

Critical Changes in Djenné' s Local Community after Its Nomination as a World Heritage Site : Issues of Preservation and Cultural Conservation

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Critical Changes in Djenné’s Local Community after Its Nomination as a World Heritage Site: Issues of Preservation and Cultural Conservation

Oussouby Sacko
Kyoto Seika University

1. Introduction

Heritage preservation or restoration is on the agenda in many African countries. Many aspects of West African culture are in danger of being lost due to cultural disruption as well as expansion of tourism. At risk are not only the well-known manuscripts of Timbuktu but also buildings, languages, beads, textiles, costumes, oral history, and traditional music, instruments, and dance. Therefore, there is an urgent need to preserve Africa’s cultural heritage and learn from the risks to this heritage, which are mostly undocumented in Africa.

Inhabited since 250 BCE, Djenné (also written as Jenné), the small city examined in this study, is historically and commercially important in the Niger Inland Delta of central Mali. It became a market center for everyday commodities such as rice and grains and an important link in the trans-Saharan gold trade in the 13th century during the Mali empire and later during the Songhai reign of the region in the 15th century. It was also a cultural



Photo 1 Townscape of Djenné (Bird view of Djenné).
(Source: the author, Djenné, May 2004)

center—of arts, science, and religion—from the 13th century.

Djenné is the site of earthen-brick (adobe) architecture and a large Sudanese-style mosque built in 1220 CE and rebuilt in 1907 (Gardi et al. 1995). According to oral tradition, Djenné used to have eleven mosques in different localities, but the Great Mosque was proposed to unify the diverse population and to develop the market. Djenné's Outstanding Universal Value was so well recognized that it was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List along with the archeological site of Djenné-Jeno and the surrounding old towns of Hambarketolo, Tonomba, Kania in 1988 (UNESCO n.d.). Since its inclusion as a World Heritage site, Djenné was considered as heritage in danger and many restoration projects have been conducted by cultural agencies and non-profit organizations, while some have been supported by foreign government aid.

Here, I discuss the restoration of Djenné's Great Mosque, a project that began in 2008, which has generated much debate concerning cultural conservation and building preservation (Photo 1). Through the restoration project, while some traditional techniques



Photo 2 House in Djenné
(Source: the author, Djenné, August 2011)



Photo 3 House facade
(Source: the author, Djenné, February 2007)

have been revitalized, others have been lost due to the precedence of modern preservation experts over more culturally experienced local craftspeople. There is also an ongoing dispute about whether Djenné should be restored as an earthen architecture town or renovated with new construction materials, which residents desire to bring in to clad buildings (Photo 2). Through the case study of Djenné and its Mosque, this paper examines the understanding of cultural heritage restoration in historical cities and underscores the importance of considering the local communities' perspectives, with respect to settling the social issues raised by such restoration projects.

2. Conservation Projects in Djenné

2.1 Definition of Cultural Conservation

Generally, cultural conservation is the process of examining, researching, maintaining, and preserving cultural heritage (Jokilehto 2011). It includes two elements: prevention and intervention (Feilden and Jokilehto 1998), with the latter being more common in cultural heritage conservation. In architectural conservation, intervention is the process of carefully planned works and activities to prolong the life of a building without damaging material, historical, and aesthetic integrity. Interventions are faced with challenges involving the following three aspects:

- 1) Physical condition: Condition of materials and structural systems; factors and mechanisms causing deterioration; technical feasibility of interventions; long-term efficacy of treatments, and so on.
- 2) Management context: Availability of resources including funds, skilled workers, and technology; political and legislative mandates and conditions; land use issues, and so on.
- 3) Cultural and social values: Why and to whom the object or site is significant; how the interventions are understood or perceived, and so on.

The aim of conservation is to maintain and shape the values embodied in cultural heritage (ICOMOS 1994; van Uytzel and Jurčys 2012).

2.2 Start of Conservation Projects

In 1995 and 1996, joint missions were constituted (Table 1). The missions, acknowledging the special quality of the built space of Djenné, also recognized that if the city had not suffered serious aggression from "modernity," it was in part due to its isolation and the stagnation of economic activity, which were simultaneous causes of the collapse of an alarming number of older structures. It was thus envisaged to undertake a short-term project with the goal of "conserving this unique monument for the present and future generations," which focused on the rehabilitation of 168 of the monumental houses considered to be the most representative of the "national cultural identity." (Joy 2008) The intervention ranges from minor repairs and wall rendering to total reconstruction, based on existing documents or relying on the descriptions of those who remember (Photo 3).

