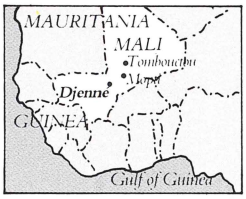
The Great Mosque at Djenné

Its impact today as a model

Text and photographs by ***Raoul Snelder.*** *unless otherwise indicated.*

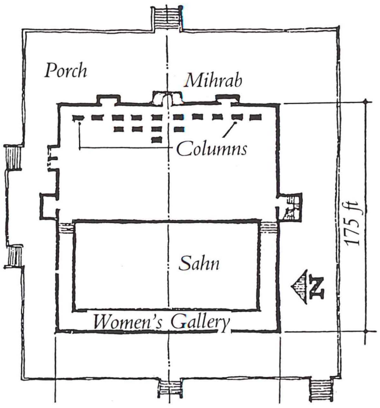


The Great Mosque at Djenné is without a doubt the model that inspired the architecture of the award-winning mosque of Niono, Mali.

In order to know more about the various influences that finally led to this magnificent style, we will have to know more about the city of Djenné, its history and its architecture: a rare example of indigenous architecture surviving intact the introduction of dominant models by colonial powers in Africa. It may even be that colonial administrators and engineers, profoundly impressed by the local architecture, were instrumental in shaping one of the features of the style as we know it today.

Awaiting more definitive studies on the subject, the following comments only brief on some aspects of the Djenné model, and on the work of contemporary master masons in the region, such as Lassiné Minta in Niono, Mali.

Above: Djenné; east façade or qibla *wall of the mosque. The slanting shadows are cast by bundles of palm-wood sticks that serve practical as well as decorative purposes.*



Plan of the mosque of Djenné. Source: L. Prussin, drawing by C. Anthony.

The Djenné Mosque

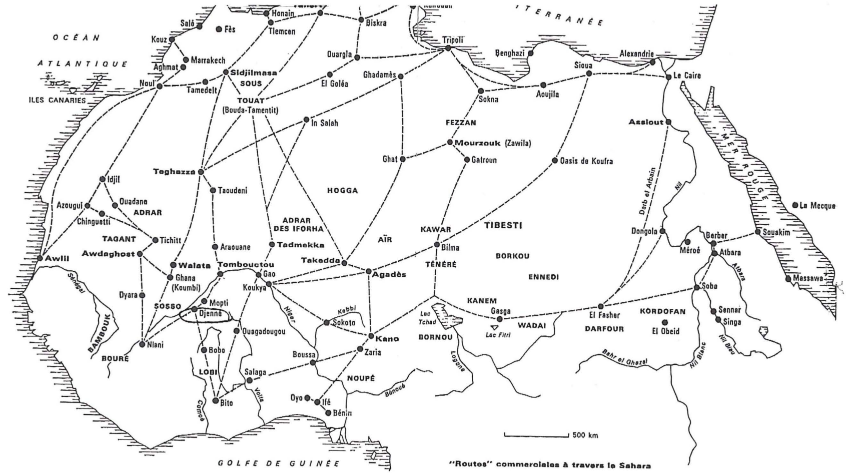
The very impressive and stately Great Mosque at Djenné is the product of architectural influences originating in a vast area that ranges from present-day Ghana to North-Africa, to the Maghreb.

As a hypothesis that still needs confirmation by more research, it is now thought that the exuberant plastic and sculptural qualities of the pagan sanctuaries for the ancestor cult in the south were a main source of inspiration for the Dyula Mosque, and this in its turn became one of the most important models for the mosques of the Djenné type.

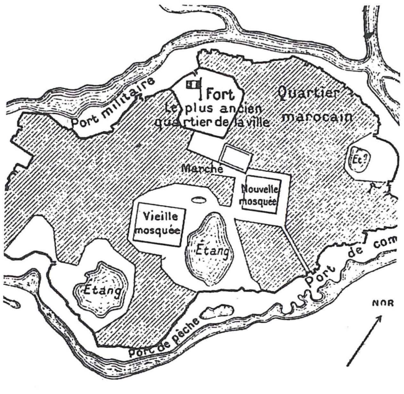
It is maybe not just a coincidence that the central minaret of the *qibla* wall of these mosques is said to refer to the Prophet, while the two flanking ones refer to 'Alassane' and 'Ousseynou'.

Northern influences inspired a specific order and hierarchy to this exuberant verticality: minarets, towers, corner quoin and pilasters got their form and place in a characteristic formal arrangement. Using Professor Labelle Prussin's linguistic parallel, one might say that the vocabulary originated in the south, the syntax in the north and that they came together to create a unique architectural language in the homeland of the Soninke people.

The plan of the Djenné Mosque shows a conventional hypostyle mosque of the courtyard type: a main prayer hall occupies the east half of a square, colonnades surround a *sahn* on the three other sides. The materials and technology used, result in the unique aspect of the interior: rows of enormous piers in plas-



Map of North Africa (from Hatier, Histoire de l'Afrique noire, *1972) Source: Hatier, K.*



Plan of the city of Djenné around 1896.
Source: F. Dubois.

tered mud-brick, joined overhead by pointed arches, seem to occupy almost as much space as they permit to create. One feels that it could have been made not by building it brick after brick, but by carving it out of one huge block of clay. This interior massiveness contrasts with the impression of elegance created by the exterior façades and their vertical elements. This contrast seems to underline inversely the primitive, almost troglodyte quality of the interior.

The plastic quality of the façades is so impressive that the absence of any reference to it prior to the colonial occupation is very puzzling: while it is reasonably sure that the 1907 "colonial" reconstruction* made use of the existing vocabulary, it cannot be excluded — on the basis of information now available — that it represents in some ways a new stage in the syntax.

