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THE MASON AND BANCO, OR RAW MATERIAL AS A POWER FOR
BUILDING A LYELA HOME (BURKINA FASO)*

Luc Pecquet

Why do studies of ‘Voltaic’ populations in Africa invariably recognize that the ‘earth’ and an ‘earth cult’ conducted by a ‘Master or Custodian of the Earth’ or ‘Earth Priest’ underlie social norms in this cultural zone, but fail to suggest any link between this ‘earth’ and the earth used to build houses? This question puzzled me when I started field work in Burkina Faso in 1988 among the Gurunsi, a number of culturally or linguistically related groups living in south central Burkina Faso, northern Ghana and Togo. My training as an archaeologist led me to imagine a relationship between the ‘Master of the Earth’ and the ‘earth’ in the sense of a raw material used for building purposes. I was struck by the fact that studies of Voltaic groups had so little to say about the earth as a material or a substance. Whether they situate the earth geographically (how the village territory is organized and worked) or anthropologically (the earth as a power underlying authority and regulating social bonds, or even as able to perform actions), these studies seemed to overlook the earth’s most concrete aspects, while invariably insisting on the Master of the Earth’s responsibility for the viability of the territory in his charge. Nothing in these studies clearly pointed to a relationship between this earth cult and the earth as a building material. Even studies of construction techniques in this cultural zone barely had anything to say about this.¹

What I learned during exploratory trips to study construction in various Gurunsi groups² – the eastern and western Kasena, Ko (or Winye), Lyela, Nuna, Puguli (or Pwo) and Nankana – led me to do field work among the Lyela.³ Several aspects drew

* The text, including all quotations, has been translated from the French by Noal Mellott, CNRS, Paris, France. All photos were taken by the author.

¹ Labouret (1958:200–201) mentions that a piece of ‘carved’ wood (a ‘représentation ancestrale’ in his words) is stuck into the kneaded earth to be used as a construction material in order to ask an ancestor for protection. After recalling the importance of earth as a building material, Prussin (1974:196) states that the power to erect a wall ‘is a gift of supernatural forces’ and that masons have special powers granted by their ancestors and the ‘earth deities’. But these few general statements apparently either concern the status of masons in Djenné (Mali), or else refer back to Labouret. Prussin has not pursued the issue in more recent writings.

² Manessy’s (1969) linguistic classification is widely accepted. For the history and meanings of ‘Gurunsi’ – a word first mentioned in 1819 and frequently used since then – see Duperray (1984) and the more recent review by Liberski (1991:32–66). Only the Nankana do not speak a Gur language, but they alone call their group ‘Gurunse’.

³ This choice does not mean that my initial question about the relationship between earth cults and the earth as a building material does not crop up among other groups, especially in the Voltaic zone. The abundance and complexity of the data gathered among the Lyela have led me to postpone any similar research in other Gur societies, but my findings clearly have implications elsewhere.

my attention to them. I discovered among them an important category of individuals, masons, whom anthropological writings have overlooked.⁴ Among the Lyela, whoever wants to build a house must turn to a mason who will not be living at the site of the building. This Mason, who is called 'the master of banco' – the banco⁵ being the kneaded, moistened clayish earth that is used as a construction material –, is in a peculiar position. For example, lighting a fire against a wall in the compound will harm his body. Masons also seem to have a quite special relationship with what they are building and with the material used. All these scattered fragments of information seemed to suggest that my initial question should enter into any general conception about material culture and building materials.

What symbolic values do craftsmen and artists associate with the objects or materials they use or make? What relationships arise between techniques and cognitive representations as a consequence of this? Before an object is conceived in thought, the material to be used in making it sets limits that are not explicable by the study of techniques alone.⁶ The anthropological study of techniques too often overlooks what, before an object is produced, dwells in the matter or material used to make it. Whether thought to be inert or alive, a material is never inactive. In a lecture given in 1939, Mauss (1974:166) declares that the notion of matter contains 'something undisciplined, wild, dangerous and, too, animated and receptive'. He goes on to state that matter, before being 'purged of all spirituality', was both a 'living principle' and a 'living body'.⁷ My interrogation led me to inquire into the limits of both banco as a building material and human actions on a material that can resist, harden, disintegrate, break, contract, expand, with the building material and people interacting or, in Leroi-

⁴ Studies have not followed up on the information gleaned by Tauxier (1912:151, 122, 209, 750, 731) about certain Gurunsi groups (Lyela, Nuna, eastern and western Kasena, Nankana) or by Labouret (1931:360:360–363), who, writing about a larger cultural zone, provides fuller information about both construction and masons. Most studies have overlooked masons and focused on smiths or Masters of the Earth. The Bari, masons among the Bambara, have been studied, but not in depth. On them, see Labouret (1931:349–352), Prussin (1970:64–66; 1974:193, 196; 1986:46–47), Leprun (1987:134–135), La Violette (1987), Domian (1989:56), Maas and Mommersteeg (1994).

⁵ According to Prussin (1981:229), 'Banco is a term which the French have taken over from Bambara terminology in West Africa'. She states that Caillé used it in his diary (1830:304, vol.3). Diarra (1981:67, 69) makes a few comments about this word, which is now widely used in western African French as well as English.

