



# Crafting Ambiguity: The Duality of Religious Expression in Almohad Architecture

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the way in which the Almohads perceived and applied architecture to explore and convey the tension between austere religious devotion and architectural creativity. A creativity that is specifically Almohads'. Besides establishing themselves as a mighty and pious Empire apprehended by locals as well as foreigners, the twelfth century Almohad rulers manifested an unprecedented artistic capacity shown in their architectural achievement and ornamentation. The Almohad Empire had a deep and lasting effect on the conception of building mosques and minarets in the Western Muslim world, starting in Morocco and spreading to Algeria and the Iberian Peninsula. The Almohad quintessential artistic style goes hand in hand with the religious ideas put into practice by the founder of the Almohads, namely, Ibn Tumart (c. 1080-1130). The latter attempted to reform the religious perception of Islam by allegedly teaching focus on the Qur'an and the prophet's sayings rather than on the widely acknowledged school of law, that is, Malikite jurisprudence. His religious revolutionary reform, contrary to his rivals and predecessors, the Almoravids, is characterised by an abhorrence and a disdain for moral laxity. As to his political ambition to impose the Almohadism as the new ruling power, Ibn Tumart died before he fully realised his dream. This was indeed fulfilled by his enormously gifted disciple and military strategist, Abd al-Mumin. Furthermore, the latter, his son, Abu Yaqub Yusuf, and his grandson, Abu Yusuf Yaqub al-Mansur all manifested a sensitivity for an austere and remarkable architecture. This paper will draw attention to the meaning of some of their finest productions, specifically the mosque Tinmal and the three iconic minarets: Koutoubiya, La Ghiralda and Hassan Tower.

## Keywords

Islamic architecture; Tinmal; Koutoubiya; La Ghiralda; Hassan Tower

## Introduction

The Almohad period is determinative in the history of Northern Africa as it represents the first attempt to bring together a Muslim North Western Africa made of Berbers and Arabs. It is also the first attempt to produce a characteristically Berber architectural perception that is specific to Morocco, although parts of its realisations are inspired by Andalusian/European style. The Almohads profoundly believed in the unity of God accompanied with an unbending and solemn religious devotion and worship. This belief and ensuing religious conduct shaped their attitude towards architecture. Indeed, the latter conveniently became an instrument highlighting the relationship between the new religious understanding and the ascetic attitude based on the founder's intense reading and interpretation of the Qur'an and hadith (the prophet Mohammad's sayings and deeds). What manifestly captured the Almohad's imagination was a peculiar combination of the austere and well-studied forms and shapes. By preserving the principle of

unity of God through the art of architecture they were able to create a vivid and dynamic translation of this principle. It can be argued that it is through architecture that the Almohad have truly defined themselves. Indeed, their will to propagate religious reform and incite spiritual and intellectual transformation is manifested in their architectural activity.

Mosques and their minarets are among the most important and impressive iconic places the Almohads had built. Indeed, Tinmel mosque and the three major minarets, namely, Koutoubiya, la Giralda and Hassan Tower are considered a strong testimony for a fine taste in building a religious space based on an aesthetic sensitivity. As Barrucand and Bednorz (1992, p.153) accurately remarked, “the Almohad period was to go down in the history of art, and especially in the history of architecture, as one of the most significant in western Islam, being far more fruitful than that of the Almoravids or the taifa rulers.”<sup>1</sup> As mentioned above, it was in Morocco that the Almohad’s architectural style was invented and pursued in various other countries, mainly in Western Algeria, Tlemcan and Andalusia, Seville. This paper is divided into two interlinked parts: The first part is an attempt to study Tinmal mosque and to show that underlying austere beauty there lies a tension between what may count as attractive and what allegedly is expected to evoke solely the unity of God by dismissing distractive ornamentations. The second part looks closely at the meaningful structure of the three minarets and seeks to bring forth the same ambiguity and tension that characterise Tinmal mosque with the exception that these minarets reveal a stronger will to incorporate ornament and to be even more creative.

