

The Preservation Problems of Harar City

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Historical Background

The early history of Harar is obscure, since the oral traditions and ancient chronicles differ. However, its history is very much linked to the expansion of Islam. The city is on the border line between the dry and sandy lowlands of East Africa that stretches out to Berbera and the Red Sea and to the rainy and fertile highlands. As a result, it is a place where farmers meet and exchange goods with caravan traders. Anyone who is strong enough to put this place under his domain will be in a good position to control the trade route.

In the 14th century when Islam started spreading its influence among the highlanders of Ethiopia, its mainspring was Harar. It was then that the present day Harar developed fully as a city. Sometime in the 17th century, a new forceful tribe called the Ormos, coming from the southern part of present-day Ethiopia, invaded the Harar area and settled everywhere except in the city itself, which survived as an independent sultanate. In order to check their movement, the sultanate had a wall built around the city. The Ormos, who previously had no religion, accepted Islam as their religion. They were not allowed to live within the enclosed part of the city. Anyone who for some reason or another entered the city through one of its five gates was asked to leave before sundown.

In 1875, the Egyptians conquered Harar and had the city under their domain for 10 years. The French, who occupied present-day Djibuti until the 1970's, also played a part in the overall economic and cultural life of the people of Harar.

The Italians, during their five-year occupation of Ethiopia (1936-41), also left their mark on the general outlook of the city.

As a result, Harar is considered as a place where different cultures and customs were brought and melted together.

The Urban Fabric

Harar is built upon a kidney-shaped piece of land. Its total area amounts to not more than 50 hectares. The length of its surrounding wall is three and a half kilometers. The wall previously had five gates, each for a different purpose.

Argo Beri	- gate for the people of Argo
Axum Beri	- gate for the salt traders

Asmadium Beri - gate for the people of Shoa
Bedro Beri - gate for the blacksmith
Sukutal Beri - gate for oxen

There are approximately 6,000 houses and 80 shrines. The houses and shrines are all of similar construction techniques.

The walls of the houses were built of rough stones laid in a so-called earth mortar. As a surface protection the walls were then plastered with a volcanic ash mortar. The roofs were usually flat and were made of timber joints covered on top by mats made of palm tree leaves. As a water proofing element a sand-earth mixture was laid down on the mats. This mixture was always checked after the end of every rainy season.

The interior of the houses were divided into three rooms: one was a living and praying room; the others were a bed-room and storage. The bed-rooms were also used as kitchens.

There were no latrines and all the human and animal wastes were collected in a container and deposited every morning inside the fortification wall. The floors were all covered with animal dung.

As for drinking water since there is no well inside the city the women had to bring it in a jar from the near-by stream. For every house there was a small courtyard which was used for washing clothes, drying grains or for future expansion.

The narrow and meandering roads and alleys seem to have grown up in a haphazard manner. In the last census (1984) there were 3,500 people living in the old part of Harar.

