

## Islamic Influence and Dogon Cultural Synthesis: Redefining Cultural Dynamics in Mali

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### Abstract

**Purpose of the Study:** This study aims to re-evaluate the commonly held perception that Islamization leads to the destruction of traditional African cultural symbols and practices. Focusing on the Dogon people of Mali, the research seeks to understand how Islam interacts with and influences their traditional visual culture. **Methodology:** This study utilizes a combination of observational and ethnographic methods to analyze visual cultural elements in Dogon Country, including sculptures, door locks, traditional buildings, and Dogon mosques, based on extensive fieldwork conducted from 2015 to 2023. **Main Findings:** Contrary to the notion that Islam erases indigenous visual culture, the study finds a unique form of interaction between Islam and traditional Dogon visual symbols. The Dogon people have retained their beliefs in “jinna” and continue their ritualistic practices. Notably, the influence of Islam has led to the creation of Dogon mosques, which are new architectural forms that incorporate traditional Dogon decorative motifs associated with idol or fetish worship. **Applications of This Study:** The findings offer significant insights for cultural preservation efforts in Mali and similar contexts. By demonstrating the capacity for harmonious coexistence of Islamic and traditional cultural elements, this research provides a framework for understanding and preserving the rich cultural heritage of the Dogon people. **Novelty/Originality of This Study:** This study offers a unique insight into the symbiotic relationship between Islamic and traditional Dogon cultures, challenging the common narrative of cultural erasure and highlighting the possibilities of cultural adaptation and synthesis in Africa.

Keywords: African culture; Dogon visual culture; islamization in Mali; cultural adaptation.

### Introduction

Islam entered the territory of the modern Republic of Mali not only through military expeditions, such as the first Arab raid on Wagadu (Ghana) in 734 (Willis, 2012), but also through a gradual process of Islamization facilitated by trade routes and the influence of Islamic values (Castro Martínez, 2021). The adoption of Islam by Ouali Keita (1255-1270), successor to the founder of the Mali Empire, Sunjata Keita, in the 13th century marked a pivotal moment in Mali's religious history. The Mali Empire, along with the Songhai Empire, played a significant role in the spread of Islamic values in the region (Castro Martínez, 2020). Despite the growing influence of Islam, it did not completely replace traditional beliefs. Instead, a coexistence emerged between animist and Muslim elements, particularly in the Dogon region of the Mopti area, encompassing Bandiagara, Douentza, Bankass, and Koro (Castro Martínez, 2020).

Over centuries, the culture of Mali developed under the dual influences of Islam and local traditions, maintaining a distinct identity. The relationship between these religious systems was not static; over time, the influence of Islam and its values increased in Mali, with religious leaders addressing social and national issues and participating actively in

politics (Nievas Bullejos, 2017). This growing influence of Islam led to a complex religious landscape in Mali, characterized by competition between traditional Malian Islam and the more recent Wahhabi trend, each vying to shape the government's orientation (Díaz, 2021). The emergence of jihadist movements in Mali added another layer of complexity to this religious tapestry, leading to a violent phase in the country's longstanding crisis (Baldaro & Diall, 2020). Despite the dynamic and sometimes turbulent religious history of Mali, the Dogon region has retained its distinct religious identity, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of traditional Malian culture in the face of changing religious dynamics.

Previous research has provided deep insights into the dynamic relationship between religion and local culture, highlighting that the impact of religion on local traditions varies greatly depending on context and circumstances. For example, religious traditions can be reconfigured as cultural heritage, which in some cases does not necessarily destroy local traditions. In fact, religious practices can be seen as fascinating and contribute to the social and cultural reconfiguration of a region (Isnart, 2020). In the United States, there has been an increase in the combination and blending of religious traditions, indicating a more multidimensional religious path. This suggests that individuals have cultural availability to other religious traditions, which is influenced by their social location, religious history, and group perceptions (Sigalow, 2016). However, the recognition of religion as cultural heritage can also lead to tensions and commercialization. While this can help in preservation, it can, on the other hand, turn religious sites into amusement parks and displace religious devotion (Zhu, 2020).