## 1. Tinmal Mosque

Tinmal is a small mountain village in the High Atlas, about 100 km far from Marrakech. And the mosque, Tinmal, bears the name of this village where it was built. Abd al Mumin, the first Almohad caliph, decided to inaugurate this religious edifice in 1153 in honour of the founder of the Almohad movement, Ibn Tumart. As Mdidech (2018, p. 1) accurately explained, ‘*Tinmal*’ is a berber-Amazigh term meaning “school”, or “madrasa” in Arabic.<sup>2</sup> Historically, as stated in the Oxford Dictionary (2003), during the tenth and eleventh centuries “madrasa” was a significant word standing for higher education, one which focuses almost exclusively on the teaching of Shari’a Law, Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>3</sup> However, when Tinmal was used as a school and a place of collective prayer, it did not follow the norm since the law taught by Almohads rejected the established Malikite school approach and practice of law. Tinmel, the place and its mosque were indeed a political site where all strategic decisions of rebellion and attack against the Almoravids took place. The mosque was also a spiritual meeting place for soldiers and lay people, all of whom had to show their unconditional support for the Almohads’ view of Islam. This view was, strictly speaking, the view of Ibn Tumart which was delineated in his main book, *Kitab A’azz ma Yutlab*, or *The Greatest of what is sought* (1903).<sup>4</sup> Since Ibn Tumart was buried near the mosque, this site also became a place of pilgrimage for the califs as well as all the people who believed that the founder was a real *Mahdi*, a messiah figure.<sup>5</sup> In other words, a prophet with supernatural gifts and a faultless character.

The architecture of Tinmal mosque reflects the Almohad’s ascetic and puritanical view of Islam since, in their view, to believe means to fully concentrate one’s attention physically and mentally. Therefore, to chase distraction and obtain quietude, Abd al-Mumin succeeded in commissioning one of the simplest and most inspirational mosque, Tinmal.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, building was an architectural statement pointing out that as the first Berber caliph assuming the role of a religious and political leader, Abd al-Mumin had to produce a novel and original style. As seen in the photo below, the mosque displays an aesthetic harmony with a perfect symmetry of 180 square meters. It is seamlessly integrated into the landscape, surrounded by the Atlas Mountains and abundant trees, creating a harmonious fusion between architecture and nature. Furthermore, the fortified walls of the mosque indicatively emphasise that it is built for spiritual as well as military purposes since, politically speaking, this period is highly critical and evocative of the historical transition from the Almoravid rule to the new Almohad revolutionary regime. Accordingly, while priority is given to defence, praying and being ready to fight went hand in hand. Built in red brick, earth mortar,

<sup>1</sup> M. Barrucand and A. Bednorz. *Moorish Architecture in Andalusia* (Hungary, 1992), p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> Jaouad Mdidech, « La Mosquée Tinmel, chef-d’œuvre de l’architecture almohade, toujours vivante », in Dossiers (Edition N: 5187, 2018), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Tumart, *Kitab A’azz ma Yutlab (Le Livre de Ibn Tumart)*, edited by I. Goldziher (Algiers, 1903).

<sup>5</sup> Such a belief in Ibn Tumart’s messianic power began to wane with the second and third caliph. With the succeeding Merinide dynasty it had completely disappeared. See Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, after nine centuries the mosque was carefully and minutely restored between 1991 and 1994. It is registered by UNESCO as World Heritage for Humanity. The mosque is still roofless and is awaiting further restoration work, one which will be as close as possible to the Almohad’s state of mind.

stones and lime, Tinmal mosque is less spacious than other Almohad mosques. The architectural elements characterising this edifice, such as arches, domes and columns were not intended to embellish the religious space; rather they are there for a symbolic reason, namely to enhance the central doctrine of the ruling dynasty and to translate their sustained religious and philosophical search for humbleness and spiritual purity.



Figure 1. Tinmal Mosque.

