

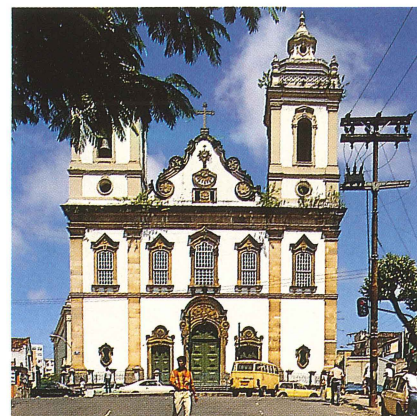
Afro-Brazilian Mosques in West Africa



The southwest of Nigeria is remarkable for a distinctive genre of rural and urban mosques. Their colourfulness, coupled with an architectural presence suggesting monumentality in miniature, stand in sharp contrast to the surrounding uniform pattern of dusty-rusty corrugated roofs and mud walls characteristic of the Yoruba village. They are also distinct from other mosques that manifest the flat roofs and unadorned mud-brick walls commonly associated with the West African savannah.

These mosques are scattered, roughly, over a triangular-shaped area having its apex just south of the city of Ilorin and its base along the Bight or Gulf of Benin, from Porto Novo (Republic of Benin) in the west to Lagos in the east. At first glance they are often mistaken for churches because of a front elevation composed of a central pediment flanked by two towers. This mistake has a basis in fact, for their ancestors are the 17th- and 18th-century 'Baroque' churches of the city of Bahia (also called Salvador) on the northwest Atlantic coast of Brazil.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Bahia was a major exporter of sugar and tobacco, which were grown on the numerous slave plantations in the surrounding area. In the early 1800's Bahia was still importing thousands of slaves, the majority from the same stretch of West African coast, Benin to Lagos. What the Portuguese-Brazilian plantation owners did not know, and were to discover only later after nearly being overthrown by them,



Above: Typical Brazilian "baroque" church in Bahia, with twin bell towers, raised central pediment and floral motifs. Such churches are frequently painted in pastel colours as well.

Below: The old city of Bahia, Brazil with the church of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks (painted in pastel blue). Designed and built over many years in the 18th century by blacks and mulattoes, it served as their own church.

Right: Interiors of Bahian churches often had 'opera-type' boxes or galleries on the upper floor, and colonnades separating side aisles from the nave (which had a low vaulted ceiling).

was that many of these slaves were devout Muslims, a number of whom were literate in Arabic, and had been respected participants in the militant reformist *jihad* led by Shehu Uthman dan Fodio in the north of present-day Nigeria from 1804 to 1815. They had the misfortune to be captured, often in battle, by factions opposing the *jihad*, sold into slavery and shipped to Bahia.

Slavery to these people was an anathema, Christianity a belief for infidels, rac-



*Text by
Barry Hallen.
Photographs by
Carla de Benedetti.*



ism something unforgivable. Nevertheless, surrounded by armed police and soldiers and 4,000 kilometres across the seas from home, they appreciated the realities of their situation. Their faith in Islam was kept private. To allay the Portuguese thirst for converting 'pagan' Africans, they became perfunctory Christians. Their native languages, of which the Portuguese were ignorant and were kept ignorant, were used as a means for confidential communication.

As they bided their time, they also helped to build the city of Bahia. The architectural landscape of the old city centre, then and now, is a collage of soft pastels. From out of it rise the churches, towering over surrounding buildings and providing unifying points of spatial reference that enhance the city's haphazard cohesiveness. In the 17th century, Jesuit missionaries stipulated that the Bahian church would be an austere, unadorned *paralelepiped* with a pitched roof. They had not reckoned with the wealth that slave labour would soon provide. Bahian plantation owners and merchants created an acceptable channel for the social expression of their wealth through 'donations' for the construction of new and magnificent churches. These first began to appear at the end of the century and harkened back to an earlier and more elaborate Portuguese design: a pedimented central structure flanked by two bell towers. This was to remain the

Bahian prototype, even if remarkably transformed by ornamentation.