Previous research has highlighted that the impact of religion on local traditions is highly dependent on the specific context and situation (Isnart, 2020; Sigalow, 2016; Zhu, 2020). In this context, the common view that Islam tends to destroy or ignore local traditions in West Africa, as outlined in sources such as Britannica (Carey et al., 2020), may need to be revised or reconsidered. According to the experience of a Malian expedition from the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), there is evidence to suggest that traditional religious practices survived the spread of Islam. Particularly in the Dogon region of the Mopti Region, the interaction between Islam and local traditions seems to have resulted in different forms of synergy and adaptation of the dominant narrative. This suggests that the relationship between religion and local traditions is more complex and multifaceted than is often portrayed, emphasizing the need for a more nuanced and contextualized approach in understanding these dynamics.

The objective of this study is to investigate how Islam, as a relatively recent arrival in the Dogon region of Mali, interacts with and influences local traditions, particularly in the realms of religious and visual culture. This study aims to explore the impact of Islam on the religious traditions and practices in the Dogon area, countering the common perception that Islam leads to the destruction of local traditions. By delving into the intricate relationships between Islam and the indigenous cultural practices in Dogon, the research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the coexistence and mutual influence between these two systems of belief and practice.

Muslims appeared on the territory of the modern Republic of Mali after the first Arab raid on Wagadu (Ghana) in 734; in the 13th century the successor of the founder of the Mali Empire Sunjata Keita, Ouali Keita (1255-1270), officially converted to Islam. Thus, for many centuries, the culture of Mali developed under the influence of Islam, and it has long become an integral part of it. One should note that it could not convert the entire population of the country into its adherents even over a thousand years of the history

of Islam in Mali.

## Research Methods

The article is based on some results of field research in Mali in 2015-2023 in the Dogon Country and in neighboring regions. The research method consists of a classical description and analysis of works of fine art and architecture in combination with the generally accepted ethnographic method of interviewing. Since the author was primarily interested in the interaction of Islam with traditional art and architecture, special attention was paid to these objects, moreover, the photo and video recorded the process of making artifacts, the construction process, etc. In order to adequately interpret the information received, in-depth interviews of informants were conducted, and special attention was paid to establishing the authorship of artifacts and the time of their creation. In some cases, the date of creation of the artifact reported by the informants was confirmed by radiocarbon analysis. In order to obtain accurate information, the interview was conducted after the transaction was completed, and the informant received guarantees that it would not be canceled regardless of the results of the survey. The article mentions only reliably attributed authentic artifacts. The only exceptions are the Dogon mosques, since none of the interviewed informants could name the architects. A relatively small number of written sources serve as secondary data.

## Results and Discussion

### 1. Islam in Dogon country<sup>1</sup>

The mass conversion of Dogon to Islam began in the 1980s and 90s, and reached its apogee in the early 2000s. Many researchers at that time noted that Dogon are increasingly converting to Islam, and mosques have become an integral part of the village landscape (Insoll, 2003, p. 356). The peak of the popularity of the new faith coincided precisely with the “tourist boom”, which began after the liberalization of economic policy at the beginning of the last decade of 20 century. Given the very ironic attitude of the Malians in general and the Dogon in particular to the “tubabu” (Europeans, mostly French<sup>2</sup>), it can be assumed with a high degree of probability that the choice of Islam was not least due to the fact that it is “non-European”, as well as the fact that Islam does not contradict many pre-Islamic local customs. But as we have seen above, it would be a big mistake to think that the penetration of the new faith into the Dogon Country was so triumphant.

The Islamization of the Dogon Country resulted in the appearance of some innovations in the culture. Thus, it was Islam that greatly contributed to the growth of literacy among the Dogon: in Quranic schools, not only the Quran and the Sunnah are studied, but also general education subjects. Of course, traditional culture has suffered losses: it is less and less possible to see ceremonies with the participation of famous masks. However, no one attempted to ban the making of a sculpture. According to the testimony of the residents of the village of Endé, it is very simple to turn it into a fetish –

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<sup>1</sup> On the interaction of the traditional Dogon culture in a broader context, see (Kutsenkov, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Malians hate and despise the French, not unreasonably accusing them of organizing the difficulties that the country has faced. The recent military coups had a clear anti-French character.

it is enough to kill a chicken and sprinkle its blood on a wooden or iron figurine (informant Seydou Justin Guindo). Judging by the characteristic black spots on some quite modern sculptures, this practice was never interrupted, but, for obvious reasons, it was not advertised.