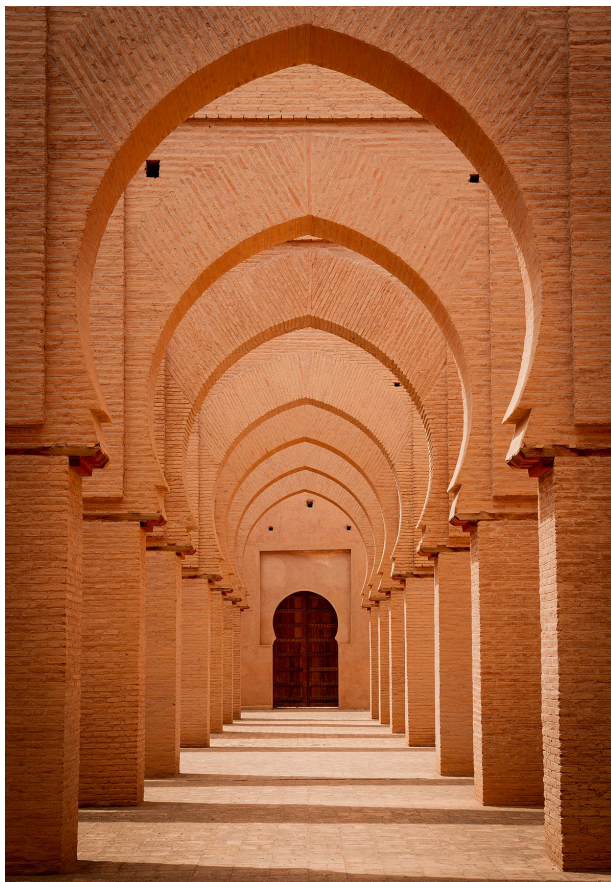
In the same vein, form also plays a prominent role in this mosque. The picture below shows the prayer hall which contains a forest of arches reminiscent of the Great Mosque of Cordoba but without the double arches to create a lofty space. Tinmal arches are made up of slim brickwork and are arranged in a precise geometrical form, either in horizontal layers, or obliquely as manifest at the top of the voussoirs of the pointed arches. The serene homogeneity produced by the rows of arches entails that architecture is deployed to serve the purpose of gathering worshippers under *one* doctrine and *one* God, religiously expressed as *tawhid*.<sup>7</sup> Yet, although a domestic-like atmosphere prevails in this mosque since the scale of its space is small and homely, the Almohads had in fact deployed their mastery of mathematical and geometrical knowledge to achieve such serenity and their aspired for collective focus. Indeed, for Muslims, mathematics and geometry supply a precious tool not only reflecting the flourishing contemporary sciences but equally significantly conjuring to one's mind a sense of infinity and awareness of fundamental universal principles. The latter remind worshippers of their finitude and fragility vis à vis the infinite power and omnipresence of God and the overwhelming universe engulfing them in its mystic and impenetrable mystery. In other words, with the help of architecture, the Almohads have attempted to convey a strong message to their followers namely that together they remain bound religiously, culturally and politically.

Furthermore, given their conviction that reason is what determines a strong Muslim faith, one that is untarnished by religious schools' debates and admonitions, the Almohads manifest a cultural alignment with contemporary philosophy and other sciences. Ibn Tufayl and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) both emphatically advocated philosophical education in order to become eventually master of one's own use of reason. In alignment with this passion for reason and mathematics, the Almohad architecture manifests itself as being essentially contemplative and abstract in its simplicity. Spahic Omer (2012, p. 11) observed that "Islamic architecture was never an end in itself. It was the container of Islamic culture and civilization reflecting the cultural identity and the level of the creative and aesthetic consciousness of Muslims."<sup>8</sup> Although Spahic's assertion is pertinent and informative it tends to limit architecture to being no more than an instrument conveying Muslim culture, civilization and identity. Architecture as well as the last three points are framed as if their position were definitely established and secure, yet they are all dynamic and much richer in their inherent capacity to reveal the importance of an ongoing exchange between various cultures and civilizations, especially Greek, Roman, Iranian and Andalusian. Such a cultural exchange, as the pictures below will successively

<sup>7</sup> In Arabic, '*tawhid*' means asserting oneness and unity of God.

<sup>8</sup> Spahic Omer, « The Concept of God, Man, and the Environment in Islam: Implications for Islamic Architecture », *Journal of Islamic Architecture* Volume 2 (2012), p. 11.

demonstrate, subverts any claims to speak of ‘identity’ as a static affirmation, sealed off in one specific culture and civilisation.



