I first visited Djenné, Mali, a landlocked country in West Africa, as a traveler in 1989. At that time Mali was only just beginning to emerge from two decades of devastating drought. The president, Moussa Traoré, continued to control the country with an iron grip, and travel was difficult at best. It was possible, however, for non-Muslims to visit the Great Mosque in Djenné and, for a small fee paid to its guardian, to access the roof and delight in the panoramic view over the offerings of the Monday market. I returned to Djenné in 2000, this time as an anthropologist to study the apprenticeship system and building-craft knowledge of the town’s masons. I carried out two seasons of fieldwork and subsequently made numerous visits to the town, including documentary film shoots in 2005 and 2012.

This paper presents a brief history of the Djenné Mosque, followed by a short description of the building and the annual re-claying ritual. It then recounts a rather tragic and violent event in 2006 that brought the struggle over Djenné’s cultural heritage, and particularly its mosque, into graphic relief. The article then proceeds to a final discussion of heritage politics and the present challenges facing the preservation of the Great Mosque.
A Brief History

The Great Mosque in Djenné is arguably the most famous architectural monument in sub-Saharan Africa. Reputed to be the largest extant mud building on the planet, the mosque — part of a complex of prayer hall, courtyard, and perimeter galleries — rests on a high platform, towering over dense urban quarters and dominating the skyline of the vast, flat expanse of scrubland and riverine floodplain that encircles the town, which becomes an island during the annual flooding of the Niger and Bani rivers. The mosque’s foreboding walls are buttressed by rhythmically spaced sarafar pilasters and pierced by hundreds of protruding palm-wood (*Borassus aethiopum*) toron spikes, all geometrically arranged like a cubist cactus. Three sturdy towers punctuate its eastern flank, providing a dramatic backdrop to the busy Monday market and orienting Djenné’s prayers toward Mecca. Each of the towers terminates in a missile-like pinnacle capped gracefully by a gleaming white ostrich egg, and the terrace rooftop of the complex is ringed by a high and curvaceously crenulated parapet.  

Residents are fiercely proud — and protective — of their mosque, and the building has long been pivotal to their collective identity as *Djennenké*, even while it stood in ruins during much of the nineteenth century. After its rebuilding, the French glorified it as an exemplar of the “Sudanese style,” and its image circulated on photographic postcards published in 1906 and on colonial postage stamps of the French Sudan (Fig. 1). The new mosque also served as a prototype for mosques built in other towns in the region. 

The appropriation of Djenné’s architecture as a marker of regional culture and local tradition was perpetuated by Mali’s postcolonial governments, most concertedly by Pres. Alpha Konaré, who, between 1992 and 2002, made cultural heritage a fundamental part of his development strategy. Konaré subscribed to the idea that architecture is perhaps the most “enduring feature of the cultural heritage and national identity of Mali” and that showcasing and celebrating distinctive buildings, such as Djenné’s mosque, is an effective means for “promoting a ‘democratic form of citizenship.’” Indeed, the mosque has become a seminal icon of Mali’s distinct world-class heritage on a global stage. As expressions of tangible and intangible heritage, respectively, the mosque and its spectacular annual re-claying ceremony feed social and political imaginings of pre-colonial roots, authenticity, and sustained tradition, while their integration into the economies of tourism and development allow them to be productively “brought into line with national ideologies of cultural uniqueness and modernity.”

Legend claims that the mosque stands on the site of the ancient palace of Koi Konboro, a local king ruling in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries who converted to Islam. Today’s masons claim that Koi Konboro’s palace was built by the legendary figure Mallam Idriss, teacher of masons and founder of the town’s enduring architectural style. Town residents maintain that the converted palace served as the principal *masjid al-jum’a*, or Friday mosque, until the early nineteenth century.

