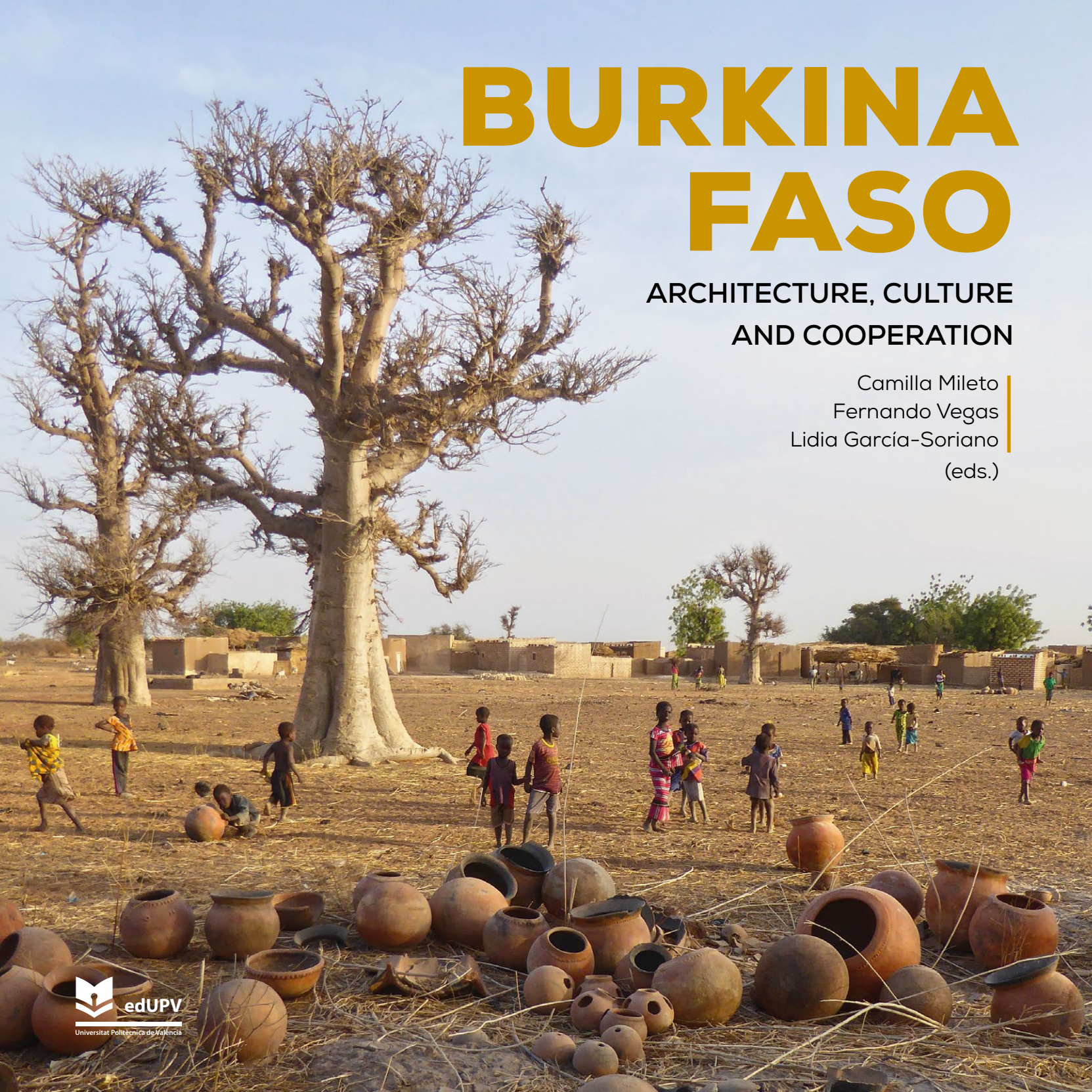


BURKINA FASO

ARCHITECTURE, CULTURE
AND COOPERATION

Camilla Mileto
Fernando Vegas
Lidia García-Soriano
(eds.)



