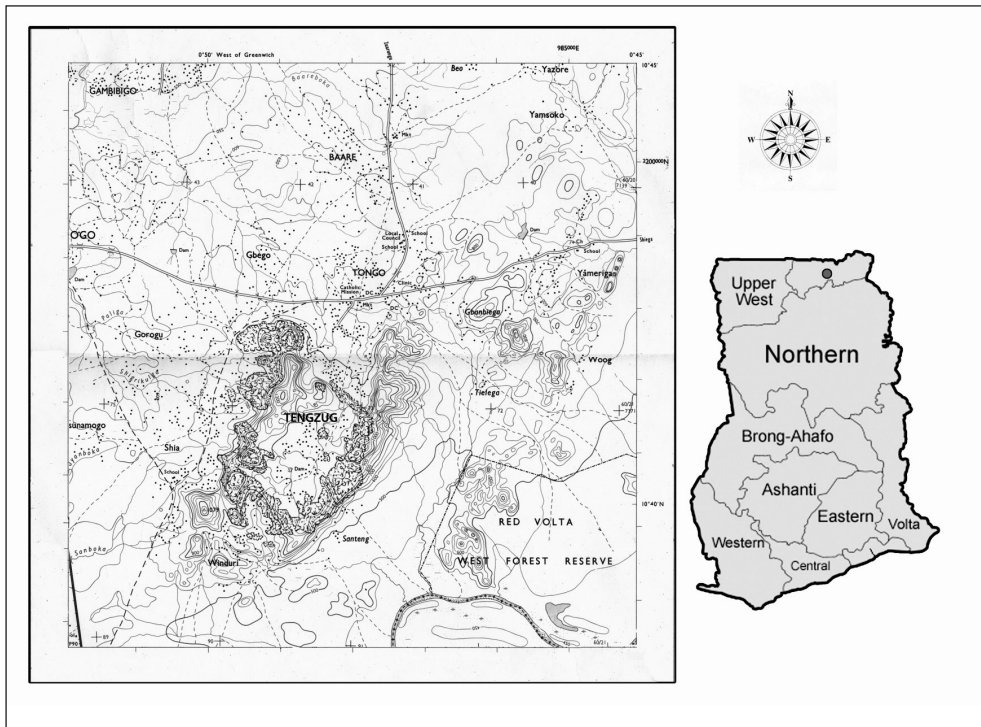


Fig. 3: Topographic map of Tengzug area (insert: Ghana Map). Source: Ghana Geological Survey Dept.

Bolgatanga. The land of the Talensi is merely a portion of a far greater, ecologically uniform region, marked off only by artificial boundaries (Fortes 1945, 16).

The Talensi reside on the High Plains, bordered on the east by the Red Volta and on the south by the White Volta, which eventually meet at the base of the Gambaga escarpment. The landscape is a gently undulating plain (elevation of 150–180 m) with scattered granitic outcrops and boulders (Gabrilopoulos 1995, 20). The land falls under the savannah climatic belt characterized by a single rainfall season alternating with a single drought season which regulate annual pattern of human activity (Prussin 1969, 9). The Talensi people live east and northeast of Bolgatanga, the regional capital of the Upper East Region. They are divided into two main groups, the Namoos and the Hill Talis. According to oral tradition, the former are migrants claiming a relatively recent Mamprusi ancestry and are supposed to have arrived in the area perhaps some 350 to 400 years ago. While the latter, the Talis, are believed to be indigenes of the region who »sprung from the earth itself« and inhabit the Tong Hills located on a plateau.<sup>1</sup> The Tong Hills covers a relatively small area of roughly 7 km by 3 km (Insoll/Kankpeyeng/MacLean 2007, 30). The study area falls under the indigenous Talis.

Thirty communities were identified by Eyifa (2007, 76) as constituting the Talensi. Among them are Tengzug, Santeng, Wakii, Tongo, Baare, Yinduri and Gbego (Figure 3). African traditional religion is the main religion of the Talensi. The people speak a dialect

1 Arhin 1981, 4; Gabrilopoulos/Mather/Apentiik 2002, 225 ff.; Insoll 2006, 224; Insoll/Kankpeyeng/MacLean 2007, 31.

of the Mole-Dagbane group of languages. They are generally subsistence farmers who as indicated by Arhin, cultivated maize and millet, and kept some livestock, cattle, sheep, goats and fowls for their own use before the introduction of large scale rice farming. They have a patrilineal family system of inheritance like the Ga Adangme and Ewe people, unlike the Akan people, who have in Ghana a matrilineal family system (Allman/Parker 2005, 28; Arhin 1981, 3 ff.). The natural environment plays a key role in the lifeways of the Talensi by influencing and supporting their social and cultural lifeways (Eyifa 2007, 163).