In 1818 Cheikou Amadou, a Fulani Muslim leader, instigated a momentous jihad that spread throughout the Inland Niger Delta. A strategic target of his military campaigns was the historic market and trading center of Djenné (Fig. 2). Cheikou Amadou admonished Djenné’s religious scholars for their laxity and syncretism and for conducting
His Fulani troops invaded from the northeast and occupied Djenné, expropriating land in and around the town, dominating its political administration, and wielding a conservative brand of Islam that had lasting impact on the urban fabric. Keenly aware of the pervasive anti-Fulani resistance and potential for uprising amongst Djenné’s citizens, Cheikou Amadou ordered the closure of all neighborhood mosques to prevent their use as rallying points. He later shut the doors to the Great Mosque, justifying his actions with claims that its sanctity had been stained by earlier corrupted and syncretic practices. Cheikou Amadou’s denunciation of music, for example, and his claims that dancing took place in the mosque may have been provoked by the drumming that, today, accompanies the annual re-claying of the structure. Vibrant rhythms serve to quicken the pace of work, tighten coordination among the hundreds of participating bodies, and transform this arduous task into a joyful celebration of community and accomplishment. In all likelihood, this tradition extends back well before the present era, possibly before the arrival of the Fulani jihad.

The Fulani leader could not lawfully order the direct demolition of Djenné’s neighborhood mosques, since they were Islamic edifices. Instead, he artfully arranged for their rainspouts to be blocked, thereby allowing the mud structures to slowly erode and dissolve during the successive rainy seasons and to eventually collapse under the assault of natural forces. The same tactic was later exercised on the Great Mosque (Fig. 3). In its place Cheikou Amadou erected a brand new congregational mosque on a spacious site located a short distance to the east of the old one. The building’s plain, rectilinear geometry accommodated greater numbers of worshippers, but its low ceiling and stark expression were carefully calculated to convey the Fulanis’ conservative religious attitudes and to focus the believers’ full attention on prayer.

The Fulani Empire was toppled in 1862 by another jihadist wave, this time arriving with Tukolor horsemen riding out from the Fouta Djallon Hills far to the west. Three decades later French troops, under the competent command of Col. Louis Archinard, were making inroads into the Western Sudan, gradually extending their grip over the Inland Niger Delta. On April 12, 1893, they took Djenné and established administrative control in the heart of the town.

The neighborhood mosques were never rebuilt, and some sites of former mosques were transformed into small cemeteries. Reconstruction of the Great Mosque, however, was initiated in 1906 on the (by-then) weatherworn ruins of Koi Konboro’s original structure. The French razed Cheikou Amadou’s ascetic mosque that same year, and in its place they erected a medersa to school their new colonial subjects in both French and Arabic languages.

The French came to be popularly associated with designing, engineering, and overseeing the reconstruction of the Great Mosque. According to scholar Jean-Louis Bourgeois, this attribution was first made by English painter and explorer Henry Arnold Savage Landor, who witnessed the rebuilding of the mosque in 1907. Shortly thereafter, Landor’s attribution was popularized and embellished by French journalists and scholars. The story of French authorship was subsequently adopted by the local Djennenké population and by Malian historians and further substantiated in the 1970s and 1980s by Western scholars who linked the design to the aesthetic rationale of the École Polytechnique and to the influence of the great nineteenth-century French architect, theorist, and restorer Eugène Viollet-le-Duc.

In 1987 Jean-Louis Bourgeois, by contrast, made a compelling case that the present structure was designed, engineered, and built not by the French, but by local masons, with logistical and economic support from a resident population that was energized by a jubilant spirit of independence from their former Fulani oppressors.
An Architectural Description

The Great Mosque was completed in 1907 by the masons under the direction of their chief, Ismaila Traoré, with the manual assistance of conscripted laborers from throughout the region. The ground plan of the plinth is an enormous parallelogram, and it is accessed via six grand staircases that ascend to a commodious terrace surrounding all four elevations of the mosque building. At a glance, the organization of the east facade appears to be symmetrical — a geometric quality that is foundational to Islamic art, but that also contributed significantly to the popular belief that the French designed the building. Closer inspection, however, reveals a balanced but irregular arrangement of architectural elements: namely an alternating sequence of four and five pilaster-buttresses along the length of the elevation, and differing arrangements of small, square fenestrations and protruding toron between the left and right towers. These minor irregularities may have been consciously calculated to produce a symmetrical effect while responding to the given geometry of the site (Fig. 4).

