Preliminary Report on Excavations at Hamdallahi, Inland Niger Delta of Mali (February/March and October/November 1989)

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Reference

This paper describes excavations undertaken in February/March and October/November 1989 on two compounds in the abandoned city of Hamdallah (Gallay et al. in press). These works were part of a project devoted to the study of traditional ceramics from the Inland Niger Delta, led by the “Swiss Ethnoarchaeological Mission in West Africa” (M.E.S.A.O.), combining on this occasion the Department of Anthropology of the University of Geneva with the Institute of Human Sciences and the National Museum of Banako.

Hamdallah had never before been the object of archaeological research. Chief town of the Fulani Empire of Massina, this city symbolizes the Islamic revival, an outstanding event in the evolution of the nineteenth-century Sahelian and Sudanese societies. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Sekou Hamadou, a simple Fulani shepherd, after receiving a revelation through a prophetic dream, undertook to regroup and sedentarise his ethnic group, until then eminently nomadic. After much fighting, he set up Massina’s Fulani Empire, “the Dina,” which followed in all points the rules that governed life in Medina’s Muslim community at the time of The Prophet. In 1819-20 Sekou Hamadou founded Hamdallah. From his capital, he organised the Empire and conquered the whole of Massina, from Djenné to Timbuctoo. The story of Hamdallah reached its end on May 16, 1862, with its seizure by the “Toucouleur” conqueror El Hadj Omar, who held it for two more years before being obliged to abandon it forever.

In conducting this excavation among the ruins of Hamdallah, the aim was to collect nineteenth-century Fulani ceramics suitable for use as a reference for the analysis of present-day traditional ceramics. Beyond this limited aim, it seemed useful to show that excavations on this key site of African history were likely to furnish knowledge of great value, insofar as archaeological facts could be confronted with those of history and tradition, as well as with the results of our ethnoarchaeological investigations.

Hamdallah is located 21 km southeast of Mopti, at 14°19’N and 4°06’ W. The site occurs on the western border of the Bandiagara plateau and is limited on its northern and western side by the marshes of the Inland Niger Delta depression.

The city is entirely fortified (Fig. 1, 1). The city walls are constructed on sun-dried bricks, delimiting a pentagonal surface, which can be estimated at 2 km². 44 ha 47 a. In the heart of the city, on a slight rise, the grand Mosque and Sekou Mamadou’s palace are built side by side. These buildings are also in sun-dried bricks, except for the enclosing walls of the palace, which are stone. At present, one can still distinguish the plan of the main streets as well as the habitation’s walls. The latter can still be discerned thanks to small, linear heaps of laterite gravel. These heaps probably represent a residual deposit after the sun-dried bricks have been “melted” by seasonal rains.

For the February/March excavation we chose a compound situated in the northern ward of the town (Fig. 1, 2). Totally
surrounded by a sun-dried brick outer wall, except for an entrance facing east, the compound has a roughly pentagonal shape, with an area of 275 m² and a large courtyard in its center. Two buildings are situated inside, backed onto the outer wall.

The southern building, because of its large dimensions (39.5 m²), its rooms separated into chamber and antechamber, the particular attention paid to its finish (cementlike mud floor, probably wall coating), its water jar supports and small hearths, can be considered to be the main residence. This abode had been carefully emptied of all remains, except for a set of intact, carefully arranged vessels abandoned upside down near the entrance.

The northern building’s function is not easy to determine. However, considering its size (16.9 m², smaller than the southern building), the lack of floor covering and the absence of hearths (excluding a kitchen fireplace), it is probably an outhouse or a subsidiary living room.

In the courtyard, facing the entrance, there is apparently a kitchen area, as indicated by a thick ash deposit. On the basis of numerous observations of inhabited compounds in this area, it would seem that the space between the southern building and the western outer wall was used for latrines and washing.

