

Gurunsi Painted Homes

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Africa is one of the last poorly studied continents, due mainly to political issues of western society. It has had a rich history that was largely looked over and forgotten in more modern times. When Europe was relearning how to run a modern civilization, Arabs in African were advancing modern thinking. Africans have a rich history of art, though it is not art in the western sense. Their art all has a meaning and purpose beyond being beautiful, remove it from its context and you have taken away its purpose and its reason for being created. One of the oldest still surviving forms of art is rock paintings, though it has advanced beyond the cave and onto the buildings. Some tribes still practice this form of that ancient tradition. The Gurunsi people of Ghana are known for their elaborate houses. The Gurunsi is a collection of several tribes that habituate the northern region of Ghana. This is a group about 11 tribes that are united by common language, histories and political dealings. Most of these tribes still create mud huts to live in. The mud huts that they create are unique to their culture and are elaborately decorated in ancient symbolic patterns, carrying on this very African tradition.

The northern region of Ghana is inhabited by a large group of people known as the Gurunsi people. This is a larger term for a group of people belonging to several different tribes, relating to both language and ethnic heritage mainly inhabiting the Asante region of Ghana.¹ The Kassena tribe and its neighboring Frafra tribe reside mainly in the Upper northern region of Ghana, on the border of the Republic of Burkina Faso. These tribes mainly consist of farmers growing millet, sorghum and yams, rice, corn, peanuts and beans, which utilize the method of slash and burn farming and rotating fields regularly. The men do most of the farming though

¹ "Gurunsi." Last modified June 6 2012. Accessed March 5, 2013. <http://patachu.com/gurunsi/>.

women usually have small plots that are mainly used for cash crops, over the staple food grown by the men.² When the season is right the men go out and hunt as well, both for food and as a ritual experience to connect with nature. They still retain a traditional governing system mainly consisting of a council of elders, without one central leader. Religious leaders are mainly responsible for the day to day issues that occur, including designating land and harvest times.³ The religion in the region revolves around the God Su, whose spirit is thought to be harnessed in the form of a mask, for both beneficial reasons for their people and harmful reasons for their enemies. There is a shrine located in the center of every village dedicated to Su to ensure he is happy, and to make sure communal harmony is achieved.⁴ Each family is individually responsible for maintaining the shrine. The Kassena and Frafra are known for their elaborate masks and for their spectacularly decorated homes.

The main village of the Kassena is called Tiébélé located in the Southern region of Burkina Faso bordering Ghana. This city has some of the best examples of the Gurunsi decorated architecture. The majority of the people still live in the traditional homes made of mud walls, usually a mixture of clay, straw and cow dung, either round or more rectilinear in form; though modern techniques have helped in the building process, utilizing mud bricks and stone foundations. The shape of the home is very significant, the square home is only for married

² "Kassena Tribe of Africa: African People and Tribes." Accessed March 5, 2013. http://www.gateway-africa.com/tribe/kassena_tribe.html.

³ iBid

⁴ iBid

couple and the rectangular home is for bachelors, too old to live at home but not yet married.⁵ Like most homes in the harsh climate of Africa, they have been adapted to the local weather conditions. The walls are thick to trap the harsh light of day and warm the home at night when the desert turns cold. There are also minimal openings to the exterior, usually only the entrance. This form of building also served as protection against the warring tribes of the region, making the dwellings significantly easier to protect. The homes of the people in this city are like many found in other parts of Africa except for one key feature, the exterior of the homes are elaborately decorated with hand painted designs and murals.

With all African art there is a very powerful meaning and purpose behind what they do. Traditionally there is never art for art's sake, it has a purpose beyond looking pretty and decorating a space. They do have a concept of beautifying something called *bambolse*, roughly translating to mean embellishment or decorated. The Gurunsi people use this concept to decorate their homes in symbolic patterning and designs. The Frafra and Kassena tribes create these beautiful homes, in a remarkably similar fashion. A study was done on the traditions and meaning behind the Frafra structures in the village of Zuarungu. The compound that they live in is known as the Yiri, starting out in a circular form but as the compound grows it becomes more oval. ⁶ (fig 1) As new buildings are needed they build them on the exterior of the compound, making the oldest ones on the interior. The entrance to the compound almost always faces

⁵ Andrea Davoust. "Traditional Tiebele, Burkina Faso." Last modified 2011. Accessed March 5, 2013. <http://www.travelsinparadise.com/travelarticle/tiebele-burkina-faso.html>.