Doorways giving direct access from the exterior to the prayer hall are located in the north and south walls of the building. North and south doors are commonly used by residents from the quarters lying in corresponding directions. Upon entering the prayer hall, eyes and ears adjust to the hushed darkness, and bare feet sink softly into the sandy floor. The interior, measuring approximately 50 meters long by 26 wide and nearly 12 meters in height, is insulated from the hum and the heat of the outside world by the building’s thick mud-brick structure. The interior is essentially a hypostyle hall containing 90 massive pillars that constitute a very considerable proportion of the total floor plan. Like a platoon of gigantic dominoes, the pillars are neatly set out in ten rows of nine each that align with the qibla wall and configure the entire space into a series of long, narrow corridors that traverse the building north-south and east-west (Fig. 5).

In combination, the massive pillars and the complete absence of any central or open space within the mosque limits the size of the Friday congregation that can be accommodated inside the hall. On the other hand, this spatial arrangement has the benefit of allowing devotees who visit on other days of the week to find a secluded spot for focused meditation, discreet socializing, or quiet rest in the cool of the dimly-lit interior. Daylight filters into the hall and between the rows of pillars through the fenestrations in the north and south walls, through the series of arched doorways along the western wall that give access to the courtyard, and through small oculi that pierce the flat, terraced roof of the building. A single oculus is centrally positioned between each quadruplet of pillars. At roof level the oculi are protected by round terra-cotta vessels with removable covers for letting daylight in and hot air out. The grid of evenly spaced vessels creates a fantastical roofscape of gentle protrusions amidst the fissured grey expanse of sunbaked mud (Fig. 6).

The spacious courtyard occupying the western half of the mosque complex is bordered on three sides by narrow corridor-like galleries that serve mainly as segregated prayer spaces for women. On Fridays, when all male citizens of Djenné are expected to attend the congregational salat al-jum’a prayer, the overflow of devotees unable to find space within the prayer hall form long lines in the courtyard and on the raised plinth surrounding the building. In unison, they attune prayers and prostrations to the imam’s cues broadcast over crackling loudspeakers.

The weekly procession of men to and from the mosque is an essential ingredient in Djenné’s social glue. As the young and old wend their way through the maze of streets, scrubbed clean and donning their finest attire, they warmly exchange greetings; donate alms (zakat) to the poor, sick, and disabled; and pay social visits to the households of friends and extended family. Joining together for the salat al-jum’a reminds Djenneños not only that they are members of the global ummah (Islamic community of believers) but more concretely that they are citizens of an urban community of believers.

![Fig. 4. East elevation and floor plan of the Djenné Mosque, 1992. From Pierre Maas and Geert Mommersteeg, Djenné: chef d’œuvre architectural.](image1)

![Fig. 5. Interior of the prayer hall of the Djenné Mosque, 2002. Photograph by author.](image2)
place populated by myriad ethnic and language groups and steeped in a long history of multiculturalism. Sharing the mosque on a regular basis helps to bridge the steep socioeconomic divides and cultural differences that strain daily cohabitation, and it lubricates negotiations of shared civic identity. Equally, the mosque can become a stage for civic competition and even violent contestation over the control and ownership of Djenné’s cultural heritage and, in effect, of Djennéké identity.

Annual Maintenance

Like its mud houses, Djenné’s Great Mosque requires basic annual maintenance and re-claying to safeguard the structure against erosion from the steady harmattan winter winds, pounding rains during summer months, and the intense Sahel sunshine that decomposes the organic matter that binds bricks and plasters. Historically, the mosque’s annual re-claying took place late in the dry season, usually in March or April, when the masons’ building activities were winding down and while stagnant ponds on the floodplain still contained sufficient water for mixing the thick gray plaster. An auspicious day was negotiated between the town elders and the barey ton chief and was publicly declared with little forewarning. Preparations had to begin immediately — and energetically. Visiting tourists and researchers relied merely on chance of being in Djenné on the day of re-claying. Circumstances surrounding the event that I witnessed in 2005, however, were entirely different from those of the past.