edUPV

Universitat Politècnica de València

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Abstract

This book aims to pay homage to the people, culture and traditional architecture of Burkina Faso, a country with an extraordinary wealth of construction cultures. Through cross-referencing and analysis this book provides an overview of the architectures of the Birifor, Bobo, Dogon, Gan, Kassena, Ko, Lela, Lobi, Mossi, Nuna, Peul, Puguli, Senufo and Tuareg, offering a series of interpretations. It examines habitat, construction materials, elements, space and notions underlying their vernacular architecture, types of buildings and built heritage as well as the weaknesses of their state of conservation and maintenance. It also presents a reflection on the concept and history of cooperation architecture in the country as a preamble to the description of the development cooperation project carried out by the Universitat Politècnica de València in the village of Baasneere.

Dedicated to the memory of Juanvi Maravilla
(1964-2020)

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
PART 1. BURKINA FASO	5
1. Historic and geographical context	7
2. Cooperation architecture	27
PART 2. THE ARCHITECTURE OF BURKINA FASO	75
3. Habitats	77
4. Materials	111
5. Concepts	127
6. Types of Buildings	145
7. Architectural Space	223
8. Architectural elements	247
9. Heritage	311
10. Common deterioration in architecture	325
11. Maintenance	337

PART 3. BAASNEERE	345
12. The village of Baasneere	347
13. Urbanism and architecture in Baasneere.....	365
14. Housing in Baasneere	387
15. Algemesi Solidari and the school of Baasneere	399
 PART 4. COOPERATION PROJECT	 409
16. Research and scientific and training support for a cooperation initiative	411
17. Earthen tile vaults: Geometric optimization and structural behaviour	425
18. Earthen tile vaults: Experimentation and constructive process.....	435
19. Construction workshops for the professional training and technical empowerment of the community.....	445
20. Awareness workshops	455
21. Perspectives	465
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 467
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	473
BOOK CREDITS	475
IMAGE CREDITS	477

Introduction

In March 2014, the members of the RES-Arquitectura research group at Universitat Politècnica de València organized the course “Earthen architecture: constructive technique and restoration”. This was the first in a series of courses and workshops we ran in the framework of the “UNESCO UNITWIN Chair of Earthen Architecture, Building Cultures and Sustainable Development” until the 2020 pandemic put a stop to these. The courses, dedicated to traditional materials and techniques (earth, lime, gypsum, reeds, rammed earth, adobe, CEBs, rendering, tile vaults, etc.) highlighted these vernacular constructive processes, stressing their value as constructive traditions and also promoting their use in the conservation actions of historic buildings or in the construction of contemporary architecture seeking a higher level of environmental, sociocultural and socioeconomic sustainability. The architect Juan Vicente Maravilla – one of the driving forces of Algemesi Solidari together with Xavier Ferragut – took part as a student in the workshop on earthen architecture held in March 2014. From that point, Juanvi took us on an intense adventure which has lasted until today, with the publication of this

book. Juanvi, a permanent source of boundless energy until illness led to his death, would have been immensely proud of this.

Since 2009, the Algemesi Solidari association has been collaborating on a series of aspects, including social, medical and infrastructural issues, with the local association A3B in Baasneere (Burkina Faso), a village twinned with Algemesi in Valencia. Against this backdrop of cooperation, in 2014 talks were ongoing regarding the construction of a secondary school in Baasneere. As there was no such infrastructure the younger population had to cover many kilometres on foot to the nearest secondary school. This then meant that access to secondary education was limited to very few students among the local population. Algemesi Solidari proposed a construction that was as environmentally, socially and financially sustainable as possible. To achieve this, Juan Vicente Maravilla, the architect in charge of the design of the school, proposed to use earth as a constructive material and attended the workshop we organized in order to learn more about these techniques. The project for the

school as part of the activity of the Algemesi Solidari association can be found in the chapter “Algemesi Solidari and l’Escola de Baasneere” in this book.