⁶ Scholars who have shown an interest in questions of this sort often restrict their attention to formal or technical factors. On the immateriality of building materials in architecture, see especially Guillerme (1985) and Garda (1992), who take quite different approaches to writing respectively about stone and glass. For a general discussion, see Potier and Simonnet (1992) on modern architecture.

⁷ Emphasizing that the 'spirit/matter opposition' is of a late date, Mauss (1974:163) points out that the pair matter/form has been a subject for thought for a much longer time. In anthropology, especially in studies of habitat, the matter/form pair has often been given consideration, usually in association with the idea of a function; and spirit and matter are still usually seen as opposites.

Gourhan's words (1991:132): 'Making is a dialogue between the maker and the material'.⁸

These theoretical aspects will remain in the background here, as field data are presented so as to focus on questions centring around the primary material used by the Lyela to build compounds: banco (in Lyele: *bo*). I shall focus on the material itself, and specifically on how it reacts to human actions:

- 1.) What is banco? The answer to this question will be drawn from the Lyela's own words (the translation of which will be placed between quotation marks).
- 2.) How does banco react and to what exactly? Various rules of conduct at the construction site will be pointed out.
- 3.) How does earth as a power and the earth as banco, i.e., a building material, affect the mason's work and life? A few rites and prohibitions will briefly be described to shed light on this relationship.

CONSTRUCTION

Most of the 250 000 Lyela live in Sanguié Province about 100 km west of Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso). The Lyela are typically sedentary farmers, polygamous, and with virilocal residence in compounds separated from each other by a distance of 30 to 200 metres. An average Lyela village thus covers several square kilometres, since groups of compounds are scattered a few kilometres apart among fields (fig. 1).⁹ The elder of a patrilineage or segment thereof heads a compound (*kèlè*, plural *kǎlse*). The people living in a compound are, except for their wives, agnates. A compound is made up of several 'houses' around a central courtyard with a main entrance. Grain storehouses are located in this yard, and animals are penned in there at night. The number of residents ranges from ten up to as many as three hundred (Pecquet 1993). The houses are the domain of the women. In general, men do not have houses, though a man must build a house for each of his wives. In a new compound houses are separated from each other so as to leave space to put up new buildings for future wives. Building houses adjacent to each other would, it is said, keep the new compound from growing (fig. 2).

A village is headed by a *cε cábal*, which in anthropological writings has usually been rendered as 'Earth Priest' or 'Master of the Earth'. *Cε* means 'earth' as a power (or entity), as a material, and as the land (a territory, site, or even a field in the bush

⁸ Mauss (1974:162) quotes Halbachs: 'Man is an animal who thinks with his fingers', a formula adopted by Warnier (1999), who has proposed using 'body techniques' to shed new light on material culture.

⁹ See Barral (1968), Bourdier and Minh-Ha (1985), Pecquet (1992).

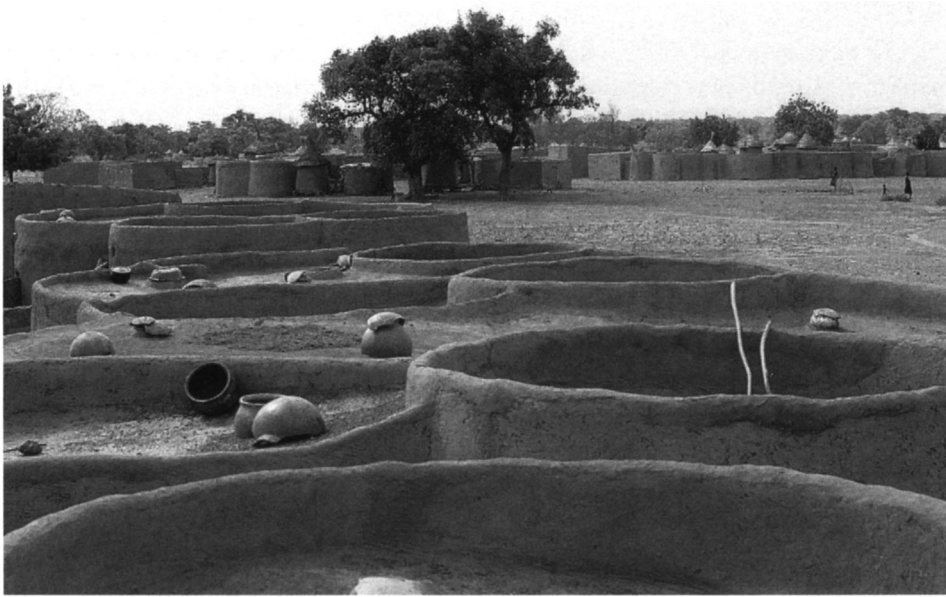


Fig. 1: View from the roof of one compound toward more distant ones in the village of Kayale (April 1991).