In the autumn of 2004 a group of town residents organized a committee to plan for the first-ever Festival du Djennéry to be held in 2005. The festival was to be scheduled for the month of February to capitalize on the country’s brief tourist season, and the committee reckoned that the centerpiece and major draw for foreigners would be the re-claying of the Great Mosque. According to anthropologist Charlotte Joy, who joined the committee as part of her study of heritage politics, motivation for the festival was driven by the economic and cultural achievement of other commercialized festivals that had materialized throughout Mali in recent years. The practice of displaying Mali’s rich cultural heritage extends back to the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century colonial exhibitions in Paris and Marseilles and more recently to the series of national Biennales Artistique et Culturelle inaugurated by Mali’s first post-independence president, Modibo Keita. For decades, Malians have also been loyal followers of television serials that display their cultural traditions, ritual dances, and music from around the country, produced with the aim of fostering national integration through celebration of locality and diversity. In particular, the Djennéry committee was inspired by the international success of the Essakane music festival held each year since 2001 in a sandy location north of Timbuktu and the newer Fes-tival sur le Niger staged annually in the historic Bamana town of Segou. Charlotte Joy reports that the 2005 Djennéry event was envisaged as a trial run for an even bigger festival in 2006 marking the centenary of the building of the Great Mosque.

Disappointingly, however, only a small number of tourists showed up for the festival in Djenné, and the whole business was tarnished by accusations of financial corruption and mismanage-ment. Most controversial, perhaps, was the fixing of the date for the re-claying ceremony to accommodate the festival calendar. This maneuver sparked enduring tension between the planning committee and the circle of

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Fig. 6. Roofscape of the Djenné Mosque, with oculi for ventilation and illumination covered by terra-cotta discs, 2002. Photograph by author.
senior men who formerly had made their selection in secret and allegedly in consultation with almanacs and lunar calendars and in sympathetic coordination with the region’s variable climactic conditions.

Nevertheless, the re-claying ceremony in 2005 retained the usual strong sense of community coordination and festive spirit (Figs. 7 through 9). I offer a brief description with passages taken from the final chapter of *The Masons of Djenné*:

A shrieking whistle pierced the dawn at 6:20 AM, signalling the start of the event. Drums beat madly to a chorus of cries, and what seemed like a thousand bodies rushed forward carrying baskets and pots of every description. Legions of sinewy, muscular arms hoisted colossal wooden ladders against the walls, creating the scene of a fortress under siege. Scores of men scrambled up the front face of the building, climbing the ladders and acrobatically scaling the armature of projecting *toron*.

A continual relay was set in motion, delivering basket after basket of mud from the ground to the highest pinnacles that adorned the towers and parapet wall....Companies of women hastily transported colourful plastic pails brimming with water from the marshes, pouring them from the top of their heads in steady streams upon the gigantic piles of mud. Masses of young boys trampled the mucky mess, churning it into plaster and playfully painting each other from toe to head. Other young ones colonised their own small patches of the building, spreading plaster over the podium walls and nearby saints’ tombs with tiny sweeps of their palms. Even foreign tourists who dared venture from the relative safety of the sidelines lent a hand in the plastering work. Musicians ferociously pounded drums, and young women spun their calabash instruments, heightening the frenetic tempo of the festivities.
The masons and apprentices were centrally involved, shouting instructions to the squadrons of young men and commandeering the plaster work from the highest rungs of the ladders, straddling toron in midair and organising the waves of deliveries that wound their way up the mosque staircases to the roof. All clothing was muted in shades of browns and greys, perfectly harmonised with the tones of the newly dressed mosque.

Television crews were on site to witness and broadcast the event to the nation. Representatives from the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Arts and Tourism were on hand, symbolically endorsing the Malian government’s vested interests in Djenné’s cultural property and its World Heritage status. Attracting media coverage to transmit Djenné’s greatest cultural event to the nation, and hopefully to the world beyond, was a core aim of the festival organizers. In effect, in the eyes of a Malian viewing audience the images on the TV screen would validate the local tradition as worthy and as relevant to modern nation-building, and they would attract more tourism and possibly much-needed development assistance for the town.