From then on we began a permanent collaboration which led to the setting up of different training workshops: for students and others taking part in the design of the school (July 2014); on tile vaults as techniques for the construction of the school roof (February 2015); and on the CEB technique chosen for the construction of the school (June 2015). Our research group also helped draw up the project from its earliest stages and throughout the later stages. Meantime, the UPV Centre for Development Cooperation awarded us a grant for the “Standing With Burkina” project (2016-2018) as part of the UPV’s “ADSIDEO Programme – Cooperation 2016”. This funding allowed us to set up the framework for our involvement in the project, following three work axes: a research plan providing scientific support for the construction of the school in the materials (choice of earth) and constructive details (production, execution, feasibility and implementation of CEBs in tile vaults); a technical training plan for the local workers in charge of the construction of the school; and a plan to raise awareness of earthen architecture and its environmental and cultural benefits among the local population, especially the children and future users of the building.

Throughout this cooperation project we carried out scientific research at the UPV on the materials to be used, dosage, resistance, vault design, structural calculations, etc..., providing scientific and technical support in the design

and construction of the school. This research is detailed in the chapters “Research and scientific and training support for a cooperation initiative”, “Earthen tile vaults. Geometric optimization and structural behaviour” and “Earthen tile vaults. Experimentation and constructive process”. Moreover, from the early stages of the project we discussed possible training and awareness activities to be carried out in Baasneere, in keeping with the desired goals: professional training workshops for builders and developers from the country’s capital, Ouagadougou and from the village of Baasneere (an experience recorded in the chapter “Construction workshops for the professional training and technical empowerment of the community”); and workshops for raising awareness among the children of the primary school of Baasneere (activities explained in the book chapter “Awareness workshops”). These activities were designed specifically for our stay in Baasneere in January 2018.

During this stay in Burkina Faso, we also began complementary and parallel research to ensure a better understanding of the setting we were working in. The first objective was to learn more about the traditional architecture of the village of Baasneere and its conservation and transformation issues, as well as the culture which these constructions were based on; secondly, we tried to expand our gaze towards the country’s traditional architecture in order to identify the role of the Mossi architecture of Baasneere within the constructive cultures of Burkina Faso; and thirdly, we aimed to learn about types of architecture which were being promoted through international cooperation, especially cases which sought to establish a

relationship with local constructive culture. This research, initiated in situ with visits and interviews and later expanded, is recorded in the first part of the book in the chapters “The architecture of Burkina Faso” and “Cooperation architecture”.

Following a grant from the Cooperation Programme, awarded by the Centre for Development Cooperation of the Universitat Politècnica de València in the 2017-2018 academic year, in September and October 2018, María Lidón de Miguel, then a student of the Master’s in Conservation of Architectural Heritage at the Universitat Politècnica de València, after an extended stay in Burkina Faso, was able to provide us with further information. This was based on the urbanism, architecture and traditional construction in Baasneere, research which she used to complete her End-of-Master’s Project “Baasneere (Burkina Faso): Urban, Typological and Constructive Study”, 2019. Part of this features in the chapters “The village of Baasneere”, “Urbanism and architecture in Baasneere” and “Housing in Baasneere”.

In situ work was interrupted in 2019 and came to a halt, first due to the political situation in the country and later the health emergency which arose in 2020. However, the school in Baasneere is still being built in phases and the research group continues to collaborate with Algemesí Solidari in the design of the different

parts of the complex. Without a doubt, this cooperation project contributed to the school in Baasneere with its scientific and technical support. Its training and awareness actions aim to increase understanding of and appreciation for the architecture being built while searching for an architecture which is more committed to its environmental and social surroundings. However, the aspects which are not necessarily linked to the outcome of the architectural project are equally important. These include the mutual learning process observed throughout and the importance of local residents identifying with architecture. The school is not finished and construction will continue over the next few years but the collaboration carried out until now has resulted in a joint learning process, an understanding of cultural diversity, mutual respect and a recognition of the value of differences.

The results of the cooperation project can be found on its webpage¹; in an exhibition which was the subject of different displays and can be consulted online on the project webpage²; in conferences and seminars; and in different papers and publications from international conferences. These results have been finally compiled in this book which aims to provide information on the research, project, collaboration and activities carried out, showing what was learnt during this experience as well as the scientific results.