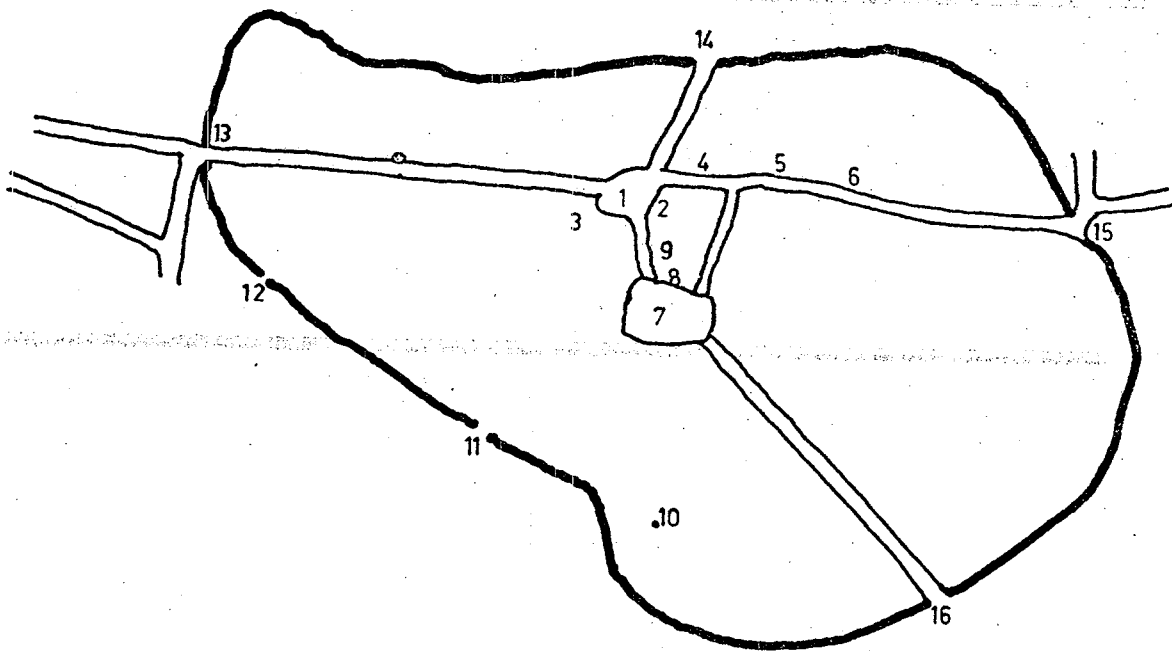
Major Buildings

Besides the principal mosque and two main shrines, the major architectural features are those built in the last century by Indian and Arab craftsmen for the then Governor Generals. The assembly and dining hall of Ras Makonnen, and his treasury, the house of Ras Teferi Makonnen (who later became Emperor Haile Selassie) and the so-called "Jorald Rambau house" can be mentioned as historical houses.

Problems of Conservation

I have tried to explain the existing conditions of the town, and the problems of conserving it are as complex as its history.

The walls and gates have been built and rebuilt by the town conquerors (Egyptians, Italians, just to mention a few) the original and the later additions are so intermingled that they are difficult to identify. Nowadays a big part of it has been



KEY

- 1—FERES MAGALA
- 2—MEDHANE ALEM CHURCH (ORTHODOX)
- 3—RAS MEKONEN HALL
- 4—AMIR NOUR TOMB
- 5—PRINCIPAL MOSQUE
- 6—MUSEUM
- 7—OPEN MARKET
- 8—RAMBOU'S HOUSE
- 9—RAS TEFFERI'S HOUSE
- 10—SHEIKH ABADIR
- 11—GATE FOR THE BLACK SMITH.
- 12—GATE TO SHOA
- 13—GATE TO HARAR (LATTER ADITION)
- 14—GATE FOR SALT TRADERS
- 15—GATE TO ARQQ
- 16—GATE FOR CATTLE

scrambled. The original gates were either torn down to give way for vehicles or were made into part of the house built around them. Some of the streets were widened and asphalted. (Due to a lack of proper drainage, the streets are being used as open sewerage gutters and hence have lost their original characteristics.) The old but functional houses are systematically torn down and re-built with modern building materials (cement, bricks and corrugated iron sheeting).

Because of a lack of proper maintenance work and a lack of funds, these old small houses are being washed away by the heavy rainfall. In the last three years some 500 houses were destroyed by rain. Since there is a lack of effective legislation, the dwellers have taken the "restoration work" in their own hands and they have completely altered the shape, the colour and the surrounding area of the 800 year old mosque.

Actions Taken

The Ethiopian Government, realizing the urgency of the restoration work, has set up a new project for the conservation of Harar city. It has also obtained a quarter of a million dollars from UNDP to cover the costs of international consultants, to purchase materials abroad, as well as to train Ethiopians in the field of urban planning. UNESCO, which has been helping the country in so many areas, has also agreed to cooperate with the government in this matter.

