

REPORT OF THE 2ND CONGRESS OF VN BUILDERS

Boromo, Oct 27 – 30, 2007



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1 INTRODUCTION

1. 1 Objectives of the congress

The Voute Nubienne Association organised its first congress in June 2007. We assisted the team working on this second meeting, which brought together all the VN masons. From now on, this type of meeting should happen twice a year, to open and close the construction season (which is during the dry season, more or less from November to June).

This second congress was aimed in particular at the masons of Level 3, 4, and 5 (mason, foreman and contractor). The goal is to divide up the future building sites between the different teams for the 2007-2008 season.

This meeting should also give the masons some tools to speed up the apprentice training for which they are responsible. Indeed the Association has a problem of reconciling demand with the available resources: many building sites are in need of qualified masons. It is thus important to accelerate the apprentice training programme, so they can become masons and run building sites on their own.

Finally, this meeting was also a chance to help the masons think about developing their entrepreneurial skills, so they can become independent, find their own clients, and not depend so much on the Association.

Sixty masons, and about twenty apprentices of Level 1 and 2, were expected out of a total of 150 registered personnel in the Association.

1.2 Available Resources

Logistics and materials

The meeting took place at the VN Hotel in Boromo (on the road between Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso). This guest house, with its rooms built by VN masons using the VN technique, is like a show house for potential clients. The vast inner courtyard can host many people under the shade of the magnificent central mango tree, providing a very pleasant working environment. Local masons had to find relatives to stay with in the town. Those who came from far away stayed at the hotel booked by AVN for the congress. Each mason and apprentice was offered lunch and dinner by AVN, prepared by the women of the Youlou family, (where we stayed) and helped by some mason's wives.

Human resources

Were present to supervise this congress:

- Thomas Granier : president of the association from France
- Séri Youlou : co-founder and responsible for Burkina Faso, based in Boromo
- Francis Tiene ; his secretary based in Boromo
- Madi Yogo : secretary based in Boromo and helped out temporarily during the congress
- Cheik Moctar K Diallo: from Mali
- Us: Gaelle Bois-Soulier and Laure Cornet, architects, studying earth architecture at the School of Architecture in Grenoble (France) and following an internship in AVN.

Preparatory work

To prepare this congress, we made several documents in the Ganges bureau (France) and in Boromo.

- *The Mason's Book* : a technical document of 32 illustrated pages, retracing the construction steps according to the AVN principles and showing a few general technical tips. The graphic documents as well as the French commentary, prepared in France, were reduced to a minimum, considering that most of the masons are illiterate. This work had to be adapted once we arrived in Boromo, that is why we tested the book on a few masons and realised that the spatial views and some symbols were not understood. The changes were more important than expected, and sometimes for totally unexpected reasons. The book was translated into Jula and Moré. This was difficult because people speaking and reading French are rare but even more so people able to translate back in their language, especially since these people are not

necessarily builders. Also inputting information on the computer was slow because some letters change from one alphabet to the other.

- *The promotional brochure* for the masons' clients was prepared in part in France: the brochure gives the preview of the type of building they are able to offer with example plans, volumes and pictures. A second document, made in Boromo, is a flyer to complete the first one. This flyer is used by masons as a business card for their clients, it presents the work of AVN and the mason's personal details.
- *Flash cards* : the last documents made in Ganges (France) are flash cards based on the pre-existing cards that were used in the first congress. These were modified and changed several times both in France and in Burkina Faso. The two first cards are the *Personal mason information* and *Personal apprentice information* ones, which give all the information useful for the Association: last name, name, language, date of sign up to AVN, level, building site participation, etc. Others cards are *Building site cards*, which give all the information concerning each building site: site, date, client, team, information on building... The last card is entitled *List of apprentices by mason* to show how many apprentices have been taught by each mason during the season. It is also to ensure that the apprentices have had a complete training (that means they progress in levels). All this to prevent one mason hiring many apprentices who do not progress.

