

The millet route _ Understanding a cultural landscape

Reactivation strategies for the cultural landscape of Dogon country, mali.

(Alf. order) Author

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ABSTRACT:

The present study proposes to demonstrate the following hypothesis: there are unique tools, such as Cultural routes and Local Development Planning, which can be used to reactivate a region and that allow both local and touristic activities to coexist without endangering local identity and heritage.

The study of these societies, their connection with their own heritage, and their adaptation to the landscape can provide an essential perspective that may help redefine the way we interact with our surroundings.

The main goal of this investigation is to come closer to a better understanding of Landscape, Tangible and Intangible Heritage, essential principals and values of Moptis Region in Dogon Country. Fundamentally, to achieve a criteria matrix that supports the articulation of any proposal to the place.

We proposed as an instrument of territorial management and organisation, a cultural route with the name Millet Route, and intendeds minimal interference to achieve maximum benefit.

KEY WORDS:

Cultural landscape, heritage, local development, cultural routes, method

INTRODUCTION:**TOPIC AND OBJECT OF STUDY:**

Cultural landscapes and research techniques and teaching method.

TEAM DIRECTOR PhD. Arch. Vidal, Miquel. UPC, ETSAB, URBANISM AND REGIONAL PLANNING DEPARTMENT DUOT, Investigation Team from the Urbanism PhD Programme

01.COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK: UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL LANDSCAPES FROM A DISTANCE

Under the Urbanism PhD programme framework, taking place in the Urbanism and Regional Planning Department (DUOT) of UPC Polytechnic University of Catalonia, we are developing an investigation and cooperation project regarding Cultural Landscapes in Dogon Country Mopti Region, Mali.

The location of the follow presented project was suggested by Professor. Arch. Miquel Vidal within his lessons framework on: "Territorial Identity and extreme developments: Cultural Landscapes. Analysis and empirical Interpretation"

Professor Vidal incorporated this work into a wider Investigation project taking course in several places of the Dogons Territory in which he has been working for the last few years, at the same time he paid several visits to the country with his students focusing in the relationship between Culture and Landscape. Reason why without his guidance the present piece of work would be impossible, and it was essential in bringing us closer to the Dogons Culture.

The investigation team has had, since the beginning, as a fundamental requirement to formulate a rapprochement capable of confronting the limitations proper of the lack of information on the place, cartography and specific bibliography.

From this emerged the necessity of putting together a specific methodology that even though it was not exhaustive, was able to significantly detect the tangible and intangible values of the cultural heritage of a threatened people, such as the Dogons.

The present work starts by developing a methodology to approach rural societies from an outsider's perspective. The study of these societies, their connection with their own heritage, and their adaptation to the landscape can provide an original and essential perspective that may help redefine the way we interact with our surroundings. An important feature of this particular method is that it can be extrapolated to other similar cases in Africa or any other place.

The methodological process is divided in two parts: "from a distance" and "in loquo". In the first phase, a cartography is created from "minimal" territorial information about the place and a theoretical ground is compiled from bibliography and different sources of data. In the second phase, both cartography and theoretical ground are verified, amplified and concluded.

The main goal of this investigation is to come closer to a better understanding of Landscape, Tangible and Intangible Heritage, essential principals and values of Moptis Region in Dogon country. Fundamentally, to achieve a criteria matrix that supports the articulation of any proposal or project to the place.

The chosen medium was the one of a cultural route that would be able to strengthen this delicate system without interfering with the fundamental values of this community.

The key concepts we worked with were the following ones:

TRANSFORMING SYSTEM

The weakening that is taking place in Malis rural society, due to the harsh subsistence conditions and migratory movements towards the cities, endanger the continuity of certain communities as well as their heritage. Trying to characterize this situation grounded in conventional parameters (isolation, exclusivity of agricultural activity, etc...) takes us towards a wrong interpretation. Considering this, to be able to understand and define the situation faced by Dogon Country we shall start from a wider perspective that would allow us to establish some characteristics that would help us when the time arrives to interpret this phenomenon:

The existence of major distances between rural and urban worlds causing strong synergies between both. The major singularity of both elements and natural factors that influence Landscape variety. Religious beliefs influence, specially Animism that comparing to Islam, "connects" the people with their territory. The natural resources shortage and the ecosystems fragility

LANDSCAPE

The European Landscape Convention establishes as the definition for Landscape "An area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors." (Council of Europe 2000)

Such definition manifests its cultural character, under the process of interpretation, determined by education and culture inherent to the individual comprehensiveness, in addition to all the connections that individuals generate in their social- psychological-cultural economical and political sphere, with the environment _ environment where such connections are created.