**Figure 2. Tinmal Mosque, Prayer Hall.**

While the prayer hall in Tinmal mosque might be regarded as beautiful and awe inspiring, there prevails an emphatic lack of ornament in its successive arches. This lack, however, does not entail an inability to produce more lavishly and attractively,<sup>9</sup> as it is the case in other Islamic edifices, but rather it reflects a judgement made to prioritise the new conception of abstract geometrical patterns, thus introducing a purified sense of aesthetic. And as Hillenbrand (2000, p. 14) poignantly remarked, “mathematical calculation is an integral part of Muslim architectural aesthetic.”<sup>10</sup> Structurally, the prayer hall operates as a prelude to the climax point in the mosque and that is the *mihrab* – a niche in the wall. Religiously, as elucidated in the Oxford Dictionary, (2003), a *mihrab* is of crucial significance, it is usually “an ornamented arched niche set into the wall of a mosque to indicate the direction of Mecca. Muslims face the *mihrab* during prayer so that they pray facing Mecca.”<sup>11</sup>

As seen in the image below, the *mihrab* in Tinmal is lightly decorated displaying a pattern of geometrical lines and two simply plastered floral stars on each side of its wall. It is framed by two symmetrical and vertical openings deliberately left empty and seem to be filled only with air and silence. However, they are not obsolete spaces for, functionally speaking, they serve as storage of prayer mats and, aesthetically, they provide the viewer with the dimension of depth, one which contrasts with the filled space of the adjacent wall of the *mihrab*. It can also be noticed that the *mihrab* is aligned with a central blind horseshoe arch with de-centered intrados and extrados opposite of which is another more prominent lobed and pointed arch: such a technical manipulation of arch forms and sizes produces a hierarchy drawing the viewer within its premises and ridding them of all types of distraction.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, The Dome of the Rock, The Great Mosque of Damascus and the Great Mosque of Cordoba.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function and Meaning* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> J. L. Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

Since the outer arch is placed in front of the mihrab it looks as though it were containing and preserving its symbolic religious connotation. There are further lobed arches set in the line of the mihrab creating a continuing short walkway, an arcaded gallery where disciples can be sheltered from the elements of heat, cold and rain. It is a place where they can discuss religious and political issues at length. In contemplating these two areas containing the prayer hall and the *mihrab*, we can begin to notice the latent tension dividing the Almohad's ambiguous sense of craftsmanship. In remaining faithful to their founder's beliefs and teachings, namely to shun all added elements besides a puritanical commitment to Islam, the Almohads have intentionally broken with previous architectural and aesthetic taste to found an unprecedented rigorous and mathematically-conceived building style and ornamentation.



**Figure 3. Tinnal Mosque, the mihrab.**

Nevertheless, in so acting they have succeeded in inaugurating a new aesthetic, minimalist and intriguing in its beauty. Curiously, and indeed cooperatively, this achieved beauty invites contemplation and meditation and does not jeopardise worshippers who are expected to give their full attention, in prayer, whilst reciting verses from the Qur'an and whilst attending their religious/political and military training.

Furthermore, the mihrab is surmounted by three domes one right above its structure enhancing its orientation towards Mecca and two more on the sides. The three are decorated with *muqarnas*, that is, honeycomb work. This technical term, as Clévenot and Degeorge (2000) and Brrucand and Bednoz (1992) pointed out, *muqarnas* or stalactite vaulting, is a three-dimensional decorative device, first seen in the Islamic world, mainly in Iran, Mesopotamia and North Africa, in the eleventh century, and quickly spread into other Muslim countries.<sup>12</sup> As seen in the picture below, *muqarnas* is made of individual elements, including niche-like concave cells. And although the domes in Tinnal are small in size and decoration is kept to a minimum, yet the *muqarnas* work sculpted inside is intricately patterned and precise, producing, on the one hand, a geometrical fragmentation of volumes and, on the other, artistically marking a transition from the walls in the *mihrab* area into the lofty dome. Additionally, *muqarnas* is profoundly significant in Islamic architecture as the painstaking presentation of its geometrical pattern mirrors the hexagonal cells generated by honeybees. To the Muslim craftsman and the ordinary contemplator (Broug, 2013), these artistically copied forms