1.3 Development of the Congress

Themes and organisation

Many themes had to be addressed during these few days of congress, so a task list was established during meetings with the supervising team:

- Thomas Granier introduction's speech including presentation of the team and collaborators of AVN (in General Assembly)
- A reminder of the rules and of the congress program (in General Assembly)
- An individual presentation by each mason and apprentice present (especially the level 3, 4, 5 and after the apprentice 1 and 2), in order to verify and record the necessary information. Also to know which masons have found clients and building sites (+ collecting information)
- Making the masons aware of entrepreneurship and independence from AVN long term (in General Assembly) + work on the *Mason's book*, with general presentation distribution document along with work in small groups (alone and supervised) + demonstration in General Assembly
- Handing out of flash card information and explanations about them.
- A speech on the money earned by masons and its redistribution in local households, and a brief word on the health risks during long trips (in General Assembly)
- Encouraging masons' group initiatives and the construction of their own house (general assembly then concerned people) + micro-credit possibilities
- Slide show on different finished building sites (open time)

- Questions on the different themes (General Assembly)
- Dividing up of the building sites for the 2007-2008 season

For the smooth development of the Congress, we had established an overall planning, but this wasn't followed in the end.

1.4 Target audience

This Congress brought together mostly masons of Levels 3, 4 and 5, which means people having attained the level of mason, foreman and contractor. Some apprentices were also invited to attend the meeting but were not directly concerned. The building contractors, the foremen, and future building contractor masons are the only ones capable of running a building site. They will become the trainers of their own apprentices, and relay the information.

2. REGISTRATION OF PARTICIPANTS

One of the important tasks of this Congress was to cross-reference the available information and to update the existing data-sheets.

Each mason, upon arrival, had to be recorded by the bureau (installed in the courtyard of the hotel *La voute nubienne*), giving information on his building site and his availability. During this step, all the transportation costs to get to the meeting were reimbursed.

As the data-sheets were completed, the building sites were redistributed according to each mason's availability.

The downside of this step : we should have organised a preparation meeting about the data-sheets prior to the congress, so that everyone on the team could use them. In the event, Thomas was alone responsible for the data-sheets, which slowed down the registration procedure, especially considering the quantity of unqualified people who simply wanted to sign up, and the unexpected numbers of masons of Level 1 and 2 who came. In addition, the masons were eager to be freed because it was harvest season.

3. PROMOTION AND CLIENT RELATIONS

The promotional documents intended for Levels 4 and 5 were extended to Level 3 masons, because of their future entrepreneurial potential. It was important to remind them that they should find clients on their own and be able to manage them because the Association will not always be present for them, indeed it will disappear in the long term. We should point out that, for the most part, up to now, the clients come via the Association.

We choose to do this workshop in several steps. First, the translators (Saïdou, Séri and Drissa) gave a general presentation of the documents to both masons and apprentices. Secondly, we put together a role-playing game. The goal was to have the masons participate in order to see if they had understood the purpose of the documents.

We were the clients and a randomly chosen mason had to sell us a project. The game was at first very chaotic because role-playing is not something very common for them, furthermore the simultaneous translation in three different languages made communication messy. After a while, the masons got used to it, and the game went on well.

To finish this workshop, we asked the masons to choose a model from the promotion document and to estimate its cost. We did not expect much from this exercise knowing that very few masons know how to read and write. But we were pleasantly surprised when the following day they all came back with their estimates. They each found somebody to write for them. Each of them truly made an effort. Considering this exercise is far from easy for them, we found them attentive and, for some, very interested.

4. THE VN TECHNIQUE

4.1 Presentation of the Mason's Book

The mason's book, which demonstrates the main steps in construction of a Nubian vault, is a support for apprentice training by the masons.

Development

First, we presented the book to the Assembly, always translating orally the explanations into Jula, Moré and Nounouma. Then the document was distributed to everyone along with a group number. Each group had to try to understand the document together. People got together naturally, according to affinity. In each group there could be different levels, different regions or languages present. We asked the apprentices to join in the groups so they could get introduced to this document.