¹ <https://conburkina.blogs.upv.es/>

² <https://conburkina.blogs.upv.es/exposicion/>



PART 1. BURKINA FASO

This part aims to help understand the historical and geographical context of Burkina Faso and the concept of cooperation architecture. Burkina Faso, an inland country with a millenary culture, is located in central West Africa. With borders that were artificially established by non-African agents as recently as 1908, Burkina Faso remained a French colony until 1960, when it gained its Independence as a country named Upper Volta. At least 26 ethnicities, ten languages and several religions coexist in this country. For this reason, in 1984 President Thomas Sankara coined the new name Burkina Faso and the adjective Burkinabè, referring to three main languages spoken in the country.

As with its geographical limits and organizational structure, colonial architecture was initially the dominant choice, despite its lack of sustainability and cultural, bioclimatic and

material unsuitability. However, in the 1970s initial steps were taken to explore an architectural language more in keeping with the culture of the country. The 21st century saw the advent of a new concept both in Burkina Faso and other developing countries: cooperation architecture – new projects with foreign funding that aimed to co-design local architecture with the residents, making at least partial use of vernacular culture, materials and local techniques. The second chapter explores this new architectural concept, both in Africa and Burkina Faso, as well as its main internationally recognized representatives, including Pritzker Prize winner Diébédo Francis Kéré.



Loubila Dam on the Massili river, tributary of the Nakambe or White Volta.

1. Historic and geographical context

An international cooperation project proposed for a country which was unknown at the outset had to be based on the most in-depth study possible of the country and its constructive traditions. Equally, research on vernacular architecture is linked both to the understanding of the cultural context of the society which built it (history, way of life and customs) and to the physical context which made it possible, the geographical and climate conditioning factors which also provide natural resources and the optimum way to use them.

Some of the key aspects for an understanding of the characteristics of the traditional architecture of Burkina Faso at present are the situation of a territory inhabited by a wide range of cultural groups, how the territory was outlined to become an independent state, the historical evolution which led to the current situation of the country. It was also subject to influences from the Sahara and the Atlantic given its continental location.

Historical evolution of the territory before becoming a country

Burkina Faso is located in the centre of West Africa, surrounded by Mali to the northwest; Niger to the east; and Benin, Togo, Ghana and Ivory Coast to the south. However, it should be borne in mind that these territories were only recognized as states just over a century ago and that their borders are based on outlines set mostly by non-African agents. One example is the straight line of a parallel dividing the new colonies of Ghana and the Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) established in an agreement signed in Paris in 1898.³

In the late 19th century, Upper Volta was the territory situated on the upper basin of this river, fed by its tributaries *Nakambe* (White Volta), *Nazinon* (Red Volta) and *Mouhoun* (Black Volta). This territory was home to numerous cultures which shared features in language structure, social organization systems, politics, and religious beliefs. All of these had unique characteristics which shaped their identity as different cultural

³ Joseph Ki-Zerbo, *Historia del África Negra: De los orígenes a las independencias* (Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2011): 609.

groups. These similarities and unique features could be seen in their construction: physical proximity meant that the natural resources available and the demands of climate were similar, although the culture of each individual society brought its own distinctive features to the use of materials.

The arrival of Europeans brought with it an interest in learning more about these peoples. Initial attempts made to classify these “Voltaic peoples” by language led to extensive academic debate due to the lack of consensus on classification criteria for the variants of local languages into groups and subgroups.

In addition, a risk was entailed in passing from a classification by language to a classification by culture, as the linguistic and cultural spheres did not necessarily overlap. According to Izard, this could lead to cultures being grouped under the same name which when examined in depth would have shown original aspects that would have led them to be considered independent from each other.⁴

Based on this debate and subsequent research, historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo listed four different population groups:⁵ The autochthonous peoples (Gurunsi, Senufo, Dongo, Bwa, Kurumba, etc.); peoples with a Mande culture (Bissa, Samo, Bobo-fing, Yarsé, etc.); the Fula or Peul, a semi-sedentary people; the Mossi.

