

# "Loosing the Sense of Thatch" (A Trio Sub-Saharan African Compendium)

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This is not an exhaustive text. Nevertheless, it seeks to serve as a very useful research and reference material for academia, policy makers and generally those in the building design and construction industry in the sub-Saharan region of Africa. It is, perhaps, to initiate a debate about Thatch. This Compendium provides an empirical evidence of how Thatch, a basic roofing material is used in Four Sub-Saharan African countries (Figure1). The materials within this compendium reflect both good and bad practices of thatch as a roofing material. The appropriateness of Thatch as roofing material for houses: chiefly stems from its availability, unique climate modification capability and generally inherent high economic potentials of replenishability, natural and eco-friendliness.

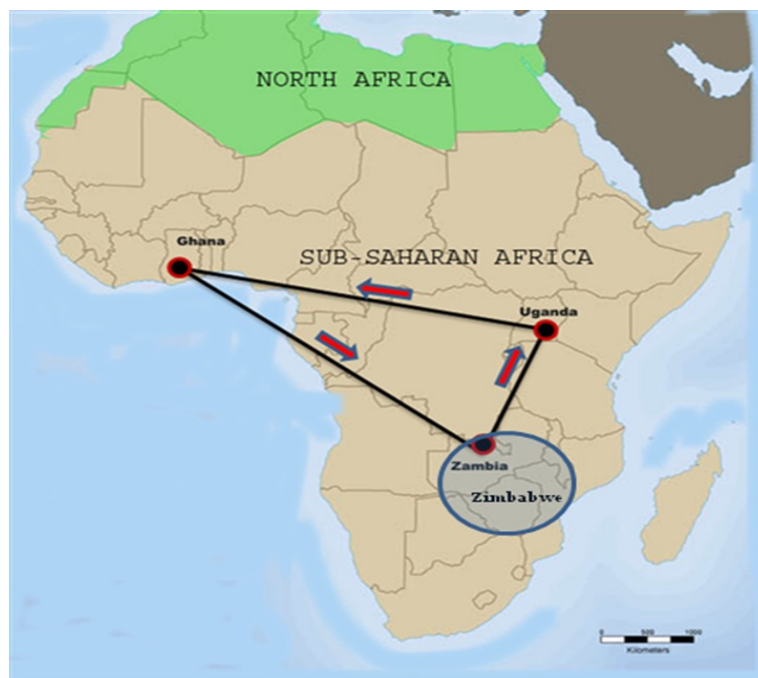


Figure1: Map of Africa showing the four Sub-Saharan African countries on which this Compendium is based.

From time of old, thatch roof has provided shelter and protection for man from the vagaries of weather before the advent of industrialised roofing materials. However, the material has nowadays been pushed to the background to the point of oblivion. Even though Thatch is traditionally synonymous with indigenous building materials, it is apparently and mostly excluded from current discourses on architectural materiality.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Thatch is not considered a material. In developing countries where thatch could help in minimizing building construction and running cost, the perception of thatch is a sad one. The material is viewed as low-cost, poor and *vernacular*.<sup>2</sup> The material is gradually being displaced by metallic roofing sheets which are mostly climatically incongruous. In hot and warm-humid climates, the heat absorption of metal roofs turns rooms into ovens, whilst the those in coastal regions corrodes very fast with attendant problems of leakages and roof-ripped offs. Structurally, what follows after this introduction looks at case study areas and the approach adopted for the study. Following on is a section of portrait description of some selected traditional Area(s) of concentration and a nuanced section of findings and discussions data on thatch. The last section deals with concluding summary.

## 2.0 CASE STUDY AREAS AND APPROACH

This compendium results from a ‘triangulated case studies’ of Ghana and Uganda representing the West and East of Africa respectively and Zambia/Zimbabwe (Combined) representing Southern Africa (Table1). The study took place between 2006 and 2008: starting from Ghana in 2006; Zambia/Zimbabwe and Uganda in 2007 and back to Ghana in 2008 in a triangulated manner (Figure1).