Concerning architectural techniques, the foundations are shallow and walls are made out of rectangular sun-dried bricks, the regular dimensions of which (30 x 20 x 9 cm) could be explained by the utilisation of a mould. They are placed side by side, two by two, their long side following the wall direction, staggered layer by layer, and cemented with clay. The introduction of this type of brick in the Hamdallahi area can be confirmed as being as early as the first half of the nineteenth century, before the arrival of the Europeans. In the eastern part of the southern building, an inner wall has been constructed in banco. Lining the outerbrick wall, this banco wall probably had an insulating function.

Another interesting datum is the use of a cement to cover the floor. It is composed of clay to which was added a sifted load. This mixture was then poured into the space left by overdigging of the room. After being cemented, the floor surface was compacted and carefully smoothed.

The lack of real foundation trenches, the thinness of the walls (40 cm) and the arrangement of the bricks (parallel to the wall axis) makes it unlikely there was any construction above the ground floor, despite the presence of two central pillars with stone seatings probably used to support a framework of beams. Observations of present-day two-story buildings at Djenne confirm these inferences.

On the other hand, as on all existing buildings, rainwater guttering indicates the presence of a terraced roof and, more generally, a street. Precautions were also taken to combat erosion by the rain: the walls were battered at the base, and a stone positioned to break the fall of the water from the gutter.

The objective of the second excavation in October/November was to dig a compound located in the palace quarter, at some fifty meters from the palace itself. For certain reasons, only the western half could be excavated, and a continuation of the work is scheduled to be carried out in 1991.

The investigations concerned a large quadrilateral compound delimited by an outer wall, with alternating sections of bricks and banco. Access from the north to the large inner courtyard is through a quadrangular vestibule with a staggered entrance. Two buildings were erected in this courtyard, backed on to the outer wall: a main room on the south and an outhouse on the west side. There is a well in the northeastern corner of the compound. The different walls were built with either one or two thicknesses of bricks, or with banco, in this last case sometimes laid on a stone foundation. As in the first compound, a smoothed cement covered the chamber’s floor, while the ground of the vestibule had been cut into the lateritic substratum.

In order to equalize and assure the levelling of the courtyard floor, earth had been brought in. Abundant archaeological material was collected in the courtyard and on the chamber floor, but the pottery was
often broken and dispersed. A skeleton was discovered lying on the courtyard floor, against the main habitation wall. Its stratigraphic location and anatomical position (in dorsal extended position oriented to the southeast) allow us to determine that it had not been buried, since all these observations contrast with Muslim burial rites. However the state of abandonment, apparently rather violent, differs totally from the first compound, perhaps because of the proximity of the palace and the long siege that it suffered.

Concerning the archaeological material collected during these two campaigns, four distinct groups of ceramic can be distinguished. Thanks to the observations made during the ethnoarchaeological mission, it is now possible to furnish some interpretations.

The first group (Fig. 1, 3) has the following characteristics: all vessels exhibit a hemispheric form; the main functions were apparently storing water, cooking cereals, and steaming couscous. Some characteristics shed light on the mode of fabrication. The temper’s fine and regular granulometry shows a careful preliminary sifting but its unequal diffusion in the ceramic itself reveals inadequate homogenization by kneading the clay. The joints between the necks and the bodies are a proof of a two-step fabrication. The shiny appearance of some vessels reveals a third phase of finishing with burnishing after drying and dampening again. The decoration consists of red-pointed motifs, which are sometimes completed by impressed flanges. Marks in relief indicate that the potters used distinctive signs to identify their own products.

Ethnoarchaeological comparisons allow this first group to be identified with the present-day Fulani traditional production. It seems that there has been very little evolution, except that now strainers and impressed flange decorations are rarely found.

The second group (Fig. 1, 4) of ceramics is distinguished by a diversity of forms and functions: water jars, oil lamps, rainwater guttering, ablution vessels. From a technical point of view, the sifting was less careful, since the temper shows a rather rough and irregular granulometry. However, its regular distribution reveals a careful kneading and its scarcity, a parsimonious use. The thickness of the potsherds and the compactness of the clay could be the result of a coil assembly, as verified on one specimen. With respect to decoration, the second group of vessels is different from the first: it shows imprints, either with a comb, a stamp, or with twisted or knotted string roulette. These decorations are generally associated with incised lines, while external surfaces are mostly uniformly coated with red paint.

