Large, freestanding parabolic domes built of locally procured clay, with a single arched entry on one side and a small oculus at the apex, were once ubiquitous in the villages of the Mousgoum, an ethnic group that lives in an area now shared between Cameroon and Chad (Figure 1). Several of these beehive-like structures (called *teleuk*, pl. *teleukakay*) joined to one another by an intervening mud or thorn-branch wall formed the perimeter of a roughly circular enclosure, or “compound,” identified with a particular family or lineage. Some *teleukakay* were used as sleeping quarters, with every married man, every older unmarried male, and every married woman (along with her unmarried children) occupying a separate building. Each building, in turn, was placed in relationship to all the others according to the social rank of its occupant(s). Though other building types were also common in Mousgoum compounds, the *teleuk* was distinguished by its all-clay construction (without using thatch, wood, or other common building materials), which necessitated the hiring of a skilled mason to erect it. In this way, the *teleuk* indexed both economic wealth in its mode of construction and social and familial hierarchies through its placement in space. Steven Nelson’s creative and sophisticated study of Mousgoum architecture provides an unacquainted reader (including this one) with just enough historical and ethnographic information to appreciate the implications of such an elaborately ordered landscape in the Cameroon context. However, as the title of his book suggests, Nelson is more interested in what happens when Mousgoum architecture—particularly the *teleuk*—becomes unmoored from its customary context.

Unlike other building types commonly found in Mousgoum towns and villages, the *teleuk* has attained iconic status as a sign of Mousgoum—and, more recently,
Cameroonian national—culture. As Nelson conclusively demonstrates, the tectonic qualities of the dome itself played a key role in popularizing the *teleuk* as an architectural icon, first in Germanophone and Francophone countries (as a byproduct of colonial conquest), and more recently on a global scale. (Nelson opens the book with an account of an ersatz *teleuk* displayed prominently at Expo 2005 in Aichi, Japan.) German geographer Heinrich Barth was perhaps the first European to single out the *teleuk* as an exalted architectural form. In his *Travel and Discoveries in North and Central Africa*, first published in 1857 (and discussed by Nelson in chapter two), Barth found “a degree of order, and even of art” in the *teleuk*, “which [he] had not expected to find among [African] tribes” (57). In 1912 British engineer Percy Waldram published sketches of *teleukakay* in his textbook on structural mechanics, noting that the mud shells were formed “to almost perfect parabolic curves,” and thus ingeniously well-resolved from a structural standpoint. Making a similar point, American architectural historian Eduard Sekler described the *teleuk* in 1963 as “an almost perfect realization of a structural principle in terms of a most appropriate and efficient construction” (7). This admiration for the *teleuk*’s constructional and aesthetic qualities, however, sat at an angle to, and clearly troubled, a widespread revulsion at most things African in those European intellectual milieus that bothered to notice their existence. Nelson deftly exploits this conundrum to bring Mousgoum architecture squarely into mainstream architectural history, showing how the *teleuk*, “as stage of quotidian life, locus of living history, sign of authenticity, architectonic ancestor, home of cannibals, repository for experience, sign of empire, perfect tectonic statement” and many other things as well, “beautifully underscores architecture’s preeminent place in representation” (191).

*From Cameroon to Paris* comprises four thematically organized chapters and a short introduction and afterword. The introduction presents the book’s key themes and provides a brief (though perfunctory) introduction to Mousgoum history, religion, and social structure. In the first substantive chapter of the book, Nelson introduces the *teleuk* as a social and material artifact by working back and forth between historical descriptions from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and more recent interviews he conducted with masons and residents during fieldwork in the mid-1990s. Given the paucity of archival material on the older structures, and evidence of distinct continuities across time in the way *teleukakay* were constructed and used, the analysis sometimes veers toward what anthropologists call the “ethnographic present,” a synchronic mingling of past and present usages that fails to distinguish rigorously between the two. Chapter one nevertheless succeeds in presenting a detailed and original analysis of Mousgoum building traditions in their relation to Mousgoum culture—especially to notions of beauty, the metonymies imagined to exist between bodies and buildings, and to the gendering of house forms, ornaments, and functions. The one place where a more rigorous attention to historical timing would have enhanced the first chapter is in Nelson’s discussion of household beauty as being tied to notions of cleanliness: “While ornament was the crux of attaining beauty in the homestead, the compound . . . had to be swept daily, and well maintained. Besides the obvious attachments to hygiene and healthfulness, decoration and cleanliness constitute windows into the personal qualities of the wives of the compound and the family as a whole” (48). One wonders from this passage what role German and French colonial rule may have played in helping shape Mousgoum notions of domestic beauty during the early decades of the twentieth century, particularly in relation to the vigorous international discourse on public health at the time.

