Historical study of the architecture of the Somono neighborhood of Ségou

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Introduction

This study will allow us to distinguish the relationship between the architecture of the Somono neighborhood and the Niger river. In Ségou-Somono-so, we see three types of architecture: Sudanese architecture for the houses before colonization, the first houses built by the *bari* of Djenné where we see the timber on the exterior of the house; neo-Sudanese architecture which challenges the new buildings of the colonial era, and most houses in the neighborhood. Therefore we cannot say that in Ségou, the architecture of the Somono neighborhood is essentially Sudanese or neo-Sudanese. Our study deals with the assimilation of these two types of architecture, as well as the architecture that is related to the Niger river, meaning the straw houses in *daga* (camp) of Dougoukouna, pictures of Bozo rooms, the form in canoe of these houses ...

The architecture of the Somono neighborhood that refers to Sudanese architecture, is one of the oldest of Mali. The Somono are a nomadic people who settled in time and in space. Their architecture responds to their culture and their concerns. Coming from Djenné at this time, the first masons or *bari* practiced the Sudanese style of architecture. Then, the Somono neighborhood formed a single block: no large streets, only narrow passageways where it was easy for a foreigner to get lost.

With the arrival of Archinard in 1893, the French decided to transform this ancient architecture by using lighter materials: baked mud, tin or concrete ceilings, but always retaining the form and style - hence the name of néo-Sudanese architecture.

To begin this study, here is an overview of the region of Ségou, which is located along the Niger river. Finding directions in the city is easy thanks to the Niger and the main road, the roundabouts, the buildings of the government neighborhood, the great mosque, the two water towers... The population density of new neighborhoods has reached medium values, however, the population density of older neighborhoods is very high. There are few empty spaces; the passageways are narrow and winding. This old system of passageways was changed and replaced by wider streets. Houses are irregular and usually mud. The main market is located on the banks of the Niger river, which facilitates transportation and commerce on the water.

We divided this text into six main parts: Sudanese architecture, neo-Sudanese architecture, Bozo architecture, the intersection of houses, the *tiè-so*, and the importance of the river on architecture.

*Sudanese architecture*

The term "Sudanese architecture" was created around the beginning of the 20th century to designate an architectural phenomenon specific to a region of West Africa that formerly bore the name of Sudan. This region extended over the present territory of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso and northern Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. Sudanese architecture is characterized by a monumental and urban building style that forms a striking contrast with the repetitive and monotonous forms of villager habitats in the same region. It has developed since the 13th century, in the great African empires of Mali and Songhai.
Sudanese cities are often the center of political and religious power, whose respective symbols are the king’s palace and the mosque. They were built entirely of banco (mud: mixture of water and clay, sometimes with a few other ingredients such as millet straw) and maintained by masons who often formed castes (the Bari of Djenné) and who used slaves... Almost every city in the Sudanese style is located along the Niger river. The oldest were not really fortified. It was in the 19th century, a period of instability, that walls were built around major cities, in particular Ségou.

Photo: Mosque in Sékoro, Sudanese architectural style.

The residences and palaces are all gone, but the mosques, the most representative buildings of Sudanese architecture, have been preserved. Like any architecture, that of the Sudanese mosques has assimilated a number of external influences, first that of Arab Mediterranean architecture and later European architecture. Still, the result is an absolutely unique and truly African product in its techniques, forms and materials...

The mud found here, contains a lot of sand and little dirt: the resistance to walls crashing is not very strong. This is why we hardly see mud houses with multiple levels in Ségou and Sudanese architecture is characterized in Ségou by large buttresses. The facades have deep niches and are topped with a typical battlement...

Thanks to its mud construction, Sudanese architecture is an organic and plastic architecture that gives its inhabitants the freedom of expressive sculpting, reflecting the culture, religion or wealth of the inhabitants. The same material made Sudanese architecture a flexible and dynamic architecture. After establishing himself in the city of Ségou, Archinard began to subdivide the city for various reasons: tax collection, taking a census of the city that was spreading out more and more and, above all, to have control over the population.

Also, we are inclined to think that the transformation of Sudanese architecture dates back to the 16th century, under the Moroccan occupation to the wealthy habitats in commercial cities such as Timbuktu and Djenné.

Ultimately, the salient features of Sudanese architecture came from Djenné, then were transformed since the arrival of the French by different administrators or architects who, in Bamako and Ségou, built in hard materials, but in this style which, hitherto, existed only in mud.

**Neo-Sudanese Architecture**

Neo-Sudanese architecture is the name of an architectural phenomenon seen in the administrative neighborhood of Ségou. There are a few dozen buildings, constructed for the colonial administration during the 1930s. The French colonizers, inspired by the splendor of cities and the composition of local traditional Sudanese architecture and functional plans of colonial architecture, used local materials and colonial techniques.

Photo: Neo-Sudanese architecture style in Ségou-Somono
In Ségou, all the buildings in neo-Sudanese architecture are characterized primarily by a base of about one meter high. This element is as much architectural as functional: the base gives the impression of importance, of grandeur: there is often this element in historical European buildings. But this base is also a protection against vermin and water. For this reason many houses and mosques of Sudanese architecture were built on a base. In addition, this base is often the vestige of a former building that fell in ruins and on which a new building has been built.