Table 1 Major Conservation Projects in Djenné

Dates	Description	Partnership
National Initiative Conservation Projects		
1996	Workshop and Training of West African Cultural Sites Management	UNESCO Financial Support
1995	Survey about Tourism Impact on Cultural Sites by Cultural Mission Agencies of Djenné and Bandiagara	UNESCO Financial Support
1993	Creation of Djenné Cultural Mission Agency by Ministerial Decision (93-203 P-RM of 1993 June 11th, review by Ord. No.01-032/P-RM of 2001 August 3rd).	Malian Government
1988	Inclusion of Djenné in the UNESCO World Heritage list	Malian Government World Heritage Committee
Djenné architectural conservation projects		
1996-2006	Djenné's Architecture Restoration Project. (Restoration of 130 Houses, Construction of New Public Projects, and valorization of Djenné's masons' know-how)	Funded by the Netherlands
1996	Rehabilitation of the inner city of Konofia, with the support of young participants in the international youth workshop	unknown
2008-2011	Rehabilitation and revitalization of the Youth House	Italian government Fund (Supported by UNESCO, DNPC-Mission Culturelle, CRAterre-ENSAG)
2008-2012	Great Mosque renovation and Training	Aga Khan Trust for Culture
Research and conservation projects for archaeological sites		
1998	Archaeological research project on the site of the future museum and of the old colonial dispensary	American Foundation named The Oliver Brunch
1998	Monitoring system for archaeological sites in the vicinity of Djenne	Funded by the Netherlands
1996-1997	Safeguarding and development project of the archaeological site of Djenné - Djéno (also called Djenné-Jeno)	Funded by the World Monument Fund
1989-1994	Surveys of archaeological sites in the inner delta of Niger ("Togué Project")	Institute of Human Sciences (ISH) of Mali and Institute of Bioarcheology (BAI) of Groningen in the Netherlands

Ref: Based on the country report (Plan de Gestion de Djenné 2008-2012, tableau 4) revised by the author

2.3 Background of the Project

The Djenné Great Mosque was restored as part of the World Heritage Earthen Architecture Program established between the Mali Ministry of Culture and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (WHEAP 2011; AKTC 2012). This program facilitated the production of a technical guide for the rehabilitation of earthen architecture to assist in interventions at the ancient towns of Djenné, specifically the Mosque, houses, and buffer zone. Following the examination of the state of these towns, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, meeting in Durban (South Africa) in 2005, requested "the World Heritage Centre, ICOMOS and International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and

Restoration of Cultural Property, ICCROM” undertake, in collaboration with the State Party, a joint evaluation mission of the property, during which will be studied alternative solutions to the pressure of urban development, and to make recommendations for examination by the Committee at its 30th session scheduled for Vilnius in 2006” (decision 29 COM 7B.36; DNPC 2008).

In the report of this joint mission, the World Heritage Centre and the Advisory Bodies (ICOMOS and ICCROM) noted the absence of town planning and construction regulations to control the growth of new constructions and poor rehabilitation of the property (Varissou et al. 2006). While applauding the support and intervention of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) in the restoration of the Mosque, they also asserted that all major projects should be tied into a management plan to set priorities. During the 2010 UNESCO meeting in Brazil, the World Heritage Committee reiterated its concerns about the absence of town planning tools and construction regulations in Djenné (World Heritage Committee 2010). It requested the State Party to submit the town planning and construction regulation as well as clarifications on the boundaries of the World Heritage property and its buffer zone to the World Heritage Centre. In 2012, the World Heritage Committee made further requests to the State Party to submit a report of the conservation state of the property and progress achieved in resolving problems in the modern town as well as at the archeological sites. The State Party submitted the report for examination by the World Heritage Committee at its annual meeting (Government Response and Planification 2018).

2.4 Development of the Project

Beginning in 2004, under a public-private partnership, the AKTC began to revitalize the center of Djenné. The Great Mosque as well as public spaces around it were repaired (Photo 4). The Mosque restoration became the most visible part of a multidisciplinary program aimed at improving the quality of life in the city. Efforts included the installation of new water and sanitation systems, street paving, early childhood education, training, health care, and economic development. The AKTC's work relied on close cooperation with local institutions and stakeholders and the participation of experienced local masons and specialists in restoration (WHEAP 2012). On October 26, 2008, technical field work was initiated by the AKTC at the request of Mission Culturelle de Djenné and a government body, the Direction National du Patrimoine Culturel (DNPC) in the technical documents (Diagnostic pathologique de la Mosque de Djenné). The local traditional authorities, religious, and administrative authorities had already consented to the project, and there was a publicity campaign for citizens to understand the project and accept the AKTC as the main sponsor.