⁶ Fred T Smith. "Gurunsi Wall Painting." *African Arts*. 11. no. 4 (1978): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3335342> (accessed March 5, 2013). 37

west, with the entrance area being meant as a solely male area known as zanore.⁷ Directly after the zanore is the area meant for the animals called the kraal, other than this area, the interior of the compound is the domain of the women.⁸ Though the compound is mainly the domain of the women it is generally constructed by the men with help from the women as needed. Every time a new structure or compound is created a soothsayer must be contacted and consulted and they will pick the location of the new structure and the area from which the building supplies will be harvested. After the construction is completed the women are in charge of decorating the exterior of the buildings.

The mud structures by nature need to be maintained and repaired often. About every four to five years the exterior of the walls must be redone and redecorated. (fig 2) The replastering process is done during the end of the dry season and is generally coordinated by the head women in the community.⁹ The mixture used to complete the murals is comprised of a water, mud and cow dung, using various local ingredients for coloring; red is created using the local soil, black from a pulverized rock and white from another chalk like rock from the area. The wall is prepared by first smoothing the wall completely with a plain layer of mud plaster. The area is then divided into the basic form of the pattern. When the design is finished the entire design is covered in a substance called nere which serves a protector of both the wall

⁷ Fred T Smith. "Gurensi Wall Painting." *African Arts*. 11. no. 4 (1978): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3335342> (accessed March 5, 2013). 37

⁸ Fred T Smith. "Gurensi Wall Painting." *African Arts*. 11. no. 4 (1978): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3335342> (accessed March 5, 2013). 37

⁹ Fred T Smith. "Gurensi Wall Painting." *African Arts*. 11. no. 4 (1978): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3335342> (accessed March 5, 2013). 40

and the design created.¹⁰ The painting of the walls is treated as a ceremony, used as a social gathering of sorts, though if it is the walls of a personal sleeping area it is usually done solely by its inhabitant.¹¹ (fig. 3) The patterns used generally are chosen because of personal preference, though there are 17 recognized motifs with known meaning.¹² All have a different meaning and representation, but are usually chosen to reflect the tastes of the inhabitants. Some of the known motifs are tana, yidoor, and kura. Tana roughly translates to mean cloth strips. The design generally consists of vertical “white stripes divided by broad black lines and is said to represent the woven narrow strips that are sewn together to make a man’s smock”.¹³ Tana is generally found in the southeast area of the Gurensi people, unlike the other designs that are found all over. Yidoor generally translates to mean lines running straight. It is a pattern of straight lines that usually is thought to represent the lines of a cultivated field. Kura usually translates to rolled grass. This design usually bisects the yidoor pattern with heavy black lines though this is one of the most varied patterns, with each woman personalizing it as she likes. As western society has influenced the designs, there have been additions of humanoid and animal figures, as well as the addition of more relief shapes and sculptures. All of these designs and patterns are combined at the discretion of the artist to beautify their own home. The wide variety of the final product is what makes this art form so unique and beautiful.

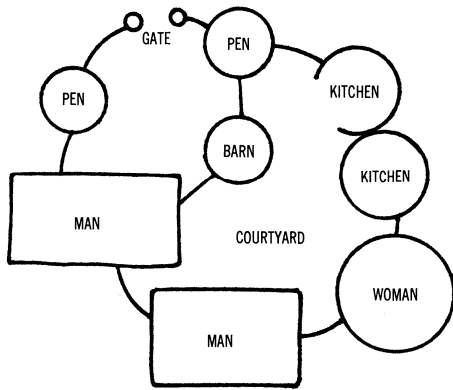
¹⁰ Schunior, Ann. "The Decorated Walls in Tiébélé." Last modified September 8 2011. Accessed March 5, 2013. <http://handeyemagazine.com/content/decorated-walls-tiébélé>

¹¹ Fred T Smith. "Gurensi Wall Painting." *African Arts*. 11. no. 4 (1978): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3335342> (accessed March 5, 2013). 40