<sup>12</sup> Dominique Clévenot & Gérard Degeorge, *Ornament and Decoration in Islamic Architecture* (Thames & Hudson, United Kingdom, 2000); Marianne Barrucand and Achim Bednorz, *Moorish Architecture in Andalusia* (Hungary, 1992).

contribute to a celebration of God's infinite perfect shapes and creations that are widely spread in Nature.<sup>13</sup> Hence, it can be argued that Almohad architecture strives to mediate between the overwhelming external world and the internal spiritual world of every worshipper.

To continue the visual reading of the picture underneath, we can notice that the frieze at the bottom of the dome contains a hand carved pattern characterised by two alternating geometrical shapes. This preference for basic geometrical figures reveals the extent to which the Almohads were adamant to forge their new conceptual and abstract design. Moreover, the presence of three small windows on one side of the dome is indicative of the important role played by natural light. The filtered light, as Hillenbrand (2000, p. 87) rightly commented, "suffuses the area of the *mihrab* with radiance, perhaps as a deliberate metaphor of spiritual illumination".<sup>14</sup> In point of fact, light is a requisite element in Islamic architecture because of its symbolic association with God. In the Qur'an, Surat The Light (1994, p. 301), we read that "God is the light of the heaven and the earth. The semblance of His light is that of a niche in which is a lamp."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the theme of light plays a pivotal role in Islamic perception of what it means to build a place of worship. It strengthens religious sentiment and creates an environmentally kinder atmosphere to pray in, to receive education and to elaborate on various pending matters. Indeed, light as well as the shadows generated by the multiple arches in the whole space are used as an architectural device enhancing the character, colour and texture of the entire rustic decoration of Tinmal mosque.



Figure 4. Tinmal Mosque, Dome above the Mihrab.

Besides the dome there are also several slim columns attached to the wall and in the adjacent enclosed walk along the *mihrab*. Some of these columns are richly ornamented, whereas others are rather simple and hardly adorned (See the picture of the *mihrab* above and the two photos below). Contrary to classical Greek and Roman orders (Roth, 1998; Gombrich, 2003), from which the idea of columns was first inspired and copied worldwide<sup>16</sup>, Tinmal columns are not freestanding, composed of a tall shaft and a base, they are rather fused with the wall so that only half the column and its capital are apparent; the other half is merely the wall itself. The twin columns seen below are structural supporting the arcade on top. However, although they look plain and rustic, the capital is ornamented and carved with stylized leaves and other vegetal shapes with a slim stucco ring composed of a series of vertical lines cut into it. The technique of leaves which, as interpreted by Beneladel (Paccard, 1981), form a semicircle at the bottom with a central

<sup>13</sup> Eric Broug, *L'Art des motifs Islamiques: Création géométrique à travers les siècles* (Pyramid, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> R. Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture: form, Function and Meaning* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 87.

<sup>15</sup> Surat An-Nur, The Light: 24. Ayat 35. See *Al-Qu'an, a Contemporary Translation by Ahmed Ali* (Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 301.

<sup>16</sup> Leland M. Roth, *Understanding Architecture: Its Elements, History and Meaning* (Herbert Press, 1998); E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (Phaidon Press, 2003).

pendant leaf on top is referred to by Moroccan craftsmen as the head of a serpent.<sup>17</sup> The presence of these columns is highly instructive highlighting an essential Berber feature and that is their cultural and intellectual openness to other Arab and European cultures.