*Table 1: A summary of Study Areas with some specifics*

<u>Country</u>	<u>City/Town</u>	<u>Some Traditional Area(s) of Concentration</u>
Ghana	Tamale/Nyampala	Dagbon Dabba Fong/Kukpegu Tua/Garizegu/Gumu
Zambia/Zimbabwe	Livingstone/Vic falls town	Mukuni Village
Uganda	Kampala	Seeta/ Mukono

No specific criterion underlines the selection of the case studies. The author’s interest in architectural history and appreciations spurs him to seize opportunities to study indigenous/traditional architecture during local and international travels.<sup>3</sup> The approach adopted in the studies is essentially Ethnographic and Narrative. Local people in the study areas were informally and selectively contacted to tell ‘stories’ of their architecture through semi-structured interviews. Over 500 people were interviewed in the Ghana; 27 in the Zambia/Zimbabwe and 30 in Uganda studies respectively. This was basically to ascertain from them their general impression and knowledge about thatch and other materials. Interesting phenomena found and observed were photographically captured some of which are presented in this compendium as a nuanced findings and discussions of data. The intent of photographs usage is not provide an objective description of the buildings roofed with thatch but to show its character, specialty and highlights certain features. Coloured photographs are used for contrast enhancement and better appreciation. Photography is asserted to be invaluable too for recording architecture.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.1 Snapshots of Selected traditional Area(s) of concentration

#### 2.1.1 *Dagbon Dabba Fong (Tamale, Ghana – Western Africa)*

Dagbon Dabba Fong literally meaning “*area of Dagomba men*” is situated within the heart of the Tamale. Tamale is a municipal and one of the fastest growing cities in West Africa due to its geographical location within Ghana as well as its proximity to some neighboring West African countries. Tamale offers architectural blend of traditional slums and modern buildings. Dagbon Dabba Fong is the historic core and houses the Tamale chief (Gulkpe Naa), the chief priest (Dakpemplana) and other powerful and authoritative leaders of Tamale. It is perceived as a place of *men*: men of bravery, patriotism and loyalty to Dagbon. The area serves as mausoleum of royals, priests and war lords and warriors. It is the meeting point where activities to climax the celebration of traditional festivals such as Damba and Bugum take place. The changing roofing pattern from Thatch to other metallic roof covering is visible in Dagbon Dabba Fong.

#### 2.1.2 *Mukuni Village (Zambia - Southern Africa)*

Mukuni Village was founded in the thirteenth century. It is an unadulterated tribal village where 7000 people live and work. Situated on a dry, sandy knoll; its traditional governance was originally based on the Bedyango the Leya (reya)<sup>5</sup> tribal matriarch. It currently has a dual leadership of a King and a Queen

mother. There is peace in the village due to the mutual co-operation between the King and the Queen mother. It is located in the Kazungula District of Southern Province of Zambia. It was originally called the Guudu but renamed in the seventeenth century to *Mukuni Village* to honour of Mukokalya Mukuni N'gombe. The natives of Mukuni Village pride themselves in an annual colorful Lwiindi Ceremony held July. Mukuni village is Chiefdom with over 15 villages and Hamlets around it. Tourism is the main economic drive of the Chiefdom since the soil does support agriculture. However, the civil war in neighbouring Congo DR has rendered Mukuni village vulnerable and this has affected her tourism potential. The younger generation of Mukuni sees no future of the Chiefdom if the civil war is not ceased. Mukuni Village is now mainly inhabited by the older generation with her traditional architecture undergoing transformation due to modernity.

### 2.1.3 Seeta-Mukono (Uganda - Eastern Africa)

Seeta is a small town north of Lake Victoria. It is about forty minutes drive east of Kampala, the capital of Uganda. Apparently, Seeta architecture is at crossroads of post modernism and regionalism. Finding people to speak to me about their architecture was virtually impossible. Remarkably, one native said to me:

*“All book people (researchers)<sup>6</sup> who come here are only interested WAR and HIV/AIDS issues; they do not talk to us about our buildings so the people will not understand you.”*

Indeed most of the traditional villages in the provincial capital Mukono are best described as *Mohenjo Daro*.<sup>7</sup> Faced with a number of development obstacles, buildings roofed with layers of thatch covering and frames made of wood strips are rare in Seeta. The local economy is driven by cash crop and subsistence agriculture. The people engage in large scale cocoa farming which was introduced in the area in 1959.

## 3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 3.1. Ghana – Western Africa



The roof of the Tamale Chief's Place (Dakpamlana) has been changed to aluminium roofing sheets.

An American Researcher and Philanthropist Dr. Susan J. Herlin (Zo-Simli-Naa: 'Queen mother for Development') built and roofed her Palace with corrugated aluminium roofing sheet because local opinion leaders did not support her intentions to use Thatch. They felt thatch does befit the status of a contemporary and modern Palace.