According to Arhin (1981, 6), the indigenous and migrant Talensi were grouped into clans. Their traditional political institutions include the offices of secular chiefs, with limited titular political authority over sections, clans and communities and, in the case of paramount chiefs, over entire ethnic groups. Chieftaincy may be a borrowed institution imported by Mossi, Mamprusi and Dagomba invaders in the mid-fifteenth century. Complementary authority resides in the indigenous religious office of the *tendaana*, or earth priest, which is of greater antiquity. Earth priests concern themselves with mediation between gods and men, the fertility of the earth, and land allocation. They are closely associated with the predominant traditional religions involving ancestor cults, although there has been recent limited adoption of Islam and Christianity (Gabrilopoulos/Mather/Apentiik 2002, 224).

The Talensi have been extensively studied by the anthropologist Meyer Fortes since the 1940s (1945; 1949), contributing significantly in understanding the social life of the Talensi. Allman and Parker (2005) have studied the historical developments within the area focusing on religious practices and beliefs. This study did not benefit from any archaeological research until archaeological survey at Tengzug in the Tong Hills began in 2004 (Insoll 2006, 224; Insoll/MacLean/Kankpeyeng 2008) contributing to the understanding of African Indigenous Religion via Talensi material culture. Excavations conducted at the Nyoo shrine in Tengzug revealed standing stones and stone arrangements, pot spread, complete pots and iron bracelets among other materials. Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL) dating provides dates between the mid 3<sup>rd</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century AD for the standing stone site, while the area of stone arrangements dates from the mid 11<sup>th</sup> century AD indicating Nyoo has been a site for ritual practices for some considerable time (Insoll/Kankpeyeng/MacLean 2007, 34). However, dating of both occupation and cultural developments at Tengzug will become more certain when a chronological sequence is reconstructed (Kankpeyeng/Insoll/MacLean 2009, 178). Other works conducted on the Talensi are an inventory of cultural heritage and an ethnoarchaeological study of Talensi house compounds (Insoll/Kankpeyeng/MacLean 2009, 42; Kankpeyeng 2005). Gabrilopoulos (1995) conducted an ethnoarchaeological study which focused on Talensi compounds and their special organization with the aim of identifying factors pertaining to the built environment. His work however, did not place emphasis on house construction processes and the gender roles involved which this study throws more light on.

## Research Objectives

The research sought to first describe Talensi society and lifeways, second examine the forms of buildings and structures, third determine the factors influencing house forms



and designs, and finally determine the specific gender roles in house construction. The aim was to find out the gender effect on Talensi house construction and decoration at Tenzug.

### Conceptual Framework

Gender is the social and cultural construction of the biological sexes. A person's biological make up does not necessarily correspond to gender. Sex refers to the biological distinction of being male or female. It is determined by chromosomes, is reflected in genital and hormonal differences (Hodges 1987, 261). For this reason, an understanding of the Talensi worldview on gender was seen as being relevant for understanding the people, their social behaviour, and their social activities such as house construction. Gender is defined by Kwolek-Folland (1995, 3) as a set of abstractions rooted in biology and expressed in social, cultural and historical terms. It is a system of interrelated ideals about men's and women's social roles, self-definition and cultural experience that is grounded in the historical process. Conkey and Gero (1991, 8) also define gender as a constitutive element of human social relations based upon culturally ascribed similarities and differences between and among males and females. Similarly, Miller (1999, 23) refers to gender as patterns of culturally constructed and learned behaviours and ideas attributed to males, females or sometimes a blend or »third gender«. In this paper therefore, I use the term gender to refer to socially, culturally, psychologically and historically constructed identities based on biological sex categorization. In this regard, an examination of the roles and responsibilities of women and men with regards to Talensi house construction is done.