The story that happened to the participants of the Malian expedition of the Institute of Oriental Studies of RAS at the end of January 2019 is very indicative: a young man named Amadou Guindo from the village of Pel (or Pel-Maoude, rural commune of Pel-Maoude of the Koro district) came to the village of Endé to sale some family fetishes. Amadou Guindo explained the sale of these items by the fact that the family converted to Islam, as well as the difficult economic situation of both the family and the entire village. But during a long conversation it turned out, the person who owned these items died. What they were intended for, none of the heirs knew, and therefore they could pose a danger. Previously, in such cases, fetishes were burned. Now the belief in fetishes is not what it used to be. There is also no doubt that the very difficult economic situation of the village played an important part in this story.

## 2. Visualization of the “Dogonité” and Islam

Despite the fact that the Dogon speak 20 languages and cultural differences between even neighboring villages are clearly visible, this people is characterized by a very strong sense of unity. The Dogon ethnicity has several visual symbols in the visual arts and architecture.



**Figure 1** Seydou (Justin) Guindo, the village of Endé. A figure with raised arms. Wood, carving. 2010s. Private collection, Moscow. Photo of the author

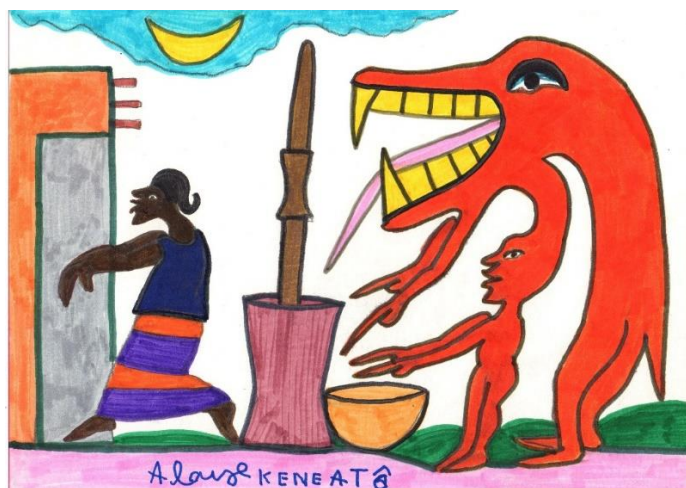
So, in the visual arts, such symbols are characteristic figures with raised hands, which are found in all Dogon groups. Often these figures are called Nommo, but in fact, according to all informants, they depict the rite of causing rain. The style of these figures varies widely throughout the Dogon Country, but the composition always remains the same (Fig. 1). Another marker of the Dogon ethnicity is the characteristic carved door locks, decorated most often with a pair of ancestral figures, or representing replicas of the mask of the antelope Walu. This mask is, as the Dogon say, a «police mask». He keeps order during the ceremonies, in particular, expels women and children who cannot attend the sacred rites. It should be noted that such door locks exist not only in those villages where masks are common, but also where masks are unknown: for example, in the village of Oume in the north-east of the Dogon Plateau (Bondum cultural and historical region, Bandiagara District (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2** The door of the mosque in the village of Oume with a door lock in the form of Walu antelope mask. Photo by the author, 2015

It is curious that the shape of the Walu mask one can find outside the Dogon Country, but in the immediate vicinity of it. These are the world-famous mosques in Djenné and in Mopti: their portals show an undoubted similarity to the masks of Walu. In Mopti, the author asked two Dogon men, natives of the village of Endé, how a form clearly associated with traditional religion could appear on the facade of a mosque. At first, they were surprised, but after a careful inspection of the mosque they admitted that this was indeed the case. Until now, no one has explained the reasons that made this similarity possible, first noticed back in 1971 by Frank Willett (1971, p. 184).

The synthesis of Islam with traditional culture can be observed in completely new forms of Dogon art. So, the graph of Alaye Kene Atô, who works with colored felt-tip pens on paper. His characters are “*jinna*” (from Arabic: جنّ ), and “*malaka*” (angels, from Arabic: ملاك), “*Jinna*” are traditional heroes of Dogon myths and folklore, but there is no doubt that angels appeared there precisely as a result of Islamization. The graphics of Alaiye Kene Atô allow us to judge how Dogon represent supernatural beings (Fig. 3): in traditional art there are scenes of sacrifices, but there are no images of spirits to whom these sacrifices are offered. The genie, except for the water spirit Nommo and the pythons Leve (or Lebe, the guard of the power of the chief), have never been depicted at all.



**Figure 3** Alaiye Kene Atô. Woman and jinna. Paper, felt-tip pens. 2010s. Private collection, France. Photo of the owner of the collection.