The less dominant elements, but also "Sudanese", are the forms of openings and the bas-reliefs.

Another element is the system of pilasters in the facades. These pilasters are perhaps the most important relationship of the neo-Sudanese style with the Sudanese style. In Sudanese architecture, the raw mud pilasters are especially important as constructive elements serving to reinforce walls and less as decorative elements.

Accentuation of the vertical in neo-Sudanese architecture

The materials (pressed mud, cooked bricks) are more resistant and because of this, the major pilasters seen in types C and D, have primarily a decorative function. They emphasize the size, the height of buildings. They connect these buildings to Sudanese buildings and form the rhythmic facades of which they regulate the composition and enhance the verticality. The tower of stairs found in buildings of type C, resemble the mihrâb of the mosque of Djenné. The stairs in the tower (in steel, concrete and wood) are truly European.

In Ségou, the French had constructed the first buildings for the military and the administration entirely in mud while retaining the Sudanese style. Yet, there also exist foreign architectural forms that have been adapted to Sudanese architecture: for example, the arches and original arches seen in Djenné. This is why it is not surprising that in 1929, the architect François Cornilleau built the "Pink market" in Bamako by employing Sudanese forms, but changing materials: no more raw mud, but more durable

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materials such as pressed mud, baked bricks and lime plaster (like in M’Pèba).

Training center for master masons in M’Pèba, in baked brick.  
Large oven for making baked brick

The fixing of Sudanese forms in durable materials by colonizers stimulated awareness of Africans about their own architectural tradition. Today, one still recognizes African forms in the colonial buildings, while in the city of Ségou, almost all the old buildings of Sudanese style have fallen into ruin. The neo-Sudanese buildings are almost the only historical buildings in the city of Ségou. The city modernizes by forgetting the forms, traditions and historical materials.

Neo-Sudanese architecture is thus a historical heritage of Mali and it may therefore be a good example for African construction methods in the future. From the climatic point of view, large verandas, large windows, large room height and thick walls encourage an effective protection against solar radiation, good ventilation and a large thermal inertia. The result is a favorable interior climate: it is very cool during the period of intense heat.

Similarities between a Sudanese and a neo-Sudanese building. Drawing by Oumou Sidibé.
Many people wonder why there are so many small holes and columns in Sudanese and neo-Sudanese architecture? The answer is simple: this arrangement promotes air circulation.

The mystery of the river
Everything that is found in the river, is not given to just anyone to see. The river may have inspired this architecture with columns, because people feel perhaps trapped in a house, between four walls with no wind or the cool air that is carried by river water. Thus holes are necessary to allow good air circulation, but also for kings to keep an eye on the outside from their palace.

Bozo Architecture
The shape of houses
The above photo is typical of Bozo architecture. The riverside people are linked to the river and want this to be obvious in everything they do. They use the shape of the old canoe to build their houses, that of the first canoes used by the Bozo well before colonization. These buildings often have round walls like the sides of the canoe.

House in the shape of a Somono-so canoe.

According to Amadou Tienta, a retired Bozo tailor of 74 years, "the riverside people always sit at the edge of the water because the river is their central nerve. The riverside people are like fish and the river. If you take them away from the river, they die. We work in water and our work materials are on the riverside. In the house, we can control everything."

The architecture along the river is still pretty. It is very different from other places. Over time, many buildings have not kept their original form, but people do everything to protect them.
On the outside, these houses appear old and to not have the strength to make it for another year, but the whole life of the Bozo blooms inside.

The intersection of houses
The first occupants thought the world was almost finished: dignè tö mandian. They therefore shared their parcels with others. Everyone who was a little clever, has a large house. They gave these houses to slaves, to brothers or to simple strangers that were visiting them. Nowadays, either these people received other plots in other neighborhoods, or they simply returned home in abandoning these places that became haunted. According to a belief recorded by another researcher from the Center for the Anthropology of Water (FLASH, University of Bamako), Adama Diakité, when a place is abandoned devils settle there, because they love tranquility. In the Somono neighborhood, houses are often very narrow (more than twenty people live in a house of 20m x 10), especially towards the river, but there are also uninhabited houses.

Patriarchy
To better understand how the occupation of houses in the Somono neighborhood is organized, we sought to identify the role of the chief, his importance and his place in the Somono sphere.

The function of patriarch went to the oldest. Authority was always given from the head of the family who decided everything. He supported all the expenses of the family and each family member worked for him.

This is why, in the Somono neighborhood, the houses are so close: the first occupants gave plots to brothers, or strangers, or even to slaves who occupied these places. Thus, often, the true owners did not have a place in the neighborhood.

The Bozos and the Somono always follow the parental decision. All the secrets of the Bozo and Somono are transmitted to children by their mother. Men are generally very short on words.

Conclusion
The salient features of Sudanese architecture were borrowed from Djenné, then transformed with the arrival of the French by different administrators or architects who, in Bamako and Ségou, built buildings of this style in hard materials, a style which, until then, had been only built in mud. Our study aimed to illustrate the links between these different types of architecture related to the Niger River and the water people, the Somono and the Bozo.