After, the moderators (Laure, Gaëlle, Francis, Séri and Nestor, and literate masons that had a good knowledge of the technique) went from group to group to review what was understood and what was not. This activity took a lot of time because we had to go over every detail, translating in some cases and explaining in detail each step.

Conclusion

We noticed that as soon as at least one person in a group knows how to read, the overall comprehension is much better, whereas in the other groups it was much more difficult to get the message across. What might seem strait forward for us is not necessarily so for the masons.

4.2 Practical exercises 3, 4, 5 : how to build a right angle ?

We found it interesting to insist on the accurate marking out of the house foundations, because it is the weak point of many masons, but an essential part for the good achievement of the construction.

After having gathered up the necessary tools (rod, rope and measuring tape) we asked a few masons from the assembly to do a demonstration of the marking out of a right angle. A few days after the congress, we met some masons on the road trying out the right angle technique, which goes to show that we had some impact with this exercise after all.

4.3 Question time

At the end of each theme, we encouraged the participants to ask their questions, and to share their worries. The answers were given collectively because often they concerned more than one mason.

The main questions were about foundations, and the construction of several storey buildings. During these sessions everyone could give their opinion and share their experience with the others. They were very interesting.

In addition, some masons shared their mistakes and advised the young ones, for instance to be careful regarding money.

4.4 Information sheets

In order to have a good follow up with the workers, we put together an information sheet system, where the masons have to provide information each year concerning themselves, their apprentices and the building sites. During the last Congress we also used these information sheets, but their use was not as thorough as planned. So this time we explained how to fill them in, and that it was important to bring them back.

As for the other exercises, we had to translate our explanations into three different languages. It was of course more difficult for the people who do not read or write because they had to understand the sheets in order to explain it to the people who will write for them.

We hope to get many sheets back next year in order to measure the year's work.

4.5 Recommendation in General Assembly

At the end of the congress, the President gave some recommendations to all concerning, amongst other things, their behaviour with clients, the health risks during long periods of travel, and the temptations offered by their earnings.

He reminded us of the AVN's objectives, how to use the documents, and next year's plans and projections.

5. CONCLUSION

At the end of the Congress, we noted an overall good attendance of the workers. In the beginning, the masons were shy but slowly became more self-confident and joined in the exercises, asked questions and shared their personal experiences, good or bad. In addition, we had some positive feedback: some masons came to ask us more questions, others, said they were very satisfied with the content of the Congress. They thought a new step was attained with the distribution of the documents, the important group work, the exchanges and advice shared.

We also had many surprises, concerning the level of personal involvement: as much as for the estimate exercise as for the right angle exercise, which had a remarkable impact on the masons, even after the Congress.

During the Congress, some masons really stood out from the group and we thank them : some helped us either by supervising the groups or by translating (Saïdou, Drissa or Nestor); others were helpful by asking questions that served all (M. Salambré).

However, recording the personal information took the masons a very long time. They had to wait two days before the real work could start. The logistics should be rethought and organised well in advance with the whole management team, to achieve a better division of work and responsibilities. It does not seem necessary to have the Level 1 and 2 masons present for the whole congress. Most of the information is aimed at levels 3, 4, and 5, we could imagine, for next year, to offer one day with specific activities for the Level 1 and 2 masons / apprentices.

Also, the many visitors who wanted to join in slowed us down, as did the eating arrangements (AVN was not supposed to provide 2 meals per day for non members). A ticket system distributed at registration could solve this problem. On the other hand it was very difficult for us, new AVNs members, to identify the many masons, their names, their level, and their location.

Another delicate subject, the multiple languages (French, Jula, Moré and Nounouma) slowed the workshops down and sometimes made the ideas difficult to follow. However, looking back at this problem, we think it is best this way, rather than to divide up into language groups (like we once thought) which would probably lessen the quality of the information and the group coherence. Besides, we should translate the documents into Nounouma, considering the large quantity of Nounouma speakers at the congress.

Overall, we were personally satisfied with the congress, especially knowing that this type of event is new for us and that the planning was very perfunctory and with many improvisations.