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The Debate on Rectilinear, Flat-Roofed African Architectural Traditions and the Development of an Arabicized German Colonial Style in East Africa

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Abstract

In 1894, Hermann Frobenius published the first study of African buildings written by a professional architect in Germany, *African Building Types: An Ethnographic- Architectural Study*. In this and subsequent texts, Frobenius synthesized three centuries of European architectural descriptions of Africa and attempted to generate an overview of what, why, and how Africans built throughout history. One of his pressing concerns was whether Africans had autochthonous traditions of building rectilinear, flat-roofed, multistory buildings or whether such forms were the result of exogenous influences. East Africa, with its history of early Arab and Portuguese activity and long-standing southerly migration of African ethnic groups was a particularly salient site for evaluating this question. Frobenius concluded that while such forms could be attributed in part to Arab presence, various African ethnic groups such as the Maasai also evolved flat-roofed, right-angled buildings. Frobenius posited multiple, overlapping cultural streams combining to produce what we now understand as a distinctive Swahili architecture.

In this paper, I re-read the development of an Arabicized German colonial style in East Africa in relation to Frobenius' re-evaluation of the origins of flatroofed buildings. The German colonial administration used this Arabicized architecture to create large official structures in the colony. It also became the architectural language of choice for representing German colonialism at exhibitions at home and abroad. There is evidence that colonial architects choose to celebrate this architectural tradition because it was most familiar and because it represented, to them, a culture and society (Arab) that were superior to those indigenous to East Africa. Based on Frobenius' arguments, however, it is possible to develop a different reading of the German use of this architectural language—one in which, despite the colonial ideology of these designers, agency is restored to the original and multifarious inventors of this architecture.



Tembe (nach Stuhlmann).

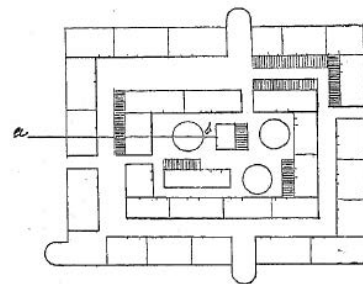
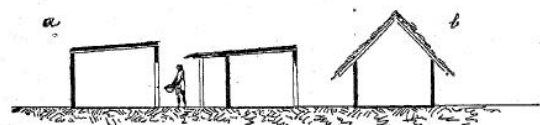


Fig. 88 b.



Above: "Arabicized" German East African architecture at the Berlin Trade Exhibition, 1896. Below: Origins of flat-roofed, rectilinear East African architecture, Wanyamesi *Tembe*, from Hermann Frobenius' *Afrikanische Bautypen* (1894)