Cultural Landscape constitutes a complex reality, integrated by both natural and cultural components, tangible and intangible, its combination accomplishes its identifying character.

Directly related with cultural landscapes, routes are "ways of gathering elements to establish bigger compounds of heritage elements or cultural benefits that share common characteristics"², setting up "a new way of interacting heritage elements, that have as main goal to favor development through the economic activity of heritage tourism".

HERITAGE ROUTE

A heritage route is the one resort that tends to integrate and promote solutions to basic needs such as economical development, through Cultural tourism. Cultural preservation, a resort that seeks for the conservation of both wealth and heritage resources, the environmental preservation and nevertheless, local communities education, as well as their visitors.

It is important to highlight that this routes organize themselves around a theme that characterizes them and grants them with their name, moreover they should award who travel them a fair amount of knowledge and activities related with its emblematic places. It must represent a comprehensive picture of the place through complementary places, services, attractiveness and communicational language.

Definitely, cultural routes allow a regional growing, not only from a touristic perspective, but also from the heritage conservation perspective. And not forgetting society consciousness on their significance.

One of the core values lies on the fact that it allows an understanding of heritage elements in their context, putting together an advance in heritage elements comprehension and treatment, as well as cultural wealth.

CULTURAL TOURISM

Being a relatively new activity to Dogon Country, Tourism, if not properly managed with a local development plan, can present negative consequences.

It would be a mistake to deny the immense potential Tourism has in the Economy. We propose the usage of Tourism has a revitalizing tool, whereas not directed towards the creation of new leisure activities with the implications they represent, but instead directed towards the starting of Local Development Plans based in Cultural Landscape management and regeneration of their economic and social activities, that constitute the rural

and natural identity and stop the loss of cultural tangible and intangible heritage of Dogon Country.

Several international organizations and institutions recognize that Cultural Tourism has sufficient potential as to be considered one of the factors to integrate a wide strategy that overcomes the mere economical interest.

Following, there are a few of the aspects that justify it:

Social interest: The range of this tourism typology overcomes the simple visit to the historical-artistic heritage of the chosen destiny. Implies a certain space-time experience that means to deepen in the mystical and cultural aspects of the matter. Through this, the tourist acquires a comprehension that potentially induce to the acquisition of a wider and more universal perspective. In the encounter of the visitor with this tangible and intangible heritage, lies the attractiveness of cultural tourism to the Dogon Country.

_ The implication of a local agent in this process is fundamental, and helps the progress of the initiative, by being an income and raising their self-esteem towards their heritage.

Didactic Interest: Travelling to other cultural contexts is considered an enrichment experience that presents an opportunity to approach other people. The acquaintance is key and previous to a following appreciation and conservation, and corrects the idea of a Single History.

_ **Economical Interest:** Cultural tourism is a complementary instrument to economical and social development to the places where its embraced and furthermore an activity of strategic interest for its capacity for generating occupation.

_ **Inducing Heritage Rehabilitation:** In the vast majority of cases the flux of visitors towards determined elements that shape the Cultural Routes mean a rethinking and "accommodation" of the architectural and landscape heritage.

An important matter is the introduction of new usage of buildings that in another circumstance would be destined to disappear. The cultural touristic resource can revitalize and regenerate "underused" heritage.

Local Development and Involvement

An important variable to the route formulation, the cultural tourism, can be the motor to local development, what directly means a rediscovering of Landscape. In such way, local development supposes an integral perspective of development, meaning that in this case includes the social, political, environmental, cultural and productive asset of Landscape.

