

# MIMAR GALLERY

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## Magnificent Mud: Mosques in Mali

*In the history of Islam in Africa south of the Sahara, Islamic forms have been incorporated by indigenous Sahelian cultures into a striking architecture — a syntheses of Muslim and African concepts. In the process these cultures have added a new dimension to their own existence.*

*Islam came into West Africa in about 9th century.*

*The earliest known West African mosques date from this period and are tentatively associated with ancient Ghana and Awdaghost. Ancient Ghana fell in the 11th century and it was not until the rise of the black Muslim Kingdom of Mali, in the 13th century, that Islam spread to the savanna region and the Djenné-Timbuktu area became the centre of Islamic influence.*

*New York based photographer Carolle Pelos and architectural historian Jean-Louis Bourgeois work as a team. The photographs shown here are the fruits of their treks across West Africa.*

*Having recently mounted an exhibition in New York entitled "Spectacular Vernacular: Traditional Desert Architecture from the West Africa and Southeast Asia", they are collaborating on a book on the same theme.*

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*Here MIMAR presents a selection of images of five mosques in Mali. There are of course other great mosques in Mali, such as the ones in Timbuktu, Mopti and Gao, but those pictured here are, to our mind, representative of the architecture of the Sahel. Editors*

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*Picture above: Mosque near Niono, Mali*

**T**he Sahel is a vast region with little rain, sparse vegetation and a rich, distinctive architecture. The form of the Sahelian mosque is unique: horizontal wooden sticks stud massive towers; mud-plastered walls and pillars are topped by tapering pinnacles, the highest of these often capped in turn, by ostrich eggs.

The contrast between the Mali Sahelian

mosque and the classic Middle Eastern mosque is striking. In the classic mosque the earth is brilliantly denied; dazzling colours and exquisite daring masonry produce airy jewels. Since in Mali stone is rare and timber is too scarce to fuel brick or tile kilns, construction is of sun-baked brick finished with mud-plaster. The mosque is closer to the earth: its colour and blunt massiveness echo hers.

