Looking for modernity | looking for heritage. Overlapping European imageries on Sub-Saharan urban environment

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1. European imageries – Sub-Saharan environment

A reality that pre-exists to its own discovery, built through stories, accounts, descriptions, and inventions. A set scene, on which Europeans, both travellers and colonizers, project their own experience and values. This is the way in which the desert takes part in that western reverie, which is aspiration to a mythic golden age that can still be traced and thought in some corner of the world.

Felix Dubois, a French journalist on a mission for Le Figaro, arrives at Djenné for the first time in 1894, and reveals the town heiress to the Songhay Empire to the world. He describes Djenné as a town intact in its forms, the same forms that, in 1324, Mansa Musa and Al-Sahili imported from Egypt returning from a long pilgrimage (Prussin, 1994; Preston Blier, 2004). What appears to Dubois’ eyes is a mirage, perhaps the most common topos used to represent the illusion of waiting that, far from vanishing, brings us back the image of an unaltered town where time seems to have almost stopped in a dimension suspended between the evocation of a disappeared reality and the projection of a renewed imagery. Dubois describes the outcome of his own expectations, dreams, built on the dreams and hopes of those who preceded him. A mythic figure takes shape, which is that of the town beyond the desert. This is a virtual representation of a world that has already been imagined and that pre-exists to its own discovery.

Leo Africanus, Mungo Park, Heinrich Barth and René Caille, by overlapping travel chronicles upon historical news, contribute to shape an autonomous universe ready to be flown over by an air balloon. In 1864, Jules Vernes publishes in Paris Cinq semaines en ballon, (Prussin, 1994) the imaginative reconstruction of an adventurous travel that, passing through Africa from Zanzibar to Saint-Louis, collects and spreads all fantasies and impressions suggested by the first European explorers. The reality from the balloon narrated by Verne, builds independently as if it were an autonomous parallel reality in time and space, far from the true flowing of life, and only possible thanks to a means, namely the air balloon – popular in Europe since almost a century. It is by distorting the world's nature that it modifies its usual perception.

The explorers’ fleeting experiences, which were generally organized by the newly born Geographic Societies, express - as Jules Verne’s first story from his Voyages extraordinaires does - the possibility of a reality that is alternative, distant,

* Par. 1, 2, 3 are written together by the authors.
exotic, packed ad hoc thanks to the instruments that only the European progress allows (the balloon, the first photographic material, etc.). When the imagery - auto produced by western men - is followed without any cognitive aspiration, it becomes, besides being a pretext to escape in time and space, a refuge by a mythic nature of which the origins precede history. Borderline cases of a cyclic reaffirmation of urban reality on the territory, Figuig (an oasis town on the border between Morocco and Algeria), and Djenné (an island town on the inland delta of the Niger river), represent the two geographical and thematic extremes useful for a first reflection on the identitary features of the towns on the edge of the Sahara desert. The survival of the towns risen on the edge of the desert is the result of a complex ecology; the sequence of always different states of balance – almost a mechanism of auto regulation – is the function of the relations established from time to time by the settlement in case of a tough geography (Guibbert, 1982). The slow change of these relations constitutes a continuous occasion of transformation for Djenné. The transformation facing the beginning of the twentieth century is an urban reality, which is the result of those historical events that progressively determine the nature of this reality. The urban structure reveals the traces left by all those who contribute to make the whole constantly commensurate with the conditions for the environment, from the magic dimension of the constructive knowledge guarded by the maçons – cyclically represented to the community through the rite of crepissage – to the mercantile reality imposed by the geographic conditions and witnessed by the variety of spaces modelled on the basis of the artisans and craftsmen’ activities. The result is a form that is manifestation of all those necessities essential for the community to continually re-adapt to urban life. Since the first settlements of Bozo fishers, Djenné has reaffirmed each time its own identitary character by, first, modifying its structure and organising itself in neighbourhoods, heirs to the originally scattered villages; second, welcoming Moroccan representatives (after 1591) and tukulor (Kingdom of Seku Amadu, 1834); finally, coming to its own configuration of spaces, which is typical and recognizable (Preston Blier, 2004). At this purpose, the events linked to the reconstruction of the Great Mosque - widely investigated by L.Prussin and J.L.Bourgeois - represents a crucial passage that is fundamental to interpret the overlapping that characterises the urban space in Djenné. The Great Mosque, for its
dimension, location, and exceptional relation established with the social fabric, can be certainly considered the expression of all relations woven by the community, evidence of all specificity and stratification of which the urban reality is the result (Prussin, 1968; Bourgeois, 1987).