Fig. 2: In the foreground a house with three rooms in a compound; its small courtyard opens toward that of the compound (Kayale, April 1991).

country). *Cábal* contains two morphemes: *bal* means 'man'; *cá*, from the verb *ci*, means 'to be responsible for', 'be the master of', 'command' or 'possess'. *Cábal* applies to any person exercising a responsibility, trade or skill – whether diviners, leaders of hunting parties, or the persons in charge of masks, compounds, lineages, clans, etc. This word implies a reciprocal power, an obligation: the thing 'mastered' has a potential hold over the person who masters it, in that a failure to follow the rules entailed by this responsibility causes a confrontation with the power of the thing in question. This particular notion of power is found throughout the Voltaic cultural zone, among the Lyela (Bayili 1983:50–80; Schott, 1984, 1995) and elsewhere (Cartry 1983, 1996).

Earth as a power is the basis of social norms. For example, the Master of the Earth must intervene when a murder is committed on village land. If he fails to do so, the consequences of this worst possible transgression against earth will befall either him or the territory in his charge; a drought or an epidemic might break out in the village, or the Master of the Earth might fall seriously ill. To deal with transgressions, the Master of the Earth usually imposes a fine of sacrificial animals. Once the person at fault has made amends, the Master of the Earth performs the sacrifice or other appropriate rites. A similar procedure holds, as we shall see, during building: any transgression threatens both the mason's health and what he is building, which will lack stability or durability. The mason's power is nothing compared to the power of which he is in charge. If he does not fulfil his duties, Earth will act against him.

The first step in building a new compound is to choose a location. This is done by a married man who has decided to leave his father's compound and become a compound chief (*kèlè cábal*) on his own. He must choose three places where he would like to settle, a choice that might take several months. At each location, he picks up a pebble as he states his wishes (to have a healthy, thriving compound, food, offspring, etc.), then goes to a diviner, who makes the final selection. The *kèlè cábal*-to-be then informs the Master of the Earth, who sets a date for a meeting at the selected location. By performing certain rites there, the Master of the Earth grants him the location and authorizes him to dig the earth for the building. From then on, the compound chief-to-be must live there, building a grass hut, where he will dwell until the head mason has finished erecting the walls for houses (Pecquet 1998:30–144). Construction occurs during the dry season and halts during the rainy season, when people go to work in their fields. The time needed to build a compound varies widely depending on how many houses are to be put up and how much help the future compound chief can muster (Pecquet 1998:304–325).

In the meantime, the *kèlè cábal* chooses the place to dig out the earth to be used for the building. Once the earth is turned, he visits a mason of his own choosing. The latter may or may not be a kinsman, but he must be someone who is not going to live in the compound. Whether building a new compound or adding houses onto an existing one, the *kèlè cábal* must ask a mason to help by bringing him the 'banco chicken' (Pecquet 1998:145–156). The mason tells the compound chief when he will come to



Fig. 3: Two masons on the 'scaffold' place lumps of banco on the upper part of a wall (Esapu, March 1989).

the site and when to add water to the earth to make banco. He does not directly intervene in preparing the banco or working it into lumps;¹⁰ he will, however, judge its quality once he starts setting these lumps, called 'children of banco' (*bo-byä*), onto the wall (fig. 3). If the banco has been poorly prepared, he will say so.

Once the mason starts working, he is no longer a *jì lürbal*, a 'man building houses', but a *bo cábal*, a 'master of banco'. The *bo cábal* heads any other masons working at the site, but he does not stay there overnight, and he might not come to work every day. In fact, he might even delegate work at the site to an apprentice, and go and work elsewhere himself. The head mason's responsibility is to build the walls for the houses, perform the appropriate rites, and handle any problems. Once the walls are up he leaves the site, but he will return for the final ceremonies at the invitation of the compound chief. What happens thereafter does not concern him, and the prohibitions discussed below no longer hold. The banco's power is most evident while the head mason is presiding over the construction.

The actual period of construction runs from the moment the Master of the Earth symbolically 'opens' the earth with a hoe until the compound chief 'closes' it by sacrificing a chicken in the new compound. Without this sacrifice, people say, the houses

¹⁰ These tasks are performed by the 'arrangers of banco' (*bo-kwarbna*).

would fall down to fill the hole dug out to make the banco: they 'will fight to fill up the hole'. The building process follows a set of rules and rites. The same rules must be followed in building all the houses at the site, even years later. The rites, however, concern the first room of the first house to be built, a house to be inhabited by the first wife, where the ancestors' altar will be placed. For the head mason, the work of construction runs from his sacrifice of a chicken upon arrival at the site until his sacrifice of a chicken when he finally leaves it. When he starts construction with the first sacrifice, he tells the earth so that it 'knows he is starting [to make] banco'.

BANCO, A MATERIAL AND POWER

The characteristics of each type of soil, the attention given to mixing earth and water, the clay's malleability and cohesion – all these technical considerations enter into the choice of banco. Here, however, I would like to focus on another aspect of the building process: for the Lyela, techniques alone do not account for a wall's solidity. Neither the best mason nor the best material can make a house stand for years if the appropriate rules are not followed at the construction site. In this sense banco (*bo*) is both a material and a power, the line between the two not being clear. But listening closely to what the Lyela have to say helps answering this question.

