The Berber House
Pierre Bourdieu

Literature Review
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Introduction

In *The Berber House*, Pierre Bourdieu describes a traditional structure used by the Berber peoples, formerly nomads indigenous to northern Africa. He takes us on a tour of a typical Berber house, and explains the unique cultural and technical aspects of such a house, and shows that these different facets of local architecture are linked in important ways.

Summary

The tour begins by explaining the overall shape of the home. Usually rectangular, they are oriented perpendicular to the contour of their site, so as to facilitate the removal of waste liquids through the building.

Animals such as oxen, cows and donkeys share the home with people, but are segregated into their own area, a step below the level of human inhabitants.

Bourdieu tells of the unique place of the visitor in a Berber home, and how different placement of a visitor's sleeping area can be seen as offensive or can be used to show the importance of a person.

The importance of religious/cosmological beliefs on the design of a Berber house is also explored. The 'magic' of certain elements of the design is also shown, such as the weaving wheel protecting the virginity of daughters in the house. This shows how Berber women's lives are centred around weaving, a service to her family and of great importance in Berber culture.

Darker parts of the home, devoted to service functions such as storage of water, food and wood, cooking, weaving and the removal of wastes, are seen as feminine areas – places where women work and provide for their household.

Bourdieu uses linguistic studies to determine the origin of and cultural implications of some of the words used to describe rooms and features of the dwelling. This is perhaps the most interesting of the topics discussed in the article, and will be the focus of this review.

Critique

Much of the beautiful poetry of language is lost when we are speaking in English. When talking about architecture we talk about rooms, spaces, direction and atmosphere – but none of these words really mean much other than describing exactly what they are describing. Arabic (and its local dialects), the dominant language of northern Africa for
centuries, and local varieties of different Berber languages, are loaded with cultural and religious significance.

It must be noted that the Berber people are a distinct people group of their own, and this group can be broken down further still. That many of these people now reside in different north african nation further confuses the study of these people.

Most Berber people are Muslim, and it is clear in Bourdieu's article that the house he is describing is one who worships Allah.

Bourdieu doesn't explain these complexities in his article, and the extra background information would be appreciated. Western audiences wouldn't necessarily know that a person of Berber decent probably speaks Arabic, but is not an Arab (or perhaps he speaks French or Spanish, depending upon which nation we was raised). He is probably a Muslim, but may also have his own religion to which Arabic religious terms may be applied. He is also potentially Tunisian, Algerian, Moroccan, or a number of other nationalities that describe the geographic area in which he was born, but not his lineage. The issue of who the Berbers are is a missed opportunity in this article.

Bourdieu talks of the *Qibla* (a word which I already knew, an Arabic word that describes the direction one faces towards Mecca at prayer time) not only being the direction, but also being the name of the opening in the house (a doorway) that is facing east. It is not clear what a Berber would do if he lived to the east and would have to face west to pray towards Mecca – In the case of north-african Berbers, it is more a semantic point than a real concern.

The east facing door is seen as *qabel* – or honourable, and looks too the future, the morning. The east facing door is also the main doorway to the house. If a man is an honourable man, he sets off for work at dawn. He creates a future.

The strongest part of the home is compared directly to the authority that a man has over his family. *Nif* is used to describe this authority, and is also used as the term for the main beam of the home, and sometimes to describe a lintel over the *qabel* doorway.

Women, who stay at home to look after the household are described using words that are similar in meaning to imply darkness and night-time. They work indoors, with only the narrow windows to allow light in, and in the harsh desert sunlight, spend much of the day either working with their backs to the sun, but their bodies casting a shadow over their work, or the other way, with their work casting a shadow onto itself.

Working in the shadow of the weaving loom does have significance. The shadow is considered to protect the young girl's virginity, as though sunlight, the thus men, would corrupt them. This dictates that the position of the weaving loom inside the home is of great importance if a man wishes to protect his daughters: The loom sits opposite the
qabel doorway – the source of sun in the morning, and with her back to the future it represents.

It seems that they have a lot of sunlight and brightness, but are never fully allowed to use it to great benefit.

Even the loft area of the dwelling is given greater importance through words: *Tha’ricth* being the term that describes the loft – it is above the house, usually more bright and airy and certainly dryer than the lower parts of the building. A *tha’ricth* is also a type of stretcher than a family would use for moving the body of a deceased relative. This hints at the elevated status of the dead, the loft being above the home as heaven is above earth.

This is confused somewhat when a guest enters the home. The guest is treated as higher than those living in the family, but, oddly, is not promoted to sleeping in the loft area, where the women and children sleep. This may be so as not to cause offense to one’s guest, in comparing them to death. This could have been explored more.

It is an interesting argument, tying the language of the people directly to use home and its uses, one that I feel is successful. There are a few quirks to this, however, in that the ‘rules’ are not necessarily applied uniformly. I have mentioned about men being represented by daylight, fire, and the future, but why then do the women of the family sleep in the loft? This is clearly the downfall of using such techniques: they do present situations where the ‘rule’ of the language does not apply. It is also worth noting that the sources Bourdieu references are all French-language sources, which adds another layer of linguistic quirks to the study.

It could also be confused, in Australia certainly, the subtle differences between the various Muslim cultures. Debates about the burqa and sharia law have tinged our perception of these people towards the extremes of Islamic faith. Understanding further the subtleties of these different cultures can make us better people. Many Australians feel that Muslims treat women horribly, making them work in the dark, and keeping them hidden. It can clearly be seen in Bourdieu’s work that this is for negative reasons (because women are less than men), but to protect their purity. We must remember that the Quran gives more instruction directing men on how to me honourable than it does trying to suppress women. Australians were probably not Bourdieu’s intended audience, so we can forgive his lack in explaining these things to us, but it is also clear that we need to learn more, and extending this article with such information would be beneficial to all.
Conclusion

Bourdieu's article on the Berber House is an interesting account of a style of accommodation that is quite different from those experienced by western readers. The deliberate gendering of the different spaces in the room reflecting the discrepancy in status between men and women in Berber society, but can also be confusing when studied without more information. In a way, Berber people personify the rooms of the house, and the rooms reflect their occupants.

References