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REFERENCES

MARCHAND, Trevor H. J. — *The Masons of Djenne*. Bloomington-Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2009, 352 p., bibl.

- 1 The aim to understand the building of mansions and mosques in Djenne and how builders learn and transmit their craft to others made the author join a building team in order to acquire basic skills through participant observation— brick-making, foundation casting, building of walls, roofing, decoration and plastering. Scenes from daily life of masons or apprentices are skilfully blended in with the construction stages. When Djenne became Unesco World Heritage Site in 2005 and obtained funding for conservation of “traditional” houses, ample opportunities to study local masons were offered on several edifices by different owners under repair or construction. The author became apprentice among others learning without plans or written and oral instruction. Building design does not use paper plans but drawings in the sand in order to explain proportions and distances to labourers and apprentices.
- 2 Part I “Elementary Lessons on the Art of Building” follows apprentices learning to lay out a site, build a foundation and make bricks, mortar or plaster in right proportions. Mud bricks are still exclusive to Djenne whereas elsewhere kiln-fired bricks are used. Therefore brick making starts in the dry season, weeks before actual construction, from sieved laterite, water, chopped straw and cow dung (in proportions 4:2: 1) to increase tensile strength. Mortars and plaster are also prepared beforehand with mixtures of above materials fermenting in open pits for greater consistency and impermeability.
- 3 While master masons come from local families, and preferably from the Bozo “land owners” and town founders, laborers migrate from nearby towns or even countries— many enrolled as students in the *medresset* and forced to wage earning to pay for their

studies. Outsiders have less chances to become apprentices and masons here, since they must not only acquire technical skills, but also proper comportment, professional demeanour and social responsibility, and last not least certain secret rituals. Customs dating back to pre-Islamic times, and transmitted for generations were adopted by the Djennenke *marabouts*—who accompany many stages of building, for example grain and animal bones buried at the corners of future buildings as foundation deposits. Non-Muslim villages of the surroundings still perform sacrifices to the land spirits as a plea for protection of the new occupants.

- 4 Yet into the traditional mud-brick buildings stone-concrete foundations have been introduced recently to guarantee greater stability of walls at rising water levels. Foundations as well as layout, and setting of bricks in mortar in overlapping fashion, is the work of masons who also verify dimensions and vertical and horizontal lines. Plumb lines, trowels, water levels, brick mould, and measuring tape are further innovations adopted at stints in the capital or abroad. An apprentice has to transport and pass materials but may complete a masters job such as bricklaying, during absences of the latter on prayers or errands. The afternoons bring, with the heat and prayers, relaxation and informal contacts among laborers and apprentices couched in joking relationships as a polite way to channel friction and conflicts, a sign of fluid class boundaries. Especially the blood pact between Dogon laborers and Bozo senior apprentices is played out in jokes. Here the author digresses on explanatory models of joking relations, like the social cohesion hypothesis of Radcliffe-Brown and the cathartic function hypothesis of Griaule.
- 5 As members of the Bozo nation, master masons acquire knowledge and special powers to pacify water and land spirits, and thus select auspicious days for building in order to protect crew and buildings from accidents. They bury charms and blessed grain under the foundation and perform ritual incantations learnt from their animist ancestors couched in Islamic terms thus invoking God's grace during crucial stages. Building in natural materials—rediscovered in the 18th c. with the virtues of the *Mœurs et pensées sauvages* by Rousseau, Lasalle and Bougainville and given recognition as attractive by Viollet le Duc or Ruskin in the 19th c.—requires interaction with live forces. sand, clay, water, grass and animal products are the only materials available from the flood plain, whereas stone or wood have to be brought from the 25 km distant Dogon hills. The Bozo as masters of the Rivers and the land in between reserve for themselves such traditional jobs as fisherman, boat builder, skipper and pilot, but also—as masters of the earth—all work related to soil and fire such as pottery, masonry and metal work in iron, copper or silver.
- 6 As a Djenne inhabitant you will inherit land from your ancestors, while an outsiders faces difficulties to get land and need approach various authorities like customary chiefs, Bozo residents and the mayor—in the absence of urban *cataster* (*lotissement*) the only ones knowledgeable about titles—for the establishment of the necessary agreements and papers against little gifts (*prix de kola ou de thé*) for site visits and their signature.
- 7 While the Bozo are believed to have special powers over the earth forces, they rarely become *marabouts* and their secret knowledge is considered un-Islamic, and official ceremonies chaired by *marabouts*. Mande cosmology recognizes 5 clans of nobles, 16 of freedmen, 4 of artisans and 5 marabouitic ones. Islam, progressively introduced to Djenne since the 11th c. and enforced by Sonray monarchy in the late 15th and again by