This way, people involvement and participation is vital in the achievement of the proposed goals in any local development plan. From this point of view, it is necessary to establish the procedures that will allow to favor an involvement process of the local agents, both in the design as well as in the management and evaluation of the development programs.

The work needed in dynamising landscape both socially and economically starts by identifying the widest range of groups of interest embracing all the aspects of the social, cultural and economic life of the concerned area, determining its expectations and motivations and hopefully achieving their involvement in the design and execution of the Development Program.

02. FROM HERE TO THERE _ THE ANALYSIS METODOLOGY: DEFINING NEW STRATEGIES

This study was an attempt to develop a seminal project on the way we relate and interact with our surroundings. In a globalization perspective our interests and concerns nowadays are moved towards "unknown" landscapes that come to our knowledge through the great variety of available media. One of today "dilemmas" is to balance the importance of the information gathered through the internet and new technologies; and the perception in the site.

In Dogon country where there is a significant absence of cartography, this "dilemma" gains a particular meaning

considering that perception and experience provide different knowledge, and we can not ignore the fundamental part that intangible represents when territory comprehension is at stake.

Embracing both this premise and the group Director orientation we started to explore all the available information about The Pringari area cultural Landscape in Dogon Country.

The present study begins with an approach to landscape from a distance that should precede a visit to the site to verify, compare and extend our analysis. This was done to support the creation of a proposal, meant to be previous to a project which goal is a heritage protection system. In our case this would be done by proposing cultural routes. Everything with the comprehension that any proposal/project with these characteristics_ can only come to life based on an understanding of the place in loquo _ genius locci.

Having our main paradigms settled we proceeded to divide the recollected information / analysis into two inherent landscape dynamics: tangible and intangible. Our comprehension of this matter understood the tangible as the landscape physical characteristics which allows a more quantitative approach; and the Intangible as its cultural and more qualitative part.

A true understanding of both landscape specificities, tangible and intangible, is the only way to create a cultural route that is an accurate interpretation of its core values.

Thus, in order to establish itinerary hypothesis we began by choosing the settlements that would form our cultural route. These were chosen because they are representative and also connect two of the main religions of the area: Animism and Islamism.

The route settlements are: Songo, Ngoro, Niongono, Koko, Bolimba, Pah and Nando.¹

Once our focus point was agreed upon, we started building our body of cartography, which we hoped would result useful to our approach to the place and to build hypothesis, always under the principle of _ minimum intervention and maximum share.

Even though all action implies a minimum of intervention, we always rule ourselves by the principle that one may always intervene if the goal is to improve. This with the omnipresent preoccupation of gathering the maximum information on the place, together with a real understanding of it. We believe this is only possible by an articulation between analysis and experience.

Based on this articulation and considering the present study reality of lack of territory cartography together with the extraordinary richness of intangible elements, we believe this methodology, would be applicable to any other landscape, with similar characteristics both in Africa or any other place in the world.²

03. UNDERSTANDING AND CHARACTERIZATION OF THE TERRITORY _ A SYSTEMIC APPROACH.

Dogon country is a region in the southeast of Mali near the border with Burkina Faso. Main settlements in Dogon Country are organized along Bandiagara Escarpment -150 km long with elevation differences reaching 300m, and the Pringari region where the Millet Route is implanted.

Following we have the analyzed systems:

- The Environmental System

· *Topography*: The study zone is an area of about 28 km located east of the Escarpment and west of Niger River. Characterized by a dry land with rock formations rising in the Escarpment and crossing the territory from North to South defining the type and location of the settlements.³

¹ Figure 2, annex, p.3: Composition of orthophoto images / marks of settlements Source: authors - production

² Figure 3, Annex, p.4: Diagrams – information/compilation and interpretation system Source: diagrams made by authors.

³ Figure 4, Annex p.5: Topography, Hydrology Source: plan made by authors.

