Buchbesprechung


Gruner approaches her subject as straightforwardly as its title suggests, and in order to make sure we grasp her purpose, sets it in italics in the foreword: to make an overall survey of the present status of the traditional earthen mosque in the western and central Sudan (Sudan here is, of course, to be understood in the sense of the sub-Saharan belt). Her field work, which was carried out in long stints from 1976 to 1986 and supported by the Volkswagen-Stiftung through the Frobenius-Institut in Frankfurt, covered the zone between 9° E and 8° W longitude, and was centred on the inland delta of the Niger in Mali, though it extended too to Niger, the Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso. The first 78 pages are devoted to a thorough thematic analysis of her findings, followed by a catalogue of 321 pages arranged in terms of the architectural regions she has identified, with general drawings of the individual mosques. This is augmented by 37 pages of drawings made during the German Inner-African Research Expedition (D.I.A.F.E.) of 1907-9, the originals of which are now in the Frobenius Institute, for which she provides comparative notes. Finally there are the 116 excellent photographs by Dr. W. Gruner and Dott. E. Gruner (evidently a family effort), arranged thematically to correspond with the text.

Half of the Analysis is concerned with architectonic elements of the region in general, and the remainder is divided between the definition of the four regions, and a description of the technology used. As elsewhere in the book, the material is so well ordered that it is hard to find fault with it. The analyses are accompanied by sixteen diagrams of the main features and their distribution, of which No. II, showing the organisation of the prayer-hall bays, and No. XIII, comparing qibla façades, are fundamental to the author’s approach. She also gives tables listing features varying from the number of transverse bays in all the mosques surveyed (1), to the size of sun-dried bricks (3), while one of them conveniently summarises the main characteristics of the four regions (2). The Catalogue gives succinct information on each mosque under the headings of location, position, year of construction, condition, dimensions, description, and notes. The drawings are equally succinct: it is probably the wisest course not to attempt great detail in essentially irregular buildings, where photography can supply further information. Those from the D.I.A.F.E. are more of sketches, and valuable in that many of the buildings no longer exist, and only two remain almost unchanged. Gruner’s notes on these are essentially comparisons with the catalogued examples. A note on present condition or disappearance is needed here, and an assignation to one of her regions would have been helpful, if only for contrast with present forms. The Catalogue as a whole is prefaced by a gazetteer of the main political, geological, geographical, economic and ethnic features, with an historical note on Islamisation. A short, locally-focussed gazetteer is provided for each region or sub-region, following its map. The technical data are important in their determination of the form, in
limiting spans to 1.8 m and bays to 16 sq.m. They are also interesting: one is surprised to learn that the walls are generally only one brick thick (40 cm), and that the plaster for the rendering is fermented for three months or more. Only the Hausa dome construction is not entirely clear. It would have been useful to architects to have had some soil analyses for the materials used, especially when Gruner notes (p. 61) that good clay leads to good architecture. The section concludes with building costs for recent examples, and the construction time, with a table of time against area built (6). The whole forms an admirable basis for further comparative work.

Early in the book the author identifies certain features as peculiar to almost all these mosques: the lack of a usable minaret, the absence of ablutions fountains, the adhān platforms, and the modest size of the minbar; besides this there are local peculiarities, such as the dominance of towers placed over the mihrāb in two of the regions, and the enlargement of the mihrāb to a room of up to 8 sq. m in the Hausa area, with a separate entrance for the imām. Other notable features, such as angle towers and buttresses with their pinnacles, with a tendency to a battered profile, arise from the use of the adobe technique, and are common to other areas, such as western Central Asia, where mud was used extensively. The external expression of the mihrāb is fairly consistent, reminding one of Lodi India. What is striking here, apart from the remarkable beauty of the finer examples, is that this is very much a living and active tradition: as Gruner points out, comparison with the D.I.A.F.E. material shows how radically the building of Djenné (1905-7) has influenced subsequent mosques. There is now, however, a danger that foreign finance and new materials may alter it for the worse.