In architecture, two types of structures serve as markers of ethnicity: *toguna* and *guinna*. *Toguna* are square-shaped gazebos with a very low ceiling, where one can only sit. These are public buildings, meetings of councils of elders, traditional courts of “first instance” are held there, etc. The name itself one can translate as “house of conversations” or “parliament”. If there is a *toguna* in the village, then there is no doubt that this village is Dogon. The second type of structures is the *guinna*. Like *toguna*, these are public buildings, but we will talk about them in detail in the next section. Finally, among the ethnicity markers can be attributed square in terms of granaries (most of the peoples of Mali they are round).

All these visual symbols of the Dogon ethnicity (especially in architecture) continue to retain their significance and play an important role in ethnic identity. So, in 2019, the participants of the Mali expedition of the Institute of Oriental Studies of conducted a specialized study of schoolchildren from the village of Endé: they were asked to draw what their native village is associated with. The children drew traditional masks and structures (*toguna* and granaries), one respondent depicted a person who conducts a rain-inducing ritual. At the same time, not a single one drew anything related to Islam.

### 3. Dogon mosques

At the end of the 20th- beginning of the 21st century, traditional architecture was enriched by a new type of structures, “Dogon mosques”, which are distinguished by amazing picturesqueness (Fig. 4).



**Figure 4** Mosque in the village of Dioundourou. Photo by the author, 2019

There are many publications devoted to the architecture of Dogon, but it still remains studied very unevenly. Dogon Country is included in the UNESCO protected list, but only hardly a quarter of it. Nevertheless, the Dogon villages are located not only on a rocky cliff stretching from southwest to northeast, but also on the highlands themselves and on the plains adjacent to it, and the architecture over there is no worse than the one that is protected by UNESCO.

In the valleys around the Plateau Dogon mud constructions absolutely prevail, since the material lies right under your feet. They are built of rectangular bricks: the mud is kneaded with water and straw, poured into molds and left to dry in the sun (oval bricks used to be in use). In the village of Endé houses are built on a stone foundation – for this purpose a shallow trench is dug, which is filled with stone. Brick walls are built on it, where the bricks are fastened with the same liquid earth from which they are made. The roof is flat; plastic film is currently used for its waterproofing. The technique of mosques building is exactly the same. It should be noted that the construction is impersonal in nature: the author has repeatedly observed the process of building houses, but did not notice the presence of the head of work. Each builder did his part of the work, which he knew perfectly and clearly did not need any guidance.

The layout and shape of residential buildings, as well as the layout of households, are directly dependent on the location of the site on the ground, and on its relief. So, on small terraces on a rocky ledge, where there is little space for construction, the buildings are small, and the layout of groups of buildings is often irregular, inscribed in the relief of the shape; in new villages in the valleys, buildings are most often rectangular or square, just like their groups belonging to a large family, *guinna*. In the highlands, where villages are often located on small natural hills, their plan may be incorrect, as well as the plan of households, but the houses themselves are usually rectangular or square too.

Cultural and historical factors play no less a role than “natural” reasons in the composition of the architectural appearance of Dogon houses. Thus, the facades of houses in the village of Bounou (the cultural and historical region of Lowel-Gueou in the north-west of the highlands), whose population is often called “the people of Djenné” (*djennenké* – Bamana language), show similarities with the Moroccan-style facades from this city. In the cultural and historical region of Bondum (north-east of the highlands) in the villages of Tintan and Semari, the layout of houses is almost identical to the layout of

houses in Djenné: they have two floors, a courtyard and a lobby, which in the south is found only in the houses of chiefs (a room for guard), but extremely rare. Finally, the powerful pilasters characteristic of guinna in the north find an analogy in the Djenne Mosque.

Mosques appeared in the villages of Dogon together with the first Muslims, but there were clearly very few of them. Until the 90s of the last centuries, structures that fit into a highly simplified version of the Sudanese style absolutely prevailed: these were very small buildings with a characteristic crenellated parapet. The style of these mosques varied little not only throughout the Dogon Country, but also in the Mali rural architecture along the banks of the Niger River. However, at the turn of the 90s and 2000s unexpectedly and very quickly, a completely new type spread, which looked little like the «classic» structures of the Sudanese style. Their accentuated decorativeness is especially striking: the walls are carved with niches (Fig. 4), whose shape and size in different villages can vary quite a lot. Although mosques of this type began to spread especially rapidly in the Dogon Country from the late 90s - early 2000s, they appeared in the 80s of the last century, moreover, for the first time they were recorded in the districts of Bankass and Koro in the Seno Valley (Schijns, 2009, p. 97; Van Holland & de Ronde, 1988). Islamization began there earlier than in other parts of the Dogon Country.