· *Hydrological system*: The hydrological system of the region is seasonal with dry and a rainy seasons that extremely affects both landscape and life conditions. Watercourses appear during the rainy season generating vegetation and flooding rivers. Obviously, this establishes a factor that determines the location of human settlements.⁴⁵

· *Vegetation System*: Vegetation is entirely related to the rainy season. It appears to be conditioned by watercourses, torrents and the presence of underground water, situated in the lower areas of the territory. During the dry season, the vegetation mass and variety of species considerably decreases. Highest areas with lack of stagnant water are almost permanently deprived of any vegetation.⁶

• **The Anthropic System**: The Anthropic system refers to all the interactions and various consequences resulting from the interaction between human elements and territory. We could basically discern nodes and connections, among them, the most important are:

· *Settlements*: Especially regarding architecture, as from a territorial structure evaluation or from an architectural level, settlements are determined by the environmental system and intangible considerations. They are established throughout the territory materializing an habitable structure illustrated by its adaptation to the harsh and rugged conditions of the place.

· *Millet fields (agriculture)*: Characterizing a special feature for each settlement, Millet fields represent an activity directly related to the hydrological, topographical and heritage system present in the Dogons Villages.

· *Connections (Paths)*: Representing clearly the local flow structure. Are the result of the multiple relations between the settlements, the hydrological and the production system, as well as other natural and cultural resources of the territory, a large number and types of paths are very basic as an infrastructure but they interconnect a vast territory in all directions and scales of approach.

• **The Heritage System**

· *Sacred landscapes*: Related to animistic beliefs, heritage landscapes are inseparable from the Culture of the Dogon people, in terms of tangible or intangible relationships.

In a society based on the belief, expressed by the "spirit of life" in any element of the surrounding space - environmental and material, landscapes are comparable to a life support. They are an essential key for the comprehension and appreciation of codes and living standards in the Dogon country.

· *Architecture*: Apparently, from the architectural point of view, the systems of grouping, localization, situation and connection between fragments and parts of the sub-urban structures have a significant value as from an historical interpretation as well as from the analysis of settlement typology in extremely harsh environmental conditions. Some symbolic architectural structures such as the Togunas and mosques particularly stand out in the landscape.⁷

04. REVITALIZATION STRATEGY THE MILLET ROUTE

Towards the construction of a cultural-heritage route

The main goal of this investigation is to generate a promoting strategy for the development of Dogons rural societies through a Cultural Route. The definition of a script or conducting thread, representative of their culture, was essential to achieve the goals set in terms of a "minimum intervention with maximum results".

Firstly, when beginning approaches to the territory appeared three points that facilitated the research method, and also were mainly related with the understanding of: first: the Dogon Country in Prignari, was a part of a wider structure called Cultural Landscape of Dogon Country, second: their heritage values could be relative,

⁴ Figure 5. Annex p.6: Hydrology and flooding areas Source: plan made by authors.

⁵ Figure 6. Annex p.7: Hydrology and "dry areas" Source: plan made by authors.

⁶ Figure 7. Annex p.8: Vegetation (dry season) Source: plan made by authors.

⁷ Figure 8. Annex p.9: Millet fields in Dogon village. Source: Photo by Miquel Vidal.

compared with other sites in Dogon Country, and third: that the subsistence of the chosen area, with an economy based on the cultivation of millet, could be an important aspect that could be highlighted through an independent and multi-functional cultural route.

Also, in parallel, we established a series of determinants that would define the election of a script. Among them, there are the space-time variables, given the extensive and apparently not so varied territory, and also the seasonal differences in rainy and dry periods that determine use.

Likewise, and with the research team beliefs that Dogon Country society values transcend the material culture into a more symbolic one, we adopted an attitude that should try to promote a personal contact with rural society of Dogon Country and encourage the “experiencing/living” more than intellectual consciousness of their culture.

Finally, we had to face the challenge that any touristic activity without previous planning, structuring and properly managed, can endanger the Dogon Country cultural heritage, and consequentially their identity.

THE RESULT _THE MILLET ROUTE / ANIMISM REFLECTION

According to the above mentioned and considering the essence of the Dogon culture, we found a tangible element present in all its cultural representations which allowed us to give an accurate explanation of the profound connotation of their culture: The Millet Field.⁸

The Dogons are a society where grain is equivalent to wealth or ability to withstand hunger, which is translated in the importance of granaries in the configuration of the settlements image. Also the importance of agriculture in Dogon culture can be shown with the role it has as a transition area between culture and nature.