Because the rainy season tends to be short, the buildings need minimal, though

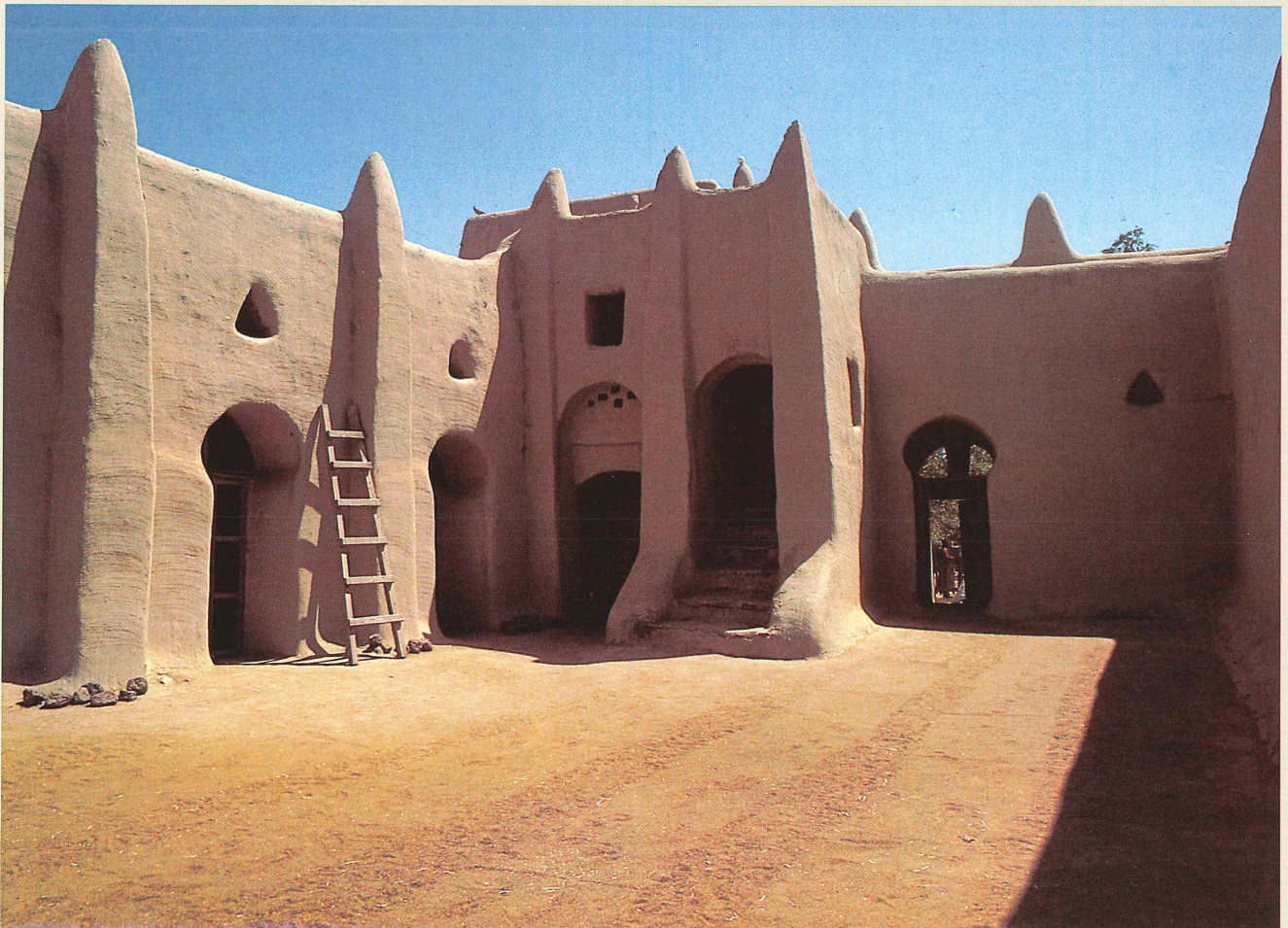
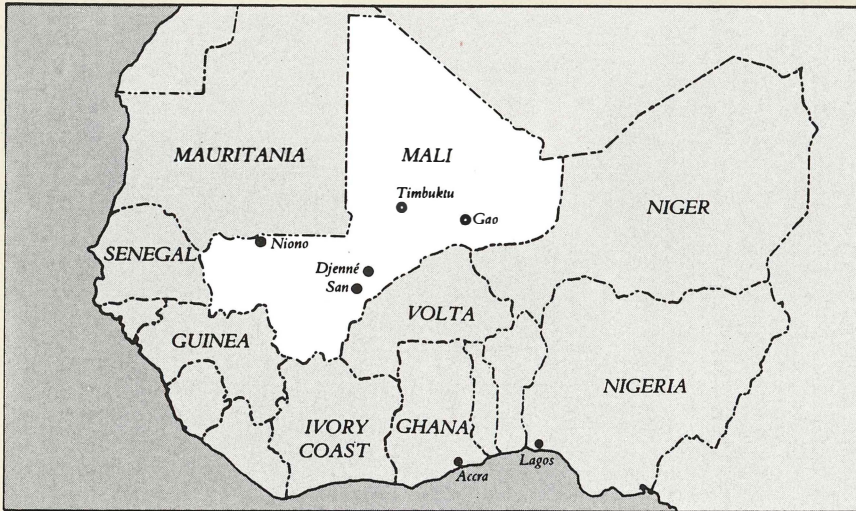
annual repair. With proper continual maintenance, some of the mud structures in the region have stood for over a hundred years. The carefully spaced sticks, which bristle from the walls, form permanent ladders to provide access to exterior surfaces for replastering. The ostrich eggs also have a practical use — they protect points of the building particularly vulnerable to the rain. The sticks and eggs play important visual roles — behind and below them every surface and contour is moulded. Though they often reach toward the hard purities of symmetry and geometry, the forms never attain them. They remain gentle and from the hand!