The main objective of this project is to develop a plan for the conservation of the historic town of Harar in general and specifically for the restoration of parts of the town wall to its original form, and to establish a pilot restoration project on a sample Aderian House. The project will actively and directly contribute to the global concern of preservation and improvement of the physical environment by outlining the necessary legislative and technical directives and encouraging the inhabitants of Harar to actively participate in the conservation of their own buildings and surrounding areas.

In the near future Ethiopia will launch an international appeal to be able to conserve its cultural heritage, some of which has gained the world's attention. And for this UNESCO, together with the Ethiopian Government, has prepared a Master Plan.

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Summary

Harar is one of the most romantic and colourful cities in Ethiopia. It lies in the southeast hills on the edges of the desert that stretches all the way to the Gulf of Aden. The city, with its walls, red buildings and lime-washed shrines has been attracting explorers and adventurers for many years. The medieval wall's total length is 3,500 meters with five gates. Within the enclosure there are about 86 shrines (mosques), two churches and more than 6,000 houses in which 40,000 inhabitants live and work.

The meandering narrow roads which were once paved with sandstone slabs now are either widened and asphalted to let cars pass through or are used simply as an open sewerage canal.

The shrines and original dwellings (Aderes houses, because the majority of the inhabitants belong to the ethnic group called Aderes) are made with the same construction technique. The foundation wall is made of basaltic stone; the walls are half-timbered and plastered with mud clay. The roofs are flat, made of juniper wood, with bamboo matting and a thick layer of earth on top. Nowadays, the dwellers are rapidly "modernizing" their houses by tearing them down and reconstructing them with new building materials (i.e., cement, bricks, corrugated iron sheeting, etc.).

After 1974, all extra houses were nationalized and are now administered by governmental agencies. Unfortunately, the rent collected from these houses and shops is so small that it cannot cover basic maintenance costs. Consequently, many of them are rapidly disintegrating.

The Ministry of Culture, the agency responsible for the preservation of the cultural heritage of the country, has made an effort to solve these complex problems by allocating special funds for maintenance, and with UNDP and UNESCO, has developed plans for the conservation of the historic town in general and, specifically, the restoration of parts of the wall, as well as establishing a pilot conservation project on a sample Aderian house.

Les Problèmes de la Restauration de la Ville de Harar

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Sommaire

Harar est l'une des villes les plus romantiques et colorées d'Ethiopie. Elle s'étend sur les collines du sud-est et le désert qui descend vers le Golfe d'Aden. La ville a attiré pendant des années beaucoup d'explorateurs et aventuriers avec ses remparts, ses édifices rouges et ses blanches mosquées. Le mur médiéval a cinq portes et une longueur de 3.500 mètres. A l'intérieur de la clôture il y a environ 86 mosquées, deux églises et plus de 6.000 maisons dans lesquelles vivent et travaillent 40.000 habitants.

Les routes étroites et sinueuses qui étaient autrefois pavées de grès sont maintenant élargies et asphaltées pour faire passer les voitures ou bien simplement utilisées pour l'évacuation des eaux sales.

Les mosquées et les habitations originelles (maisons des Aderes car la majorité des habitants sont de cette ethnie et sont appelés Aderes) sont toutes construites selon d'une même technique. Le mur de fondation est fait de pierre basaltiques, les murs sont souvent en pise, les toits sont plats et fait de bois de genévrier, avec des bambous et d'épaisses couches de terre dessus.

De nos jours les habitants modernisent leur maisons les batissant avec de nouveaux matériaux de construction (ciment, briques, tôle ondulée etc.)

Après 1974, beaucoup de maisons ont été nationalisées et sont maintenant administrées par des agences gouvernementales. Mais malheureusement la location de ces maisons et des boutiques est si insuffisante qu'elle ne peut couvrir les frais d'entretien. Par conséquent beaucoup sont rapidement abimées.

Le ministère de la culture responsable de la préservation du patrimoine culturel a fait un effort pour résoudre ces problèmes complexes en allouant des fonds pour l'entretien avec l'aide de l'UNDP et de l'UNESCO pour développer un plan pour la conservation de la ville historique en général et restaurer en partie le rempart. Il a établi un plan directeur concernant un type de maison Adere.