There has never been anything like it in the old mosques of the Dogon Country, or in general in all mosques of the Sudanese style; the latter are characterized by cutting the walls with flat pilasters, but niches have never been found there. There is one exception in secular architecture: this is the palace of Aguibou Tall in Bandiagara, built in the so-called Moroccan style, common in Djenné (the Sudanese style is divided into Moroccan style and Toucouleurs Style). Within the framework of the journal article, the author is deprived of the opportunity to dwell in detail on the origin of these styles. But there is no doubt that both were clearly formed before the Moroccan conquest of the city (1591) and before the invasion of the Toucouleurs (1862). As for the Style of the Toucouleurs, they had no specific architectural style before the conquest of Djenné: in the homeland of El Hadj Omar Tall, in the town of Alvar (Halvar) on the border between Senegal and Mauritania, a small mosque built during his lifetime was preserved, but it is difficult to find anything in common with the Style of Toucouleurs of Djenné.



**Figure 5** The facade of the house in Toucouleur style, Mopti. Photo by the author, 2015



As mentioned above, the portals of the mosques in Djenné and Mopti are very similar to the animist Dogon Walu antelope masks, and the doors of the mosques can be locked with a door lock of the same shape. The facades of houses in the Toucouleur style in Djenné and Mopti are distinguished by obvious anthropomorphism (Fig. 5), which would hardly be appropriate in the architecture of orthodox Muslim Toucouleurs.

Thus, there are no prototypes of new Dogon mosques in the urban Muslim architecture of Mali. Therefore, we can assume that the origins of this style should be sought not in Djenné or Timbuktu, but in the Dogon Country itself, especially since similar decor in old buildings was only recorded on their territory, in the Aguibou Tall Palace, although it cannot be ruled out that there were and other buildings that have not survived.



**Figure 6** Guinna in the village of Soninghé. Photo by the author, 2019

For pre-Muslim Dogon architecture are characteristic *guinna* or *guiran guinna* (*guaran guinna* i.e., “family house”, “big house” - Fig. 6). They are often called “men's houses”, although it would be more accurate to call them “traditional administrative buildings of a large family”. The number of such a family can reach one hundred people, and it is also called “guinna”. In these houses, for example, traditional courts of “second instance” sit. Women are not prohibited from entering there at all - they thoroughly clean the guinna every day.

A distinctive feature of the guinna are the characteristic facades with niches where “fetishes” are stored. They can be anything from high artistic quality sculptures to torn flip-flops, animal horns and even bicycle headlights.

With the spread of Islam, the guinna quickly lose their significance. So, in the village of Soninghé in the rural commune of Dourou in Bandiagara District, most of the guinna has already been abandoned. The author also saw many abandoned guinna in the village of Tintan in the north of the highlands. In general, in those villages where there are only mosques, the guinna are no longer active; where there are churches and mosques, there are also active guinna. Such differences are explained by the fact that in those villages where there are both Christians and Muslims, many of their inhabitants still adhere to the traditional religion, and the struggle for the souls of people is by no means over. The absence of churches usually means that the entire population of the village has already

converted to Islam. All the churches surveyed by the author in the Dogon villages had nothing in common with guinna – most often, these are very simple structures, the purpose of which is indicated only by a cross on the roof.

Thus, as Javid Ghanbari has put it, “In general, vernacular mosques of West Africa, from the viewpoint of architectural form, regarding their combined form, correspond to the Dogons’ house” (Ghanbari, 2021, p. 76). To this precise definition, the author can only add that we should not be talking about any houses, but about guinna.

#### 4. Discussion

The research in Dogon Country of Mali reveals a complex interaction between Islam and traditional Dogon culture. Key findings indicate that while Islam has influenced certain aspects of Dogon life, leading to changes such as the gradual disappearance of mask-related traditions, it has also incorporated and been influenced by local customs. Notable examples include the fusion of Islamic and traditional elements in the art of Alaiye Kene Atô and the adaptation of animistic decorations in the architecture of mosques, particularly the use of Walu mask shapes in door locks.