This means that it should be possible to identify distinct gendered social roles, images, inequalities and equalities as well as differences and similarities that are socially accepted due to the people's experiences over time at Tenzug. However, one needs to be mindful of the difficulties of mapping the present into the past equally. The research employed the concept of gender to look at the role of the voiceless agencies in contemporary indigenous Talensi house construction. This is because gender is a lived experience and is not necessarily the same in all cultures. The study of the lived experiences of the present-day Talensi offers analogous insights into the interpretation of the archaeological record. Ethnographic data on Talensi gendered activities would also be useful to future archaeological reconstructions. Material culture constructs and maintains gender interactions on a macro-societal level, but may also construct gender awareness on an individual level from a very early age (Sofaer 2007, 91). It can be said that the lived experiences of people influence the manufacture, use and discard of cultural materials that archaeologists use as evidence for reconstruction of past lifeways. It is therefore possible to approach a gender reconstruction of materials recovered from excavations.

## Research Methods Used

A number of research methods that aided in getting an emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspective of Talensi lifeways, the reasons and ideologies behind house construction were employed. Informal and formal interviews were conducted in the field by asking a cross section of the people questions on what they do and reasons behind what they do. In order to understand the gendered views, people of various social status, and sex were randomly selected from four out of the eight sections in Tengzug and interviewed. Most of the one-on-one interview sessions ended up as a multi-participant interview with observers and onlookers participating occasionally. In all 93 people were interviewed comprising 35 men, 37 women, 9 male children and 12 female children. Women and children were significant informants. The interview was conducted in a flexible way and there were occasions men, women and children were interviewed in a group. Documented and archival records on the Talensi, indigenous architecture and mural decorations were also consulted. Visual images (photographs) of indigenous architectural decorations and designs were gathered and analyzed. Oral historical data was collected in addition to personal field notes and observations.

For effective personal observation and participation in gendered activities, a survey and documentation of old buildings and new buildings under construction was made. Although the researcher could systematically follow the building processes and document them, but due to the fact that the researcher is of the same gender group she was only able to participate and have a feel of the experiences when the activity involved was restricted to women such as flooring.

Four sections specifically Kpatari, Buncheog, Sakpie and Gundaat out of the eight sections in Tengzug community, as previously stated, were sampled and visited. The sampling strategy was based upon observations made in the field such as the variation in architectural styles in the various sections. At the time of the research, compounds associated with Kpatari and Buncheog were circular houses with flat mud roofs except the house of the assemblyman and the only government primary school that were built of cement blocks. At Kpatari and Buncheog, three of the community shrines namely Tonna'ab, which is paramount among the earth shrines, Bonab and Nnoo can be located. Other compounds associated with Sakpie and Gundaat section had both circular and rectangular houses with roofs of thatch and modern materials such as aluminium or galvanised sheets. These observed variations in architectural styles informed the random selection of compounds. It has been pointed out by Kankpeyeng (2005, 16 ff.) that, the Nyoo is the home of the Golib deity which abhors fire and therefore thatch, as it can cause a gusting fire resulting in calamities, is not used as building material. This explains the difference in architectural variations at Tengzug and the proscription against the use of thatch in house construction by the communities in Kpatari and Buncheog sections at Tengzug.

## Research Findings

Among the Talensi there is still a tradition of building houses by people who have not received any formal apprenticeship. Building knowledge is practically acquired through observation of the building processes performed by experienced builders. By the age of five, young boys and girls assist their parents in daily household activities thereby learning what the society expects of them. Through this, from age of seven upward, boys observe and assist in carrying molds for building while girls assist in fetching water and sand for plastering and in the process acquire basic building knowledge. The research revealed that the Talensi view on building is not the same as that held in urban areas, where both men and women are employed in construction firms and are involved in construction activities without limitations.

For the Talensi, an earthen wall structure that has been roofed is a building. However, not all buildings are habitable by humans. A building that is fit for human habitation requires plastering and flooring. Building of houses is perceived as hard work and involves digging, preparing and moulding of earth to put up the walls of the structure after which it is roofed. These processes which are claimed to require much »strength« is done by men because the people of Tengzug believe men are stronger for such a task. Psychologically, this notion has been inculcated in women for them to believe that they cannot build houses because only men possess that strength and energy. This is a socio-cultural gendering of task by the Talensi. What women do after the men have built a house is to »cover« the building. To »cover« implies activities such as plastering and decorating the walls, and flooring. In order words, women beautify the built structure for habitation. Incidentally these activities are culturally not considered as hard or even harder work to count toward the building process. In the view of men and women, plastering and flooring takes time and requires patience an attribute which is ascribed to women. It is mistakenly considered as not requiring strength and non-exhausting. For this reason, women who are thought as naturally patient and devote much time in whatever they do, are considered the best gender group for these activities. Therefore, the Talensi view on house construction is that men put up structures and roof them while women »cover« the structures for habitation. Yet, what women do is not counted as building and so »women do not build«. This saying perhaps affirms the Talensi conception that men own houses and women are married to help maintain the house. Similar observations of »invisible« producers of pottery have been made by Wright (1991, 198). She notes for example that when either males or females participate in pottery production, discrepancies may occur in reporting which sex/gender is the »producer«. Often, one sex/gender is reported as sole producers even if the other sex/gender contributes.