the 19th c. Fulani *jihads* of Sheikh Amadu and Omar, resulted in the adoption of *fiq* and the influx of coranic scholars opening schools but also certain syncretic practices such as production of amulets blessed charms and herbal medicines. “In order to be a good mason, one must have sound knowledge of Islam” is a tenet.

- 8 The stylish two-storey houses with vestibule, inner court, indoor kitchen and vaulted windows and wooden ceilings present problems of materials, static and cost and therefore belong to a few rich, *marabouts*, merchants or chiefs, concentrated around the market and in few quarters.
- 9 A crucial stage is roofing of both floors : timbers measured and cut to size on the ground are lifted up and placed diagonally over the four corners—with the open middle space being covered perpendicularly with acacia beams. This produces a convex curvature intended to drain water to the sides towards clay pipes built into a parapet wall. Various compositions for the ceiling plaster are experimented with—some with organic material or oil soaked to render the roofs impermeable and again accompanied by secret incantations by the master builder.
- 10 As the decorative façades are tackled late in the season—when *harmattan* winds carrying dust and germs interfere with work and spread eye infections, colds and meningitis and less labor—interruptions and absences of masons needing to quick appointments of replacements leads to conflict and delays. The pilasters flanking the main gate support a projecting lintel for rain protection, and a traverse of decorative elements designed by the master mason.
- 11 A façade’s final stage is its decorative top (*potige*). From an imagined centre line the master establishes spacing and symmetry of the ornaments by trial and error with the help of wooden pegs. A “Moroccan” style façade is topped by an odd number of *toron*, bundles of 6-8 sticks tied together to a single rectangle, carrying equal numbers of intermediate pillars topped by cat heads (*musi bumo*) separated by an even number of square or rectangular apertures (*funey*) under round holes (cats eyes or *musi moo tondi*). The cat heads (*musi bumo*) and lance-point shaped miters (*sarafar*) are made from bricks shaped circular or octagonal by chopping off corners and their weight must be carefully distributed across the lintel, again accompanied by incantations to preclude accidents. Unfortunately, the author remains silent about origins and evolution of these elements either in North Africa or the French revival of “Sudanese” architecture in the 1920-30s.
- 12 “Portraits of Life and Work in Djenne” are painted in part II with sketches of apprentices, labourers, masons and entrepreneurs and authorities in “authentic building”. More about the hierarchy and social network of master masons (*barey amirou*) and apprentices (*dyente idye*), and their association (*barey ton*) with an elected president (*barey bamo*) is revealed through biographies such as that of a master-mason turned contractor and businessman.
- 13 From Joboro, the oldest quarter and largely Bozo, to which the profession is traced to 3 families, masons send their sons to uncles as trainees where as small boys they clean tools, carry loads, prepare materials etc. As junior apprentices they work with the laborers, as senior ones with the masons, learning to respect hierarchy and discipline but progressively are given tasks to perform without supervision. Training implies “propositionally based directives” coupled with physical demonstrations if corrections are necessary. Social relations are more relaxed and hence less competitive during apprenticeship. When a master declares him ready and has informed the association an

apprentice officially turns mason. When admitting him as full member the master makes benedictions and gives him trowel and crowbar. Thereafter he sends him to work for wages with other masons or procures independent commissions. An apprentice unable to establish his own client base remains dependent on his master for work. Contracts such as that by Djenne *Patrimoine* for a house in Moroccan and Tuculor style in Joboro with all resident laborers under a master-mason from there provide welcome employment.