This study's findings in Dogon Country contribute significantly to existing literature on the dynamic interaction between religion and local cultures. Building on previous research by Isnart (2020), Sigalow (2016), and Zhu (2020), which highlighted the varied impacts of religion on local traditions depending on context and circumstances, the Dogon case offers a distinctive perspective. Contrary to the common narrative in sources like Britannica (Carey et al., 2020) that suggests Islam tends to overshadow local traditions in West Africa, our findings reveal a mutual enrichment and coexistence between Islam and Dogon practices. This mirrors Isnart's observations of religious traditions being reconfigured as cultural heritage without destroying local customs, and Sigalow's documentation of an increasing trend in the U.S. of blending religious traditions, reflecting a broader cultural openness. While Zhu notes the potential tensions arising from commercialization in recognizing religion as cultural heritage, the Dogon experience diverges, showcasing a harmonious blend of Islamic elements with indigenous practices. These findings, therefore, challenge the oversimplified view of religious impact on local cultures, underscoring the need for a nuanced understanding of these complex relationships, as vividly demonstrated in the Dogon region of Mali.

The research results from Dogon Country not only highlight the specific case of Islam's interaction with local culture but also illuminate a larger pattern of cultural resilience and syncretism globally. The Dogon's capacity to assimilate Islamic elements while preserving their ancestral practices mirrors a broader phenomenon of cultural adaptability, as discussed by scholars like Hannerz (1992) in his exploration of cultural complexity. This synthesis in Dogon Country, where Islamic concepts are visually represented within a traditional framework, offers a compelling counter-narrative to the often-predicted homogenizing impact of Islamization on indigenous cultures. It aligns with Bhabha's (1994) notion of cultural hybridity, where the blending of cultures leads to the creation of unique, intertwined identities. These findings from Dogon Country, therefore, are not just an isolated instance but a part of a larger global tapestry of cultural interplay and the importance of understanding cultural dynamics as fluid and evolving rather than static or binary. This adaptability and syncretism challenge the often simplistic narratives that portray global cultural processes, particularly Islamization, as merely oppressive or erasive.

As we look to the future, the necessity for comprehensive and in-depth research

becomes increasingly apparent to grasp the evolving dynamics of Dogon culture in the context of Islamic influence. This need is particularly pressing in light of the ongoing security challenges in Mali, which add a layer of complexity to the cultural landscape. In-depth studies are imperative not just for enhancing academic knowledge but also for informing strategies aimed at cultural preservation. This involves understanding the nuanced ways in which Dogon culture is negotiating its identity amidst Islamic influences, a process that is continuously reshaped by both internal dynamics and external pressures, including socio-political changes in Mali. Research in this area should extend beyond mere observation of cultural practices to include the voices and perspectives of the Dogon people themselves, thereby ensuring that their narrative and understanding of their cultural evolution are accurately represented. Such research can provide invaluable insights for policymakers and cultural practitioners, guiding them in devising approaches that respect and preserve the intricate mosaic of Mali's cultural heritage. Furthermore, understanding the interplay between Dogon culture and Islam could offer broader lessons on cultural resilience and adaptation, which are relevant in diverse global contexts where cultures are navigating the complexities of religious and cultural coexistence.

## Conclusion

It is well known that visual symbols and images play an outstanding part in the cultures of the peoples of Tropical Africa. It is also generally accepted that Islamization (as well as Christianization) destroys traditional African cultures and, accordingly, their inherent visual images. But, as we could see, at least in the case of Dogon, the situation is different: one can observe a very peculiar variant of the interaction of the traditional visualization with Islam.

In itself, the phenomenon of using traditional forms and types of architectural structures for mosques is well known – it is enough to recall the Ottoman mosques, the prototype of which is the Hagia Sophia. But in this case, it was not an animistic structure that was imitated, but a church built by “People of the Book”.

The situation is different with Dogon: in the architecture of mosques, not just the decor of a building directly related to traditional religion is reproduced, but precisely those details of it that are associated with the worship of “idols” or fetishes. In the author's opinion, this example helps to understand how openly animist forms of traditional architecture appear on the facades of mosques, and those turn into traditional public buildings. Strange as it may sound, but, according to the author, this situation does not speak about the weakness of Islam – the penetration of animist elements into Muslim architecture, rather, is evidence of a synthesis of Islam and traditional culture, such that animist elements are no longer recognized as such, and Islamic Dogon features are not identified only with religion. Anyway, it can be stated that Islam can form a symbiosis with traditional cultures, not destroying, but fruitfully modifying them.

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