

# Earthen Architecture of Africa: Of Buildings and Belief

Lecture Notes — Smithsonian Associates — Friday, November 19, 2021

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## **Lecture Summary**

Across the African continent, men and women have built monumental and aesthetically innovative structures from mud and earthen material. In large kingdoms and small-scale societies, these buildings were used not just as dwellings or gathering spaces, but as ways for the people to express fundamental social, cultural, and religious beliefs. This lecture draws on the architectural expression of states and societies in Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Togo and explores how people used the buildings to express themselves. More specifically, the lecture tracks how the entrance of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century restructured the social and architectural fabric of these western African societies and cultures.

It is, of course, impossible survey the entirety of the African continent's earthen architectural forms in a one hour event. As such we will focus our attention on one building: a mosque in the northern Ghanaian town of Larabanga. The mosque was built in a unique architectural style that we now call Sudano-Sahelian. This style is the result of a centuries-long synthesis of Islamic and non-/pre-Islamic beliefs and architectural styles. This lecture seeks to explicate unique historical forces that allowed structures like Larabanga to come into being.

## **Fundamentals of Pre-/Non-Islamic Architecture in Northwestern Africa (Thesis)**

- Before the entrance of Islam into Africa, architecture is believed to have been primarily defined by the near-imperceptibility between the natural world and the human modification of it. Buildings, in other words, were meant to blend in with the surrounding environment, not to stand out from it.
- Moreover, architectural structures are anthropomorphized in ways that link the living and dead together.
- Architecturally these structures take the form of circular and other organic shapes and tend to have layers of deep symbolism embedded in individual architectural and decorative elements.
- Although there are no extant examples of pre-Islamic architecture, historians have studied the qualities of non-Islamic architecture in Africa and found perceived parallels in the structures created by:
  - Dogon communities, Mali
  - Batamaliba communities, Togo/Ghana
  - Gurunsi communities, Burkina Faso
  - Mousgoum communities, Cameroon

## **Fundamentals of Islamic Architecture in Northwestern Africa (Antithesis)**

- Core philosophies of Islam in Africa developed during the Umayyad (661-750 CE) and later Abbasid (750-1258) Caliphates. It was also during this era, known as the Middle Period (945-1500), when Islam's architectural identity began to take shape.
- "Classic" Islamic mosque architecture, such as that developed Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates in northern Africa attempts, in many ways, to replicate the first mosque, that used by the Prophet Muhammad and has three primary features

- *Sahn* (Courtyard): This is the area where congregants gather to pray
- *Mihrab* (Mecca-facing niche): This is an element that indicates the direction of Mecca, towards which all congregants pray.
- *Minaret* (Tower): This is a tower from which the *muezzin* issues the call to prayer.
- As a result of these elements, Islamic architecture —particularly Islamic ecclesiastical architecture—is fundamentally an objective, geometric venture, one that orients buildings (and with them, bodies) along cardinal lines. By forcing buildings (and the people who use them) to orient themselves toward Mecca via the *mihrab*.
- Even non-ecclesiastical structures created by Muslim men and women tended to replicate geometric, rectangular space.
- Key examples of “classic” Islamic architecture in Africa include:
  - Great Mosque at Kairouan , Tunisia (c. 670 CE)
  - Ribat el Monastir, Tunisia (c. 796 CE)

### **Sudano-Sahelian Architecture (Synthesis)**

- Sudano-Sahelian emerges in the between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. This is the time when Islam begins to push further and further south, into and beyond the Sahara Desert. As a uniquely flexible religion, Islam was and is inherently adaptive, a religion whose encounters with differing rulers and belief systems generated new cultural vocabularies and architectural repertoires in response to various pressures, influences, and inspirations.
- Sudano-Sahelian style merges the classic Islamic architectural style developed in northern Africa (and the beliefs that undergird it) with the non-Islamic architectural styles (and the beliefs that undergird them) that pre-existed the religion in the northwestern regions of the continent.
- Key examples of Sudano-Sahelian architecture include:
  - Mosque at Kawara, Côte d’Ivoire (date unknown)
  - Tomb of Askia Mohammad, Mali (c. 1495)
  - Great Mosque at Djenné, Mali (commissioned between 1200 and 1330)
  - Mosque at Larabanga, Ghana (c. 1421)

### **References and Materials for Further Investigation:**

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