Throughout history out of these groups only the Mossi appeared to have created a recognizable state based on grouping kingdoms (Yatenga, Ouagadougou, Koudougou, Tenkodogo and Kaya) which demonstrated their authority over the rest of peoples. However, as the author points out, this statement is relative as the scope of local authority and the complexity of the political relationships between groups were not known.⁶

In short, the Volta territory was mostly occupied by the Mossi who inhabited the basin between the *Nakambe* and *Nazinon*. Other peoples in the area were the Peul and Gourmantche in the north and east; the Bisa and Gurunsi in the south; the Lela, Ko, and Samo in the west; and the Lobi, Bobo and Birifor in the far south.⁷ These groups would have settled in the territory as a result of migration, conflict and alliances about which little is known given the paucity of written historical sources and the lack of knowledge of traditional oral sources. It was thus to this unknown multicultural context that representatives of European countries travelled in order to begin what later became known as the “distribution of Africa” or the “race for Africa”.

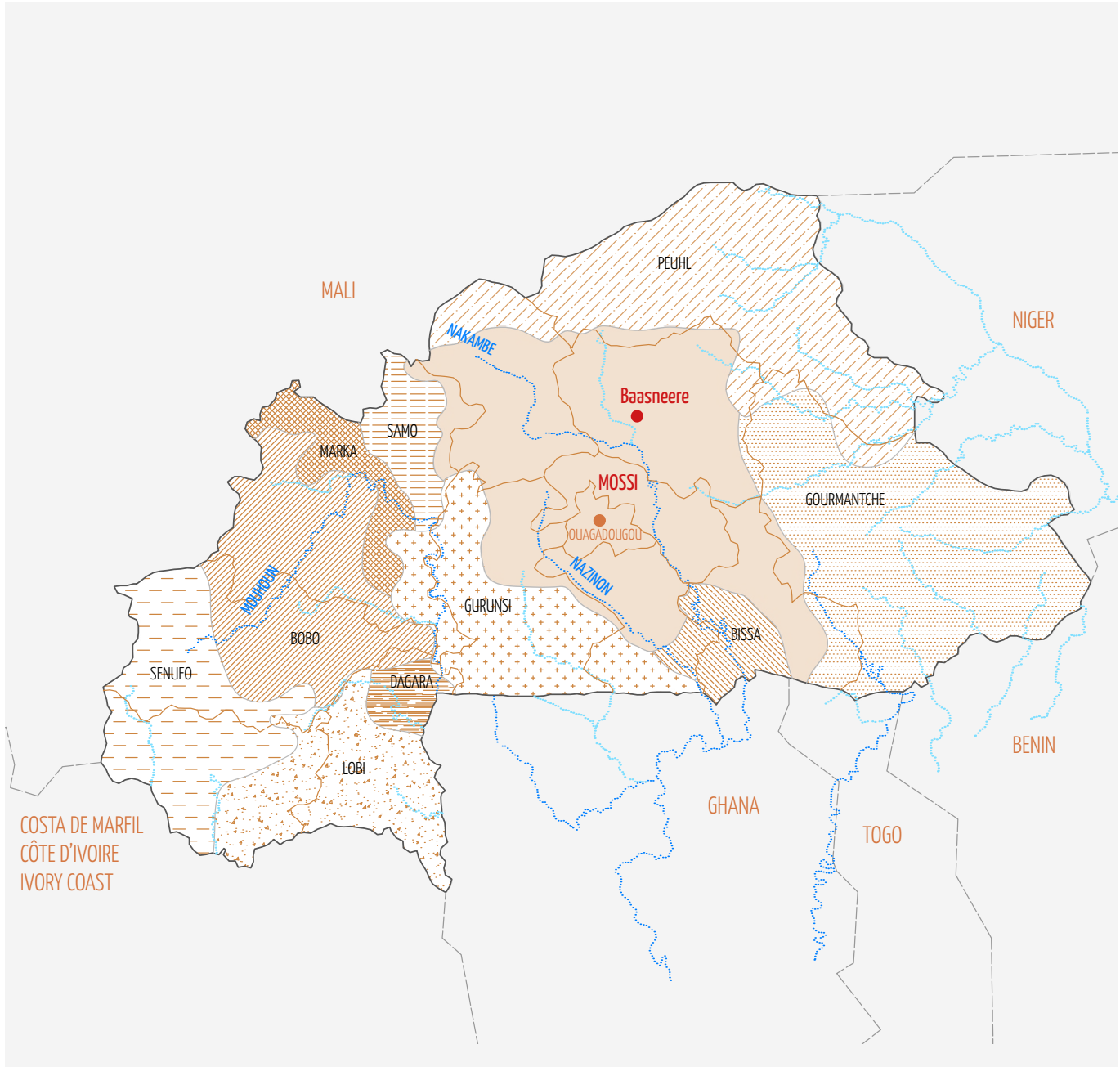
Following the conflict between Great Britain and France to establish alliances and free trade agreements with the different peoples of the territory and breaking the agreements