Every able-bodied man and boy, and hundreds of women, participated in this extraordinary feat of coordination, energy and speed. By 7:30 AM, the eastern façade and towers of the Mosque were complete, and the remainder of exterior surfaces, including the courtyard walls and the roof, were finished a few hours later. By late morning the task was over. Unlike in the past — when half the building was plastered and the other half tackled a week or so later — the entire building was covered at once. Because of the enormity of [the 2005] mission, accurately estimating the total quantities of mud required was difficult. As a result, supplies ran dry before all the surfaces could be adequately covered. It was rumoured that a second coating would be needed once the first coating would be adequately covered. It was rumoured that a second coating would be needed once the first coating was applied. The depth of mud plaster accumulated over the last century and to assess the state of the wooden supporting beams below. Following further courtesy calls to the prefect, the mayor, and the chef de village and a meeting with the chief and secretary of the masons’ barey ton association, the team of AKTC specialists assembled on the roof of the Great Mosque in the early hours of September 20 and began digging a hole.

According to some sources, the excavation was made at a “sensitive” location close to the mibrab tower. Rumors about illicit foreigners spoiling the mosque, digging for sacred treasures, or secretly planting a computer device in the building spread through Djenné like a brush fire. A group of youth vocally confronted the AKTC workers on the roof, drowning out the experts’ explanations with cries condemning the imam and the chef de village, who had authorized the restoration work, as “corrupt.” A riot quickly erupted on a scale and with a level of intensity unprecedented in the recent history of the town. Though the AKTC team escaped unharmed, their tools were vandalized, and the angry crowd descended into the prayer hall, ripping down the electrical wiring, and its sound system, and destroying displays of archaeological objects. These young people are members of the most marginalized communities, reaping little or no economic benefit from tourism, development, or the few employment opportunities that cultural heritage and its policies bring to the town.

The majority of those arrested were residents of Djenné’s southern quarters, reputed to be the poorest neighborhoods. These young people are members of the most marginalized communities, reaping little or no economic benefit from tourism, development, or the few employment opportunities that cultural heritage and its policies bring to the town.

A Gathering Storm

The 2006 Festival du Djenné was, according to Charlotte Joy, a “scaled-down” and “insignificant” event largely soured by the corruption scandals that had surfaced the previous year. The year 2006 also marked the start of a decline in tourism, not just in Djenné but throughout the country, as international news reported the emergence of a group calling itself Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its suspected infiltration into West Africa, including Mali.

The tourist trade, a significant sector for the national economy, was dealt further blows by the renewal of Tuareg rebellions in the North (2007-2009 and again in 2011-2012), while a general situation of impoverishment throughout the Sahel region was exacerbated by threats of catastrophic drought in 2005, 2010, and again in 2012.

One particularly calamitous event in 2006 will long be remembered by Djennéniës, and equally by foreign researchers and conservationists who have worked in the town, especially on its mosque. On September 16, 2006, a team of technical experts from the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) arrived in Djenné. Three years previously, the AKTC had signed an agreement of cooperation for development with Mali’s president, Amadou Toumani Touré, which included plans for the architectural restoration of the historic Sudanese-style mud-brick mosques in Mopti, Timbuktu, and Djenné. Restoration of the Komoguel Mosque in Mopti was successfully completed in 2006, and preparations were underway to commence work on Djenné’s Great Mosque. On earlier visits to the town in 2005, the AKTC team made initial inspections of the building, noting especially the problems posed by a colony of bats residing in the prayer hall. Together with representatives from the Cultural Mission, members of the team also paid courtesy visits to the imam, the hereditary chef de village, and other elite office holders. The five short days they spent in Djenné would prove surprisingly eventful.

During the first four days, the AKTC team conducted further elementary surveys of the mosque structure, its electrical wiring, and its sound system, initially proposing that the necessary work would take eight months. The state of the roof was investigated, and it was decided that a small excavation should be made to accurately measure
The Djenné Mosque town. The heritage projects are popularly perceived as “cash cows,” exclusively benefiting a select, privileged, and allegedly corrupt circle of civil and religious office holders. The top-down promotion and management of cultural heritage, according to Charlotte Joy, further entrenches “divisions between those people in society who can legitimately mobilize money for its promotion and those for whom the money is intended (directly or indirectly) and who remain disenfranchised from the whole process.” The 2006 riot was not merely the delinquent activity of a few unruly youth, as portrayed by the authorities. Rather, it was the manifestation of a widespread sense of impotence and exclusion from the centers of power and decision-making that directly affect the homes where people live and the buildings where they pray and socialize and which they maintain as a community.