Figuig rises as a self-sufficient centre with a defensive nature. It is isolated in the middle of the hammada (the African rocky desert), and is built around the only resource able to guarantee development and survival, namely water.

The oasis nature is artificial and is the result of alteration and continuous modification. This is a built nature that, constantly maintained, survives thanks to men and is fundamental for their survival in reciprocal relationships of dependence.

Identitary features characterising the community life are identified in the settlement shape that is organised in seven ksour – true fortress-districts laid on the territory according to water availability. The urban morphology is reflection of a complex social structure that is modelled on solidarity and based on a shared administration of goods. In defence of a system of relations and values focused on the fragile balance between inhabitants and resources, the ksar appears as a densely populated agglomerate, able to welcome all declinations of the oasienne urban life, and sized according to the direct relation between population and the production that is necessary to its maintenance.

The system preservation seems to be linked to the constant ability of a community to keep alive the correspondence between self-sufficiency and solidarity that distinguishes the specific identity of an oasis. When there is lack of one of the two aspects, the physical reality, which is built around a fragile balance that is recomposed at every season, loses its meaning.

Figuig and Djenné are both towns built of raw earth. Being impossible to find combustible resources in order to transform earth into a resistant and durable material - wood is used as a fuel to cook clay - the raw earth represents the only means able to ensure a proper stability to the settlement. In this sense, the building made of raw earth is a founding element to define the urban identity. The resulting morphology, which derives from a necessity, discusses the expressive ability of techniques. Thus, it is by doing, that is by knowing how to use the building technique, that the architectonic rule coexists with the urban one; a contextual definition of the urban space corresponds to the construction of the building.

In the Maghrebi oasis, the masons’ corporation passes on building single houses following precise architectonic codes, which are established by an egalitarian philosophy that does not allow any distinctive feature within the urban fabric. In Djenné, construction shows itself in the collective realization of the town, which is inspired by a principle of democratic urbanism finding its foundation in the esoteric, magic knowledge handed on from the Bari’s cooperative (Marchand, 2009).

Both in the Maghrebi oasis and the area surrounding the inland delta of the Niger river, the urban élite, guardian of know-how, holds and manages the logics of building and transforming a town and its urban facts. In this way, the transformation expressed through the rituality of maintenance is an act able to renew each time the shared principles of community life.

Indeed, earth, a plastic and workable material, needs a constant processing in order to resist extreme environmental conditions. This is the case of a care that, erasing the time marks superficially and bringing the form back to a supposed original state, represents the pretext by which the community acknowledges its own history. In view of the permanence of some building techniques, which is representative of an urban image deprived of its time, it does exist the continuous change of an architectonic form that is able to integrate the progressive settling of the community’s balance.
2. Colonial postcards – the style and the authentic

In 1893, the French colonel Louis Archinard, founding himself in front of Djenné, will use the following words to describe it: c’est la ville la plus riche et la plus commerçante que j’ai vue au Soudan; c’est celle qui, pour un Européen ressemble le plus à une ville, et elle diffère absolument des autres grands centres noirs qui nous sont déjà familièrement connus: Segou, Sansanding...!