To consider the problems surrounding restoration at the Djenné Mosque, I surveyed the site and conducted interviews with local masons, site experts, builders, and conservation leaders in Djenné. I also interviewed the UNESCO Representative in Mali and the Cultural Mission responsible. The field surveys were conducted from February to March 2010 and from February to March 2011. More general information about the city was gathered from 2004 to 2010 and in 2015.



Photo 4 The Great Mosque
(Source: the author, Djenné, March 2011)

3. The Great Mosque of Djenné

3.1 Traditional Masons Who Supported Djenné's Conservation

In this region, the construction process is undertaken by masons according to special ties with families and communities: A family has “their mason,” whereas a mason has “his family.” The relationship is inherited from father to son on both sides: The son of the house-owner’s mason is the mason of the house-owner’s son. The mason must ask his family and fellow masons for approval when he works for other clients.

Masons (*barey*) form a professional union, *barey ton* (Joffroy 2011), which guarantees their professional training and establishes oral and intangible codes of conduct and support with other professions. Apprenticeship begins at the age of seven. The apprentice goes through a clearly structured training in tools and materials, building techniques, building conception and the supervision of construction before he is officially accepted as a *barey* in his mid-twenties. Magic plays an important role both as a means of protection against professional risks and as part of the code of relations between all the participants in the house building. It is notable that most masons in the region start their work by “drawing” the facade. The type of facade is the first issue for the mason and the client to agree on, as it seems to determine the whole spatial organization of the house (Chabbi-Chemrouk 2007).

Recently with the lack of tourism activity which result crisis and change in building material, some masons have started to use baked bricks instead of earthen and natural dried ones. The new change and move toward modern building and diverse construction materials are affecting the profession. Some masons are even practically “specialized” in the technique of baked brick cladding. Although a large number of masons are now aware of the problems such as compatibility of earthen material and cement, weakness of building structure, caused by this practice, they often feel that they do not have a choice and must respect the wishes of their clients. These masons play a major role into the restoration project, as professional and cultural facilitators for heritage conservation.



Photo 5 Traditional mud bricks (Djenné Ferey) (Source: the author, Djenné, August 2009)



Photo 6 Framed mud bricks in fabrication (toubabou ferey) (Source: the author, Djenné, March 2005)

3.2 Building Material in Djenné

There are two types of adobe blocks used in Djenné's historical sites. The older type, no longer used except for specific restoration work, is called *Djenné ferey* ("blocks of Djenné") and consists of roughly cylindrical pieces (Photo 5). From the 1930s, it became common to shape the adobe blocks into rectangular forms (*toubabou ferey*, "foreign blocks") (Photo 6). During the dry season, builders transform the riverbanks into pits for the preparation of banco, the material (*labu* or *labou* in Djenné's local dialect *Djenné Chiini*) that forms construction blocks and rendering mortar. Wood is used for the construction of floors, ceilings, and roofs. This wood is also used for *toron*, a natural architectonic material specific to the region.

3.3 Mosque Restoration Process

For planning the restoration process and understanding the building and construction material problems, some architectural measurements and diagnostics were conducted (Photo 7). For the site installation some preliminary works were done such as bat exclusion, management and storage of material stock and construction of temporary storage space, and rehabilitation of surrounding zones.

For the drainage and cleaning of surroundings and sanitation improvement, the Mission Culture de Djenné raised some concerns about the use of space, which was contributing to the deterioration of the Mosque's structure. These concerns included the closeness of the ablution space to the Mosque's main wall, which could cause structural damage; difficulties in maintaining the ablution zones due to a lack of an enclosure; allowing dust and plastic bags or garbage to enter the space; lack of ablution space



Photo 7 Mosque roof before rehabilitation
(Source: the author, Djenné, August 2009)



Photo 8 Renovated roof
(Source: the author, Djenné, March 2011)

during festivities and Great Prayers events; low and uncomfortable ablution seats; poor evacuation of wastewater; stagnation of wastewater (which affects neighbors); and public use of spaces and toilets during the regular market day. Before restoration started, some preliminary works were done on these issues, such as cleaning up of ablution zones, organizing different ablution zones, and plastering them with cement mortar.