**Figure 5. Tinmal Mosque, Columns.**

More strikingly, such openness equally appears in another unexpected feature and that is the motif of the scallop shell. This decorative pattern is the official religious emblem referring to Saint James the Great and is also associated with the shell ornament worn by medieval Christian pilgrims undertaking the strenuous journey to Santiago de Compostela where the relics of the saint are buried. The motif of the scallop shell (1452; 1472; 1478) has been constantly repeated in art and architecture denoting fertility and rebirth,<sup>18</sup> on the one hand, and an architectural decorative element widely used in churches and other Christian establishments as a reminder of the apostle, on the other. Astonishingly and, as seen in the picture below, the scallop shell is also happily incorporated within the framework of the Almohad mosque. Without doubt its presence is intriguing and pushes one to wonder under which circumstances such a quintessentially Christian symbol finds its way in such a vehemently Islamic space of worship built by one of the most conservative and most religiously demanding dynasty?

Unfortunately, with a few exceptions, historians not only have ignored this important question, but they have not even acknowledged the presence of this crucial detail in Tinmal mosque. In his article on this edifice, Jaouad Mdidech (2018, p. 8) knowingly observes that there are designs which remind us of the cathedral of Saint James of Compostela and that only a vigilant eye would perceive it.<sup>19</sup> Regrettably, Mdidech did not go further than these adequate yet incomplete remarks. Another renown historian, Jean-Pierre Van Staëvel (2017, p. 97) first, reports the Medieval historian Cressier's questioning of the *raison d'être* of the scallop shell in monumental gates in Marrakech and in Rabat.<sup>20</sup> He explains that for Cressier the shell motif transcends a mere decoration on the important gates of urban cities and that it is an emblem actually invoking the first golden Age of Andalusia.

<sup>17</sup> Information suggested by a leading Moroccan craftsman, Abderrahim Beneladel, son a prominent and highly skilled artisan, Abdeljalil Beneladel (1918-1997). See André Paccard, *Le Maroc et l'artisanat traditionnel islamique dans l'architecture* (Edition Atelier, 1981) Tome 2.

<sup>18</sup> See Italian Renaissance artists, mainly, Sandro Boticelli, *The Birth of Venus* (1452); Piero della Francesca's altarpiece, *Montefeltro*, 1472 and Leonardo da Vinci, *Annunciation* (1478).

<sup>19</sup> Jaouad Mdidech, « La mosquée Tinmel, chef-d'œuvre de l'architecture almohade, toujours vivante » in *Dossiers* (Edition N 5187, 2018), 8.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Pierre Van Staëvel, « L'art almohade fut-il révolutionnaire? » in *Perspective, Actualité en histoire de l'art* (Le Maghreb, 2017), p. 97.



**Figure 6. Tinmal Mosque, Scallop Shell.**

Pondering on this thought, Van Staëvel elaborates his own hypothesis holding that even though the Almohad have brutally broken away from the Almoravid's decorative style, they remained under the great influence of the Andalusian Golden time, especially the Umayyad's masterpiece, the Great Mosque of Cordoba. Van Staëvel draws attention to the presence of scallop shells in its *mihrab* and holds this to be an anticipation of the coming splendour eventually realised by the Almohad caliph. This hypothesis led the historian to raise a further question, namely for whom specifically might the caliph have intended the emblematic employment of the scallop motif. He deduced that these visual signs with their almost hidden meaning must have been intended for the *tullab* and *huffaz*.<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that Van Staëvel, more than Mdidech and Cressier, has attempted to account for the significance of the scallop shell in the Almohad architectural design his analysis begs further interpretations. It is worth clarifying that Tinmal mosque features among the very early constructions by Abd al-Mumin, the first acclaimed caliph who was still deeply steeped in the teachings of his mentor and founder of the Almohad movement. He was adamant to keep architecture contained within a rational style prompted by the development of mathematics and rational thinking of the age- as mentioned above. The sober beauty achieved in Tinmal mosque is perhaps an unexpected yet astounding by-product as a result of substantially using geometrical lines and frames. Indeed, the shape of the scallop shell is a semi-circular shape with ridges stemming from a point at the centre bottom. It is integrated in different spaces around the *mihrab* area and is modelled to provide the dimension of depth to its proportioned shape. Such Christian architectural design reinforces the idea that the Almohad's advocating for rationality means that this intellectual capacity has a universal appeal to minds alike regardless of their strong religious affiliation to one faith or another. Furthermore, the presence of the mathematically drawn scallop shell in Tinmal mosque shows that despite the Almohad's fierce fight for the