Most of the raw materials used in building are locally derived and abundant in the natural environment. The locally available building materials are earth, water, wood (for support and cross poles), and cow dung. Cement is a recent introduction, which substitute the use of cow dung and extracted juice from boiled empty *dawadawa* fruit pods (*Parkia clappertoniana*, or *Lucust bean*). Sex (males and females) and gender (men and women) play a vital role in the acquisition and transportation of the raw materials used in building. An overview of the emic (the people's) perception is shown in Table 1. Build-



ing of houses is a cooperative venture and a process in which gender roles are clearly defined.

Table 1: Raw Material Transportation

Resource	Carriers/Gender	Comments
Earth for building walls	males/men	no carrying – it is dug close to the site
Earth for plastering and flooring	females/women	heavy to carry – different types of sand are used
Water for all building activities	females/women	heavy to carry
Wood for roofing	females/women	heavy to carry
Cement and Bitumen	males/men and females/women	it depends on the quantity bought
Others: animal and plant based	females/women	collected by women

## Discussion

Gender construction varies from one culture to the other and gendered roles also vary across cultures and within groups in the same culture. The processes and stages in house construction of the Talensi clearly depicts their unique cultural ideology on gender. Talensi ideology on gender is based on cultural historical experiences. It also shows the extent to which this gendered ideology is put into practice consciously and unconsciously. House construction involves a series of activities which include digging, preparing and moulding of earth to put up the walls, plastering the walls, roofing and flooring. Embedded in these activities are cultural ascriptions, decisions (who does what), behaviour and knowledge systems which are all based on gendered frameworks. There is also division of labour and the assignment of gendered roles rely more on socio-cultural assumptions and expectations than on biological or innate factors like strength.

Cultural decisions on house construction take into consideration a number of factors such as the climatic condition, availability of time and food. Seasonality in tropical environments in Ghana is determined by wet and dry phases as noted by Casey (1998, 52). Climate is a determinant for growth, type, size and quantity of vegetation (Prussin 1986, 26). The climate in Northern Ghana is characterized by one rainy season from May to October and a long spell of dry season from November to April. The climate changes determine the cultural activities and gendered lifeways of the Talensi. They lead a dual life as a means of adapting to the changing climatic pattern and making effective use of the seasons. These changes have been worked over time in a way that cultural practices are ordered according to the dictates of the climate. According to Casey (1998, 54), in seasonal tropical environments the farming schedule revolves around the coming of the rains. This was observed at Tengzug. The rainy season is a period for farming which is the main occupation of both men and women. Less social activities take place during

this season as men and women busy themselves with daily clearing and cultivating the land. Farming activities reduce by the end of the rains and harvesting and drying of farm produce start during the dry season. This is the period social activities are organized because of availability of time and food. Among the Talensi, harvesting of farm produce takes place from November to December. January to March is the time devoted to building, repair of old buildings, plastering, roofing, celebration of final funeral rite of deceased family members and celebration of festivals.

For instance, the annual Golib and Boaram festivals of the Talensi are celebrated in the dry season. Golib is celebrated by the Talensi who reside at Tengzug to appeal to the gods for good rains and successful farming seasons. Boaram is celebrated by the Talensi in the Bongo Traditional Area who reside at Bongo to give thanks to the gods for a good season (Eyifa 2007, 66 ff.). Fortes (1987, 98) quoted in Insoll (2009, 196) describes the Golib as the »cycle of the great festivals« of the Talensi. The festival is held at the end of the dry season and prior to the sowing of the early millet. It is composed of a variety of group dances, solemn rituals, and community fishing. The festival season also helps to acquaint families and cement social ties (Casey 2000, 35). There is no doubt that the dry season offers an avenue for the creation and reinforcement of social relationships and communal identity.