The City's History

About three kilometres to the south-east of the present city of Djenné, which is located on the south-eastern edge of the interior delta of the Niger river, archaeologists recently found and studied the remains of what they call — somewhat surprisingly — the "forgotten" city of Ancient Djenné or Djenné-djeno. Surprisingly, because the existence of this parent-city is well documented both in literature and in the local oral tradition.

However, according to the archaeological data, the history of Djenné-djeno goes much further back than related by either one: a first settlement must have been established towards 250 B.C. on one of the islands between the winding ramifications of the Niger and Bani rivers. It said to be the oldest known city and perhaps the most important Iron Age site in Africa, south of the Sahara.

As this village grew, it took on urban characteristics and excavated artifacts (notably an earthen wall of about two kilometre surrounding the settlement) suggest that at sometime between 400 and 800 A.D., it became a true city.

As early as the fifth century, commercial links seem to have stretched as far as one thousand kilometre to the north (copper) and eight hundred kilometre to the south (gold).

At first, housing construction was of the beehive type that is still present today in the delta region. However, huts seem to have been plastered with mud. Then round, mud houses covered with thatch cones were built, using a puddled-mud kind of technique and later, by the ninth century, a masonry technique with round bricks. This masonry technique would appear to have been first used, from 400 A.D. onwards, in the construction of the city wall. Between 700 and 1000 A.D. rectangular houses appeared, built with rounded mud bricks similar to the ones used until today.

This city must have reached the height of its prosperity in this period, between 700 and 1000 A.D.; from then on its size decreased. It was abandoned around 1400 as present-day Djenné grew.

Origins

Abderrahman Es-Sa'di, originally of Timbuktu and Imam of the Djenné Mosque in the 1620-30's, tells us in his chronicle "Tarikh es-Soudan" that Djenné was founded by pagans (i.e. non-Muslims) in the second century of the Hegira or towards 770 A.D. It was first established in a locality called Zoboro and later transferred to its present site. Other sources also mention a transfer of the city although details vary.

The reason for the shift in population are said to be unclear but it is suggested that they may relate to the conversion to Islam of the local elite. This suggestion would seem to fit Es-Sa'di's history of Djenné but he does not himself make the link between conversion and transfer.

Maurice Delafosse, the first French scholar to write an extensive historical and socio-cultural study of the French Sudan, places the founding of a primitive Djenné at about 800 A.D. when a group of Soninke, directed by one Adyini Kounate, joined their relatives, the Bozo fishermen at a place called "Dioboro". But the real founding of Djenné, for him, is to be situated around 1240, when a second and more important group of Soninke-Nono settled at Dioboro, among the Bozo and the Kounate-clan, trying to escape the Mali emperor, Soundjata's dominance after the final destruction of Koumbi Saleh, capital of the Ghana empire.

The number of the newly arrived Soninke was too great to be accommodated at Dioboro, according to Delafosse, and the Bozo, masters of the land and water, attributed the Knafa-plateau, site of an earlier settlement of the Bobo, to the newcomers. One wonders if, apart from overcrowding, religious reasons may not already have started to play a role: the Soninke-Nono, mostly tradesmen, must have been in contact with Muslim counterparts for over two centuries.

It had been dismantled in 1830, shortly after René Caillié saw and described it.

Arrival of Islam

Although the sovereigns of two of the most important Sudanese states converted to Islam at a much earlier date (Dia Kossoi of Gao in 1009 or 1010; Baramenda of Mali towards 1050), Es-Sa'di tells us that the first chief of Djenné to convert to Islam was Konboro: he proclaimed his conversion in front of an assembly of 4200 ulemas towards the end of the sixth century of the Hegira (about 1180 A.D.). He then had his palace demolished and replaced by a mosque. A new palace was built nearby. His successor is said to have added the towers at the mosque, and the successor to this chief added the wall that surrounds the mosque. Es-Sa'di then says that this is the mosque of his own days of which he became imam in 1627.

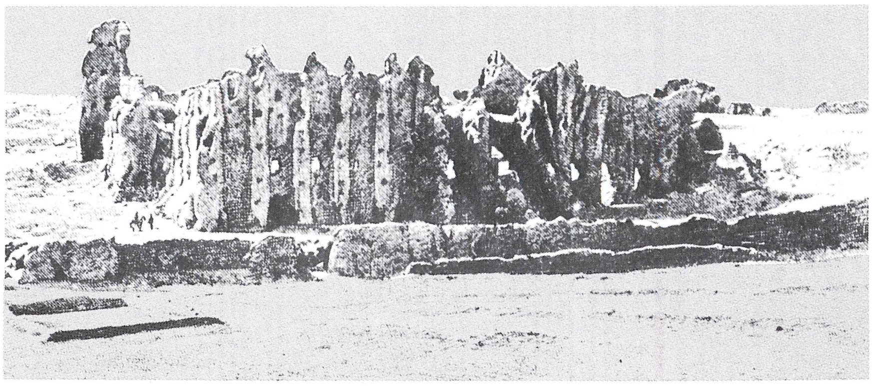
Even if Djenné's inhabitants are said to have followed their chief's example, paganism must have lingered on and as late as the end of the ninth century of the Hegira (about 1470), its temple was still in place: the jurisconsult Foudiya Souna el-Ouankori, when finally accepting the invitation to establish himself in Djenné, then "immediately ordered the demolition of the temple of the idol that the pagans had adored".

Delafosse and Raymond Mauny, another French scholar, do not follow Es Sa'di on this point. The former places the conversion of Konboro — "the 26th sovereign since Kounate settled at Dioboro" — towards 1300, suggesting that as a mean each of these sovereigns would have ruled for an amazing twenty years. The latter gives Es Sa'di's version placing it "before 1106"; when he states that the Islamisation of the Djenné region took place in the thirteenth century, one is inclined to think that Konboro's conversion is to be placed in 1206.