⁴ Michel Izard, “Introduction à l’histoire des Royaumes Mossi”, *Recherches Voltaïques*, vol. 12, (Paris-Ouagadougou: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1970): 11-12.

⁵ Ki-Zerbo 2011, op. cit.: 366.

⁶ Dominique Zahan, “Pour une histoire des mossi de Yatenga”, *L’Homme* 1, n° 2 (1961): 6.

⁷ Izard 1970, op. cit., p. 13-16.



Approximate distribution of cultures found in the territory of Burkina Faso.



Ouagadougou, 1932.



The chiefs discuss government business while passing round and sharing a bowl of tea, 1930.



signed with Great Britain, the French finally imposed their power conquering Ouagadougou in 1896 using Senegalese and Bambara troops.⁸ The occupation was complete in under four years and the borders were established in the fourth year.⁹

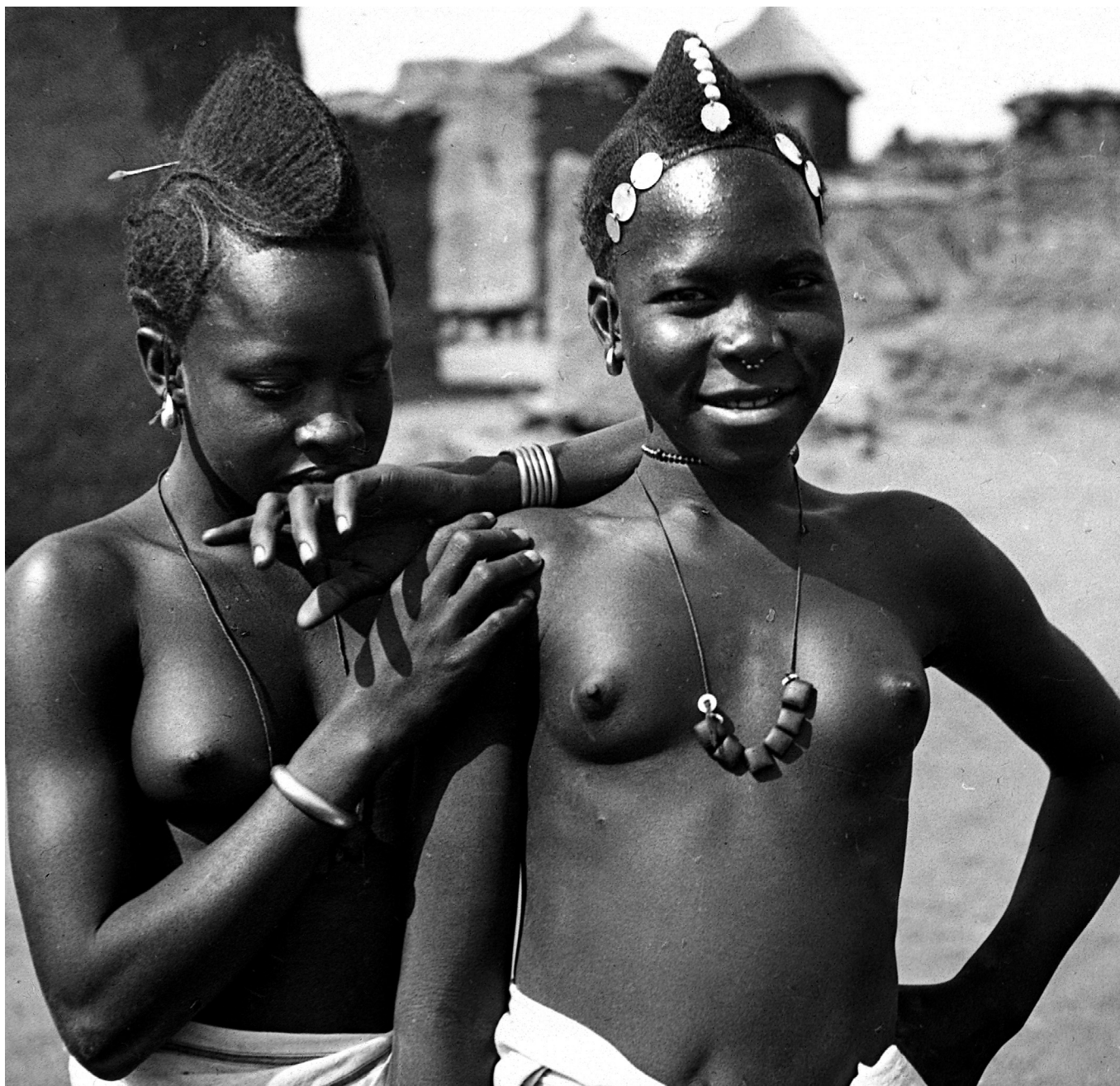
In 1919 the territory known as Upper Volta appeared officially as a colony of French East Africa along with the Ivory Coast, Dahomey (currently Benin), French Guinea, Mauritania, Senegal, French Sudan (now Mali) and French Togoland (now Togo). In 1932, however, it seemed more convenient to France to divide this colony with no coastal access and little production compared to the rest of colonies. Upper Volta was distributed between French Sudan, Niger and the Ivory Coast, and its inhabitants were forced to emigrate in order to work the land in neighbouring colonies.