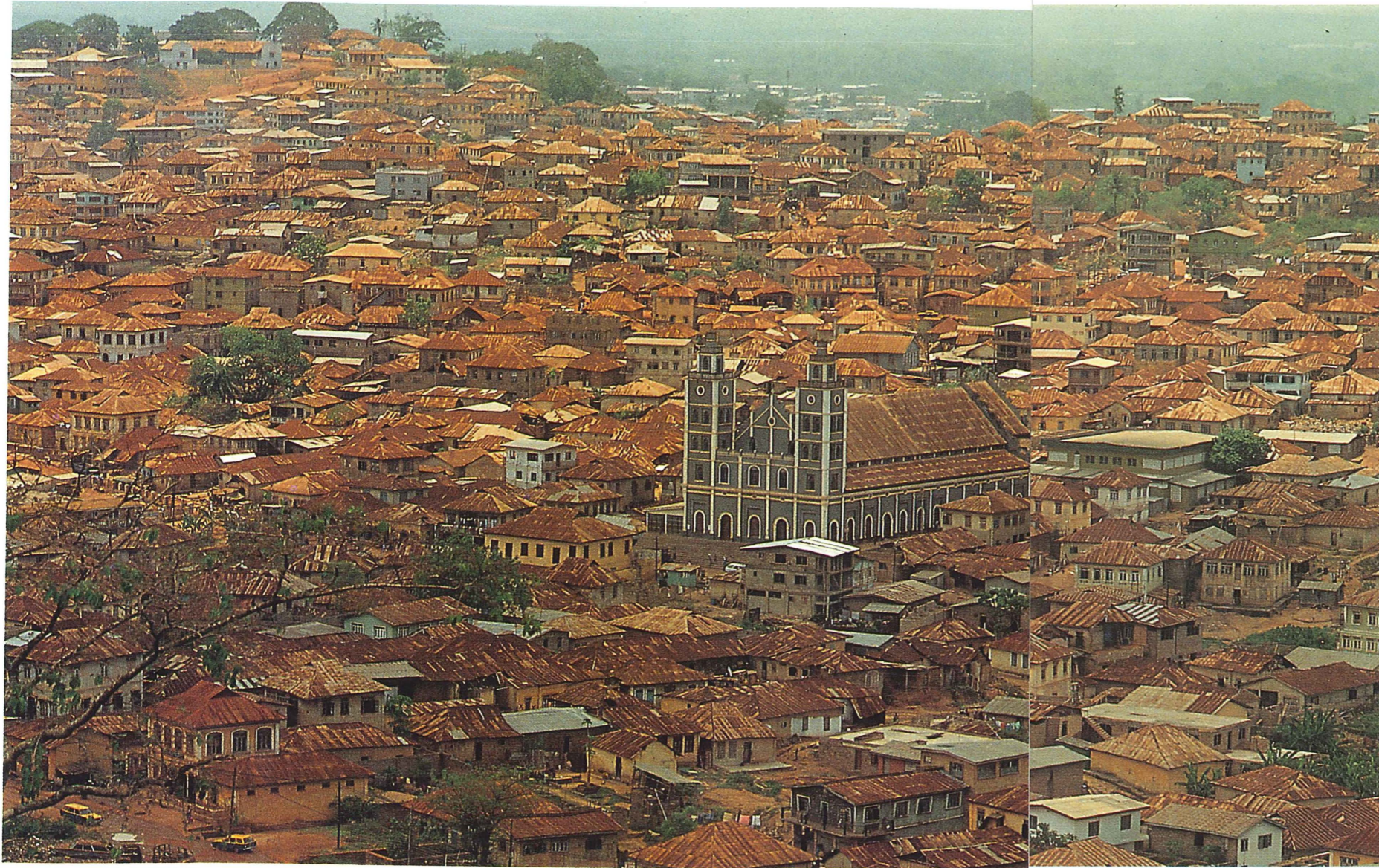
At first the surface of the facade was structured and ornamented with mouldings and pilasters incorporating false columns. Sometimes their effect was heightened by leaving them in natural stone and painting the rest of the wall surface white or, only occasionally, in a pastel colour. Arched windows, pilasters and even roofline were given pronounced cornices. As time passed ornamentation became more elaborate. The main pediment was raised well above the roofline, creating a false front that was ornamented with complex volutes and a discreet number of bas-relief floral and leaf motifs, derived from the lush foliage of the tropical jungle. The roofs of the bell towers evolved from flat-sided pyramids into rounded cones and then curved bulbs. In the interior there was generally a single nave flanked by lateral corridors. In earlier churches the space of the corridors was set off by columns. Later these were superseded by walls with access doors. Above the corridors, along both sides of the nave, ran a series of ornate 'opera' boxes, enabling the upper class to attend Mass on a different level from that of the populace. And finally, above all, a low, vaulted ceiling.

