

An Assessment of Conservation Practices in Earthen Buildings in the Context of Cultural Heritage: The Case of the Great Mosque of Djenne



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ABSTRACT

Earthen buildings are not only physical heritage elements, reflecting traditional building materials. They are also areas of living cultural heritage that continue to exist through local knowledge, craftsmanship, community participation and practices passed down from generation to generation. In this context contemporary conservation approaches view heritage not only as a physical entity to be preserved but also together with the social practices that produce and sustain it. This concept is discussed in the international heritage literature as the “heritage as process” approach. Accordingly, this approach argues that the value of cultural heritage lies not only in its tangible form but also in the practices and networks which ensure its sustainability. In this context how conservation practices can be read as not only a tool for the preservation of cultural heritage but also as an integral component that ensures its sustainability is a question of significance in current conservation debates.

Based on this approach, the study discusses how conservation practices which ensure the sustainability of heritage can be read as an integral component of cultural heritage, based on the Great Mosque of Djenne in Mali which is included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. Traditional plastering and repair practices are carried out at the mosque every year by the local community. This study examines how this practice can be read as a “cultural conservation practice” not only in terms of ensuring the physical sustainability of the structure, but also in terms of the transmission of local craftsmanship, the strengthening of social solidarity, the preservation of rituals, and the reproduction of collective memory. The

study is evaluated in line with living heritage and community-based conservation approaches, in accordance with the principles set forth in UNESCO's "1972 World Heritage Convention" and "2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage." In this study, UNESCO and ICOMOS documents as well as national and international literature are examined using document and content analysis methods within the framework of qualitative research.

The study aims to contribute to rethinking conservation practice not only as a technical intervention but also as a cultural practice linked to local knowledge, community participation, and living traditions that ensure the sustainability of cultural heritage. The study aims to provide a theoretical perspective on conservation principles and methods for earthen structures, focusing on community-based approaches and local traditions.

KEY WORDS:

Earthen Buildings, Cultural Heritage, Conservation Practices, Heritage as Process, Great Mosque of Djenné.