

Material Culture
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Mali is a country of rich history and diverse culture. Its cultural heritage is, however, threatened by both pillage and illicit trade. Looting has dramatically increased in recent years, especially in the Inner Delta of the Niger and the Dogon country, and has obliged the Malian authorities to take measures to counteract this negative development.

The fight against the loss of cultural heritage in Mali has been reinforced by the enhancement of legislation aimed at regulating archaeological excavations and prohibiting unauthorized excavations. It also forbids the illicit export of cultural heritage. But a further step at the grassroots level has also been taken by creating awareness of the importance of protecting Malian cultural heritage in the local population. This is done through radio and television broadcasts, exhibitions, and articles in magazines and newspapers. The establishment of 'Cultural Missions' in the cities of Djenné, Tombouctou and Bandiagara, which figure on UNESCO's List of World Heritage Monuments, formally reinforced this. However, regional and international cooperation, which is currently being sought, is still somewhat wanting. A joint-programme between Mali and the Netherlands has given rise to several projects for conserving and protecting Malian cultural heritage, one of which concerns one of the major old centres of West-African Islam.

Architectural heritage management

The city of Djenné is one of the oldest known cities in West Africa. Archaeological traces of early settlement, dating from the 3rd century BC, have been found in the city. Urbanization was well developed by the 10th century and the region must have been densely inhabited. Some 79 sites within a radius of 4 km around Djenné appear to have been inhabited during this period. Evidence for extensive settlement is indicated by one of the largest mounds in the region, the site of Djenné-Djeno, measuring more than 33 hectares. Due to the advantage of its location in the fertile Inner-Niger Delta, which ensured rich pastures, fertile soils, and fish and game in abundance, Djenné developed into a flourishing commercial centre, initially mostly interregional, later also becoming a post on the long-distance trade routes across the Sahara.

The Inner Niger Delta played a major role in the history of West Africa and was closely related to the development of such medieval empires as Ghana/Wagadu, Mali, and Songay. Many people were attracted to this fertile region bordering on the Sahara, the Marka/Songay (urban merchants), Bozo (fishermen and masons), Fulani (herdsmen) and Bamanan (agriculturists) forming the majority. Their descendants can still be seen in Djenné and together with the merchants from the North and the South determined its real cosmopolitan character. To date, the town has a population of some 12,000 inhabitants.

Nowadays, only the monumental mud architecture reminds us of Djenné's former grandeur. The famous mud-brick architecture, which made the reputation of Djenné, is threatened however, not by the fragile nature of the material, but by the economic recession preventing the inhabitants to maintain their houses and by social transformations endangering the traditional house structure. This also incited UNESCO in 1988 to accept both the city itself and the archaeological sites around it as a World Monument.

Protecting Mali's Cultural Heritage

The architecture of the monumental two-storied mud buildings with their decorated façades is world famous. The mosque, for example, measuring 75 square metres, is the world's largest mud construction. It dates from 1906-1907 and was built on the ruins of the first mosque, according to oral tradition built in the 13th century. The ruins of this first mosque can still be seen in photographs from 1893. Archaeological excavations yielded evidence of the use of mud bricks as early as the 8th to 9th centuries, and of rectangular house plans dating back to the 11th and 12th centuries. However, the exact age of the existing houses is difficult to ascertain. All we know for sure is that some of them figure in photographs from as early as 1893 onwards. Since these houses then already show signs of a certain age, it may be estimated that they could at least be some 200 years old.

Ever since the 1970s, the wide possibilities of research in Djenné attracted many researchers. An exhibition on Djenné, based on this multidisciplinary research and complemented with a catalogue, first opened in Leiden (the Netherlands) in 1994 and was later also shown at Bamako and Djenné itself. Presenting a vivid image of this multi-ethnic city, a wide audience became aware of the disastrous situation of its architecture. Consequently, in 1995, the Dutch Embassy at Bamako took the initiative and asked the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde (Leiden) to draw up a plan for the restoration of the city. A joint Malian-Dutch mission went to Djenné to make an assessment of the actual situation. It then appeared that more than 30% of the monumental buildings that had been visited by Dutch researchers in 1984 had disappeared and those houses still extant were in a dramatically poor state of conservation.

A plan for the restoration of the city, submitted to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, met with the favourable decision to subsidize the project (for the period of 1996 to 2003), which concentrates on the restoration of some 168 monumental buildings in the city of Djenné (out of a total of some 1,850). It also focuses on setting up an organization to assure safe management of the

cultural heritage. The project is currently being executed by the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, in close cooperation with the Musée National du Mali in Bamako, and the Mission Culturelle de Djenné.

Local masons in Djenné – often of Bozo ethnic origin – carry out the restoration work, along with blacksmiths, carpenters (for making doors and windows) and potters (for the earthenware windows and drainpipes). Local masonry techniques and available materials are used. The quality of the mud-brick architecture in Djenné is directly linked to the craftsmanship of the masons, who are formally organized in a kind of guild structure, the *barey-ton*, which is unique in Africa and has its origins probably in the 15th century. It is through this organization that the craftsmanship, which guarantees the high quality masonry of the houses in Djenné, has been passed on from generation to generation. The internal organization of the *barey ton* is strictly hierarchical, involving apprentices, young masons and master masons. The latter are expert craftsmen and possess the necessary magical knowledge. Each family has a long-established relationship with a specific mason's family, in which magic also plays an important role. In the project, naturally, this connection between houses and specific masons is duly respected.

Restoration ethics

Because Djenné has been registered as a World Monument, the project has adopted certain principles of restoration, based on the International Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites. These principles have been adapted conform to local circumstances. Even for World Monuments, there are no absolute and universally accepted restoration principles. The project tries to retain the atmosphere of the city based on its location, with its typical structure of narrow streets and small squares and, especially, the monumental mud-brick houses with decorated

façades plastered by hand. This ensemble must survive. For this reason a number of 168 mostly monumental houses were selected for restoration, sometimes bordering a street or square, sometimes standing by themselves, spread all over the city and in various states of deterioration. This selection is primarily based on architectural criteria. In the project now being carried out, the architecture and the city's atmosphere of around the turn of the century are taken as an arbitrary model for the restoration. It is from this period, the beginning of French colonization, that the oldest written records and illustrations survive.

Before any intervention, careful recording and research is necessary. The documentation consists of: the already existing plans and photographs; drawings and photographs of the actual condition; plans for the restoration with a detailed description of the work to be carried out, a calculation of the quantity and quality of the required materials, and a tender. The restoration plans are made by a Malian architect and submitted to an international committee. The principle to retain as much of the original parts of any monument as possible is of paramount importance in making of decisions. The elaborate documentation ensures that all restoration work is more or less reversible. It will also permit a reasonable control, which was formerly virtually impossible.

We hope that this project will give rise to a larger interest in the city of Djenné and will contribute to the conservation of one of the most beautiful cities of Mali. This project is further expected to reaffirm the still often overlooked fact that Africa has indeed, a rich history and that its traces must be respected. ◆

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Rain damages the vulnerable mud architecture