Bahian houses also were transformed by decoration, though never so ostentatious as that of the churches. Flat-roofed facades were raised and ornamented by a

variety of balustrades. Windows were arched and their tops filled with half-circles of multi-coloured glass. Exterior walls were painted in every shade of the city's distinctive pastels and liberally decorated with bas-relief floral motifs.

Slaves did much more than provide the manual/menial labour for these buildings. Slavery had been an institution in Bahian society since the 17th century. Interbreeding had produced a mulatto population. Many mulattoes and blacks bought their freedom and trained as artisans, but were forced to remain in Bahia as highly skilled but poorly paid day-labourers because they had no means of returning to Africa. Among them were master masons, carpenters, bricklayers and painters, as well as talented artists. Alejadinho, one of the famous names associated with Brazilian church construction during this period, was architect, sculptor *and* mulatto.

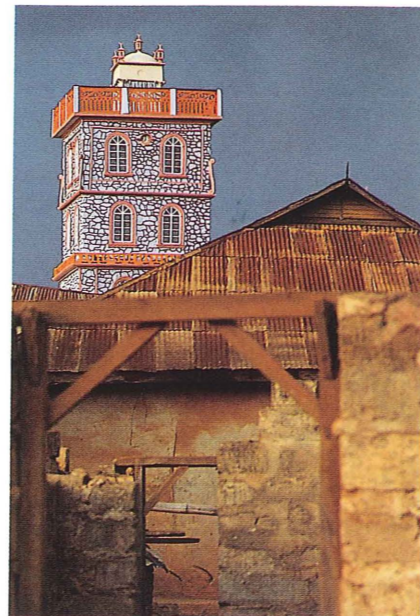
The Bahian system of apartheid did its best to obscure these people's contributions by prohibiting mention of a black or mulatto name in the articles of construction. But the real consequences of all this are that the design, construction and ornamentation of the city were as much products of black artistry as of white, of Muslim artisans as well as of Christian. It is this that is responsible for the uniqueness of its ornamentation. "Brazilian mulattoes contributed heavily to the artistic expansion of Brazil; they as much as



Above: The central mosque in Abeokuta, Nigeria is seen here in its urban context. Painted pilasters and string courses compartmentalise the surface of the facades typical of Bahian churches. It was built in the 20th century.

Right: An early example of strong Bahian influence is this mosque in Abomey, Republic of Benin from the late 19th or early 20th century. (Date indicated on the facade is often fictitious).

Far right: Modakeke Central Mosque in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, where paint is used to imitate masonry work.



Right, above: Exterior of a mosque near Porto Novo, Benin.

Right: Detail of a mosque facade near Porto Novo, Benin. The twin towers are cylindrical rather than square, with multiple balustrades. (Note the painted decor, altogether in keeping with the brightly coloured textiles of the region).

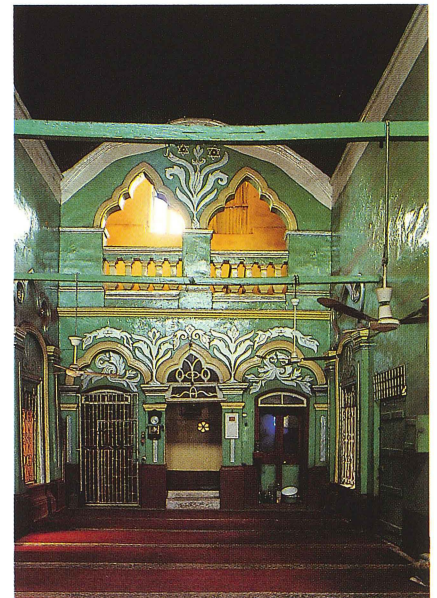




Above and above, right: A newly constructed mosque in Porto Novo claims in writing on the facade that it dates from 1885. The green cupolas probably come from Middle Eastern sources, while the rest of the iconography, colours, and spatial features place it in the Afro-Brazilian tradition.