The reason for establishing the millet as a central axis, is because it represents a true symbol strongly influenced by the proximity of the Nyama, and is used in ritual celebrations as sacrifice, as well as in the mask festivals where it is given to Dama, or used to make millet beer for the festivity in Sigi that represent one of the most important rituals in Dogon Country celebrated every sixty years in Youga, the northern area of Sangha.

It should also be explained that the kingdom of Nyama clearly establishes the border between the village and the exterior. This explains that in settlements with the chance of spatial expansion, their perimeters remain immovable in time, as if in fact there was a protection wall where the agricultural field represents an area of transition between culture and nature.

Thus, the Millet Route represents a material route with symbolic value; where with a trip through the fine and scattered plantations, irrigation systems, storage systems (granaries), and Know-How, among others, the Millet Culture is represented and transmitted. At the same time, relevant aspects of Dogon Culture are explained and knowledge sharing happens (transmitter-recipient _ orally), issues such as the one of sexuality in relevance to life, the importance of water, death and funerary rites and other mythological rituals are made known.

When selecting our theme it was necessary to face the intended goals . Among them, we understand that regenerating the self-sufficient economy of Dogon society would be a safe bet when our intentions were to secure continuity and lasting of natural and cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible spheres .

Consequently, Millet Route main goals are:

- Understanding landscape through the principles and core values of Dogon Society located between Songo and Nando.
- Create a territory of new economic, politic and socio-cultural opportunities for communities living in Dogon Country, by the usage of existing assets and heritage recourses.
- Preserve and value the cultural and natural heritage, tangible and intangible, of Dogon Country.
- To reinforce and enhance the identity of local communities living in the area and proposed for intervention.

⁸ Figure 10. Annex p.9: Millets grain. Source: <http://www.gastronomiaycia.com/2008/10/27/mijo/>

- Educate the local community with values and fundamental principles towards tourists.

_ THE MILLET ROUTE _THE STRUCTURE

The Route that includes the territory between the villages of Songo and Nando would be structured from two substratum; a territorial layer that determines the perceiving of the territory with road vehicles or by foot _ trekking, and an “experience” layer that depends on an “invitation” from Dogon society, to take part in a meeting point for visitors and their guide. □ In the case of the “territorial layer”, the route represents the gate of the village of Songo, because of the proximity to the main road of Mopti, where in addition would be set an interpretation centre for visitors, directly managed by Dogon people. Also, the link between different settlements would be outlined on a system of roads depending on the used transportation. The relationship between paths and settlements was an important matter of thought among the investigation team, valuing the connections hierarchy.

In short, it was decided that for vehicles, a peripheral path would be used, in order to avoid obstructing the “urban” systems of local communities, but close enough to allow an appreciation and understanding of their way of life.

This lineal route allows two types of approaches: the territorial viewpoints and settlements "visits".

In the first case, territorial viewpoints allow a territorial understanding in addition to individuals relationship with it. In these spots the most specific features of Dogons look towards landscape and the intangible are "available". Thus, the sacred places laden with animistic beliefs, invisible for occidentals, but crucial for Dogons and their relationship with environment. We recognized 2 apexes in this system that correspond to two places: Mountain viewpoint and Lake viewpoint.⁹

In the case of settlements, vehicles should always remain at a prudent distance from villages, in places that represent no impact on the perceiving of the place. Here we proposed millet fields as meeting points to visitors and hosts, as an interface, where would be possible to organize an explanation about cultivation methods and their relationship with Dogon beliefs.

These meeting points to local community and visitors are aimed for tourists to experiment the Dogon "way of life", and at the same time for Dogon people to get more familiarized with the visitors. The selected sites for this activity should be areas proposed by Dogons with dynamic and binding qualities.

From this approach, would raise the “route of experience”, where knowledge deepening of the Dogon Society solely depends on the visitor empathy, interest, and aspiration to go beyond in their immersion in this foreign culture. Therefore, we consider three levels of approach: Parking Places, “meeting points” and the “invitation/initiation” place.