The sight offered to the colonel’s eyes is, in fact, that of a town deeply marked by the political and economic vicissitudes that compromised its structure and role (Prussin, 1994; Bedaux et al., 2003). Archinard who is seduced by the western imagery, which is created on the basis of the explorers and lieutenants’ diaries and accounts, gives back the image of a private urban reality of its historical deepness. It seems that this is the first letter of a series of cartes postales that portrays a seemingly paradoxical static image. The most part of colonial urban politics will be founded on this simulacrum, and will focus on the preservation and valorisation of an image that is assumed as the mythical origin of the town form. The invention of an alternative memory to the real stratification of historical events is based on the return of a fictitious figure, a means of divulgation by an authentic nature (De Jong and Rowlands, 2007). On the basis of this mystification overlapping the authentic to the real, it has been created a memory that recognises the style as a code of a universally decipherable and transmissible communication. Therefore, the construction of the Great Mosque of Djenné becomes the paradigmatic event of aspiration to the Sudanese style, probably without any real historical precedent, consistently advertised in the various European Expositions straddling the century. As Labelle Prussin suggests, the event of reconstruction of the third mosque of Djenné, between 1906 and 1907, seems to be linked to modes, convention and procedure originating from Europe. The Great Mosque, which is built on the ruins of the first mosque as a pretext for a supposed continuity with the origins of the Islamic cult, faces an empty space of considerable dimensions in the middle of a populated centre (Prussin, 1968; Prussin, 1994; Bedaux et al., 2003). The urban fabric, which is originally organised in thirteen districts according to the different ethnic and social structures, results to be definitely subjected to and hierarchized by one great building able to resume the whole urban scene. Reflection of a synthetic interpretation that shuns the deepness of changes occurred over the centuries, the facades’ architecture addresses the town according to rules and principles proper of a certain late nineteenth-century façadisme. The vague symmetry of the oriental elevation, marked by the three western towers, and the monumentality of the northern facade, clearly opposing the plain southern entrance, seem to be remote transpositions of western features, which are alien to the local know-
how. It is by leaving out the organization of the inner space, divided into galleries by a series of ogival arches, that the architecture of the third mosque can be considered a *talking* monument. This is well-visible from the large opposite space (nearly a *champ de mars* around which most of the administrative and military centres of the French delegation will have their own headquarters), and stands aloof from the rigorism that characterised the work of Sekou Amadou, who inspired and commissioned the second mosque. Nevertheless, it is by the same rigour that a fracture is inflicted to the urban *habitat*. The space where the Great Mosque stands is definitely compromised by the peculiarity of a centre that is thought to serve the business, and is organised around small spaces that are managed by individual communities. Mopti town, French outpost on the Niger river, which distances seventy kilometres, will inherit the commercial role that Djenné will slowly lose in favour of an authentic, almost imaginary, stylistic hegemony - the irony of fate is that, through a kind of weird role reversal, a mosque in a perfect Sudanese style will be built in Mopti. This mosque will be every inch the 'younger sister' of the just finished Great Mosque in Djenné.

The *cité administrative*, which was realized in Figuig in order to provide a proper settlement to the French legions, seems to ignore the necessary characteristics that the oasis urban centre requires from both a morphological and a topological point of view. The high population density, the territorial layout in relation to the sources' mapping, and the egalitarian construction of the urban space surrender in the face of a centralising attempt over the territory that, contextually, corresponds to power concentration. Therefore, the decisive element becomes the infrastructure along which the *cité* articulates herself. By linking the Mediterranean regions to the Algerian border, the 17th *route nationale* goes across the *ksour* system, which loses its own defensive function and its own self-sufficiency, both prerequisites to guarantee its survival.

Those who arrive at Figuig are welcomed by an iconography that overlaps suggestion on imagination. This reveals an architectonic language that is, at the same time, eloquent and incomprehensible, made of arcades, *enfilades* of arches, and public spaces. The *cité* is situated high on the *djouf* - the scarp marking the oasis topography – from where she shows in a contemplative attitude all her non-involvement in that territory, from which the oasis always defended through a slow process of changing.