Right: The painted ceiling of this mosque in Porto Novo attempts to approximate the vaulted ceilings of Bahian churches.

Far right: This detail from an early 20th century mosque in Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria shows mud walls painted in green and silver with floral motifs. The scalloped arches of the upper galleries, as well as the décor, are reminiscent of Brazilian churches.



the whites, gave it its autochthonous character (Bazin, p. 25).”

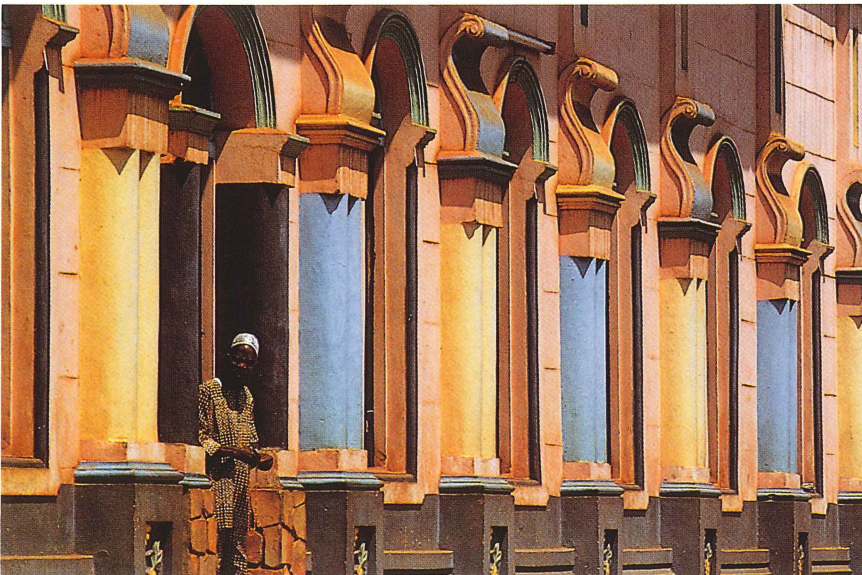
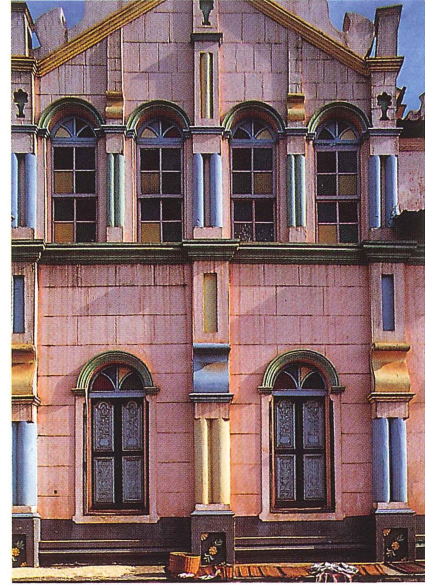
Between 1807 and 1835 there were a dozen organised attempts by the slaves and ‘freed’ blacks and mulattoes to revolt. All were pre-planned and directed by African Muslims. Houses and entire plantations were burnt to the ground. Foremen, ‘masters’ and their families were killed. The Bahian colonists found it increasingly difficult to be at ease in the company of their own slaves. Neighbouring towns joked about who were in fact masters and who slaves. They had not witnessed the ferocity of the resistance, the slaves’ preference for death to surrender, and did not know how close some of the carefully planned revolts had come to succeeding. And, they had not seen the strange documents and scraps of paper, at first thought to be written in Hebrew or Egyptian hieroglyphics, taken from the pockets of the dead bodies. When the script was identified as Arabic, and the catalyst behind the revolts as Islam, the Portuguese-Brazilians were even more alarmed by the possibil-

ity that they could be involved in a religious war as well as a struggle for freedom. A resolution was hastily approved that all “dangerous Africans” in Bahia should be deported back to their home continent. Ships were chartered, and in the first few months more than 700 blacks and mulattoes were ‘emancipated’. Thousands were to follow. The quickest way to qualify for a passage out of Bahia was to be identified as Muslim.