Both suggest that the mosque was built in the early fourteenth century, at the same time (Delafosse) or a little later (Mauny) than the famous Djinguereber mosque in Timbuktu.

On the basis of the information actually available, the official adoption of Islam and the construction of the mosque of Djenné can not be more precisely situated in time than somewhere between 1180 and 1330.

Tentatively and very roughly, the following history of Djenné and its region, based on the information now available — which is admittedly still incomplete and sometimes contradictory — can now be sketched. In the third century B.C., what may have been a small village of fishermen grew into a trading place of some importance as the Sahara desert had reached its actual limits. A small group of Soninke, possibly related to the people already established, settled there towards the beginning of the ninth century. Djenné-djeno has become a true city some time before and remained prosperous until its decline set in the eleventh century. In the mid-thirteenth century, another group of Soninke settled nearby, on the site of present-day Djenné.



Above: Ruins of the old mosque in Djenné. From a photograph transmitted by M. Hugot and M. (apparently some unknown person). In the centre we see the remnants of what Dubois thought were a set of three enormous buttress. However, it seems more likely that it was an entrance similar to the one of today's mosque; it may have been obstructed following the dismantling in 1830.
Above, right: Sketch of the old mosque according to Dubois. Source: F. Dubois.

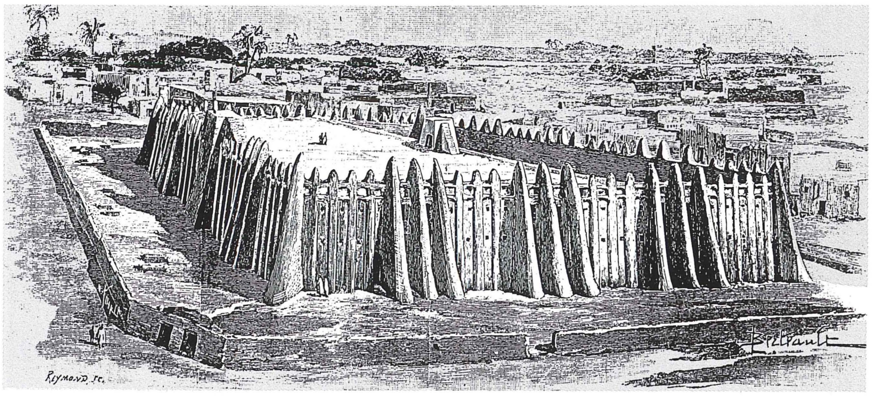
The Role of Commerce

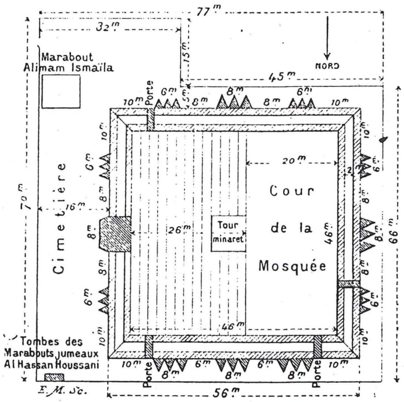
The location of both settlements near the border of the arid zone and the food-producing sahelian belt, on the south-western edge of the great interior delta of the Niger river, where rice was produced and fish were abundant, made them into natural centres of exchange. As surplus production of food and trade made it possible for crafts and enterprise to develop, Djenné-djeno became a flourishing city that benefited from the stability created by the Ghana empire. At the height of its development Djenné-djeno and its nearby satellites may have had close to 20,000 inhabitants according to the archaeologists.

At some time in the eleventh century, Djenné-djeno's population started to decrease and this marked the beginning of its decline. It is probably not just a coincidence that the same period saw the decline of the Ghana empire — its capital being sacked by the Almoravids from Morocco around 1076 — and the beginning of Islamisation in West Africa, south of the Sahara.

Islam had already reached the western Sudan in the second half of the eighth century and the capital of Ghana, at the end of the first millenium, was a dual city, one of which was pagan while the other was Muslim. In the same period, trade must have served as a vehicle for the peaceful introduction of Islam. Djenné-djeno, which by then already was a kind of polynuclear settlement, may have seen one of its satellites become predominantly Muslim. A kind of dual-city situation may then have developed with finally the younger city absorbing the population of the older one, as more and more people turned to Islam.

But even if long before, Islam must have spread in the region in the wake of trade, it was only formally adopted — as a kind of state religion — somewhere between the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries. However unclear the history of this period may be, one cannot fail to notice that it is this same period that, according to the archaeological data, saw the decline of Djenné-djeno while modern Djenné developed. The latter city prospered economically and it must have started early to acquire its reputation as an Islamic centre of learning. It managed to maintain a degree of independence, benefiting possibly from a kind of benign neglect on behalf of the Mali emperors, who were probably well aware of the need for peace and stability in order to create wealth through trade. The same trade must have been a vehicle for cultural exchange over quite consideration distances, reaching from the forest in the south to the Maghreb in the north, while the pilgrimage to Makkah assured contact with north-east Africa and the mid-east.





Plan of the old mosque according to Dubois. Source: F. Dubois.

Conquests and Rivalries

Djenné must have been a rich city and tradition says it was besieged 99 times, but apparently it was not to be taken at the price of its destruction.

The great Sunni conqueror, Ali Ber, the last but one of the Berber rulers of the city of Gao, did not have such scruples. He laid siege to the city in 1465/66 or in 1469. The siege lasted for seven years, seven months and seven days-according to one version, for four years — according to another. It was finally taken around 1473.

Under the Askia, successors to the Sunni dynasty, Djenné lived through a new period of prosperity and, like Timbuktu, became once more a centre of Islamic learning and teaching. Askia Mohammed, the founder of the dynasty, held the ulemas in high esteem and under his reign, their position which had been quite difficult under Sunni Ali Ber, was fully restored. From that time, Djenné became an integral part of the Songai empire.