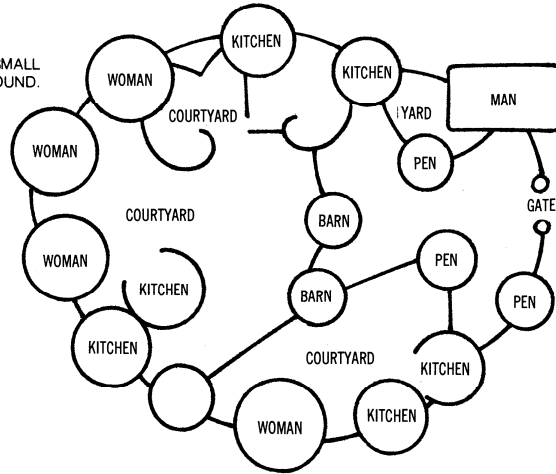
¹² Fred T Smith. "Gurensi Wall Painting." *African Arts*. 11. no. 4 (1978): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3335342> (accessed March 5, 2013). 40

¹³ Fred T Smith. "Gurensi Wall Painting." *African Arts*. 11. no. 4 (1978): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3335342> (accessed March 5, 2013). 41

All societies that have created a permanent built society have decorated their buildings in some way, making art out of what they have. The decorations are not always attached, some decorate with rugs or skins, but almost all have something to make the buildings more attractive. The Gurunsi people have adapted this tradition for even their comparatively simple buildings. The decorations and murals on the exterior of their homes show a unique tradition. The designs make the buildings beautiful and reflect the unique tastes and talents of the owner who resides inside. It carries on the centuries old tradition that originated with the ancient rock paintings and has been adapted to the utilization of patterns and designs being carved onto the exterior of their homes. The designs have a deep meaning to the owner, the artist. Some of the designs even carry a deep spiritual meaning for the people who paint them and the people who see them everyday. The people who live in these villages have a value for history and their culture. They have made the decision to continue to utilize their heritage and preserve this culture for all generations to come.



1. GROUND PLANS OF A SMALL AND A MEDIUM-SIZED GURENSI COMPOUND.



Fortes has concluded that “the other tribes adjacent to the Tallensi—the Gorisi (or Nankansi), Namnam and Kusaasi . . . differ so little from them that they might all be regarded as subdivisions of a single cultural unit” (Fortes 1940a:239). This article will concentrate on the Gurensi.

With the exception of Tamale, a large modern town 160 kilometers to the south, the Frafra area has the highest population density in all of northern Ghana. The Frafra are primarily subsistence farmers. Over 90 per-

Figure One

Smith, Fred T. "Gurensi Wall Painting." *African Arts*. 11. no. 4 (1978): 36-41.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3335342> (accessed March 5, 2013).