For woodworks and bat elimination, the site works replaced and restored doors and windows, replaced damaged bat nets, and conducted a progressive elimination of bats.

Special work in collaboration with local masons was done to identify material sources and fabricate olden style material. The *yellow banco* (earth material) used for block fabrication and mortar preparation (locally called *coreyndi*) was sourced from a carrier 2km north of the town of Djenné on the way to Senassa village. For *Djenné ferey* (“*blocks of Djenné*”) fabrication, banco was sourced from Camantale village. The Black earth (*yar labou*) for plastering was sourced from a site close to the archeological site of

Jenné-Jeno. Earth for pottery and tile works (*djammay labou*) was sourced from Camantale village on the bank of the river. Grass and rice husks were sourced from villages around Djenné. These works were important to review and understand the diversity of earthen material used in the construction of the Great Mosque.

For site preparation and installation, some zones and temporary spaces were constructed, such as material storage zones, mortar mix zone, wooden trays, and bins storage. Two scaffolding areas were set up north and south of the Great Mosque. For the roof restoration, all beams and *torons*¹⁾ were refurbished, repaired, and replaced (Photo 8).

4. Issues Arising from Mosque Restoration Project

The conservation site report and review mention, in several documents including government official ones, that the Mosque restoration will save Djenné's architecture, as well as justify conservation and collective action to the residents. The continuity of restoration and conservation projects is also said to contribute to Djenné's socio-economic and tourism development (Juma 2010).

But the restoration projects raise some problems, such as the gap between traditional and modern techniques or approaches in construction. Residents mentioned that the AKTC did not keep their promises of providing earthen material for subsequent annual Mosque re-covering festivals (Photo 9). There was also confusion between building workers (masons, *barey ton*) from different generations because younger masons who could read and write were favored, as they could communicate with the foreign experts on site and thus enjoyed more professional advantages than other workers. Another problem was how to respect the traditional procedure of renovation alongside more modern ones. For instance, some local techniques were not preserved during the restoration projects. The restoration and conservation of Djenné and its Mosque also raised the fundamental question of the roles and responsibilities of the local population,



Photo 9 Annual mosque recovering event
(Source: the author, Djenné, May 2004)

especially traditional and public authorities, in the process.

Recently new constructions in concrete and cement blocks at Djenné town's entrance and periphery have become popular. This is because this area is not included within the conserved area. Most of the buildings concerned are second homes of successful Djenné natives living in the capital city Bamako. The use of new materials and techniques can be discussed, but the design of those building does not reflect the essence of Djenné's architecture or building shapes. This means a lack of control in preserving the construction system by local and central government bodies.

According to the joint survey of the association of Djenné Patrimoine (Brunet-Jailly 1999) and Accroterre (Brunet-Jailly and Scherrer 2017) in September 2009 led by Olivier Scherrer, hundreds of houses in the conserved area have been recovered by fired bricks including a few municipal buildings. The survey reported that nearly 10% of the houses in Djenné are affected and that the phenomenon is growing exponentially: from 28 between 1973 and 1999 (average of one achievement per year) to 112 between 2000 and 2008 (an average of 10 times higher).

However, in addition to the esthetic damage and the degradation of the quality of architectural heritage leading to a loss of identity of the city of Djenné, the cladding of the fired brick facades presents major drawbacks from a technical standpoint (low durability, problems of infiltration, weakening of the building structure in the long term), as well as from an economic perspective (much more expensive than the best traditional plaster, less labor required, deprivation of regularly-paid masons).

Although the city has been classified as a "World Heritage site" since 1988, and several heritage development and rehabilitation projects have been conducted, the situation of the architectural heritage of Djenné continues to deteriorate. These poor results raise questions about the real will and capacity of national and international institutions to ensure the protection of this heritage.

Recently, the joint group has accomplished a new model of earthen construction, the Djenné Patrimoine House (*Maison du Patrimoine*), in which many new conservation techniques and improved building materials have been tested. As I was following the progress of this project as part of my research and was conducting field surveys, I interviewed some of the masons involved in the project as well as a few persons of responsibility of Djenné Patrimoine and Accroterre.. The project was a chance for Djenné masons to understand some of the construction material resistance, but without continuous follow-up by the ACCROTERRE team due to the insecurity in the region, some parts of unused buildings collapsed and the outside mortar deteriorated.