For the Lyela, banco as a raw material used in building houses is 'earth' (*ce*). Actually, although this goes without saying, it is a mixture of earth and water. When the Master of the Earth arrives at the location, he may hoe the earth repeatedly in order, say the Lyela, to 'take out banco'. This signals that the compound chief may start digging the earth and that he is authorized to build there. The word 'banco' also refers to the dried material, which is left once the water has evaporated. Although banco is a mixture of water and earth, not all such mixtures are banco. For example, *shó*, or earth used for plaster, refers to the ground as a surface and to the very fine matter (dust), which, taken from this surface, is fluid like air and quite different from compact banco. Significantly, *shó* is dry, without any water in it, but above all, it is earth (*ce*) and even when mixed with water to make plaster, it is still *shó*. Secondly, *sóló*, the laterite soil used to make the last layer of mud roofs and floors in courtyards and houses, lies in between banco and *shó*. Like clay (*do*) it can be mixed with water, and it evokes the idea of a hole, whether deep or so shallow as to be invisible, whether a drop of water suffices to fill it up or not. There are prohibitions relating to the places where *sóló* and *do* may be dug out of the earth. A person may not take earth dug out by someone else lest the water genie 'catch him'. The hole from which *sóló* and banco are extracted looks more like a shallow surface than a hole. Despite this similarity, no prohibitions apply to the hole that is left after digging out banco, perhaps because rites are performed to close it up after the compound is finished.

‘Banco is banco, but it is tough’ (*zum*: hard, difficult, dangerous, laborious). This is a leitmotif that is heard much more frequently than the statement ‘Banco is earth’. *Zum* defines banco in a way that draws attention less to the building material than to the power. Banco will be said to be tough when the mason has trouble working it – especially in relation to the rules and prohibitions concerning it. However, this same statement is heard in other contexts with reference to troubles of a like nature. If, for example, after a few months a wall falls in without explanation, the collapse is said to be the banco’s tough reaction. Something may have happened during the construction that went unnoticed. What is ‘tough’ in banco as an immaterial power is related to its material manifestations. In short, banco is earth as both material and power.

RULES AND TRANSGRESSIONS

Like the rules and prohibitions relating to the earth, which concern a whole village and, if transgressed, would threaten social life and prosperity (by endangering the fertility of the earth and of individuals or by causing sickness), the rules and prohibitions that are binding at the place of construction concern the site alone. Breaking them would threaten the compound chief’s goal of setting up a healthy, thriving homestead. Certain rules and prohibitions mainly affect the head mason. Whereas the Master of the Earth must see to it that the *súsúúli* (singular: *súsúú*) of Earth are followed in a village, the master of banco must see to it that the *súsúúli* ‘of the banco’ or ‘of the mason’ are observed at the building site.¹¹ Transgressing such a prohibition normally entails a fine. The banco ‘does not like it’ whenever such a prohibition is transgressed, its reactions varying in intensity and scope as a function of the offence. Some reactions are slow but inevitable: a house or wall wears, or even falls down in a few years or months, or even just after construction. Indeed, some reactions happen quickly: a wall being built cracks, or lumps of banco come loose and fall out while the mason is laying them. In such cases, the mason must break off his work in order to identify the transgression and deal with it. He will normally go back to work once the fine he imposed has been paid.

¹¹ The Lyela disapprove of certain behaviours at the construction site without considering them to be *súsúúli*. For instance, everyone knows that a ‘house should not be built behind the woman’ who will be dwelling in it – her agreement ought to be sought for the number and size of rooms. But building without her agreement is not prohibited, even though such an action could cause the house, once built, to fall down. Actions of this sort, which are not *súsúúli*, lead to the settlements of the dispute through negotiations, not fines.

Prohibitions

First of all, whistling is forbidden. In some villages this offence does not entail a fine, whereas in others the head mason, besides imposing a fine, will throw banco at the whistler (often a child) or catch him and fill his mouth with banco. If he throws banco, the child will fall to the ground 'crushed by the banco' and then run away without saying anything, because he knows he has done wrong. If the master of banco takes no action, the house or wall he is building will collapse. Whistling invokes evil souls, who come and touch the wall, making it collapse.

Secondly, several rules have to do with what may be brought into or taken out of the site, whether a new compound being built or houses being added onto an existing one. Although this circulation normally occurs under the direction of the compound chief, the head mason must be informed of whatever enters or leaves the compound, even during his absence. For example, one may not take something from the compound to sell or pay off a debt. A nephew must be stopped from taking a chicken, something he may, under normal circumstances, do without his maternal uncle's permission. The mason should also be told about any fish, game or gifts entering or leaving the compound. Once informed about the bringing of goods into or taking them out of the compound, the head mason has three options: allow people to dispose of the goods as they wish (to make a sacrifice, pay off debts, etc.); take a small part for himself (in the case of fish or game); or share the goods (for example, the food a bride receives from her in-laws) through a communal meal. When informed beforehand, he usually agrees to the movement of goods. If he was absent when they were moved, the mason must be told as soon as he comes back, and this explanation normally suffices. But some offences are more serious. For example, a fine must be paid for any chicken sacrificed during his absence. The transgression is not so much taking things into or out of the compound as how this is done. What really counts is the relationship between the two main people at the site, the head mason and the compound chief. Hiding facts from the mason makes the banco react: 'its words speak' as the wall cracks – the most frequent evidence of transgression – and the mason will stop working. He then questions the compound chief and will go back to work once the fine has been settled. But if the full truth does not come out, the banco will 'rend' (*kār*), and the wall will have to be rebuilt.