Indeed, protesters and members of Djenné Patrimoine placed blame for the riots on the Cultural Mission and on elite civil and religious authorities, accusing them of making critical decisions regarding the town’s mosque in a thoroughly undemocratic fashion and without public consultation. Mission representatives responded in detail, vociferously defending their position and insisting that plans for the AKTC works had been communicated to the population well in advance. But plainly the power struggle over control of Djenné’s cultural heritage, and namely its mosque, entangles a far more complex mix of interest group than just those hardline localists, a party of foreign AKTC “experts,” and a handful of self-interested civil and religious elites. Rather, a web of tension is spun by players at local, national, and international levels. While fostering its own international network of scholars, experts, and benefactors, Djenné Patrimoine proclaims to represent the true concerns of local townsfolk about their historic urban environment. But reaching agreement among an ethnically and linguistically diverse citizenry about how architectural heritage can add tangible value to their lives or about how their homes and their mosque might Fig. 10. Restoration of the Djenné Mosque sponsored by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2009. Photograph by Joseph Brunet-Jailly.
be preserved while simultaneously taking advantage of present-day amenities and new technologies on offer is an arduous process with no guarantee of clear outcomes. The Cultural Mission, too, represents the cultural and social aspirations of some town residents, but, as a government office, its more overt agenda is to safeguard heritage for the nation and to keep Djenné on UNESCO’s World Heritage list. It also acts as official mediator for, and collaborator with, the teams of foreign experts who propose and finance conservation initiatives in the old town and the surrounding region. To state the obvious, bringing all of these various scales of concern and interest into dialogue with one another and establishing a workable consensus is a formidable task, but nevertheless a necessary one to keep the peace and give the Djennénké population a clear stake in the making of their futures.

The Mosque Remade

The 2007 re-claying of the Great Mosque was carried out in a single day and without the pomp and pageantry that many had envisaged to mark the centenary of the building’s completion. The re-claying task was followed the next day by a maouloud celebrating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, with the aim of healing social ruptures and fostering peace and unity in the still-shaken community.

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture did finally return to Djenné and began restoration work on the Great Mosque in January 2009 under the stewardship of an international team of architects and in close collaboration with the town’s barey ton masons and local laborers (Fig. 10). The work site was promoted positively as a forum for “fruitful exchange” between the foreign experts and the masons and as a place for training and for improving technologies for earthen structures that would be transferrable to other historic buildings.

The team’s first task was to remove the nearly 24-inch-deep (60-centimeter-deep) accumulation of heavy mud on the roof terrace and assess the condition of the wooden supports below. Two layers of wood were discovered, one laid perpendicular to the other. The lower level was constructed of termite-resistant palm timbers spaced tightly together, and most were judged to be structurally sound; by contrast, the upper layer was made of ordinary timbers, many of which had rotted. All of the latter were replaced with lengths of quartered palm wood imported from Kayes, a distant western region of Mali. The masons re-clayed the parapet walls and pinnacles surrounding the roof terrace with a smooth rendering made from a light-colored earth that was carefully mixed and fermented with rice husks. It was agreed that the annual re-claying ceremony would proceed in order to coat the remaining wall surfaces, but an exceptionally late date of June 4, 2009, was set for the event. This would be prove to be the last re-claying ceremony for three years.

On November 5, 2009, after a spate of heavy rainfall that damaged numerous houses, the upper half of the Great Mosque’s southern mihrab tower suddenly collapsed, releasing several tons of mud bricks, plaster, and wooden toron, which came crashing down onto the terrace below (Fig. 11). Four masons working on the scaffolding at the time were thrown to the ground but miraculously suffered only minor injuries. According to Djenné masons, no person has ever been seriously injured while working on the mosque, not even during the frenzied re-claying ceremony, owing to the prayers and the secret benedictions that they recite beforehand. The masons also claim that they share with their totem, the yellow-headed m’baaka lizard, the “agility, balance and capacity to cling to, and scale, vertical wall surfaces.” The collapse of the tower prompted Djenné Patrimoine to acknowledge the extent to which Djenné’s architectural heritage is in danger and the extent to which its protection demands urgent action of a well-defined and large-scale nature. This intervention is precisely what ensued with the Great Mosque.