It should be noted, however, that the author’s emphasis throughout is on documentation, and very little reference is made to history. One can understand why this should be so when the material is so perishable, and the oldest buildings (e.g. Gao) appear to incorporate work from ca. 1500 at the earliest – of course continuously renewed. Precise records are evidently rare, and much of the work is so recent it was erected during the field-work period. Nevertheless an analysis should have taken earlier precedents and practice more into account. Gruner, for instance, while stressing the absence of minarets for the call to prayer, does not note that the original adhān was made by Bilāl from the roof, and that the tower was a relatively late development. Similarly in liturgical terms she dismisses the West African minbar as unsuitable for a raised pulpit, though the Prophet’s original was in fact of two steps only, with a third for a seat – in fact very much like these. She notes the absence of fountains or facilities for ablutions other than the simplest water-pitcher, but does not refer to the alternative allowed of “washing” with sand. One has the impression that these mosques reflect not only, as she observes, a simpler level of practice, but something nearer the original than can be found elsewhere in the Muslim world, and an explanation is called for. With such a transient material any inferences on the earlier appearance of these mosques must be tentative. Gruner is positive in stating that the buildings of her fourth region, the Upper Niger, with their conical roofs, are based on indigenous savannah housing forms, but is much less assertive where the other three are concerned. She raises the question, for instance (p. 50), whether Ségou plays an intermediate rôle between the Mid-Niger and Volta-Niger regions, or else represents a synthesis, but drops it with the remark that it “remains hypothetical”. The domed forms of the second, Central Sudan region are particularly interesting, as the questions arise as to whether this type of reinforced ribbed vaulting derives from, or could have been a prototype for the sophisticated ribbed masonry vaults of the north, for example that of the mihrāb chamber at Cordoba (ca. 965); as Islam only reached this region in the fifteenth century, the latter would only be possible if
the form were already in use elsewhere, but the combination of vault and mihrāb room suggests a connection.

In general, too, the author is reticent in aesthetic judgements, though perceptive where she allows herself to venture one, as where she observes that the visual effect of projecting rods is in some cases more important than any rôle they may play in maintenance. The assertion (p.44) that the low profile of mosques on the Niger Bend reflects the Lebensgefühl of nomads used to low tents strikes me as dubious: it assumes a limited mentality for which there is no proof. Very little is said of possibly symbolic aspects of the buildings: why should ostrich eggs, for example, have been used as finials, even if they were pre-Islamic life symbols? There seems to be a subject for a monograph here. In the liturgy, it should be explained precisely how the extra-mural adhān platforms, or the mihrāb chambers are used. It seems that most of these deficiencies are the result of Gruner’s deliberate limitation of her subject matter, but one hopes she will fill them in on some subsequent occasion.

There are two other notable omissions of a technical nature. There is almost no discussion of the climatic effects of this architecture, except for a brief allusion to the benefits of a thick roof construction. Ventilation openings in the roof are mentioned, but their periodic use is not explained. The thermal effect of the courtyard is neglected: it probably explains why only partial use is made of matting for shade. Secondly, nothing is said of lighting levels within the mosques.

The book is clearly, if somewhat impersonally organised, and the correspondences between analysis, catalogue, and photographs are on the whole so easy to follow that they require no explanation. In view of this it may seem ungrateful to carp, but in case a second edition or a companion volume is considered, I would suggest the following improvements. The key numbers for mosques, as used for the cross references, are a little difficult to use, as they are embedded in the text of the catalogue: they should have been in bold type, and preferably at the top of the page for instant recognition. The references to photographs are given in the margin beside the analyses, but the key numbers appear in brackets in the text, usually together with the name of the mosque, and this, by disrupting the text, is disturbing to the reader. As the margins here are unusually wide, these references would be better placed next to the text, perhaps in a distinctive type. The maps should have been referred to by page number: as it is one has to refer back to the list of contents in order to consult the one cited. Further, it would have helped had they overlapped a little, where contingent, so that one could relocate oneself. The photographs, oddly enough, are not cross-referred to in the catalogue, as they plainly should be. The pictures themselves are skillfully and often captivatingly arranged, in a continuous array without titles: one has to turn back to the list at the the beginning of the section in order to identify them. Though this is justifiable in terms of the visual format, it again requires rather distracting physical effort from the reader. This could be ameliorated were the appropriate pictures to be listed with their titles in the catalogue section for each mosque, and the main list placed after the pictures at the end of the book. In at least one instance (p.131) the key numbers cited in the analysis are wrong: Kong I-II should be 168-9, not 155-6.

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