***Institutional rejection of Thatch is common in Sub-Saharan Africa. Here are classic epitomes of the Chieftaincy gradually doing away with thatch in Tamale.***





Vice-Chancellor's Lodge under construction as at June, 2008 on the Tamale Campus of the University of Development Studies in Ghana roofed with anodised aluminium sheets .



Gate way to the Nyanpala Campus of the University of Development Studies

### *Examples of Governmental rejection of Thatch in Tamale and Nyanpala in the Northern Region of Ghana*



Students Hostel on the Tamale Campus of the University of Development Studies in Ghana also roofed with anodised aluminium sheets .



*To be or Not to be?* This Shakespearean Hamlet's question is exactly what confronts the design decision to use thatch as a roofing material in Tamale. The decision to have thatch with aluminium underlay renders this pseudo governmental hospitality project tasteless. The design and detail are not well conceived to bring the elegance of thatch.





If God rust what will iron do; individual estate developers are compelled to switch to metallic roofing sheet since Government does not encourage the use of Thatch. One respondents remarked: *"why do we use thatch when our leaders do not respect it; there is no way that we are going to use it, no grass around, we go far to get it and it is not respected"*

### 3.2 Zambia / Zimbabwe - Southern Africa)



Mukuni Village Tourism Office constructed and roofed with thatch. The management plans to rebuild it in 'attractive materials' such as metallic roofing sheets and sand-cement blocks to reflect the changing times.



Rexford in a pose with the Local Officer-in-Charge in front of Tourists' waiting/ resting place



Iconic "Butterfly tree" in front of the Mukuni Village Place. This tree embodies the worldviews and beliefs of the village.



**Locally constructed roof structure of wood saplings in Mukuni Village**



**Roof structure to receive thatch roof covering in Mukuni Village compound**



**Palace of Mukuni Village**



**There are isolated cases where originally thatched roofed buildings re-roofed or being changed to metallic roof covering in Mukuni Village . The Palace of the Village has had the sleeping places of the King and the Queen re-roofed in aluminium for security reasons.**





Painstaking attention and detailing brings to bear on Natural materials their beauty and good sense of Taste like any other material in the world for architectural design purposes.

Fuel Filling Station built of Thatch in Livingstone, Zambia.

4-Star Hotel in Victoria Falls Town in Zimbabwe roofed with thatch and other organic materials for Balustrades etc.



A well informed designed project with right choices of construction techniques, structural methods and load requirements gives a resultant effect materiality permanence



Thatch is not devoid of monumentality. It just need a little sense of touch.



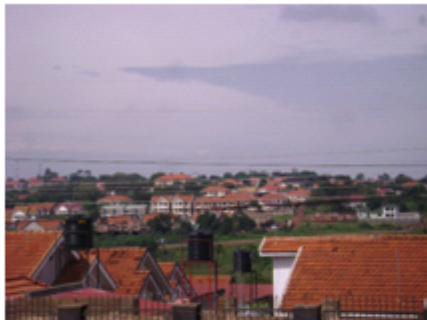


Chalets roofed with Thatch in postmodern style at the Ridar Hotel, Seeta-Moluno, Uganda.



Le Petit Village - a hotel built with a 'sense thatch' in Kampala, Uganda.

The use of thatch is very popular among hotel buildings which are owned and operated by foreign nationals in sub-Saharan Africa .



*Emerging residential architecture in Uganda hardly consider Thatch as alternative roofing material. This phenomenon is common in sub-Saharan Africa.*





### 3.0 GENERAL CONCLUDING SUMMARY

Using thatch for roofing goes back as far as the Bronze Age. Thatched cottages and farm buildings were the norm in rural Britain for more than a millennium of time.<sup>8</sup> Theatres were even built and roofed with thatch. In Africa, the thatched roof has been used from the earliest times<sup>9</sup> but it has not seen perfection from generation to generation thus far. Thatch roofs, properly constructed can last for over half a century depending on the climatic conditions. Arguably, due to the changing times and circumstances, people who traditionally desired thatch as building material are gradually waning. Metallic materials such as Aluminum, Zinc and many others are fast replacing thatch. Government institutions, political and traditional leaders regard thatch as archaic building material. There seemed to be a general decline in the use and preference of thatch. The taste for thatch has become rather mixed: for the few (the aged and old), the material needs to be preserved for posterity. However, the majority of the youth upon whom the future depends refer to Thatch as *Ka no mi?* (*And what is this one too?*)<sup>10</sup> and *Daziegu mam* (*The fair man's girl friend*)<sup>11</sup>. This question of the youth may superficially sound dismissive and disgusting. But this compendium conclusively interprets it as a clarion call to tell them what Thatch is: a deemed responsibility for architectural intellectual and the building industry professionals.