The highest concentration of Mossi workers was in the Ivory Coast where planters needed abundant and cheap labour.¹⁰ In fact, these population flows from Burkina Faso to the Ivory Coast remained over time and then became customary, as Suzanne Lallemand has

⁸ Izard 1970, op. cit., p. 627.

⁹ Ki-Zerbo 2011, op. cit., p. 607.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 760.



Peul girls in a village north of Ouahigouya, 1933.



Musicians in the Court of the King of the Mossi, 1930.



In the Court of the King of the Mossi, 1930.



pointed out.¹¹ The accounts of some men in Baasneere confirm that emigration in search for work in the neighbouring country is still often found today.

The dissolution of the colony, mass migration of the population to other territories, the forced labour regime suffered in neighbouring territories, and the compulsory participation of men as a corps of the French army in the Second World War did not prevent the traditional chiefs from conserving the identity and autonomy of their peoples. After the war, a group of chiefs from the former Mossi kingdom of Yatenga began a campaign to convince the National Assembly of Paris to re-establish Upper Volta. The French government finally elected to send a representative to determine whether the population was in agreement with this.¹²

Whether due to the favourable result of this report or the desire to halt the anticolonialist advance of Houphouët-Boigny and the RDA (*Ressemblement Démocratique Africain*), with increasing representation in the Ivory Coast, Upper Volta recovered its status as a French colony in 1947, holding its first elections two years later in 1949.

These elections marked the start of a slow process through which power gradually passed from the hands of the traditional chiefs to politicians in the newly formed parties. In fact, these parties were actually born as representatives of the different cultural groups, led by those whose economic and

¹¹ Lallemand, S. « Une famille mossi ». *Recherches Voltaïques*. Vol. 17 (CNRS: Paris, France, 1977).

¹² Skinner, Elliot P. *The Mossi of the Upper Volta: The Political Development of a Sudanese People* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1964), 183-184.

social status met the conditions required to found a party. In addition, the rural populations were reluctant to change and even now the figure of the traditional chief maintains its authority. For these populations the re-establishment of the colony and the holding of elections did not signify the gaining of civil rights but rather the end to forced labour outside the territory.¹³

On 5 August 1960 the colony gained its independence from France. In the ten years following the first democratic elections, anticolonialist ideas had spread to the different political parties in the country, just as they had in all the other French colonies in West Africa. Finally, circumstances both inside and outside the country led to Maurice Yameogo becoming the first president of the Republic of Upper Volta.