A third category of prohibitions has to do with disputes, tensions and bad intentions, as manifested in actions ranging from malicious gossip to fights. The underlying idea is that a stable compound cannot possibly be built at a location driven by discord. Friendly feelings must reign there. These rules are intended, it is said, to achieve genuine mutual understanding, just as the prohibitions having to do with the movement of things into and out of the compound reflect the need for transparency in intentions and relations, since nothing should be hidden from the mason. If one of the rules in this third category is broken while the master of banco is on the site, he will impose a

fine. If the transgression occurs during his absence, he must be told as soon as he comes back, when he will sit down to hear the case. People will pay close attention to what he says and, if necessary, pay any fine.

If one forgets to collect or pay the fine, the compound will bear the consequences: the banco will turn bad, and the buildings will not last as long as they should. Should such incidents recur, the walls will crack or even, in case of serious offences, fall down. If the head mason is not told about any fights that may have broken out during his absence, the lumps of banco will fall inside the house as he starts laying them and continue doing so if he tries to lay more. If the fight took place outside, they will fall outwards. If a man and his spouse quarrel while their house is being put up, lumps falling inwards means that the woman is wrong, if outwards, that the man is wrong: 'The banco falls to tell the mason'. The banco can react later on, gradually or even right away (by turning too liquid as soon as the mason picks it up). If the walls were already up when the incident occurred, one of them will crack wide open in the mason's presence, and the house will collapse. To take another example: when a woman is planning to leave the compound while her house is being built but has not yet said anything, a large crack will cleave the banco above the entrance. Once he sees it, the mason will call the woman to question her. If she lies to him, the house will fall down. If she holds her peace, lumps of banco will fall out of the wall, and the mason will be unable to continue working.

The banco's reactions are said to be its words or language (*zòmè*). The severity of these words depends on the offence. The complaints of a woman as she is making a meal for the mason only cause small cracks. In contrast, if a man beats his wife and does not tell the mason, his wife's house will collapse all at once, without warning. The major and most frequently mentioned transgression is fighting. Once the mason receives the fine for fighting, he might decide to go back to work; but he might also decide to abandon the site, and no other mason will be willing to come and work there. If the people in the compound decide to finish putting up the buildings themselves, their efforts will be in vain, since death and disease will afflict the compound. But the banco also reacts to positive words and deeds, for example to what the head mason says at the end of his work. If at that time he says nothing good but talks ominously instead, because he thinks he has been poorly treated, the houses will not remain standing very long. The banco's words are not always easy to understand. As soon as the banco reacts, the head mason must stop working and discover the reasons. To do this, he does not examine the banco or in any way use it as a material for divination; instead he starts asking questions. The truth must come out, otherwise the mason will be unable to build: the banco's reactions will keep him from carrying on with his work.

Fines

Fines erase transgressions; they 'give ashes to banco', since ashes, which are often used to halt a conflict or ask for pardon, oblige parties to bring a quarrel to an end. The head mason imposes the fine within limits that depend on how serious the transgression is. If women quarrel, he imposes a fine of condiments. If men quarrel, he will ask for millet and perhaps one or more chickens. Whether or not to go back to work is his decision; it depends less on how much the fine is than on whether or not it is actually paid. When the fine is small, work soon continues. When it is large, a meal must be prepared and shared before work resumes – for instance, a chicken killed, dressed and cooked, along with millet and a sauce. The matter is much more complicated for serious offences, such as beating a woman. The mason asks elders who used to be masons for their advice. They will come to the site, talk to the inhabitants, and fix the fine. Goats or sheep might have to be sacrificed, although this does not happen often: 'The blood is given to the earth to wash away the fault and for the compound to stand healthy'. When the master of banco thinks the offence 'amounts to a cow' (an animal that only the Master of the Earth may demand in sacrifice), he normally asks for the equivalent in goats or sheep. Some masons ask for token fines, whereas others impose excessive fines. Asking for too little or too much will make the banco react. If a mason is too lenient, does not fine or fails to collect a fine, lumps of banco will keep falling out of the wall. If his demands are too harsh, the banco will make him fall off the scaffold. If he arbitrarily or inconsistently sets a fine, he will die when he goes back home because he has defied the banco. People say, 'It is between the mason and the banco'. The banco thus seems to be in charge of the building process; it can physically harm the mason as well as others.