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<sup>1</sup> In some cases Thatch is insufficiently mentioned in current discourses on architectural materiality. See for example, Victoria Ballard Bell and Patrick Rand book *Materials for Architectural Design*, Published in 2006 by Laurence King Publishing Ltd, London, United Kingdom and *need to know? How to read a building* by Timothy Brittain-Catlin, HarperColins Publishers (2007), London, p.17.

<sup>2</sup> The deeper and intellectual meaning of the term inspires the rejection of the term *vernacular* as 'classic and perfect' description of African architecture in our forthcoming article. The word "vernacular" has its origins in the concept of "the local" or "home grown." Verna, in Roman Latin, is a noun specifically referring to home-born slaves. In classical Greek, the noun "verna" is *oikotrips* and the adjective is *oikogenes* or "home-genetic." For the Greeks and Romans, the marks of this "home genetic" nature were found in the language with which a person spoke. This meaning is clear in Plato's dialogue, Meno, when Socrates asks Meno to provide a "retainer" for an experiment in learning. Meno brings a boy forward, and Socrates asks: "He is a Greek and speaks our language?" Meno responds: "Indeed, yes—born and bred in the house" (see "Meno." In *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Hamilton Edith 353–84. Translated by W. K. C. Guthrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.). The slave was a *verna*. He was "vernacular." In classical Roman society, most slaves were seized during wars, during the suppression of colonial insurrections, or even through outright piracy. The vast majority of these slaves spoke little or no Latin, the institutional language of Roman government. Since any person born to a slave woman (without regard to the social position of the father) was automatically a slave, female slaves were encouraged to have children to increase the master's slave stock (See Bradley, K. R. "On the Roman Slave Supply and Slave Breeding." In *Classical Slavery*, ed. Finley Moses 42–64. London: Cass Publishers, 1987.). These verna became even more valuable than their mothers because they were native Latin speakers and could be trained in more valuable skills that relied on literacy in Latin. (See Howard, Robert Glenn(2005)'A Theory of Vernacular Rhetoric: The Case of the "Sinner's Prayer" Online', *Folklore*, 116:2,172 — 188. This article was downloaded by: University of Liverpool On: 26 August 2009.

<sup>3</sup> The Ghana Case Study of Tamale has advertently become one of the major Case Studies for a PhD Research being carried out by the author in the School of Architecture-University of Liverpool in the United Kingdom.

<sup>4</sup> For evidence of Photography as an invaluable tool for recording architecture (see: *need to know? How to read a building* by Timothy Brittain-Catlin, HarperColins Publishers (2007), London, pp.32-33. And also, *Manfredo Tafuri (2006) Interpreting the Renaissance — Princes, Cities Architects*, translated by Daniel Sherer, foreword by K. Michael Hays, Yale University Press and Harvard University Graduate School of Design, Cambridge and Massachusetts, originally published in Italian, 1992 by Giulio Einaudi editore s.p.a. Torino.)

<sup>5</sup> According to oral sources the Leya is sometimes pronounced as *Reya* and the people of Mukuni have come accept it

<sup>6</sup> Author's Parenthesis

<sup>7</sup> According to oral sources the villages in Uganda were recognized as important traditional entities but most have become annihilated and "dead towns" due to vicious civil wars and diseases.

<sup>8</sup> The Thatcher's Craft, available on [p1.countryside.gov.uk/LAR/archive/.../thatchers\\_craft.asp](http://p1.countryside.gov.uk/LAR/archive/.../thatchers_craft.asp)

<sup>9</sup> Elleh, N. (1997) *African Architecture: evolution and transformation*, McGraw-Hill, New York, pp22-23, 25,148.

<sup>10</sup> This question was a popular refrain by Respondents for expressing dislike for buildings roofed with thatch in an interview conducted in Tamale, Ghana in June, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> The susceptibility and attractiveness of thatch to fire is metaphorically compared women who easily get attracted to men who are fair complexion (*Interview: at Gumu near Tamale, Ghana in June, 2008*).