The dry and wet seasons also determine the availability of local raw materials such as water, earth, and wood suitable for the flat roofed building of the Talensi. The sources of water for building construction in the dry season are wells, ponds and streams. Among all the stages of house construction, it is the actual erection of walls that demands more drums of water. Due to this, the walls of rooms are erected from mid January to the end of February. This is the time sufficient amount of water can be drawn from the ponds and wells before they completely dry up. At the time of the research, boreholes were the source of drinking water at Tengzug. It has been noted that, since water is critical for any type of earthen construction, topography also determines the choice of construction materials, as well as their derivative forms. In much of the savannah, where earth is the most logical and abundant building resource, the alternating wet and dry seasons, which dictate the availability of water, inhibit its use in the construction process. The presence of surface hydrology and riverine networks facilitates construction by extending the building cycle beyond the limits imposed by seasonal rainfall. The availability of water for longer periods of time not only improves the workability of the construction material but reduces the labour time required for water transport (Prussin 1986, 31). The presence of a reservoir, or »dam« as marked on the Survey of Ghana Sheet 10001A3 (Insoll 2009, 192) and boreholes at Tengzug have not alleviated the problem of unreliable water supply for construction nor reduced the labour time required for water transport during the dry season. The boreholes often break down and as at the time of the research, only one was functioning. The boreholes are clean water source for human needs as well as animals. Water from borehole is not usually used for construction at Tengzug hence the labour time required for fetching water has not reduced.

The region's soil is »upland soil« mainly developed from granite rocks. It is shallow, low in soil fertility, weak with low organic matter content and predominantly coarse textured. Erosion is a problem in the rainy season. However, in the dry season, the coarse textured and sandy loamy soil which nature offers is made workable and is the basic

building material for the Talensi. Building becomes easier because the grasses dry up giving access to the soil and tree branches used in roofing. In the dry season when all the green vegetation is dried up, one sees an absolute blend of nature and culture. The colour of the soil, the rocks and the buildings blend together.

The seasons further determine the availability of labour. Building is a communal activity done in stages as mentioned earlier and requires the contribution of men, women and children. Because the people of Tengzug are predominantly farmers, the rainy season is a busy farming period. With the exception of elderly men, women and little children, everybody undertakes small or large scale farming. This leaves them with less time for any other activity. The dry season offers them enough time for social activities including building. There are male and female working parties which strengthens social bonds. When the various gender groups get the opportunity to work together some sing, dance, chat, crack jokes, share ideas and also gossip.

There is also availability of food during the dry season. However, the outcome of harvest in October to December is one of the factors influencing the intensity of the building season. This is because the owner of the house must ensure that he has enough food to serve all the working parties who would assist at every building stage. There must also be enough time to complete all the building processes. Any other communal activity such as funeral and festival can halt the building activity. Building activities often resume in full swing after the Golib festival in March and continues till the beginning of the rainy season. By this time, enough materials would have been gathered for the plastering, roofing and flooring of buildings. There is also less interruption after the Golib festival. This keeps both men and women busy till the beginning of the early rains when farming commences again in full swing.

Another issue is the transfer of building knowledge which is based on the gender group in question. Young boys get the privilege to directly observe and assist in tasks designated to men while young girls also get the privilege to directly observe and assist in tasks designated to women. There is an unequal social learning opportunity created as a result. Although the gender roles are distinct and knowledge is transmitted in a similar manner, the roles complement each other. The knowledge of building and roofing is transferred to males only while that of plastering, designing and flooring is transferred only to females. Over time, this has become what the gendered socio-cultural learning structure permits and has become part of the building history. A detailed study of the gender roles involved in all the building stages is shown in Table 2–5. There is also a culturally laid down framework of gendered division of labour in the construction of houses. This is as well seen in the various stages in construction. These include digging and preparing the earth for building, laying the foundation, building up the walls, plastering and designing the walls, roofing and flooring of rooms and courtyards.

The laying of foundation and building of walls is an activity culturally attributed to men and regarded as a purely male work in Tengzug. Details of the actual roles involved as revealed through the research are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Gender Roles in Laying Foundation and Building Walls

Activity	Gender Roles	
Digging of earth for building walls of structures	men	–
Fetching and carrying of water for mixing earth	–	women
Mixing and moulding of earth for building	men	–
Laying of building foundation	men	–
Carrying of moulds to builders	men	–
Performing of ritual on first course of new rooms after laying foundation	men	–
Cooking and serving of food after building	–	women

For instance, men believe they are stronger for certain tasks than women. The idea of strength is not referring to biological strength but to acquired knowledge in the context of house building. This is the way the society which is patrilineal has gendered the building activities and it clearly affirms that gender constructions vary across and within cultures. Because women have not been permitted by society to undertake such tasks they are not given the opportunity to ascertain whether they are capable and strong enough for building house walls or not. On the other hand, men have also not been permitted to do the tasks women are assigned in order to know their abilities and capabilities. If plastering and designing of walls, which is culturally designated to women can totally be done by them without the assistance of men as shown in Table 3, then if society allows women to acquire the knowledge of building and roofing they can exclusively undertake that activity as well.