Future prospects

Following the establishment of the republic, the first elections with direct universal suffrage were held on 28 July 1964. However, a period of instability followed the democratic process, with several coups and referendums leading to the formation of a Second (1970) and Third (1975) Republic of Upper Volta.¹⁴

The intervention of members of the army in political activity was increasing and coups became the way to reach the presidency. After one such coup in 1982 there was a split in ideology between those who had taken part in the uprising so that the more progressive faction, which included Henri Zongo, Jean-Baptiste Boukary Lingani, Thomas Sankara and Blaise Compaoré, was persecuted and incarcerated.

¹³ Skinner 1964, op. cit., p. 189.

¹⁴ Bernard Zongo, *Parlons Mooré: Langue et culture des mossi* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), 18.





Traditional housing undergoing change in the Tiébélé region.

On 4 August 1983, Blaise Compaoré took power. At the head of the National Council for the Revolution, as first minister of the new government, was Thomas Sankara whose speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations in defence of the dignity of his people attracted the attention of the representatives of the remaining countries.¹⁵

On his arrival to power, Sankara took a series of measures which, like his words, were surprising for their unexpected realism and coherence. His main objectives were to fight corruption and ensure the austerity of a rich and privileged political class in one of the poorest countries in the world. He also implemented initiatives for promoting education, boosting local economic development, and improving the situation of women in society. On the first anniversary of the revolution, to boost the morale and trust of a population undermined by instability, Sankara gave the country the name of “Burkina Faso”. Thus, in a single name he united the three main languages of the country: More (language of the Mossi), Diula (language of the ethnicities of the Mande culture) and Fulfulde (language of the Peul). In Mooré the term *burkina* means “integrity” or “honour” while the Diula term *faso* means “territory” or “land”. From that point on, the inhabitants of Burkina Faso became the *Burkinabè*, that is, the “citizens” (*bè* in Fulfulde) of the “integrity” (*burkina* in Mooré).¹⁶

However, the hope that sprung in the Burkinabè with the arrival of this new government soon disappeared when on 15 October 1987, in his third year in power, Thomas Sankara was murdered during

¹⁵ Thomas Sankara, *Somos herederos de las revoluciones del mundo: Discursos de la revolución de Burkina Faso 1983-87* (Atlanta: Pathfinder Press, 2007), 10.

¹⁶ Zongo 2004, op. cit., p. 11.



Dwellings in the Burkinabe savanna dotted with thatched granaries.



a coup initiated by his former friend and colleague, Blaise Compaoré. In time, all the former members of the political revolution started in 1983 by Sankara were tried and executed and Compaoré remained in power for 27 years, abolishing all the measures put into place by the previous government. Sadly, the poverty denounced by Sankara in his speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1984 has not improved greatly in over 30 years and Burkina Faso remains one of the countries with the lowest Human Development Index in the world.¹⁷

In 2014 a new coup and a civil revolt ended the rule of dictator Compaoré. Since 2015 Burkina Faso has had a democratically elected president, but its history as a colony created, dissolved and recomposed, the instability of its governments, successive coups, the assassination of a president beloved by his people, corruption, the exploitation of natural resources by foreign companies with the connivance of a dictatorial government, have left an imprint that is hard to erase in a country that already seems exhausted and apathetic with regard to its future.

Fortunately, this may only be in “appearance” as the Burkinabè youth continues to believe that, despite it all, better prospects are possible. The words of Sankara can still be read on the streets of Ouagadougou and theatre festivals are a reminder of the verses of the writer Aimé Césaire, poet, playwright, intellectual and politician from Martinique, ideologist of the concept of “blackness” and defender of African roots, with a great influence in the decolonizing movements in Africa. These ideas of freedom and justice are found

¹⁷ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Índices e indicadores de Desarrollo Humano. Actualización estadística de 2018 (Nueva York: PNUD, 2018) (http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2018_human_development_statistical_update_es.pdf)





Peul women around the village of Baasneere.

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