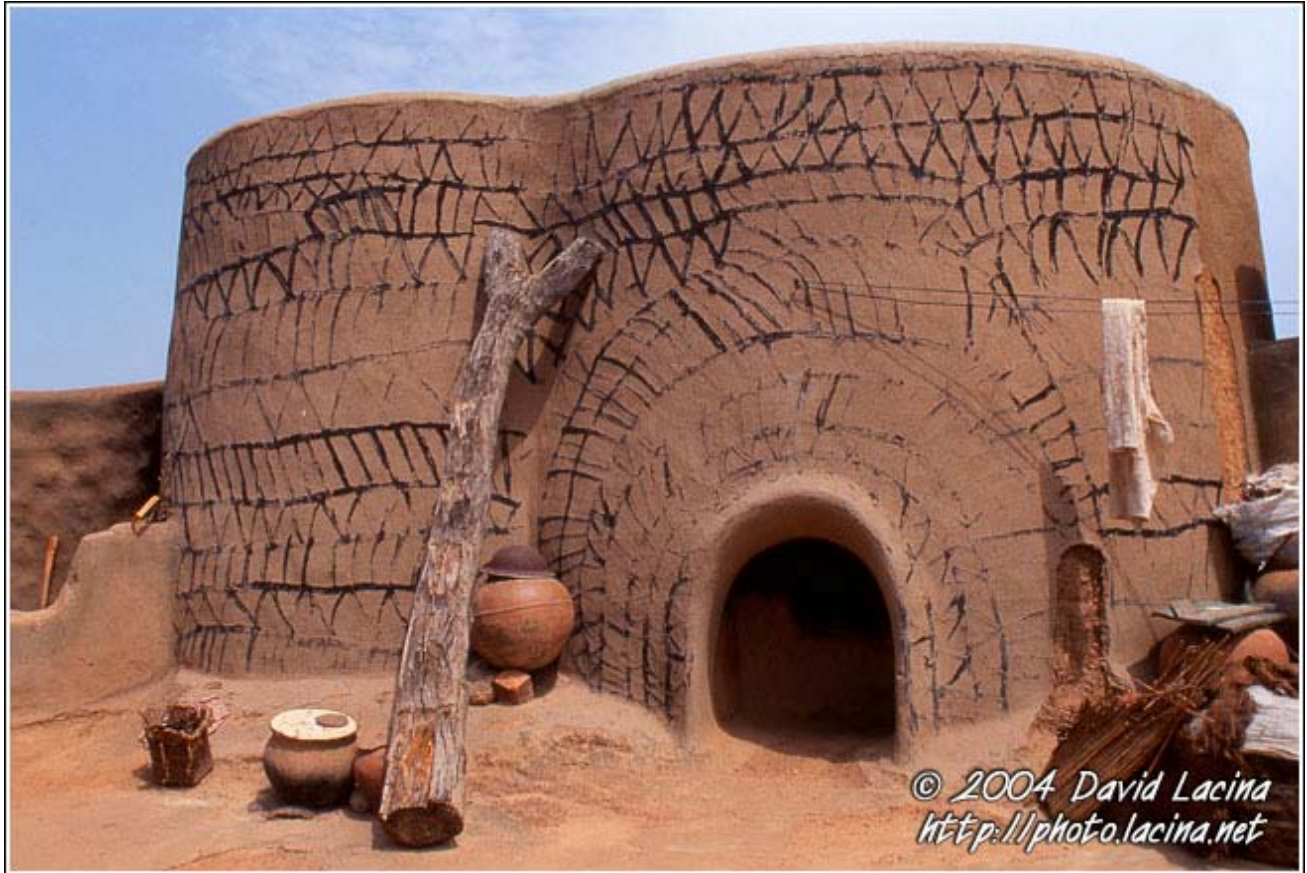


Figure Two

"TRADITIONAL KASSENA HOUSE." Last modified 2013. Accessed March 5, 2013.

<http://photo.lacina.net/photo-1962-traditional-kassena-house-kassena-tribe-ghana.html>.



Figure Three

Schunior, Ann. "The Decorated Walls in Tiébélé." Last modified September 8 2011. Accessed March 5, 2013. <http://handeyemagazine.com/content/decorated-walls-tiébélé>



Figure Four

Schunior, Ann. "The Decorated Walls in Tiébélé." Last modified September 8 2011. Accessed March 5, 2013. <http://handeyemagazine.com/content/decorated-walls-tiébélé>