This layer, as well as the “territorial route”, is a linear system with entrance and exit in Songo that runs through the network of territorial viewpoints and settlements. These would be differentiated into the ones considered accessible or suitable for visitors, and the places where the Dogons considering its symbolical values are willing to permit access.

The schematic graphic shows the different layers (peripheral and linear), the gates (symbols) in Songo, nodes or territorial viewpoints in the Mountain and Lake (rectangles) and meeting points around the visitable settlements (frames).¹⁰¹¹

⁹ Figure 12. Annex p.10 Songo Village – schematic plan Source: image made by authors.

¹⁰ Figure 13. Annex p.10 Route hypothesis Source: authors – production.

¹¹ Figure 14. Annex p.11 Route structure with settlements Source: plan made by authors.

05. FINAL THOUGHTS _ CHALLENGES“FROM A DISTANCE” _ GENERATING NEW _ MECANISMS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE AREA

The defining aspect of this assignment: working “from a distance”, was probably the biggest challenge throughout the development of the entire proposal.

Not having any knowledge about the Dogon people and their territory, as well as the social, economic, political, legal and administrative realities, produced the need to generate a series of new mechanisms that would help us understand this landscape with the same rigor as if it would have been done with absolute prior acquaintance of it.

Therefore, we were able to innovate in the investigation and production of new ideas and mechanisms to understand the territory using the resources provided to us by internet and programs like Google Earth and ArchGIS among others. Furthermore with the definition of strategies to comprehend landscape without prior information of almost any sort, being this result of inaccessibility or inexistence, we came closer to the formulation of a work/proposal hypothesis from a distance, that can later be verified “in loquo”.

_ VISUAL SOURCES AS HOLDERS OF CONTENTS

One of the recurring problems of the research was the limited amount of information as well as its unsatisfying content about Dogon Territory.

Considering this problematic, the information acquired through the informatics mediums such as aerial photos, gained a primary role in the landscape identification and characterisation. In such a way that from the optimization of its analysis rose a series of project hypothesis that determined prosperous and full general guidelines, waiting their verification "in loquo".

_ FROM THE MATERIAL TO THE IMMATERIAL CULTURE: THE TANGIBLE AS AN APPROACH TO UNDERSTAND THE CULTURAL ESSENCE

Considering the fact that the Occident mostly bases cultural considerations on material features, in Africa we are facing a challenge since the material aspect finds new meaning through the immaterial, and it is this dynamic that holds the essential part of the heritage.

Facing such Panorama and willing to promote visits from other parts of the world, it seemed critical to define a material element as a conducting thread or script of the cultural route, an element that would explain the deep sense of the Dogon cultural spirit.

Therefore, the millet, present in all Dogon cultural manifestations, would be the material interface carrying the goal to explain not only intangible but also the various spatial approaches that visitors would need, in order to experiment what could be the Dogon Cultural Spirit.

_ CULTURAL COMPREHENSION: PROMOTING THE MEANING _ SUBSTANCE.

Understanding that most of Dogon culture heritage is deeply related to the intangible, Millet Route aims to preserve and enhance the value of the significance and the essence of the cultural beliefs through what we named the "Experience Route"

The route intends to reach an experience in itself through the perceiving of the physical context, it aims to let the visitor surpass his cultural assumptions and to experiment as a local actor the "Dogon life", not through the understanding of the material, but through experimenting the living condition, customs, traditions and daily life.

_ DEFINING PARADIGMS _ ESTABLISHING CHALLENGES

The definition of prior premises such as “minimum interference and maximum sharing”, which in other words means minimal intervention to achieve maximum benefit, entailed an adaptation of the meanings that identified the challenges we faced in the process.

This premise entailed that, in a still “virgin” and “unexplored” cultural and territorial context, from an Occidental perspective, all action would produce an immediate effect, as well as a series of positive and negative

externalities, difficult to measures in advance.

Comprehending the prior thoughts and considering the inevitable interference on the cultural Dogon territory, if we want to approach their reality, any proposal must reach a status and goal of protection and enhancement of their Intangible culture.

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