A RECIPROCAL HOLD

The head mason's power to fine is a sure sign of his pre-eminence at the building site, so much so that some people say he 'commands the compound', even though this is only partly true. Deprived of certain prerogatives, the compound chief will describe the mason's leading role as having 'his hands on the compound'. But the head mason sees the situation quite differently: he must remember that he is 'in the banco's hands' throughout the construction process. As the master of banco, he is better placed than anyone else to receive the 'banco's words', but he might misinterpret them. This privileged position jeopardizes him. He is at the banco's mercy. It can, for example, make a wall fall down if he uses a cracked calabash to smooth it. The banco's hold lasts from the very start of construction up until the head mason is no longer in charge of the site. Pursuing the metaphor of exerting a hold, it is notable that the chicken sacrificed by

the mason once his job is done is called the ‘chicken for freeing the hand’ or the ‘chicken of the hand untied’. Indeed, ‘The mason is tied (*lyē*) to the banco’ is a recurrent theme in what is said about construction work. However, one cannot understand the banco’s hold over the mason if one does not take into account the mason’s hold over the banco, as expressed in the phrase ‘master of banco’. This brings to mind the Voltaic idea of power mentioned earlier.

The Lyela describe the mason’s gestures for making lumps of moist banco fit tightly together with the phrase ‘compressing/squeezing the banco’ (*kàm bo*). This phrase is, in fact, used only about masons. *Kàm bo* refers not to the lumps used to build a wall but to the building material itself. Besides referring to the mason’s major activity, this phrase also says something about his relationship with the material. Technically, ‘squeezing/compressing banco’ refers to the repeated actions masons exercise on the damp clay so as to improve its building quality. Compressing the banco makes it cohesive so that it can be worked into lumps to be used in building (fig. 4). But this technical explanation does not cover the full range of the meanings of a phrase that defines a mason’s work so as to associate closely the material and the person. Used to the exclusion of any other word, the verb *kàm* (squeeze, compress, constrict) conveys the idea of a reciprocal effect, a strong action affecting both the thing on which it is exercised and the person who performs it (as in the English phrase ‘a tight shirt’). But it also conveys the idea that what is compressed does not crumble or break up into pieces but remains whole. It is still capable of reacting: a shirt is tight on the body, but the body can burst the buttons. A mason squeezes the banco; and, we might say, the banco squeezes him.



Fig. 4: Squeezing the banco as the lumps are placed in a row, and compressing the new row against the preceding layer (Esapu, March 1989).

Once the head mason marks a more or less circular form on the earth for the wall of the first house and lays the base for this wall, he 'shuts himself up in the banco', a phrase referring to the space thus delimited and to the building material itself. The hold over the soul (*ywálá*, one's double) starts once this first circular room has been laid out. The banco takes hold of the mason's body once he has laid the base of the wall. To erect a wall, the head mason forcefully throws banco down onto the ground and then shapes it with a hoe to form the base (about 45 cm wide tapering off to 10 cm at the top, approximately 50 cm high). Though others may help him throw down this first layer (which takes about an hour), he himself will use a hoe to mould the banco into shape. Significantly, the mason is not yet said to be 'squeezing banco'; instead, a verb (*fwar*), meaning 'to throw down' or 'hurl', is used. 'Compressing the banco' is the quite different technique he uses next to erect the wall, as, on this base, he successively lays nine rows of closely packed lumps of banco (each row being approximately 25 cm high) (figs. 5 and 6).

Interestingly enough, informants used a metaphor to describe the mason's work of laying down the base of the wall: the mason is said to be 'pinning down' (*ji*) the banco, the verb here being that used during a traditional wrestling match, when one of the contenders pins the other down with his back to the ground. Like the phrase 'compressing the banco', this metaphor involves the body and refers to how the banco is



Fig. 5: Laying the base of the wall along the circle on the ground: 'pinning down' the banco (Esapu, March 1989).

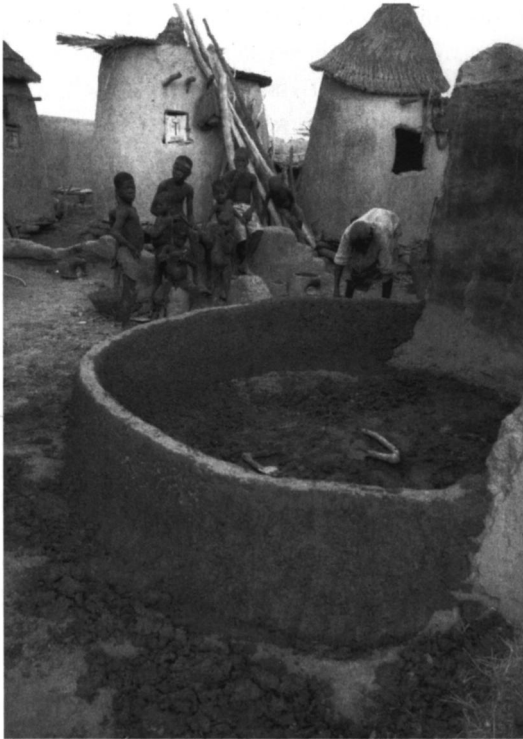


Fig. 6: Laying the base of the wall: the first layer is finished (Esapu, March 1989).

worked. As Lyela masons know well, the force with which the banco is thrown onto the ground affects the quality of the building material and the solidity of what is to be built. This know-how, gleaned from empirical observations, can be verified scientifically with an electronic microscope: as more pressure is exerted on the wet banco, more tiny particles are set in movement and come into contact with one another, thus forming bonds that, once the banco has dried, increase the clay's cohesiveness and help make it waterproof.¹² Saying that the mason 'pins the banco down' draws attention to a physical impact that takes place during the very phase of construction, when, symbolically, the banco takes hold of the mason's body. This simultaneous, reciprocal hold between the head mason and the banco also figures in other

phrases referring to the cohesiveness of the banco and to the unbroken circular wall being erected. It also crops up in many other associations made throughout the ritual cycle (Pecquet 1998: Chapter IX). The first phase in this cycle – the head mason sacrifices a chicken, marks a circle out on the ground and lays the wall's base – lasts three days and ends with a group meal called the 'meal of the base of the wall'.