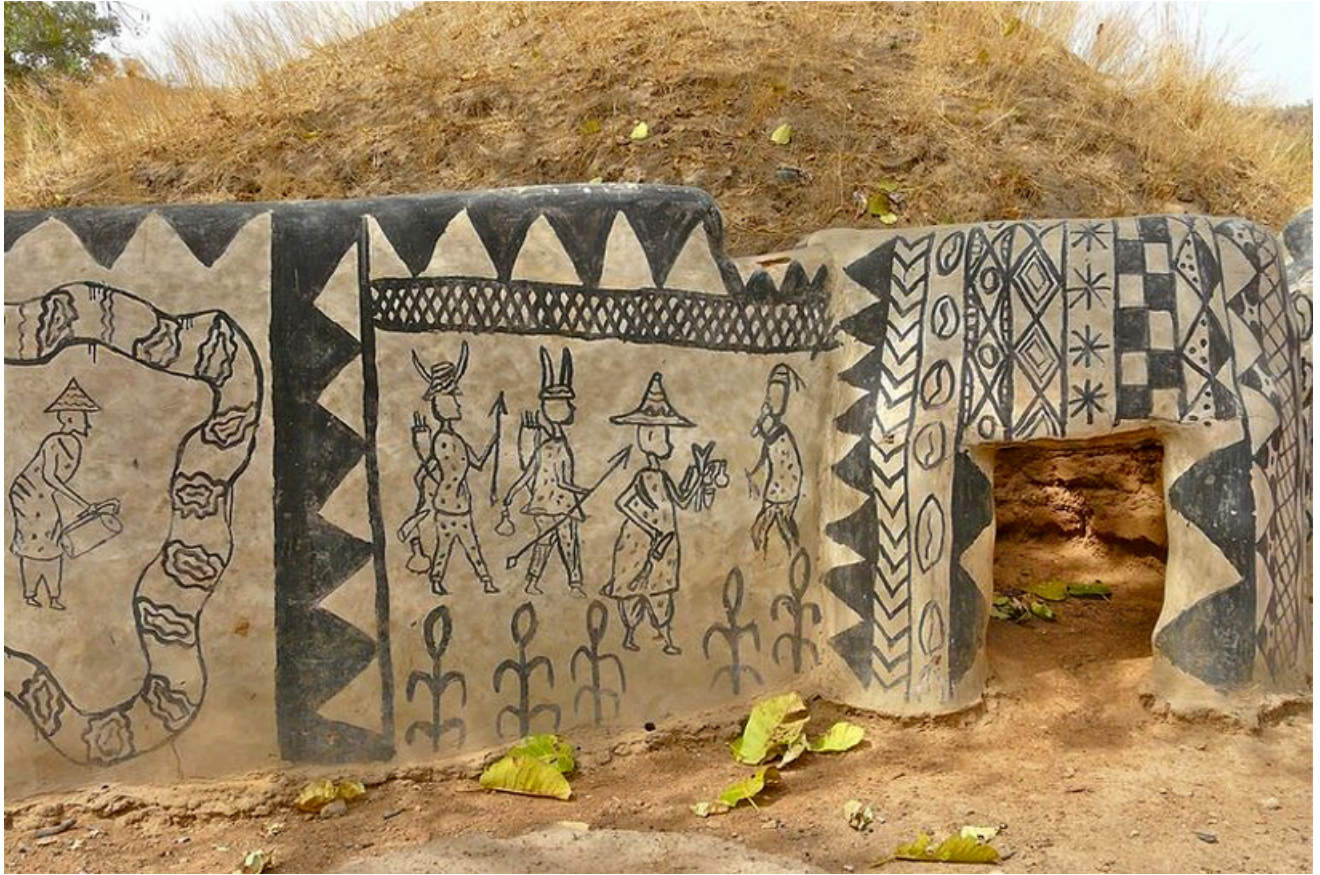
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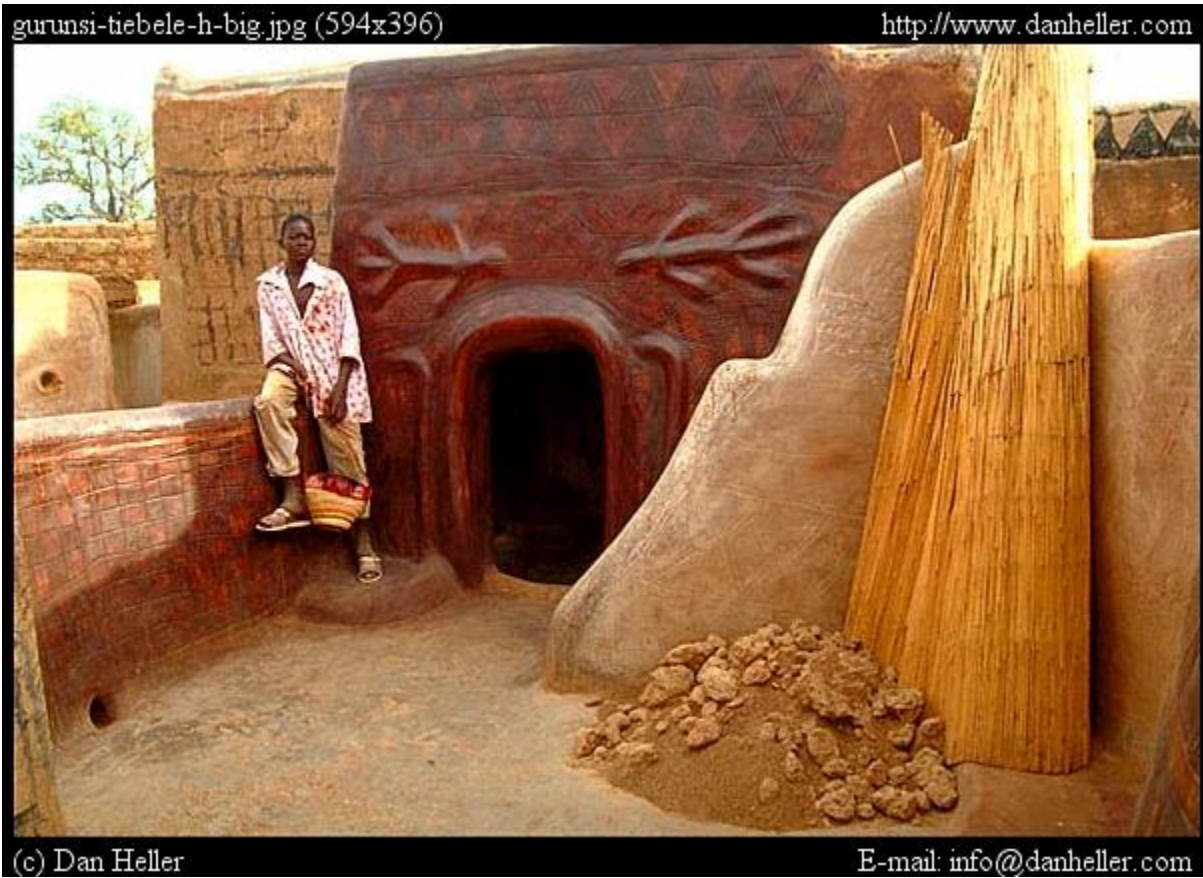