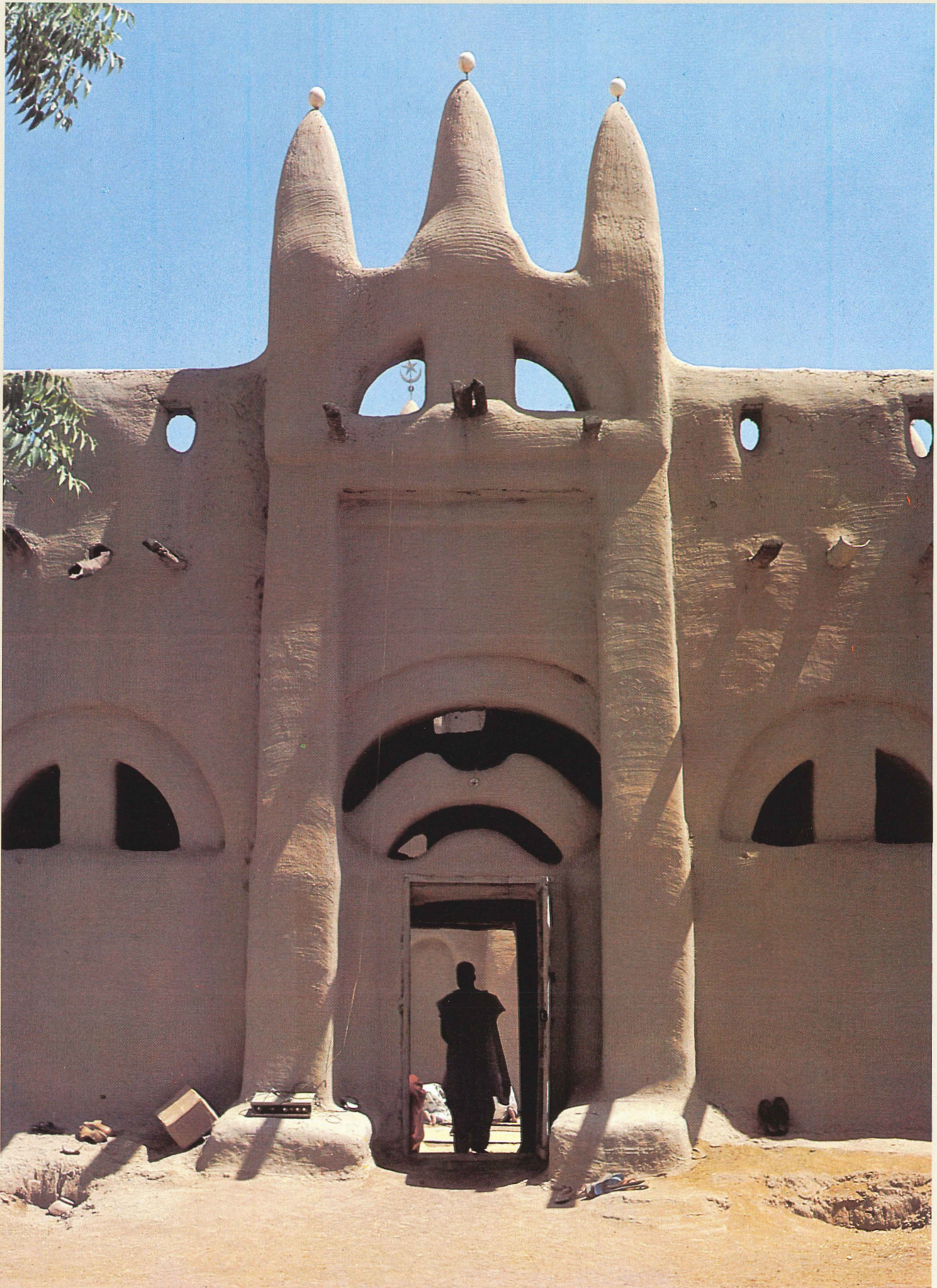
Perched on these relaxed masses the sticks and their shadows are abrupt and angular and the eggs dramatic in their smooth perfection. Conspicuously unsculpted, they accent by contrast the sensuousness of the magnificent buildings they help sustain.

#### San Mosque

*Below: The interior courtyard of the mosque at San (date unknown), with entrances to the prayer hall to the left.*

*Right: Mosque at San, showing the main entrance on the west facade. The entrance replicates the shape and form of a classic pagan African Dogon mask.*