After a few days working on the first room, the head mason, standing on the outside, makes a small hole through the wall where the door will later be cut out. This second phase of the ritual cycle takes just a few minutes. Following its performance, the mason is said to 'get his soul back' from being shut up inside the circular wall. Were someone else to make this hole, the mason would abandon the site and no one could go on with building, because the walls would keep falling down. People point out that since the mason has built a continuous, solid wall, making a hole in it, however tiny, is not 'something simple'. Once the wall has been pierced, only the mason's body is still in the banco's grasp.

¹² Water is the archenemy of clay used as a building material. Modern techniques for making earthen bricks follow a similar procedure (Houben and Guillaud 1989).

The final phase in this ritual cycle, performed when the head mason finally quits the site (even though building work will still go on), comprises three rites. Firstly, the mason turns his back to one of the poles used for scaffolding and kicks it out, thus recovering the full use of his back. Were he not to do this, he would run the risk of a stiff, aching back. In fact, when the mason sacrificed the chicken to start construction, he asked the earth to 'take his back'; and now, at the end of this cycle, he retrieves his back. Secondly, he 'pours ashes', that is, splashes water containing ashes on the walls of the rooms that have already been built. This frees him from the construction site and from ties with those who continue to work there. Transgressions of the sort previously described no longer concern him: they are now matters for the compound chief to handle. Finally, to free himself from all ties to the banco, the head mason must sacrifice the 'chicken of the hand untied', which the compound chief has given to him, over a pile of refuse in his own compound. Only in this way can he fully repossess his body, recover his manhood, and get back his mental faculties. Were he not to perform this sacrifice, his hands might tremble so much that he could never work again, he might become impotent or sterile, or 'his eyes might be scorched' as his understanding fails.¹³ When he quits the site, the head mason turns it over to the compound chief, thus making him fully responsible for the compound. The new houses put up by the mason supposedly fulfil all the conditions for fertility, a point reminding us of the banco's hold over the mason's sexuality.

This overview of the ritual cycle provides glimpses of the reciprocal hold the head mason and banco exert on each other. The banco that is 'pinned down' by the mason at the start of construction might later pin the mason down. If certain prohibitions (adultery is usually mentioned) are broken, the mason might fall off the scaffold. Another aspect is the 'shutting up' of the mason inside the construction site. The refuse over which he sacrifices the chicken to 'untie' himself is said to represent everything that he might unwittingly have shut up inside the banco and that could keep him tied to the building material. A chicken's feather borne by the wind might have become mixed up with the banco. If the mason sees it and leaves it there, he risks becoming so shut up inside the banco that he will become sterile or impotent. The reciprocal hold the mason and banco have over each other has been demonstrated through facts of language and ritual, as have its implications for the technical aspects of construction and for human relations. A few prohibitions specifically related to the head mason also cast light on how this hold is exercised in activities at the construction site. Tamping the earth, or spreading out dirt to be tamped, as well as roofing, are forbidden lest the mason be 'hurt'. Furthermore, while the head mason presides at the site, no one may

¹³ Several Lyela phrases associate seeing with understanding and thus place knowledge 'in front'. In contrast, the back is the unseen and unknown, anything over which one has no control and, above all, one's offspring ('people of the back') and sexual potency. During construction, the head mason may continue having sexual relations; but owing to the banco's hold over him, he is not deemed in full possession of his potency. The Lyela say his manhood 'is not big'.

‘plaster’ a wall¹⁴ or mend a crack in the wall once the banco has dried. Transgressing this prohibition shuts the mason up inside the banco so much that ‘his body hurts’. It would ‘heat’ his body, and he would fall sick. If the transgression is committed intentionally, the mason will not simply fine the offender. When he finally leaves the construction site, he will have recourse to a much more serious sanction by failing to express his wishes for the homestead to last and thrive. The prohibition establishing the strongest link between the wall being built and the head mason’s body is the prohibition against lighting a fire against a wall lest his body heats up and he falls sick. Breaking this rule might have the same effects on the transgressor’s body. Lighting a fire amounts to ‘smoking’ or ‘grilling’ the mason. The symptoms might be a burning sensation, a fever or a drying up of the body. The person might even die. In this case, no other mason would agree to come and work on the compound.

