

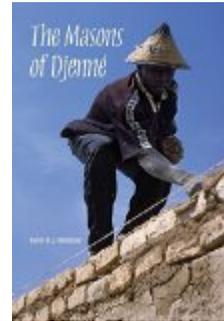
Trevor Hugh James Marchand. *The Masons of Djenné.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. xvi + 352 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-31368-3; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22072-1.

Susan Vogel. *The Future of Mud: A Tale of Houses and Lives in Djenne.* Video. Brooklyn: Icarus Films, 2007. Presented by the Musée National du Mali.

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Building Mud Houses in Djenné (Mali): An Anthropologist as Apprentice

Djenné, a town on the Bani River in central Mali, is famous for its mud architecture, and is a UNESCO World Heritage site. It is a favorite town for tourists, because of its mosque, the beautiful traditional mud buildings, and the Monday market. Trevor Marchand, an architect as well as an anthropologist, worked for two winters (2001 and 2002) as an apprentice with established masons, went back every year after that, and co-produced a documentary film in 2005.

Marchand cooperated with Dutch projects, the first year (comprising chapters 1-4 of his book) constructing a new traditional Tukolor-style house for a Dutchman, Ton van der Lee, under mason Bayeré Kouroumansé. Van der Lee, who used to be a documentary filmmaker, is an author as well: he wrote a book about the building of his house, *The Sand Castle, A Home in West Africa* (2005). During the second year (chapters 5-10) Marchand was an apprentice in a Dutch government project of reconstructing the Moroccan-style house belonging to a French scholar, Brunet-Jailly, and the house of a marabout, both under mason al-Hajji Kouroumansé, “the Michelangelo of Djenné.” His objective was to understand the training and transmission of knowledge and expertise to younger generations in the trade, through what anthropologists call participant observation. An outline of the book can be found in pages 23-27.

Marchand describes the principles of building and the social structure of the trade. The building process is minutely described: brick-making, the basics (the walls), the more complicated aspects (the arched openings and decorative elements), the proportions (measured by body measurements such as finger width, hand span, arm, stride). The masons are organized in a guild-like association called *barey ton* (*barey* means officially validated mason). Meetings are convened to organize the division of labor, to mediate conflicts between masons and clients, to settle disputes between masons, and to organize the annual replastering of Djenné’s mosque. The masons’ traditional education remains entirely practice-based, and their transmission of knowledge relies on an apprenticeship system which they control and reproduce. Technologies and secrets are transferred and transformed in the confluence of generations. The majority of the masons are Bozo, an ethnic group who are traditionally fishermen. They work together with apprentices (often Koranic students, and young men from other ethnic groups) and laborers. Interaction often takes place in the form of bantering, a common form of expression, often in the form of insults. The drawings and photos are welcome additions to the text.

Being a mason requires more than mere technical competence. The masons of Djenné demonstrate a keen

ability to innovatively configure building plans and details, communicate their ideas and knowledge with words and actions, negotiate their positions and status, and perform secret knowledge. Or, as Marchand puts it, morals, muscles and mind are integrated, and his argument is that the traditions most worthy of support and conservation are part of the apprenticeship system itself.

Of course, the masons function in a changing world, and act accordingly. Some of them opt for working in other Malian cities or abroad, and work with modern materials such as cement. Marchand mentions “the interface between local building traditions and foreign intervention” (p. 25). An example is mason Bayeré Kouroumansé, who worked closely with several European researchers, had an integral role in the Mali-Dutch restoration projects, built houses for Europeans, traveled to Europe on several occasions, and participated in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington DC in 2003. Another is the annual replastering of the mosque, which is now specially staged during a festival in February, in hopes of attracting tourists. This raises a question: what would have happened to Djenné if there had not been outside intervention?

In 2005 Marchand returned to co-produce a “constructed” documentary film on Djenné’s masons, with Susan Vogel (director) and Samuel Sidibé (director of the National Museum in Bamako). Mason Konmoussa Tenepo is the central figure in the film. He was chosen because he had excellent camera presence and an effervescent personality. Moreover, he had not been part of Marchand’s field research, a fact which precluded conflict between the masons with whom he had already established relations.

The film reveals the interdependence between masons, buildings, and lives lived in them. It examines the tenuous survival of the inherited learning of masons, and the hard work that sustain this style of architecture. It shows daily life in Djenné’s mud buildings: courtyards, a

blacksmiths’ workshop, the construction site, and Friday prayers at the great mosque.

The main characters are Konmoussa and those who surround him: his apprentice Amadou, a Koranic student from Timbuktu; his father, who taught him the trade; his wife; and his teenage son. His sister is a business woman who lives in Bamako, an example of the modern Malian woman: enterprising and outspoken. Some actors are real persons (Konmoussa, his father, his wife, Amadou), and some are acted (“invented”), like his “sister” who in real life runs a cybercafé in Djenné, and his “son.” Interviews in Bamana are subtitled, and Mme Diallo, an official of the Cultural Heritage Center, narrates the English voice-over. The music is by Issa Bagayogo and the editing was done by Henry Kafka. An invented story line is that of Konmoussa’s childless sister taking his son with her to Bamako. I imagine it was put in the film to show the dilemma between keeping a son in Djenné to be a mason, or sending him off to Bamako for a formal education. The discussion between Konmoussa and his sister, about the future of his son, takes place in public: she is in the street below, he on top of a building. This does feel a bit staged.

The resurfacing of the great mosque, at the end of the film, is quite exciting to watch: one sees Konmoussa and Amadou clinging dangerously to slippery ladders and working feverishly, accompanied by drumming and rattles. The last shot, of the two of them leaving, holding hands, is quite touching. For me, this could have been the last shot of the film. In my opinion, the filmmakers succumbed to the temptation to say too much, and there are too many people and subjects in the film. It might have been a stronger film, if less pedagogically useful, had the Koranic scholar, the blacksmiths, and the epilogue (“Two Years Later”) been left out and replaced by longer shots showing more of the actual work of the masons, and the interaction between them. Still, to have a film accompany a book is a wonderful thing, and I can only hope that it will be done more often in the future!

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