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Pierre Van Staëvel, « L'Art almohade fut-il révolutionnaire? », *ibid.* 96-97. N.B: 'Tullab' and 'Huffaz' are the young intellectuals and scholars whose task consisted in memorizing the Qur'an and Ibn Tumart's doctrines and also ensuring that the rest of the community followed suit. See, A. J. Fromhertz's valuable book, *The Almohads: The Rise of an Islamic Empire* (I.B. Tauris, 2013).

principles of Islam, as they figured its reading and analysis, they were nevertheless respectful and appreciative of cultural difference. Early Almohads' regime, as noted by historians (Abun-Nasr, 1993; Brett & Fentress, 1998; Messier, 2010; Fromherz, 2013), was fraught with violence not merely towards the exterior enemy, the Almoravids, but also the surrounding community whose religious and political faithfulness had to be immaculate otherwise they would be harshly punished and at times tragically face death.<sup>22</sup> Oddly and paradoxically, with this intransigent and bleak conduct the Almohad were well-disposed towards learning and integrating foreign aesthetic and architectural devices into their own. More than exhibiting their inspiration from the Greek columns, the Roman arches, and the North Iranian stalactite/*muqarnas*, by including the scallop shell motif, the Almohad have displayed a stronger ambiguous desire to be pure and indifferent to external embellishments, yet to employ those same peripheral elements to convey their unique message concerning an untarnished unity of God. However, embedded within their powerful view of Islam there exist layers upon layers of what constitutes their aesthetic translation of their conception of Islam and the edifices built in its honour.

Last but not least regarding the architecture and craftsmanship in Tinmal mosque is its strange minaret. According to Jaouad Mdidech (2018, p. 2), what can be seen today is merely half of what remains of the minaret, the other half had fallen to ruin.<sup>23</sup> However, worth paying attention to in the strangeness of this monument, as the image below demonstrates, consists in its being built right behind the wall of the *mihrab*. Such an architectural decision is peculiar to this mosque since in Islamic architecture minarets are usually adjacent to the building and if incorporated within its structure, they will not be constructed at the back of the *mihrab*. This deliberate choice has political connotations indicating that this is a fortified mosque and a centre for educating young members of the community teaching them religious and military prowess to fight against the Almoravids and other adversaries, thus preparing for the colossal realisation of a whole Empire. This endeavour is historically unprecedented. As Pascal Buresi holds, "For the first and last time in history, the Maghreb is politically united, from Tripolitania until the other side of the Atlantic, under the sovereign authority that is not Roman or Arab, but Berber."<sup>24</sup> In other words, the fortified Tinmal mosque and its minaret mark the cradle of a happening history, one that will change the fate of North Africa and Andalusia for a century and a half to come.

Historically speaking and as elucidated by Behrens-Abouseif (2010), a minaret is a tower that has always existed since the earlier civilizations and its uses and aims vary according to different cultures and religions.<sup>25</sup> In Islamic lands, the primary function of a minaret is the call to prayer by a male figure, *muezzin*, who has to ascend its enclosed staircase and perform his melodious call, *azan*, five times a day prior to the start of each prayer. Minarets are characterised by their length which serves as a focal point easily spotted by Muslims to orientate them in finding the nearest mosque. And therefore, as Bennison (2011, p. 81) accurately mentions, to fulfil their duty by going to this sacred place if not every day at least on Fridays for the midday prayer and for listening to the imam's preaching.<sup>26</sup> Structurally, a Maghrebi minaret is distinct from other Islamic minarets in the Near, middle and Far East, especially in Iran and India. Indeed, Behrens-Abouseif (2010) argues that minarets there can vary both in number and in shape: there may be two to six minarets per a mosque with forms ranging between an extreme height, spiral, pencil-thin or cylindrical form.<sup>27</sup> By contrast, minarets in the Maghreb are characteristically tall, fairly large and square. However, as seen below, Tinmal minaret is massive and looks more like a military base than a spiritual symbol of faith. Its shaft does not have the usual open top storey which is crowned by a dome and gilded copper balls at the very top. Indeed, Tinmal minaret is plain and set on the same ground level as the mosque. It has a rectangular base measuring 9.50 m by 5.50 m. The only obvious decoration consists in its blind simple arches and a pair of wooden carved doors built on its right side: these twin doors lead to the interior of the minaret and directly to the prayer room. They are raised above the ground by four large mudbrick steps creating symmetry between the interior and the exterior.