CONCLUSION

The destiny of the compound and its residents is bound up with questions concerning the ties between earth and banco. When the head mason finally leaves the site, he will have partitioned off the space.¹⁵ By erecting walls around the courtyard, he marks out a place where sacrifices to earth will be made. However, he does not simply cede power to the compound chief over a place with established boundaries. He gives him a *kèlé* (that which surrounds), a noun derived from the verb *kékéle* (surround). The following example shows how the head mason turns the *kèlé* over to the man, whom he thus makes *kèlé cǎbal*. Just before he splashes the walls with ashen water, he gives the calabash to the compound chief-to-be and asks him to ‘pour the water of the power of the earth of your *kèlé*’. This libation prefigures the first sacrifice, which is about to be made to earth by the compound chief. By thus authorizing the compound chief to sacrifice to the earth of his compound, the mason ‘gives’ him the *kèlé* and makes him into a *kèlé cǎbal* – someone who, because he sacrifices to earth, is likened to a Master of the Earth.

The prohibitions relating to the banco no longer hold after the head mason quits the site, even though this material will still be used to make the roof terraces. Lifting these prohibitions is indicated by the compound chief sacrificing the chicken to the earth. After this sacrifice, the prevailing relationship is no longer with the banco but with earth. The compound chief must assume his duties before earth and the Master

¹⁴ The mason might, however, authorize plastering (but only on the inside of a wall, never on the outside) or certain other exceptions to these prohibitions.

¹⁵ This reminds us of what Mauss (1974:163) had to say about how the notion of matter ties into the idea of a partition between two worlds: ‘In the one, there is shelter [...] in the other, outside, danger lurks’.

of the Earth. Furthermore, whoever, despite repeated warnings, now transgresses a prohibition relating to earth risks being buried alive by an earthen roof caving in. People will say that 'earth killed him' by means of the banco. But the powers of the earth and of the banco should not be confused, nor should the one be seen as dominating the other. Although the master of the banco has, at the construction site, prerogatives similar to those of the Master of the Earth over the village territory, he is not a Master of the Earth. Nonetheless, when he makes a hole in the first circular wall, he is performing an act similar to what the Master of the Earth does when, before construction, he 'pierces the head of the earth' (*pwá yò ce*) with a hoe to authorize digging at the site.

The question of the links between earth and banco as powers also occurs outside the realm of construction. From the choice of several sites up to the sacrifice performed after the head mason's departure at the very place where a pebble was picked up to represent the site, the whole construction process re-enacts commonly told stories about the founding of the village. These stories, most of which follow a similar outline, hinge on establishing a sacrificial bond with earth. They tell how the first Master of the Earth (a forefather of the current one) received power from someone who had the original claim to the land. Many associations can be made between these stories and the construction of a compound. For example, when, right at the start, the head mason sacrifices a chicken to earth, he fills the position of this first claimant for as long as he oversees the building work. Furthermore, by asking the Master of Earth to come to the location selected by the diviner, the compound chief-to-be takes a secondary position like that of the Master of the Earth in relation to the original claimant. All this is necessary for the Master of the Earth to be able to hand the place over to the compound chief when he leaves the site.

The Master of Earth is always represented as a descendant of the first settler on the village territory. But village foundation stories present a different version: the first settler, who discovered the original location for the village, was obliged to hand power over the earth to a newcomer. Regardless of the village, the story follows much the same outline. One day, this first settler and the newcomer crossed paths at a watering hole, and each claimed the land. To settle the matter, they decided to meet there again. In the meantime, each one put something into the water: the first occupant, a piece of banco; the newcomer, a stone. They agreed that, when they met again, they would take out what they had put into the water to prove who had arrived on the land first. When they came back later, naturally only the stone was still there. The newcomer thus became Master of the Earth. These stories become more intelligible if we relate them to the building process. In brief, earth's altar in a village is always a stone. For the Lyela, banco is both the body of the first man shaped by God (*yí*) and what the corpse becomes after burial. For this reason, banco is used to build altars for ancestors. The name of the compound's founder will always be uttered henceforward whenever any sacrifice is made at his altar in the first room of the first house to be put up. The com-

pound's future – the conditions the mason must bring together so that it lasts and thrives, in short, the compound's destiny – revolves around the construction of this earthen altar to turn the compound chief eventually into an ancestor.

While the head mason is playing the pre-eminent role during construction, the compound chief-to-be is learning how to exercise power. The compound's future depends to a large degree on the latter's ability to prevent conflict with the mason and to avoid transgressing the prohibitions relating to the banco, or to manage such situations should they occur. Since the future compound chief is learning how to exercise power during construction from a head mason who will not be living in the houses that are being built, his future responsibilities are proven in three ways. First of all, obeying the prohibitions relating to the banco prefigures the obedience owed to the prohibitions relating to earth and to the rules to be followed in compounds in general. Secondly, respecting the mason's authority prefigures the respect to be shown to the authority of the Master of the Earth. Thirdly, mutual understanding among people at the building site prefigures the understanding that must reign among the compound's future residents. Failing to meet up to the obligations imposed during construction jeopardizes the compound's survival and prosperity. Fulfilling them during construction and thereafter is a necessary condition for the compound to be a long-lasting, thriving home, and for the compound chief to become a founding ancestor.

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