5. Conclusion and Discussions

In the case of Djenné, as described in this paper, foreign agencies and experts led the preservation project, and the local population was obliged to play the role of the audience. In some cases, new techniques were introduced for making mortars, and in others, old techniques were revitalized. The restoration projects in Djenné seem to have created a gap between cultural conservation and building preservation. This paper aimed

to rethink the conservation of cultural heritage, which is about to be lost in the process of building preservation (Joy 2008).

The question of why Djenné is being preserved—as well as for whom and for how long into the future—needs to be addressed. UNESCO feels that all of Djenné should stay the same. Attempts to de-classify some parts of the town for development while protecting others have been rejected by UNESCO. This occurred most recently in 2005 when the UNESCO delegation to Djenné stated that it was a World Heritage site due to its architectural integrity. How does freezing the town's architecture allow it to develop and change with shifting local needs? Are tourists coming to Djenné to look at a town frozen in time? Tourists, in fact, have a far more sophisticated understanding of the situation than they are given credit for. For example, a riot that broke out in Djenné in the end of 2006 was due to local anger at an unauthorized restoration project of the Mosque, which provoked several blogs on the Internet where tourists described their experience and revealed a good understanding of local tensions. I would argue that a sensitive way to move forward in this difficult situation would be to lay bare and understand the point at which tourists' expectations meet peoples' realities (Brunet-Jailly, and Scherrer 2017) —this border zone is at once the stage for tourist expectations and the backdrop to peoples' real lives, not a static situation based on UNESCO's model of discrete World Heritage. As a researcher visiting Djenné from outside, I would like to contribute to the residents' understanding of outer actors' ideas, as well as outer actors' understanding of the residents' ideas.

Hindering the achievement of this goal, however, are the rebellion in the north of Mali, the series of foreign kidnappings by several groups of bandits, and the decrease in the number of tourists. The number of tourists had already begun to decrease prior to 2012. Comparison of my two visits to Djenné in 2003 and 2007 convinced me of this fact, even though Djenné was one of the most visited tourist sites in Mali and tourism was the main business goal for local youngsters. In my recent visit after 2015, I saw a lot of empty hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, and bars, as well as ruined hotels that was once supported by government but had few foreign guests and public workers for seminars. The travel guides and young people, whom I have known for many years, lost their jobs; some of them are currently in the capital Bamako, and others in neighborhood countries continuing the same jobs, while some have returned to their villages. Tourist facilities also suffer from the same problem because people do not feel the need to maintain them, even if many buildings become dysfunctional. This clarified how big the tourist industry was. People have lost their courage to conserve their heritage. We should further discuss the question of for whom world heritage should be preserved.

6. Future Challenges

If the future project I plan as hope comes true, I would like to conduct further research, in collaboration with the residents on conservation problems, which they face at different levels and which is regarded by international agents as World Heritage in Danger. The problems in Djenné come from different aspects of the cultural, social, and economic

changes that affect the entire region. Changes in building materials have occurred because Djenné-born politicians and wealthy people want to make it a city with a modern look and economic potential. Djenné's people are very proud of their city, but why do they have to keep it as only a tourist attraction? In addition, building maintenance is increasingly expensive in relation to the average standard of living. For instance, the cost of labor is also rising due to the lack of available young workers or apprentices on construction sites. Traditional materials are also becoming difficult to obtain. For these reasons, new construction projects have decreased in number and many young people have moved out of Djenné. The lack of use of the essence of Djenné's housing plan or construction spirit needs to be pointed out. The local group of Djenné Patrimoine researched new conservation and building techniques and said that conservation is needed in this town in a cultural evaluative context.

One other problem in Djenné that needs further investigation and consideration is the sustainability of the masons' group, *barey ton*. Djenné is facing a loss of transmission of tangible and intangible expertise. Traditionally, transmission was carried out within a rigorous framework, from the elders to the youngsters, mostly within the same family or in a hereditary system, through a system of apprenticeship, sometimes starting at the beginning of adolescence. With schooling, crisis, and the gap between generations, many master masons in Djenné have failed to fully transmit their knowledge and expertise to the next generation. This knowledge and abilities need to be urgently archived and documented as part of the World Heritage conservation project.

Note

- 1) *Toron* are bundles of palm-tree trunks that project out some 60cm from the facades of taller buildings; they serve simultaneously as decoration and as scaffolding for the periodic rendering of the walls. In this case, *toron* are half embedded and rhythmically arranged on the wall surfaces. These sticks are needed on higher positions as scaffolding when replastering the whole surface of the Great Mosque, which takes place once a year. They are not necessarily required at lower positions, but gradually these sticks have come to be used as decorative elements even for smaller mosques.

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