A subsequent series of borings made through the thick layers of plaster of the walls and into the underlying structure

Fig. 11. Collapsed tower on the east facade of the mosque following heavy rains, 2009. Photograph by Joseph Brunel-Jailly.
led the conservation team to conclude that the mosque was showing signs of weakness and that a more thorough intervention was justified. A report published by the AKTC in January 2010 noted that the annual re-claying ceremony was failing to supply the technical maintenance necessary for the building’s long-term preservation. Analysis of the plaster layers also revealed that the general quality and water-repellent properties of the mud had declined in recent years. According to the report, this change was due to poor preparation of the mud rendering, which did not allow sufficient time for fermentation of the added organic materials, and to the feverish competition among workers from the town’s various quarters, which motivated their hasty and incompetent applications of the rendering. The AKTC’s recommendation for future practice was that “the masons should play a central role in preparing the materials and overseeing the annual re-claying; and, on the days following the festivity, the masons should conduct technical surveys and carry out the more delicate repairs and maintenance.”

The AKTC offered to furnish an illustrated technical manual to guide future maintenance; this, they suggested, would complement the embodied know-how of Djenné’s local masons.

The various parties involved agreed that a century’s worth of accumulated plaster should be removed from the building envelope in order to execute the necessary structural repairs. As a supposedly beneficial consequence, this exercise would also restore the Great Mosque to its “original” 1907 form. Over the next two years, all interior and exterior surfaces were peeled back and renewed; electrical wiring for interior lighting, ventilation, and the sound system was replaced and encased within the mud walls; wooden doors, windows, and grilles were restored or remade; and structurally unsound sections of the building, such as the two towers flanking the central mihrab tower and the north stair tower, were demolished and reconstructed. Reconstruction was executed with djenné-ferey, a compact, cylindrical brick prestressed by hand and used almost exclusively in Djenné until the introduction in the 1930s of the rectangular wooden mold for rapidly manufacturing so-called tubaabu-ferey (literally “white-man’s brick”) (Fig. 12). Reviving the method for producing and building with djenné-ferey (a skill apparently lost to all but one surviving elder mason) has long been a priority for the Djenné Patrimoine, and thus the AKTC program of public works won local trust and support. Permanently evicting the resident colony of bats from the prayer hall, however, proved to be a more challenging campaign.

Cancellation of the annual re-claying ceremony in 2010 and again in 2011 while restoration work continued, combined with the prescriptive recommendations for future maintenance, resuscitated suspicions that care and ownership of the Great Mosque had been wrested from the hands of Djenné’s ordinary citizens. Worries were dispelled when, finally, a date for re-claying was announced in 2012. On March 11, the task was carried out in a single morning, seemingly with the same energy and zeal as in the past. Mali’s Minister of Culture attended the early-morning prayers and benedictions, and he stayed to witness the sensational start of the event. However, mounting troubles in the country, including the kidnapping of foreigners, an armed Tuareg insurrection, a growing Islamist insurgency in the north, and violent demonstrations in the capital kept most tourists away from the 2012 re-claying spectacle. Just a few weeks later (and one month before scheduled national elections), a military coup d’etat ousted Pres. Amadou Toumani Touré from power, with the effect of further reducing and practically eliminating any remaining tourism in the country.

Troubles persist today in large parts of the country without foreseeable resolution in the short to medium term.
It therefore seems reasonable to predict that Djenné will be putting on its re-claying spectacle for itself only in coming years. The political and security crises and the resultant desertion of tourists and disappearance of foreign aid has had, and surely will continue to have, devastating effects on an economy that has long been crippled by corruption, drought, and regional instability. Conservation and research projects in Gao, Timbuktu, the Dogon region, and Djenné have been suspended or terminated for an indeterminate period. If there is anything positive to emerge from all this chaos, it may be that Djennénkés will, by necessity, re-appropriate ownership and responsibility for sustaining their cultural and architectural heritage. This is not to suggest that Djennénkés harmoniously share a common ideal about what to preserve and how to preserve it. Rather, struggles and competitions over meaning, value, building materials, and methods will be anchored once again in the local community. In my opinion, this is where they belong.