The written accounts of four European travelers comprise Nelson’s primary archive in chapter two. Each of these four travelers—German geographer Heinrich Barth, bereaved Scottish widow Olive MacLeod, French writer André Gide, and Swiss filmmaker Marc Allégret (who was also Gide’s lover for a time)—found the Mousgoum *teleuk* to be a felicitous object for reflecting on the fragility of the boundary between self and other, between the civilized and the primitive, which Western society rendered much more rigidly at the time. Nelson’s readings in this chapter are informed by recent insights from postcolonial literary criticism and race theory, but he keeps the center of focus on the historical texts themselves. Nelson argues that for Barth, the *teleuk* provoked a grudging acknowledgement that African culture may well have had a glorious past,
since the telenk occupied a relatively high place on a scale that—for him and others in the late-nineteenth century—measured civilizational achievement through the quality of a culture’s artifacts. For MacLeod, the Mousgoum setting provided cognitive access to an otherwise exclusively male domain. She appropriated white racial privilege to classify and represent Mousgoum architecture and homelife in serialized published missives from her journey. For Gide, Mousgoum architecture prompted positive comparison with the best of European modernist architecture, a comparison painter Amédée Ozenfant endorsed by using the telenk as a symbol of progressive “Negro architecture” in his 1928 manifesto Art. In each of these cases, Nelson argues, the “telenk could not be comfortably distanced, it could not be fully translated, and it could not be fully integrated into Western terms” (96–97). In its tectonic sophistication, its easy absorption of gender categories, and its combination of “strangeness” and “beauty,” Nelson suggests, the telenk demanded a discursive claiming of boundaries from its Western observers that was fraught with productive instabilities.

Chapter three addresses the colonial context of architectural production in Africa much more directly than the book’s other chapters by exploring the role African buildings played in the International Colonial Exposition held in Paris in 1931. While the ostensible focus of the chapter is on the French Equatorial Africa Pavilion, which took the form of a strangely exaggerated telenk, there is a wealth of information here on other, lesser-known buildings as well. Nelson departs from a standard narrative on international exhibitions that sees only the distancing function performed by isolating “Native” or “primitive” cultures in theme-park versions of their “traditional” architectural context, and argues instead that this practice also underscored the modernity of “the primitive” as a constitutive feature of “twentieth-century European national identity” (146). This insight informs Nelson’s discussion in this chapter of the contradictions inherent in French policies of “assimilation” and “association,” as the on-again, off-again rationales for a French mission civilisatrice. While some of the material in this chapter repeats well-trodden ground, Nelson productively contributes new insights to earlier work by Patricia Morton, Gwendolyn Wright, and others.

The book’s final chapter addresses a point brought up earlier in the book: namely, that by the 1930s (and possibly earlier) Mousgoum were building telenk-key less and less frequently, substituting instead simpler, less expensive forms derived from a wider pool of precedent. While in an earlier chapter Nelson briefly alludes to population migration brought on by war, epidemics, and agricultural transformation (all of which accompanied colonial rule) as factors in the decline of traditional construction, this final chapter is less concerned with decline and more concerned with the contemporary resurgence of telenk construction in Cameroon. While some of the newer buildings discussed in chapter four are being used much as they had been generations earlier, Nelson is most interested in those telenk-key and other traditional structures that function self-consciously as cultural heritage, including the Mousgoum Cultural and Tourist Center in Pouss, Cameroon (built 1996), and the recently refurbished palace of tribal leader Lamido Mbang Yaya Oumar in the same city. Of particular interest in this chapter is Nelson’s presentation and analysis of a new genre of mural painting on the exterior of Mousgoum houses. This development places the (primarily) women painters of murals in a new role: as narrators of Mousgoum history and “cultural identity.” At the same time, by gaining control over the representation of what we might broadly call Mousgoum “tradition,” Nelson argues, “women, however tacitly or subtly, have the power to subvert, resist, and circumnavigate male voices” (187).

The University of Chicago Press has produced a handsomely designed book largely free of editorial errors, and Nelson’s own photographs add interest to an otherwise rich presentation of archival drawings and photos keyed evenly to text throughout the book. From Cameroon to Paris brings several important dimensions of African architecture plainly into view, and does so for a scholarly audience that is too infrequently exposed to the complexity, richness, and indeed paradoxical familiarity such a site can reveal in the hands of an accomplished scholar.

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Note