

## The Re - plastering of The Mosque of Djenné; A Peoples Celebration



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### ABSTRACT

Djenné situated on the Bani a tributary of the river Niger is an ancient city. All along the centuries it has been an important centre in the Trans Sahara with an uninterrupted history dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. (Archaeological excavations started in 1977 have revealed <Djenné – Jeno> an ancient city at 3 miles from present day Djenné dating 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. It had a population of 10000 inhabitants in a more or less egalitarian society. This find challenged and laid to rest the belief that urbanism was brought to black Africa by the North Africans around the 11<sup>th</sup> century). Along with its better known twin sister city of Timbuctou it was and is considered amongst the most important centres of Islamic learning in black Africa. It is a city built entirely in earth. Thanks to the unique typology of its famous mosque and that of its urban habitat its contribution to the Sudanese style of architecture is considered as decisive, defining and original. It was classified as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1988.

The Mosque of Djenné, was rebuilt by the French in 1905-07, based on the plan of the ancient mosque. It is an imposing structure unparalleled in the world. Its front facade of over 60 meters length is dominated by 3 imposing towers with the average wall height varying between 11 and 15 meters. It is built entirely, like the rest of the city in raw earth and it celebrates a unique synergy with the city's citizens. There are a number of little anecdotes related to the mosque that demonstrate the pride and attachment Djenné's inhabitants have for their mosque. One of them goes like that.

Colonel Gaddafi, the Libyan chief at the height of his powers proposed to this ancient city, a majestic mosque, built entirely in the finest marbles. The city politely declined the offer.

The pride and the attachment of the city to its mosque manifests itself in the most impressive, joyous and mind boggling form in the ceremony of the replastering of the mosque. This event is organised in clockwork fashion every summer. The replastering is carried out over two sessions in the space of a week by the inhabitants of the two quarters that make up Djenné. It is a playful competition with healthy rivalry. The plaster is prepared in advance in the public place facing the mosque. The earth is specially chosen from the banks of the river Bani. It is mixed with water, sullage, cowdung, hay and a number of other ingredients and is left to 'prepare'.

Around the end of April a date is announced by the Imam of the mosque roughly a week/10 days in advance. The specific quarter gears itself for the event with everybody including, girls, women, boys, the young and the old playing an active and important role. The aim being that they finish replastering their part (which is half the mosque surface) in the shortest time possible. Eventually beating the other quarter. Last summer in April 2002 the first group started at 5 am to finish their half at 9 am, which meant that they finished plastering a surface area of 4500 sq meters in 4 hours flat. (Djenne had 12000 inhabitants by the census of 1987-90, one could imagine the organised mobilisation of over 2000 people for the replastering). An incredible performance, even more so considering that they plastered huge vertical facades and the terrace.

The vivacity has to be seen to be believed. That a population is so intricately and passionately involved in the maintenance and evolution of its heritage, virtually living and celebrating its heritage is most impressive, more so considering the scale and the finesse of the operation.

It is a grand festival. Even the little boys have their small mosque that they plaster and guard zealously from photographers prying lenses. Everybody, even foreign visitors can participate. Women are often asked to bring water and men can try their hands at plaster. (Till not long back the mosque was open to non muslim visitors. However after an incident of unacceptable conduct inside the mosque by a group of foreign tourists entry to the prayer hall has been restricted).

This ceremony is a great living heritage not only of the people of Djenné, but that of this world. It clearly and impressively demonstrates that architecture and urban settlements can be people centric, that religion is about participation, about community, about simple people and their simple acts. It is open in spirit and action, it is about sharing and it is about celebration. And that whole hearted public participation can manifest itself in different, diverse ways that are enriching and evolutive not only for the inhabitants but also for the architecture, for religion and for humankind itself.