- 14 Most labourers do not aspire to become masons but will return home to become imams and marabouts ; only few have entered the profession through their Bozo mother. Labor division is rigid : mixing mud, filling baskets with it, even tea-making are chores of particular individuals. Yet in comparison with Yemeni masons, borders between professional grades are less rigid, but accomplished master mason are expected to have passed all the processes from layout to final decor. Builders qualification and status are judged by the capacity and experience with design and completion of a decorative façade sense in symmetry and proper proportions and with a show of innovation. Moreover indoor elements such as staircase, arches and upstairs toilets—usually situated on second floors because of restrictions on septic tanks due to high groundwater table—must be part of their repertoire.
- 15 Most masons have little schooling but claim to have particular powers on site, know incantations and tricks from their master or family members, and wear protective charms and blessed rings imputed with secret powers (*korbo*). Becoming “*maître*” depends on the recognition by others, and freedom from others jealousy. Fathers pass on secrets to their sons, so that secret knowledge remains in the family. “Though the Bozo form part of the ethnic mix that has populated the town since its beginnings they regularly distinguish themselves in conversation from the urbanized and heterogeneous groupings of Djenneké.”
- 16 As no standard measures, *e.g.* for window heights of windows or doors exist but are calibrated on the human body, *e.g.* owner’s eye level, renowned masters seek legitimacy by tying themselves to former masons of repute crediting them with innovations which might be their own. Most younger masons, however, live in precarious situations unable to build and sustain families— either living with older brothers, or leaving wife and children with her family. Polygamy compounds the problem, as each wife needs accommodation for her children and space for cooking. To gain income they have to seek odd jobs or commissions from masons elsewhere. Additional specializations *e.g.* in façade decoration will guarantee jobs—because masters concentrate on less time-consuming work such as walls and roofing—and even contracts with colleagues who are usually competitors.
- 17 As Djenne is in transition from subsistence to market economy, the few masons trained as specialized artisans are still part-time farmers or fishermen. Most people are self-sufficient not only in food production but also for many other daily needs, clothing, utensil making and home building. As fisherman the Bozo builds and repairs canoes, and provides river transport. In times of crisis, such as insufficient inundation leading to harvest failure, the incomes of all drop to subsistence level, and even masons must seek outside income, when building activities slow down drastically. The diverse professional risks and private social lives of those observed by the author on the sites are the stuff of the final chapters of the book.

- 18 But in Djenne identities are also in transition—through cooperation and intermarriages ethnic identities are fading away and give rise to an urban identity—or composite Djennenké ethnicity. Still, the Bozo see themselves as a more cohesive community—*bo* so meaning bamboo house in Bamana, term for the mat hut habitation of the migratory fishing communities. When the Songhay incorporated Djenne in their state by the late 15th century, the *koyra boro* (white-people) from the Niger bend they identified the Bozo with their own fishing groups, *Sorko*—and both use the term interchangeably. Though the Bozo speak the Bamana, or Fula or Songhay language they maintain a strong sense of communal identity, expressed by residential quarters alongside the canal, endoga-mous marriage and professional guilds and monopoly in certain professions such as shipping, fishing and boatbuilding. Reserving professions occupied by noumou among the Bambara, Marka or Dogon¹.
- 19 A comprehensive bibliography, glossary of technical terms, index of names conclude the book. Generously illustrated with drawings and photographs which make technical details readily understandable the book makes easy reading like a fiction novel but falls somewhat short of analysis—as for example Adria La Violettes work on craftsmen—since of 200 masons and association members, and 30 regularly attending meetings, only 3 or 4 masons and a couple of labourers and apprentices are followed in depth.
- 20 1. Thus they form a nation, even though some authors claim wrote that the Bozo never claimed descent from a common ancestor, *cf.* J. DAGET, M. KONIPO & M. SANANKOUA, *La langue bozo*, Dakar, IFAN, 1953.