Conclusion

Outside interventions that aim to control the materials and methods employed in the annual re-claying ceremony in Djenné impose a detrimental kind of change upon people’s relationship to what they do. As master mason Konbaba Tennepo declares at the end of a documentary film on Djenné and its masons, the re-claying event is “our ceremony in Djenné impose a detrimental control the materials and methods so as to make and remake, modify, and maintain the structure and the available materials and conditions to do so, Djenné’s Great Mosque will surely endure as a living place with meaning and purpose for resident Djennénkés and, hopefully, too, for the wider world.

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Notes

1. A version of this article was presented as the College of Fellows lecture at the 2014 APT Conference in Québec City. Additionally, a longer version of this essay was published in Oskar Verkaaik, ed., Religious Architecture: Anthropological Perspectives (Amsterdam and Chicago: Amsterdam Univ. Press and Univ. of Chicago Press, 2013), 117-148.

2. My anthropological fieldwork, supported by the British Academy and the School of Oriental and African Studies, resulted in a number of publications, including The Masons of Djenné (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), the documentary films The Future of Mud: Tales of Houses and Lives in Djenné (co-produced with director Susan Vogel and Samuel Sidibé, distributed by Icarus Films, 57 minutes, 2007) and Masions of Djenné (directed by Trevor Marchand and produced by Mary Jo Arnoldi for the Smithsonian Institution, 22 minutes, 2013), and exhibitions at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London (2010) and at the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History (2013, with Mary Jo Arnoldi).


4. Sometimes referred to as Sahelian or Sudanic style, the Sudanese style is a French creation that combines the “minaret of the Djinguéré Ber mosque at Tombouctou with the traditional Muslim façade of a house at Djenné,” according to Labelle Prussin, Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 18. These elements were used in constructing a model colonial citadel of French West Africa at the 1922 Marseille Colonial Exposition; more ambitiously, they were employed to establish “an architectural prototype for France’s entire West African empire” (ibid.). Attempts to define the core features of the style and its geographical spread have been taken up by numerous Western scholars, including Tor Engeström, “Contributions aux Connaissances des Styles de Construction au Soudan Français,” Ethiop 2-3 (1955): 122; Susan Denyer, African Traditional Architecture: An Historical and Geographical Perspective (London: Heinemann, 1978), 160-161; Labelle Prussin, Hatumere, 103 and 161; Sergio Domian, Architecture Soudanaise: vitalité d’une tradition urbaine et monumentale (Paris: Éditions l’Hammattan, 1989), 24; Pierre Maas and Geert Mommersteeg, Djenné: chef d’œuvre architectural (Bamako, Eindhoven, Amsterdam: Institut des Sciences Humaines, Université de Technologie, Institut Royal des Tropiques, 1992), 77; Adria LaViolette, “Masons of Mali: A Millennium of Design and Technology in Earthen Materials,” Society, Culture and Technology in Africa, ed. S. Terry Childs (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 1994), 89; and J. Spencer Tringham, A History of Islam in West Africa (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), 69.


8. John Hunwick, Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: al-Sa‘di’s Ta’rikh al-sidān Down to

About work and life strategies among the communities of masons in African cities further afield. See Marchand, 2009, for more detailed discussion about work and life strategies among the community of masons.


30. A Cultural Mission was set up at each of Mali’s UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including Djenné and the archaeological site of Djenné-Djeno, the town of Timbuktu, the tomb of Askia Muhammad in Gao, and the Dogon region. Their remit is to sensitize local populations about the value of cultural heritage, to educate them about conservation management, and to enforce the rules and regulations that accompany UNESCO World Heritage status.


32. According to a report in Djenné Patrimoine Informations 21 (2006), during a visit by the American Ambassador to the imam of Djenné in 2002 (apparently to explain that the war against Saddam Hussein was not a war on Islam), the imam seized the opportunity to ask for “a small gift.” The electrical fans were later donated by the American Embassy for the Great Mosque.


34. Ibid., 2006.


36. Djenné and the adjacent archaeological site of Djenné-Djeno were added to the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1988.