However, by the end of the sixteenth century, the wealth of the western Sudan, as perceived by the Moroccans, led to an expedition of a mercenary army under Pacha Djouder, sent by Sultan Moulay Ahmed of Marrakech, at a time when internal conflicts seriously weakened the Songai. The Moroccan army bringing fire-arms which were until then unknown in the Sudan, only met with ill-organised resistance and easily defeated the Songai army in April 1591. Djouder took Gao which was deserted by its inhabitants. Timbuktu was not only taken with resistance, the Moroccans were rather welcomed if not invited.

Djenné accepted the authority of the pacha Mahmoud, successor to Djouder, in late 1591 or early 1592, and swore allegiance to the sultan of Marrakech. The city was ruled by a Caïd answering to the Pacha in Timbuktu who, until around 1660, recognised the sultan of Marrakech as his sovereign. Far from bringing stability and prosperity, the Moroccan rule was a period of constant upheaval aggravated by frequent natural disaster. Even Es-Sa'di, who lived in the first half of the seventeenth century and appears otherwise favourably disposed towards the Moroccans, sees in the Moroccan dominance and the resulting conditions, the punishment of God.

For the region as a whole, and Djenné in particular, these can hardly have been very prosperous times. Trade must have been seriously disrupted by the almost constant warfare, the plundering and the levying of heavy tributes. Touareg, Peul and Bambara rulers, each in turn, tried to establish their authority over the area with changing luck. Eventually, the Bambara prevailed and the Peul rulers were at least nominally vassals to the emperor of Segou. Djenné's position must have been somewhat particular, neither independent nor really ruled by either, although the Bambara rulers were, to say the least, very influential in both Djenné and Timbuktu towards the end of the eighteenth century.

Cheikou Amadou destroys the Mosque

Delafosse says that neither Peul nor Bambara were Muslims at that time. However, among the latter a minority — and possibly even some of the rulers — may have adopted Islam; a rival clan of the reigning rulers may have done so for political reasons. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, a Muslim Peul, Cheikou Amadou, brought this rival clan to rule and justified his action by proclaiming a holy war against the pagan rulers and their Bambara overlords.

Cheikou Amadou, born towards the end of the eighteenth century in the central Macina, was well versed in Islam and spent time with Ousman dan Fodio whose action was a source of inspiration. After his return to the Macina, his growing entourage of "talibé" (students and followers) was soon taken as a threat by the ruling clan. An incident provoked by a son of the ruler Hammadi Dikko — ending in the *talibé* killing the son on Cheikou Amadou's orders — triggered the holy war. Cheikou Amadou obtained Ousman dan Fodio's benediction as well as the approval of the population which handed over Hammadi Dikko after a battle lost by his general.

The population of Djenné, ardent Muslims, also welcomed the change of rule by the Arma family, descendants of and successors to the Caïds named by the Moroccans, had no intention of obeying the dictates of a fellow Muslim and murdered the representatives sent by Cheikou Amadou. After a siege of nine months, the city was taken and a representative of Cheikou Amadou installed in or shortly after 1810.

Around 1830, Cheikou Amadou, disapproving the unorthodox lifestyle of the people of Djenné and the profane activities going on around (and according to some: in) the mosque, ordered it to be dismantled. A new mosque was built to the east of the old one. It was to be extremely sober and, according to Dubois who saw it in 1895, "simple, nue, banale". Cheikou Amadou organised his state in a remarkable way and pushed its limits to Timbuktu in the north, to the confluent of the Black Volta and the Sourou rivers in the south. He also won over to Islam most of his fellow Peul of the Macina. Djenné again knew a period of prosperity but it was to be short-lived.

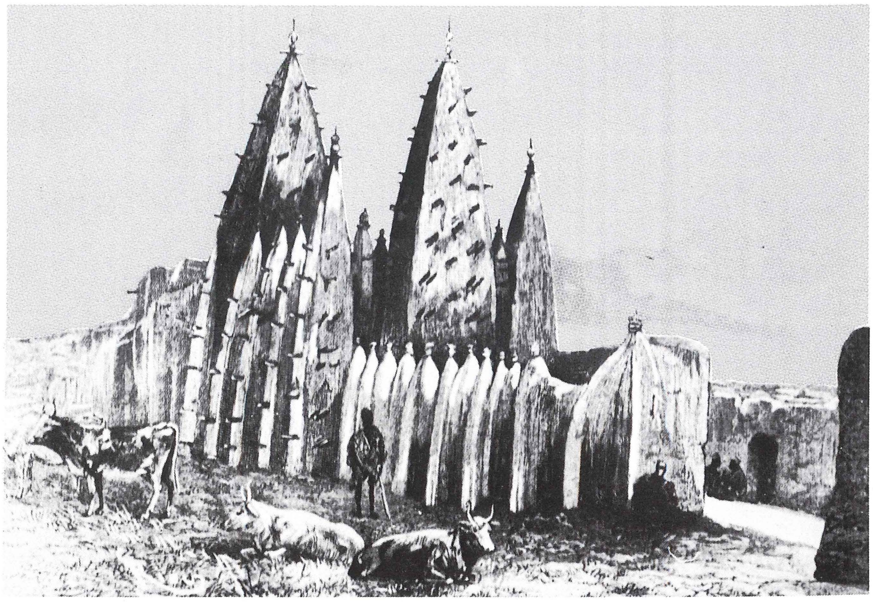
Arrival of the French

In 1828, René Caillié was the first Western visitor to Djenné. His description of the city shows it as a still prosperous trading centre with caravans leaving and arriving "every day". It is very puzzling that, although he does give a description of the houses he stayed in, there is no indication whatsoever of the existence of the architectural features that so much impressed later visitors, notably Félix Dubois. His description of the mosque is extremely brief and apparently he was not impressed.