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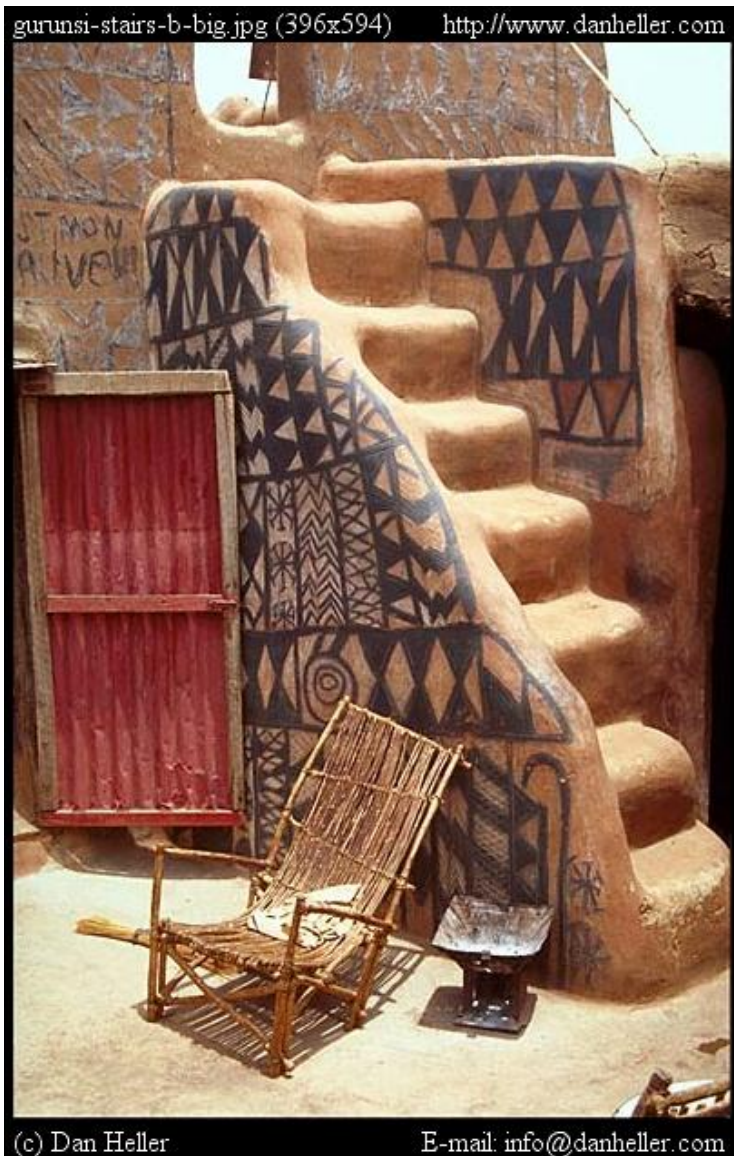
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De La Hoz, Ryan. "The Tiebele house decorations of Burkina Faso, Africa." Last modified 2013.

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