![Figure 4. Djenné, view of a street](image1)

![Figure 5. Djenné, the masons at work for the crepissage](image2)
Figure 6. Figuig, postcard with the ruins of an ancient ksar, 1910

Figure 7. Figuig, postcard with the cité administrative, 1910
3. Postcolonial perspectives – heritage and modernity

Such perishable and fragile realities, deprived of their role and nature, lose the necessary means for their own survival. The changes that were induced by the European vicissitudes loosened the identity ties binding the social structure to the physical reality. They, then, corroded that system of human relationships and territorial relations that had represented a necessary basic ecology for centuries. Today, a relentless impairment corresponds to the break-up of these relationships. Due to the lack of a cultural support and of the resulting technical tools, which are necessary to the development of a structure that is now precarious, the raw earth with its architectonical and urban rules loses the essential value that is decisive in the city construction. The traditional houses have been neglected and deprived of the necessary upkeep following up on the considerable migratory phenomenon that was produced by the break-up of internal balance.

Since 1988, the whole town of Djenné has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Also Figuig hopes to be part of this list while supported by several European organisations. It is necessary that the legacy inherited by the West at the beginning of the twentieth century, having been so hardly created thanks to travels accounts and iconographic testimonies, does not change and sticks as much as possible to the original form. Today, the constant protection of the inherited image becomes the means through which the West periodically renews the original discovery. Up against the necessity of protecting a traditional centre – a western legacy subject to preservation and valorisation – it is left a glimmer of that inclination to change and balance that has always been typical of a town risen on the edge of the desert. The neglect of a traditional centre represents a natural reaction to the distortion imposed by the European thought. This reaction materializes in new spaces and relations able to reinterpret the alternation of new original and different conditions.

In Figuig, new spaces and new relations with the territory set against the fabric that is dug by the ruins. Almost half the emigrated population, once back home, tries to express its new state through the re-significance of those marginal and peripheral areas among the ksour, a favoured territory for the new forms of living. The spaces opened among the ksour become, then, occasion for new forms of appropriation. They are articulated areas where the most recent extensions of the built-up area crowd close to the urban entrances, and spaces where the concentration of activities and the density of participation to the urban life become more intense. These sites are often aggregated around crossroads and take form of true urban carrefours, which are anti-polar compared with the centrality of the consolidated urban centre. It is in the distance between the relation with the territory that is defined by characters of necessity – characters that have always produced the settlement morphology - and the relations focused on the representation of a new individual state that the modernity of a settlement comes off voicing different values.

The construction of a communitarian space is overlapped by an auto representative space, which is founded on a public aesthetic criterion through which anyone is able to understand the individuality of the expressed values. The plasticity and the workability of raw earth are set against the seeming, perhaps, illusory stability that is ensured by a reinforced concrete building. The rough surface of the banco is set against the regularity of the baked clay tiles. The facing of the djennenké facades, despite the fact of representing a considerable threat to the static stability of buildings, is a public display of an aspiration to modernity that becomes a symbol when the peculiar elements of traditional buildings, once crystallised and deprived of their original function, persist. Pillars (sarafar) and stakes (toron), by losing any reason for
their use, remain as a symbolic testimony of affiliation to community, which is now mediated by the personal experience. The Djenné road, though unaltered in its form, becomes the space for new icons that prove the renewal of needs and requirements, which reflect the change of domestic life and that of social aggregation spaces. The natural endogenous turning of the urban image into representative figures of new communication codes (often imported from European, North-African and Sub-Saharan metropolitan realities), is overlapped by the resistance that is connected to the defence of a conventional and transmissible image of the town built of raw earth. The town reifies itself in one big monument that is entirely exposed to the global market logic, and is not interested in the territorial relations that have ensured throughout the time the settlement functioning and nature. It is, perhaps, not interested in that inclination to survival that has always distinguished the towns on the edge of the Sahara desert.

![Figure 8. Djenné, souvenirs and carpets](image1)

![Figure 9. Djenné, the plaque UNESCO in front of the Great Mosque](image2)

References


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1 “It is the richest and the most business town that I have ever seen in Sudan ; it is the town that, according to Europeans, looks most like a city, and really distinguishes from other big black centres that are already well-known: Segou, Sansanding...”. See Prussin, 1994.