It seems clear that the state of war that was almost permanent during the mid-18th century must have had its effect on the volume of trade in the area and thus, on Djenné's main activity. Nevertheless, when Rene' Caillie' visited the city in 1828, he found its wealth impressive and he reported that caravans left and arrived every day carrying all sorts of "useful products". By then, according to his very short description, the mosque was in a pitiful state and hardly used. Prayers were said in the courtyard rather than in the prayer hall itself, which appeared abandoned to the swallows. The mosque which he saw had two towers of modest height. Clearly, Caillié was not impressed at all by its architectural quality since no detail is recorded. It is also very puzzling that there is no indication whatsoever, of the existence of the architectural features that so much impressed later visitors, notably Félix Dubois. Although brief descriptions are given of the houses Caillié stayed in, there is no reference to a particular Djenné 'style' in domestic architecture.

In the late nineteenth century, the French colonial expansion moved eastward from present-day Senegal. Under Governor Faidherbe, a methodical policy of penetration and annexation was implemented and by 1855, a fortress had been established in Medine, near Kayes on the upper Senegal. Ruthlessly and skillfully exploiting the region's political instability, alternating the use of force and diplomatic approaches, the French moved along the course of the upper Senegal and its tributaries, and established a base at Kita in 1881.

A French stronghold was established at Bamako in 1883. In 1886 and 1887, treaties were signed with both Samori and Amadou, successor to Elhadj Omar, but nevertheless, a new military campaign was launched by the French in order to "pacify" the region. In 1890, Segou was taken without resistance. Djenné had to be taken by assault in 1893. Finally Timbuktu accepted the authority of the French in 1894, after inflicting considerable losses on the French troops. By then, the resistance was reduced to a series of skirmishes.



Mosque at Sorobango. Drawing by Riou after a sketch by M. Treich-Laplène. Example of a typical mosque in the Dyula style. It shows two towers of which one probably marked the mirhab, *the other the main entrance. Two corner coins look like secondary towers.*

In 1899, the whole region was sufficiently under control for the French to enter the era of what Delafosse called "organisation et (la) mise en valeur". As early as 1896, Djenné had received the visit of a French journalist, Félix Dubois, whose highly evocative prose bears witness to his fascination with Djenné, its people and its architecture.

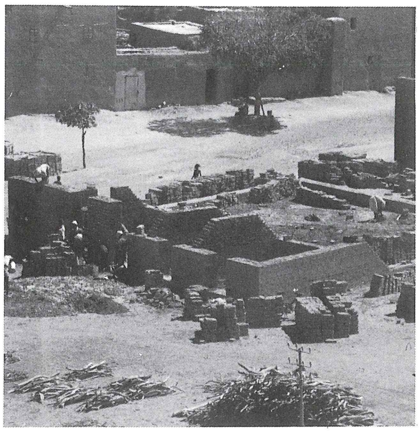
History of the Present Mosque in Djenné

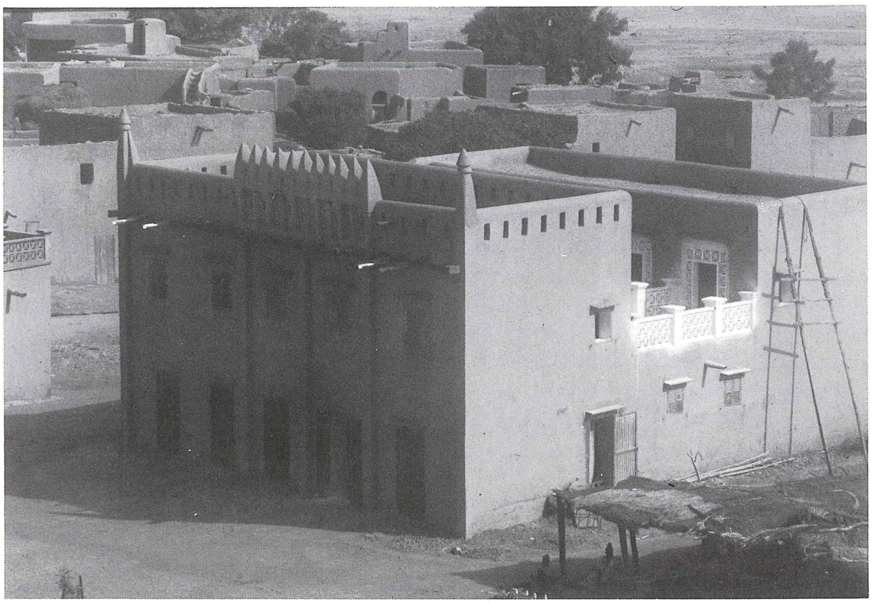
According to most sources mentioned above, Djenné's mosque was built at some time between the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries, at the site occupied by today's mosque. Originally built by chief of Djenné, Konboro, his successors are said to have added the towers and the wall surrounding the mosque. It must have been renovated or rebuilt at least once and possibly more than once. Cheikou Amadou had it dismantled in 1830 and under his son's direction, a new mosque was built on the north-eastern side of today's market square.

In 1907, the "old" mosque, of which remnants were still standing, was reconstructed. According to Méniaud, this was done by order of the French "Gouverneur Général Ponty", and on the basis of the plan of the old mosque. A school was built on the old site of Cheikou Amadou's mosque.

