

# Conservation efforts on Ivory Coast vernacular architecture in West Africa

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## 1. Background and Objectives

The environments are gradually worsening all over the globe, with phenomena now well known to the scientific community such as: global warming, sea level rising and desertification. Over the past centuries and in some cases millennia, humankind has found vernacular solutions to adapt its living conditions to its direct environment. The studying and understanding of those solutions could be helpful in providing solutions to the contemporary environmental issues. Earthen dwelling typology is recorded by experts to be the most common habitat found around the world. Earth readily available nature makes it one of the most environmental options for construction. West African vernacular architecture has been suffering from the stigmatizing notion that it is somewhat “inferior“ in comparison to the Western model, which in time led to the neglect and endangerment of its vernacular ways of life. Long left at the backscene of cultural actions, efforts for conservation of the vernacular heritage are now rising in some West African countries. Such is the case of Ivory Coast, where conservationist professionals are attempting to re-valorize their cultural heritage by registering on the Word Heritage list their first cultural native site. This study is investigating the social and environmental potential of conservation efforts conducted by the Ivorian Heritage professionals in order to preserve and promote the earthen vernacular heritage. By focusing on the case of the Earthen Sudanese mosques in Northern Ivory Coast and on traditional dwellings in the South, the thesis covers the new conservation mechanisms developed by the Ivorian professionals, the shortcomings of the conservation efforts, the impacts of international co-operation regarding conservation and promotion effects of vernacular heritage.

## 2. Methodology

Data for the research were collected over a four month stay period in Ivory Coast, including a three-month internship at the UNESCO Abidjan office in 2018. Participation to inter-institutional meetings and execution of administrative policy work allowed for investigation of both national and international institutional mechanisms in Ivory Coast. Periodical field visits were conducted in four selected southern traditional earthen villages to record the states of the vernacular dwellings and investigate the traditional way of life, the place earthen architecture holds in it and the cognition attributes the communities attach to it. To achieve those goals, photographic and measurement surveys were executed along with interviews and group exchanges with members of the local communities. Participation to a ten-days conservation workshop in Kong village gave opportunity to gather information on mosques construction techniques and transmission methods for the monumental heritage. Participative building activities between the expert masons and the local communities were held and allowed to gather data on the villagers' interest toward their cultural heritage. Photographic, measurement surveys and structural analysis were done on site for the composition of an architectural identity record of the two Kong mosques. Complementary literature review has been completed on history of conservationist actions and policies concerning earthen and African heritage. Finally, expert interviews with significant conservation professionals were conducted during and post field work to deepen the understanding of conservation actions from regional to global scale.

## 3. Conclusion

Results of this thesis work are presenting the various environmental and social aspects of the earthen constructions. Thus, they confirm the relevance of vernacular conservation efforts in Ivory Coast, not only regarding Cultural heritage, but also in the neglected field of traditional dwellings. The Ivorian government has deepened the native heritage efforts with the on-going registration attempts on the World Heritage list. Through this process and the various activities held in the concerned localities, a positive shift in the local population attitude toward their vernacular heritage is already observable. To consolidate and further the conservation efforts already in place, promotional actions will be decisive factors in the years to come. To achieve those goals, the research has shown that international co-operation and transdisciplinary approach are valuable means to improve conservation actions. The pursue of such initiatives paired with monitoring of the ongoing conservationist activities led in the north of the country, could lead to the establishment of a precedent in architectural vernacular conservation in Ivory Coast. This could pave the path to completion for previous abandoned conservation sites and inclusion of native earthen dwellings in conservation efforts.