Over the centuries, many semi-nomadic and nomadic cultures have inhabited the desert environments which stretch across the African continent. Pastoral peoples continue to live in these harsh habitats. Their inventive architectural responses reflect timeless, sophisticated thought processes and involve cultural strategies:

- Spatial mobility is the key to their viability;
- Women are the primary producers, owners and users of the domicile;
- The architectural process unfolds in the context of marriage ritual.

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House is a feminine noun among the nomads, and the language of both technology and architecture is spoken in a woman’s voice. House and marriage are synonymous, architecture unfolds through collective creativity and the nomadic aesthetic is expressed in women’s song. The interior, with its rich color and detail, communicates the woman’s self-identity and sense of place. Metaphor and iconography link furnishings to the tent’s structure.

Menfolk sit and watch as a gabra wife packs up her complete household. Photo: Labelle Prussin

Tuareg kel ferwan tents are rotated in space during the extended wedding, emphasizing the relationship between ritual and space. Drawing after Dominique Cazajus.

The reinforced wall opposite the entrance, designed to resist the strong desert winds, is also the focus of the wedding ceremony. Within, directly behind it, the wedding milk containers are hung. Photo: Labelle Prussin.

Spatial organization is structured by mobility and transhumance. Spatial acuity is critical to survival. Orientation in space, symbolically expressed both on the interior and exterior, reflects and reinforces behavioral and social patterns.

Tuareg women singing. Timbuktu, Mali. Photo: Labelle Prussin

The design on a hassaniya wedding pillow with its sexually overt symbols mirrors the design of the apex of the hassaniya tent. Drawing after Odette du Puigaudeau.

Interior apex of a hassaniya tent, Rosso, Mauritania. Photo: Labelle Prussin.

The settlement plan of a nomadic camp is clearly dictated by extended family relationships, environmental responses, herd ownership and pastoral needs. The same underlying physical structure in space, reflecting hierarchies of male and female, agnate and cognate geneology, is maintained at each new site. The pattern of movement over time, rational not random, is dictated by a unique knowledge of the habitat.

Documented migration of a rendile camp over a seventy five-year span. Drawing after Anders Grum.