Compared to present-day ceramics, this last group is recognizable as Somono, or Bambara production. Indeed, vessel forms and decorations are similar to those still in use today and only the lamps seem to be no longer fabricated.

The third group is poorly represented. Only some sherds of large jars, with vertical bodies and alternately left- and right-plaited fibre roulette surface decorations could be found. Such vessels are at present characteristic of the Bambara production around San, and they can be used either to store or to cook foodstuffs.

Some sherds exhibit shapes that are unknown in contemporary pottery. They could perhaps be more ancient forms and are provisionally assigned to a fourth group.

In concluding this report it must be said that most of the ceramic material abandoned by the inhabitants of the two compounds belongs to the first group, which allow us to identify the compounds as Fulani. Analysis of the present-day situation suggests that the Somono or Bambara vessels were used only to compensate for the lack of comparable items in the Fulani repertory. For example, the Fulani technology does not allow the fabrication of such complex forms as oil lamps or rainwater gutterings. Apparently these lacunae could already be felt in Hamdallahia.

The compounds’ ethnic attribution is confirmed by the fact that during ethnoarchaeological inquiries, the organisation of many Fulani compounds was observed. One of their distinctive
characteristics is the small number of permanent buildings they contain.

We hope in the future to extend our research to other wards of the town to discern its principal characteristics and to expand our knowledge of the Fulani Empire of Massina.

References

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NIGERIA

Contemporary Material Culture in Niger State: An Ethnoarchaeological Study

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The Niger State Archaeological Research Project, conceived in 1988, was designed as an ethnoarchaeological investigation of the whole of Niger State, and is intended to serve as the beginning of a study of the culture history of the various traditional rural societies in Niger State (Aiyedun 1989a). The project, sponsored by Niger State government in collaboration with the state’s Council for Arts and Culture, could not commence until 1989 because of logistical problems. Members of the team include the present writer as the principal investigator, with the assistance of one cultural officer in each Local Government Area, as well as a photographer, Mr. Peter Inmin, from the Centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies.

Apart from an initial period of four weeks, during which library and archival materials were collected, the research team spent over eight weeks on the project in 1989 (May 17–July 27), during which oral interviews were conducted in about fifty towns and villages in eight of the state’s ten Local Government Areas. Information obtained from the eight Local Government Areas, which include Lavum, Gbako, Mariga, Magama, Rafi, Shirro, Agaie and Suleja, covers topics such as subsistence adaptation and economy, i.e., farming, stock raising, hunting and fishing; the manufacture, use and discard of objects made from materials such as wood (carvings), clay (pottery), stone (beads and other domestic utensils made of stone), glass (beads), and metal (smelting and smithing); settlement architecture; active nutritional and medicinal ingredients obtained from plant resources; and the people’s funerary practices. Detailed information on each area of study, including its location, size, population, climate, vegetation, fauna, geology, and geomorphology is provided elsewhere (Aiyedun 1989c).

This ethnoarchaeological research offered an opportunity for studying pottery and smelting/smiting among diverse rural societies such as the Nupe, Gwari, Koro, Kambari, Dukkawa, Hausa and Ura. Data concerning pottery includes various aspects of its preparation and use in rural societies. For example, questions were asked concerning the procurement of raw material, pot manufacture, decoration and firing; pot types, names and functions; life expectancy and discard; relationships between family size and sizes of the pots, especially those used for cooking; and the linguistic affinities of the people from whom pots were imported. Special pots, used for smelting local ore, and the large pots, used for brewing beer, cooking shea butter, ground nut, and palm oil and for burial purposes in a number of places, were studied. An effort was also made to collect replicas of tools used for pot decoration and to determine local names of such implements.