Table 3: Gender Roles in Plastering and Designing Walls

Activity	Gender Roles	
Fetching and carrying of water for plastering	–	women
Plastering and designing of interior and exterior walls	–	women
Maintenance and re-plastering of old buildings	–	women
Digging and carrying of earth for plastering	–	women
Mixing of earth, water and cow dung or cement for plastering	–	women
Collection of plant and animal base materials for plastering such as <i>dawadawa</i> fruit pod ( <i>Lucust bean</i> ) and cow dung	–	women
Cooking and serving of food after plastering	–	women

Again, if the differentiation of tasks is based on biological strength, then most of the things done by women such as carrying water, foodstuffs and wood for roofing over a distance of about 8 km from the bush to the house should have been done by men who are perceived to be stronger. A Tale saying goes that, »women are better carriers than men« by which there is acknowledgement that it is not strength that makes women better

carriers than men, but rather the acquired knowledge of carrying things. The researcher believes that by looking at the work of men and women in house construction, if equal learning opportunity is given in the acquisition of knowledge, women can also do the »hard« work that men do and men also can do the »patience required« work that women do. Else, house construction will not be complete in the absence of one gender group.

Roofing is a building activity culturally assigned to men while flooring is culturally assigned to women. The actual gender roles involved in roofing and flooring as observed during the research is provided in Table 4 and 5.

Table 4: Gender Roles in Roofing

Activity	Gender Roles	
Cutting of wood for roofing	men	–
Carrying of wood	–	women
Laying of wood for roofing	men	–
Fetching and carrying of water for mixing mortar for roofing	–	women
Mixing of mortar for flat roofing	men	–
Flooring of flat roof after laying the wood	–	women
Cooking and serving of food after roofing	–	women

Flooring is an activity assigned to women. It is alleged that flooring takes a lot of time, requires patience and it is women who have the stamina to undertake this activity.

Table 5: Gender Roles in Flooring

Activity	Gender Role	
Fetching and carrying of water for mixing mortar	–	women
Mixing of mortar for flooring	–	women
Flooring of rooms and courtyards	–	women
Cooking and serving of food after flooring	–	women

Apart from the activities that are specifically assigned to women such as plastering, designing and flooring, women contribute enormously in the execution of tasks culturally assigned to men. Without the contribution of women in the men's task, their »hard« work would be incomplete. However, without the support of men, women are able to accomplish their culturally assigned responsibilities like plastering and flooring. Yet, the culture does not consider women as builders. It must be noted that without men erecting the structure, women cannot plaster and in the same way, without plastering, a house is incomplete for human habitation. The activities performed by men and women come together to make the house complete and habitable. If the Talensi say »women do not build«, then gender ideology veils women's contribution to house construction.



## Conclusion

Although claimed to be a solely male activity, the research has provided enormous evidence that house building among the Talensi is in fact a complex activity divided into multiple segments that are performed by different genders.

Women play a major role in fetching the water used in mixing the earth, they carry the wood used in roofing from the bush to the house, they do the plastering and flooring, and also cook all the food served at every stage of the house construction. That this role has not been acknowledged by the Talensi society is problematic. It is an example of an overemphasis on men's role without practical evidence to support it. House constructions restricted to the laying of walls and the roofing of buildings are not complete. The negation of women's contribution by a pile of cultural norms leaves women and their roles trivialized, unrecognized, invisible and unrewarded in the housing enterprise of the Talensi. That accounts for the marginalization of women in land and house ownership. A critical examination of the total building experiences of the Talensi society clearly shows that women build.

Women give artistic touch to the house to make it attractive. In spite of this, it is obvious that women's role in house construction is culturally unacknowledged by the Talensi men because the society is patrilineal. The role of women in building construction has also not been the focus of architectural research. The need for researches designed to understand the roles of women in Ghanaian indigenous architecture is advocated and this research has demonstrated the useful insights to be generated. The prospects for gender perspectives in the study of indigenous architecture (archaeological and ethno-archaeological) can no longer be taken for granted. Perhaps, more academic courses on gender issues and how gender influences social activities needs to be taught in Ghanaian Archaeology to create gender awareness in our analysis and interpretation of the archaeological data.

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