However, one source gives a far more complex history of Djenné's mosque. According to oral tradition recorded by Hampaté Ba and Daget, Konboro's mosque was built on site B after his pilgrimage to Makkah (there is no mention of this pilgrimage in the relevant section of the Tarikh es-Soudan). His successor, Malaha Tanapo, a non-Muslim, far from adding towers to the mosque, had it demolished and built another sanctuary on the site of today's mosque (site A). This building is said to have been partly mosque and partly temple, for the pagans to house their "fétiches"; a very unusual arrangement. Askia Mohammed, who deemed this arrangement incompatible with the percepts of Islam, demolished Tanapo's building and reconstructed Konboro's mosque (around 1500 A.D.). The Moroccans, for a reason not specified, allegedly demolished Konboro's mosque and rebuilt Tanapo's mosque (around 1600?).

Cheikou Amadou, in the nineteenth century, found this building too sumptuous and the activities going on in and around it inacceptable. The great council of the Macina state decided that it had to be dismantled by taking down its roof (1830). Without paying heed to the pleas of Djenné's people, this decision was carried out by Cheikou Amadou's son and





Above: Djenné; a building under construction at the south side of the market square, in early 1976. This illustrates that the building tradition used here and in Niono is still very much alive and in demand. Right: The same building, finished by early 1977.

Konboro's mosque was rebuilt (the austere building may not really have been a faithful reconstruction; it can hardly be identified as a mosque on the only picture available to us).

As far as we know, only one source prior to Hampaté Ba and Daget gives information that possibly confirms at least part of this tradition: Marty suggests that Cheikou Amadou's mosque was built on the site of another, older Friday Mosque.

One sequence of constructions might thus be (site A)-(site B)- (site A), another possible sequence (site B)-(site A)-(site B)- (site A) — (site B)-(site A).

Little information as to what the earliest mosque actually looked like is available, apart from Dubois's reconstruction sketch. The Tarikh el-Fettach refers to "les galeries et colonnades" of the mosque, suggesting that the two types of building we see today were present in the early sixteenth century. The Tarikh es-Soudan tells us no more than that it had towers and a surrounding wall, shortly after it was first built.

René Caillié only tells us that it is very big, roughly built and that it has two towers of modest height; he also refers to a small courtyard.

Félix Dubois saw the ruins of the "old" mosque and included two engravings in his book, showing them as he saw them in 1896: a view of the north façade and a view of the same wall — or what was left of it — seen from the inside.

An engraving, based on a photograph taken in early 1895, shows the same façade and since it is taken from a somewhat more revealing angle, a much shortened view of the east façade. Dubois interviewed people in Djenné on the subject of the mosque and, on the basis of what he heard and saw, made a sketch of the mosque as he thought it must have looked before it was dismantled in 1830.

In this sketch, the main features are the two towers (one projecting out of the middle of the east façade and one, on the same east-west axis, standing in the main prayer hall against the west façade) and eleven sets of gigantic sloping buttresses (two on the east façade and three on each of the three other façades). The plan of his reconstruction is rather curious: a gallery runs on all four sides of a square, the eastern half of the inner square is covered and constitutes the prayer hall. Apart from the buttresses, all walls have pilasters identical to those of today's mosque. A parapet is formed by the conical projecting tops of the buttresses and pilasters, which are linked by a beam: the result is a kind of balustrade much like the one we see today.

Dubois' reconstruction sketches have been qualified as fanciful, and indeed close inspection of the engravings of the ruins seems to confirm that opinion. The sets of gigantic buttresses were possibly inspired by what more probably were the remains of an entrance very much like the one of the north façade of today's mosque. There is no visible reason to suppose there were three sets similar to this one on the north façade. Nor is there any visible reason to suppose that the colonnade of the west half of the square ran on all four sides, which would be an unusual arrangement.

The mosque as it has been reconstructed in 1907, seems more true to the original than Dubois' sketches. However, some elements are very puzzling: the profusion of towers which number five in today's mosque has not been mentioned at any moment prior to the 1907 reconstruction. The east façade has one central and main tower, flanked by two lower secondary towers. On the south-west and north-west angles two, low, squat towers house the staircases leading up to the roof. The set of three towers of the east façade is now one of the most striking features of the "Djenné style" in mosque architecture. Did this feature exist prior to the 1907 reconstruction?

Both Caillié and Dubois suggest — by omission — that it did not. And one would indeed conclude it did not exist if it were not for one of the engravings mentioned before: it shows, on the east façade, the remnants, that Dubois apparently took for a set of buttresses, but that just possibly may have been a northern secondary tower. All other information suggests that the east façade prior to 1907 was significantly different from what it is today. Labelle Prussin cites a report of 1901, stating that the mosque of Segou was built on the model suggested by the remains of the old mosque at Djenné: the Segou mosque most certainly did not have a set of three towers on the east façade.

Domestic architecture in Djenné

The architectural style of Djenné houses was first documented in 1868 and then not in Djenné itself but in Segou. It has been an object of fascination to many a visitor, scholar or not. Dubois is the most striking example: his enthusiasm led him to engage in an amateurist analysis of its origins. His conclusion is that it must have been brought from Upper Egypt by the people of Djenné, the Songai. Delafosse invalidates his arguments by pointing out i.e. that although Songai is the language of Djenné, by far the majority of its people are Soninke and always have been. He concludes that exterior influences on Djenné's architecture came from the Maghreb and notably from Morocco, although Ishak es-Saheli (a poet and architect of Spanish origin brought to the Sudan by Mali emperor, Mansa Moussa), who is in his opinion probably the first to inspire the Djenné style, may have been influenced by the architecture of Egypt that he saw on his travels.