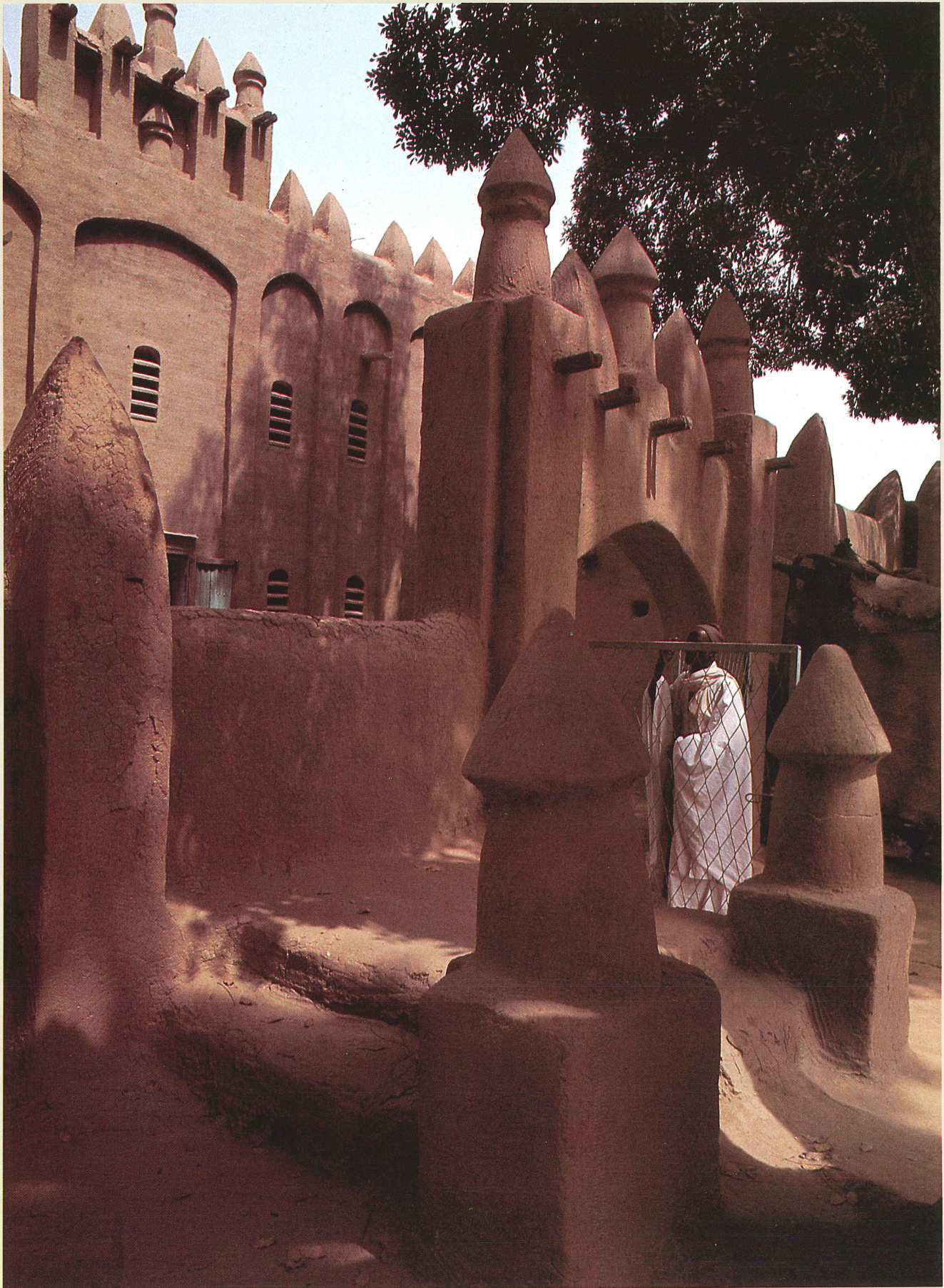


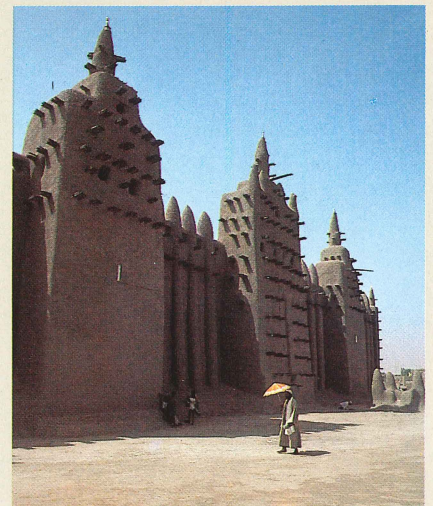
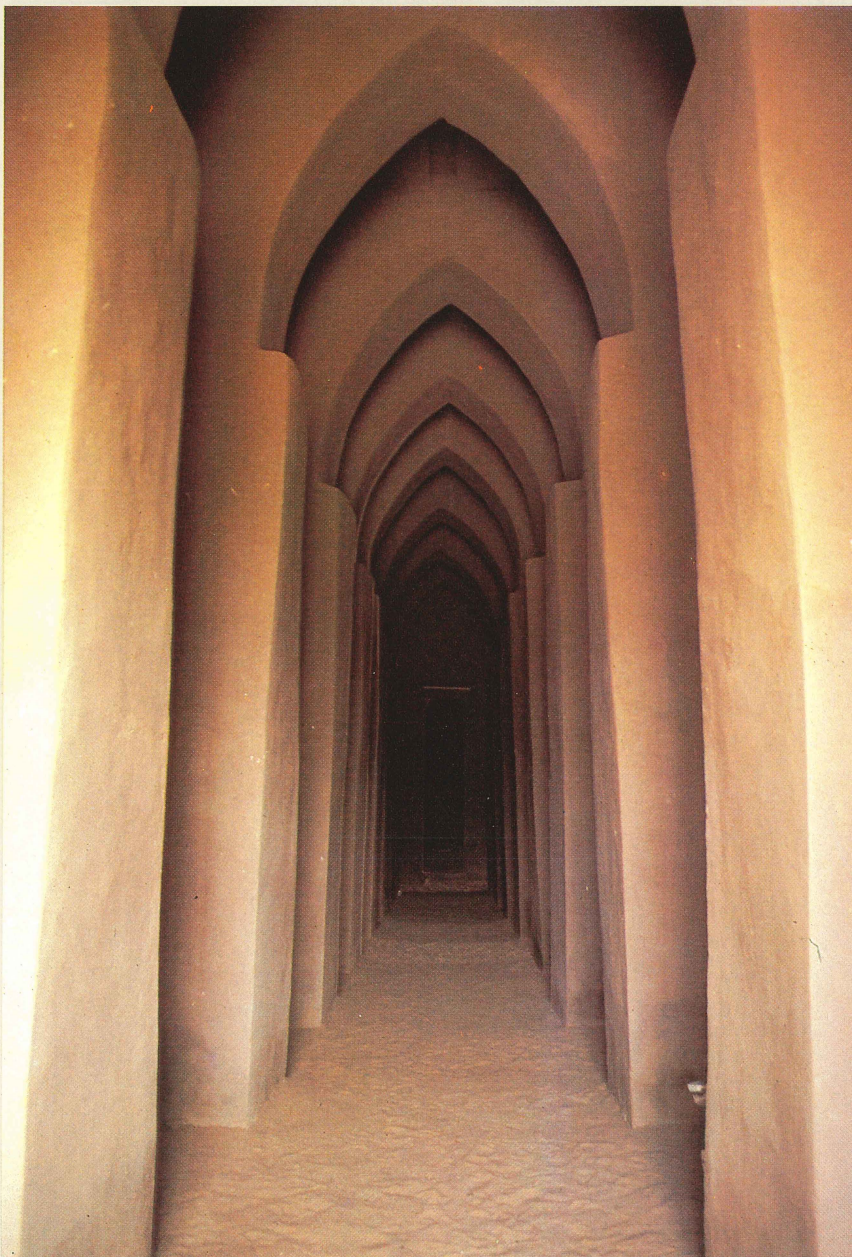
**Niono Mosque**

Above: The mosque at Niono built in 1957, the east facade measures 162 feet in length.

Left: The courtyard tower of the mosque at Niono. The tower, six-stories tall (about 150 feet), is of sun-dried brick, only the platform and parapet at the top are of kiln-baked brick.

Right: The south entrance to the Niono mosque with 'guarding pillars'. "The first monument in Sahelian architecture is the ancestral pillar which marks the centre of the indigenous universe. The ancestral pillar, one unrelated to Islam, has been transformed over time and incorporated into an architectonic creation which is a symbolic expression of a new conceptual order. But the form itself, and the names by which people designate it in two different contexts, remains the same". (L. Prussin in *Architecture in Islam*, Aga Khan Awards for Architecture, 1980).





### **The Great Mosque of Djenné**

*Top: The Great Mosque of Djenné. The present mosque was built under the aegis of a French administrator in 1907 on the consecrated site of an earlier mosque. It represents the beginnings of an 'official' ethnic style — widely adapted throughout this region. The earlier building was largely demolished about 1830 by the Masini-Fulani leader, Sheku Ahmadu. No certain date can be given for its foundation, although the 14th century seems likely.*

*Above: The east facade of the Great Mosque of Djenné shows how the ancestral pillar has been transformed into the buttresses and Mihrab.*

*Left: Interior of the Djenné Great Mosque.*

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### **Titama Mosque**

*Right, top: Detail of the moulded earth steps leading to the roof of the Titama village mosque.*

*Right: Mosque at Titama village, built in 1981 continues the tradition of larger mud mosques.*