Bahia still had strong commercial ties with the Bight of Benin, and so it was expedient to repatriate the ‘emancipated’ blacks and mulattoes there, where so many had originally been sold into slavery. But during their absence Islam had penetrated this area internally from further to the north and won its first significant converts. They, as the orthodox

Muslim indigenes, found these repatriated ‘internationalised’ Muslims who could speak and write Portuguese, had European names and manners, and wore European dress — regardless of their claims to patrimony — alien. Fortunately the common faith in Islam served as a bridge so that the Muslim repatriates did not suffer the same severe social isolation as, for example, those who returned as Catholic Christians. Yet even within the greater West African Muslim community to which they were introduced, for almost a century thereafter they formed a distinctive social and cultural sub-group.

The Muslim artisans who had carried their skills back with them found little demand for their services, at first. Africans who had not seen Bahia found no need for what they claimed they could



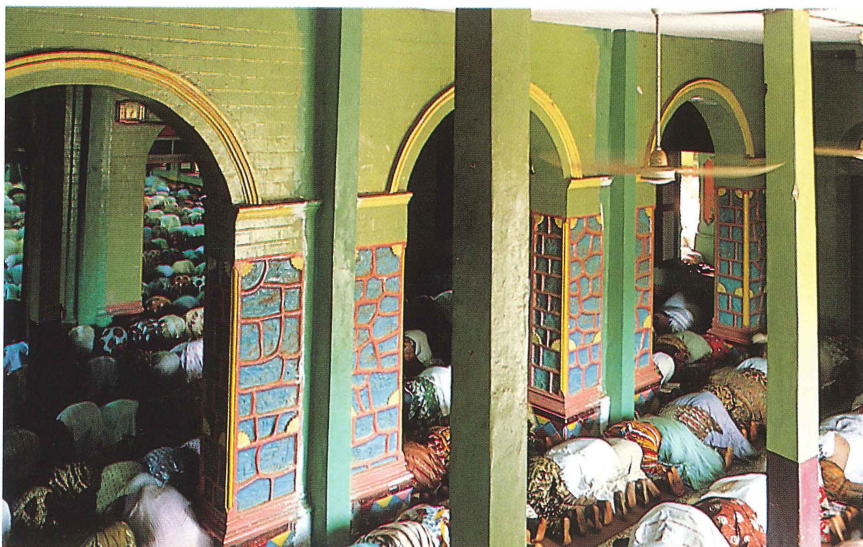
The Central Mosque in Porto Novo, Benin, was begun in 1912 by African repatriates from South America. It towers over the relatively low horizontal urban fabric of the city much like the cathedrals of medieval Europe. This mosque represents most typically perhaps the cross-fertilisation of Bahian and African traditions, spatially and decoratively. The diversity of pastel colours on the exteriors are one important example of this link. Vegetal motifs for decoration are stylised to a degree of abstraction that makes them barely recognisable. Nonetheless, taken as a whole, the relationship between the two cultures is quite evident.

build. In any case, the local people had their own traditional styles of housing and mosques, and their own building techniques. So the first Muslim repatriates became merchants, traders, men of commerce and, ironically, sometimes slave traders, often with links to Bahia for both exported and imported goods.

Only when they had established themselves economically were they able to build houses suited to their own taste — the locally well-known but now dwindling number of 'Brazilian houses' (actually a blend of African traditional and elements from Bahian architecture) that still stand in a number of Benin and Nigerian 'coastal' cities and towns. And they began to build their own mosques. At first these were mud-walled, thatch-roofed, unadorned and rectangular in shape, though even then they were distinguished by the surrounding verandahs. But eventually master masons, bricklayers, carpenters, painters and artists, financed by their fellow repatriates, combined to design, build and ornament the remarkable genre of mosques that has come to be known as Afro-