Charles Monteil, a French colonial administrator who was the first to study the architecture of Djenné, agrees with Delafosse — qualifying Dubois' theory as literary entertainment without foundation — but he thinks that the possible influence of es-Saheli is exaggerated. He recorded local tradition among the "bari" or master-masons of Djenné, stating that they practice their craft following the principles set by a Moroccan called "maloum Idriss" (maloum = moallim, i.e. master craftsman, especially in the building trade). Delafosse also mentions this maloum Idriss and sees in him a contemporary of es-Saheli (1325) and the architect of Konboro's mosque. Both Monteil and Delafosse mention oral traditions, saying that the same maloum Idriss was responsible for the construction of the palace of the Bambara emperor Biton, in Segou (early eighteenth century). As this is obviously impossible, Delafosse retains the earlier date while Monteil prefers the latter one as the most probable period in which maloum Idriss must have lived and worked. The Tedzkiret en-Nisian, a chronicle written towards 1750, mentions the presence in Djenné of a maloum E1 Amin ben Tagh, contemporary of Timbuktu pacha Mansour (around 1725).

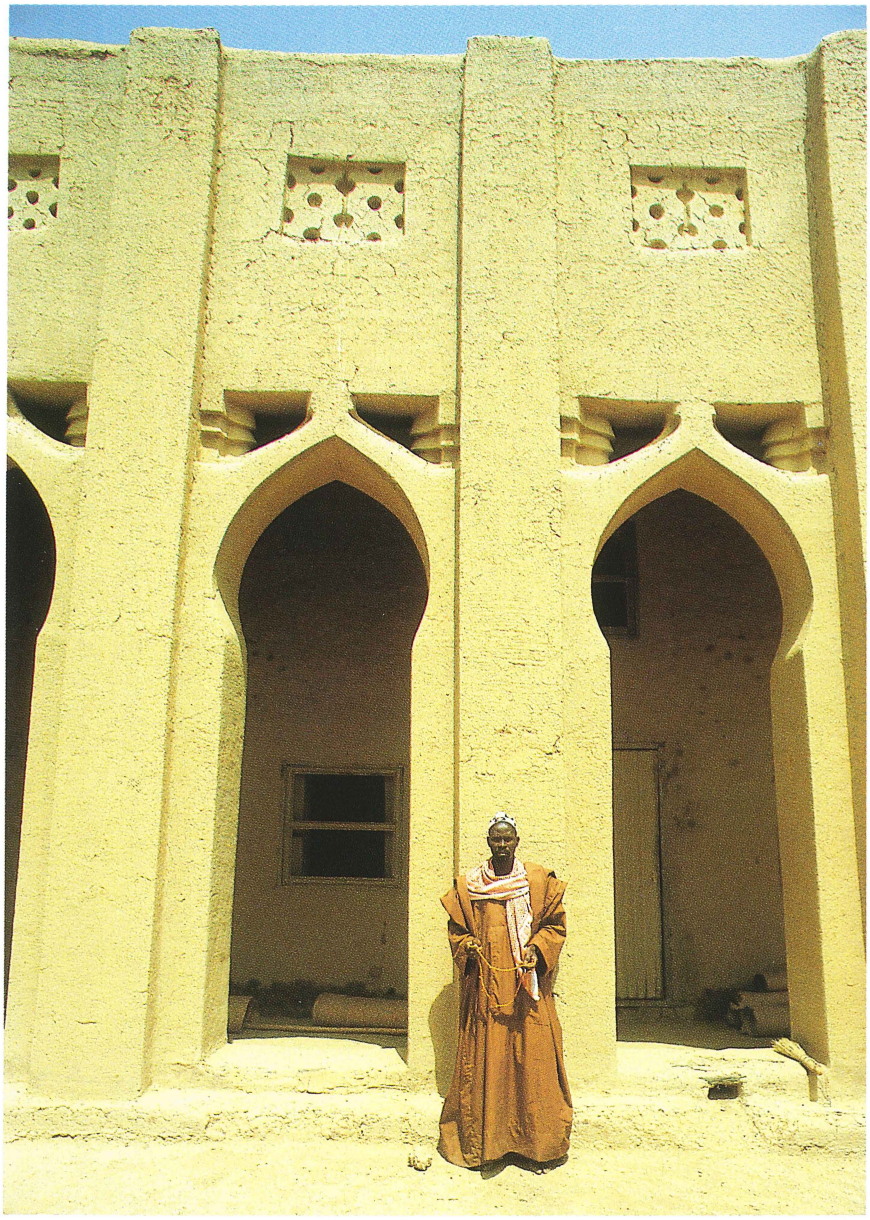
On the basis of an analysis of historical sources, technology, architectural vocabulary and stylistic elements, Professor Prussin comes to the conclusion that external influences on, or external sources of' Djenné's architecture originated mainly in the Maghreb. Most of the examples illustrating her argument are from Morocco. She also believes that links existed with Mozabite architecture: in a footnote, she suggests that in this latter case, it was Sudanese architecture influencing the architecture in the M'zab as a result of the Black diaspora northwards. This is one of the rare instances in which it is clearly suggested that this cultural exchange was a "two-way street".

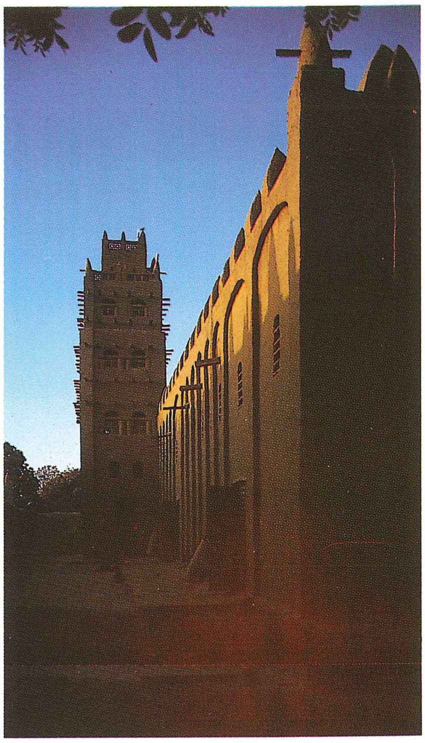
It seems safe to assume the existence of intimate links between the architecture of the Maghreb, Morocco in particular, and the architecture of the central western Sudan. But the particular architecture of Djenné can only be explained by supposing a strong indigenous tradition leading to a very specific synthesis.

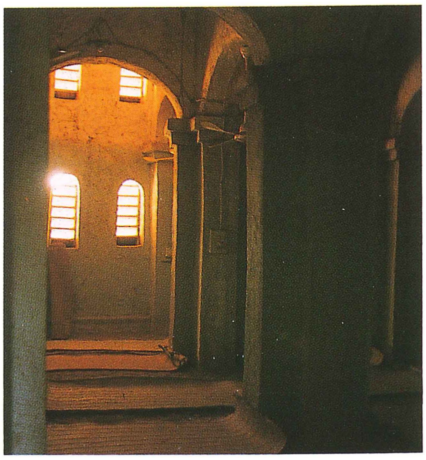
Timbuktu, where contact with the Moroccans must have been far more intensive and where direct contact probably goes further back has developed an architecture that is significantly different. The strikingly ornamental main facade so characteristic of Djenné's domestic architecture only exists in Timbuktu as an exception, and is in those cases clearly a copy of the Djenné model. The fact that the houses in Djenné known as "Moroccan" do not have all the elements of what Prussin calls the "classic" facade might be seen as an indication of the differentiating presence of indigenous elements in this facade.

The architecture of the mosques of the

Top: Koa; east facade of a mosque that qualified as "recently built" in 1973.
Above: South-west corner of the same mosque.
Above, right: Detail of the west facade of the main prayer hall. In front of the mosque stands the imam, son of the imam who initiated the construction of this mosque.







Top: Niono; south-west corner of the Great Mosque with its square west tower.
Above: Interior of the Great Mosque.
Photographs: B. B. Taylor

two cities is also quite different: those of Timbuktu resemble much more closely the North African models. Djenné's mosque could be described as a highly stylised version of the Dyula Mosques, with an elaborate hierarchy of vertical elements, conceivably inspired by pre-Islamic or non-Islamic ancestral pillars and cones of which the phallic connotation is just one of many elements of a complex system of elliptical references, of which several examples exist in the area.

The Niono Mosque

Although many mosques in the area belong to the Djenné 'family', i.e. are stylised versions of the Dyula Mosque, found to the south, actually very few offer all the major characteristics of the Djenné Mosque. The master mason, Minta's mosques in Niono, are among these few, although even here the general lay-out does not follow the Djenné model: they have simple rectangular prayer halls of the Medina type, surrounded by freestanding secondary buildings and a wall. But their facades, without being exact copies, closely follow the model. The *qibla*-wall of the Great Mosque in Niono has a magnificent set of three minarets. The central one is four-tiered, the secondary ones three-tiered. Each one is crowned by a pinnacle on which ostrich-eggs are placed. The typical projecting bundles of palmwood sticks — as decorative as they are useful for maintenance purposes — cast slowly evolving shadows on the walls, as if they were so many sun-dials. The pilasters are treated in a way that appears singular to Minta's work. They are joined, on the level of the base of the parapet, by arches in the same shallow relief, expressing on the outside the arches of the interior. The main entrance on the west facade, facing the *mirhab*, is dominated by a fourth tower that would seem to be an element all Minta's own. One wonders if it is inspired by the church-architecture that Minta must have seen when working for the colonial administration. Looking at other mosques in the same style (built by other masons), one gets the impression that it is indeed this west wall that leaves the most room for the expression of in-

Niono; east façade of a smaller mosque also built by Lassine Minta, Award-winning mason of Niono's Great Mosque. Note the somewhat unfinished looking minarets as compared to the Djenné model.Photograph: B.B.Taylor

dividuality. (In Niono, it is the west tower; in Koa, we see the two corner staircase-towers — one square and one round — as well as the very elaborate pointed arches; in Mopti, we see, very curiously, an almost identical copy of the *qibla* wall itself).

The *qibla* wall generally remain much closer to the model. Other elements and details, notably the elaborate windows in the prayer gallery for women and in the west tower of Niono's mosque, are again very much Minta's own. Lassiné Minta seems to be a perfect example of the master-mason in the tradition of Djenné: at the same time strongly attached to local building tradition and familiar with, and open to, influences from outside, these being the qualities that must have created the style in the first place. And which make it so amazingly dynamic.

Being trained in the Djenné tradition as well as in the colonial building practice, he blends the two in his works, adapting the degree of integration to the general context within which a given building has to be built. If the client so desires — and if he can finance his wishes — the building will comprise more "modern" elements. But even then, they wil be integrated and used in a way that appears perfectly natural; there seems to be no preference for modernity for its own sake, yet no fear of it either.

In the case of the Great Mosque at Niono, financial means were very slender indeed. Nevertheless, one sees not just the following of a model but the evolving mastery of a craft incorporating new experiences — however modestly — all the way. The interior of this mosque appears much lighter and more spacious than in Djenné. Minta changed the proportions of the piers and gave them the section of a cross rather than a rectangle, apparently because his training made him feel that this was technically possible and functionally desirable. His works show many examples of this approach and open-mindedness: materials and techniques that are often thought of as being in rather different — almost opposing — categories, "modern" and "traditional", are used alternatively, or integrated without any such prejudice.

The tendency now is growing stronger to look once more at traditional and vernacular practice as rich sources (allowed until now to almost disappear) for finding elements of the solutions of the problems of today and tomorrow. This is true where purely practical, i.e. technical managerial aspects are concerned, but also when such things as personal and cultural identity come into play. More and more it is understood that the solution lies not in replacing one thing with another — but to master, to improve and to implement the best of both. In his own way, this is exactly what Lassiné Minta has been trying to do for a lifetime.

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