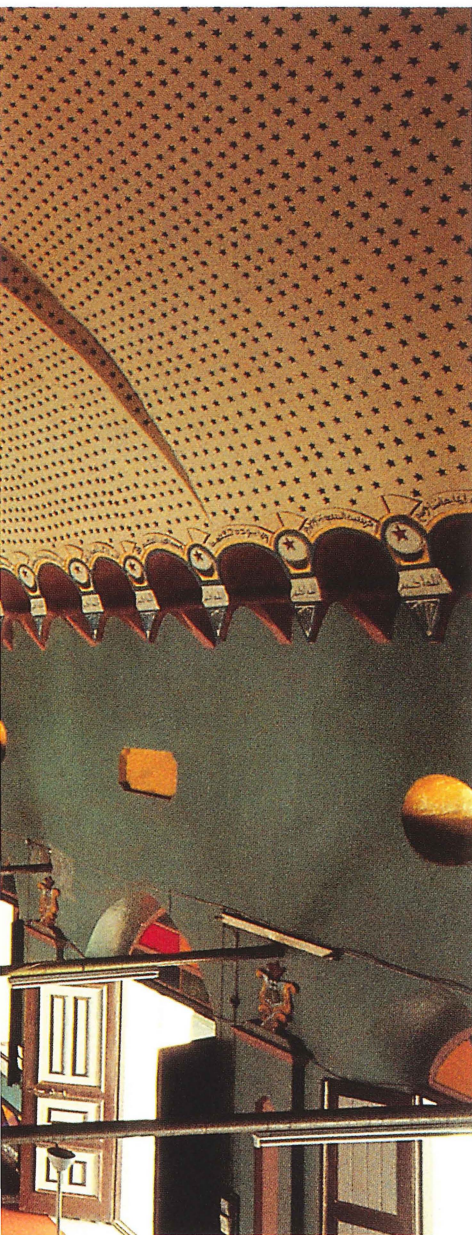


Top and left: The Central Mosque in Porto Novo, Benin.



Brazilian and that is still evolving in the area today. One of the oldest, and certainly most monumental, examples of it is the Central Mosque in Porto Novo, Republic of Benin.

It would be wrong to describe these mosques as simply copies of the Bahian originals, with a star and crescent substituted for the cross. Some physical transformations of the ritual space to make it conform to Islam are, of course, obvious: bell towers, when retained, become minarets, the nave becomes the hall for prayers, and the apse the *mihrab*. The space of the aristocratic 'opera' boxes is opened up and transformed into public



the churches of Bahia were sparing in its exterior use, the Afro-Brazilian mosques affirm the use of numerous complementary colours, usually pastels, to reinforce and even create — in the case of imitation stonework with masonry — the architectural elements of the building. Stylised elements of Bahian house decoration have also been transposed onto the Afro-Brazilian mosques. Balustrades occur frequently, usually on the minarets, but sometimes spanning the entire facade. The tops of the arches of windows are filled with half-circles of multi-coloured glass or, more recently, these are realistically painted on the wall surface above rectangular window frames.

Today this style of mosque, and with it a new vocabulary of forms, have transcended their social and cultural roots and been adopted by Muslim communities in surrounding areas as another indigenous alternative. It explains why they are now being built as much as 300 kilometres inland from the Benin Coast. This object lesson in aesthetic acculturation is another example of Islam's remarkable ability, demonstrated over and over again throughout its history, to absorb, modify and redirect artistic elements from diverse cultural contexts. For it is this that has given the Afro-Brazilian stylistic tradition the vitality that enables it to continue to develop and evolve as a contemporary form of architecture.

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galleries, often used as places for women to worship under their polylobed arches.

The decorative motifs of the Bahian facade have undergone a process of stylisation. The elevated false front is retained, but the high-relief scrolled volutes are replaced by flattened curves and these, in turn, superseded by a step-like pyramid. Generally a few pilasters have also been retained, though in the newer mosques they have been much simplified and, except for painting, stripped of all decorative adornment. Floral and leaf motifs have largely disappeared from exterior facades, though the same cannot be said for interiors.

One decorative element that has increased in importance and become much more complex is the use of colour. While



The dissemination of a tradition takes place today even on the back of a truck, here depicting a stylised version of the Afro-Brazilian mosque (as well as metaphysical reflections!)