<sup>22</sup> See, R. A. Messier, *The Almoravids and the Meanings of Jihad* (Praeger, 2010); M. Brett and E. Fentress, *The Berbers* (Blackwell, 1998); J. M. Abun-Nasr, *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); A. J. Fromherz, *The Almohads: The Rise of an Islamic Empire* (I. B. Tauris, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Jaouad Mdidech, « Tinmel, épopée almohade », Fondation ONA, in Dossiers: La mosquée Tinmel, chef-d'œuvre de l'architecture almohade, toujours vivante. Edition N 5187, 2018. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Pascal Buresi, « Les Almohades, entre unitarisme et berbérisme (vers 1116-1269) » in Yannick Lintz, Claire Déléry & Bulle Tuil Leonetti (ed.), *Maroc Médiéval. Un empire de l'Afrique à l'Espagne* (Hazan, Paris, 2014), 260-265. (My translation).

<sup>25</sup> See Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *The Minarets of Cairo: Islamic Architecture from the Arab Conquest to the End of the Ottoman Empire* (I.B. Tauris, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Amira K. Bennison, *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the 'Abbasid Empire* (I.B. Tauris, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> See Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *The Minarets of Cairo: Islamic Architecture from the Arab Conquest to the End of the Ottoman Empire* (I.B. Tauris, 2010).



Figure 7. Tinnal Mosque, Minaret.

## 2. Koutoubiya, La Giralda and Hassan Minarets

Correspondingly, apart from Tinnal mosque, including its strange minaret, there are three further contemporary Almohad minarets which manifest the same architectural principles and are worth analysing and discussing. As explained above, the Almohads have inaugurated a creative and unique style which can be further appreciated by examining the three emblematic minarets, notably Koutoubiya in Marrakech, la Giralda in Seville and Hassan Tower in Rabat. Historically, Koutoubiya refers both to the mosque and its minaret, yet as it quickly became an important landmark in Marrakech, the name Koutoubiya unanimously conjures to mind the minaret more than the mosque. The latter was first built by the Almoravid dynasty but once Abd al-Mumin captured the city he had it demolished and rebuilt again both to mark the arrival of a new powerful and more pious ruler and also to level the mosque to face the direction of Mekka. According to Alami (2011) and also to Laroui (2011), Abd al Mumin deemed that the preceding dynasty failed to get the calculations right and in consequence he saw it fit to redress their equation.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, as Attali (2004) rightly explained, the name “koutoubiya” refers to the Arabic name, “kitab”, meaning book, and koutoubiya (or maktaba) stands for a bookshop, except that it was an open bookshop situated around the area of the mosque where hundreds of booksellers gathered to sell or exchange rare manuscripts coming from various parts of the world.<sup>29</sup> While the mosque was founded by Abd al-Mumin in 1147 and rebuilt in 1158, completion of the minaret was not finalised until 1195 during the reign of his grandson, the third caliph al-Mansur. Indeed, the latter had a great love for building and completing what was inaugurated either by his father, Abu Ya’qub Yusuf or his grandfather Abd al-Mumin.

In 1184 the Great Mosque of Seville whose construction was ordered by Yusuf was ended but the minaret, similarly to Koutoubiya, was seen to and supervised by al-Mansur who made it his personal daily routine to go and watch the work in progress. The name, “La Giralda”, meaning the bell tower, was later attributed to this minaret when Seville was reconquered by the Christians during the Reconquista in 1248. The Catholics then in charge generously kept the minaret, but in the Renaissance and after the earthquake in 1356 the top pavilion was restructured to accommodate the bells and a Christian architectural style. The shaft of the minaret still stands today as *La Giralda*, a major and

<sup>28</sup> See, M. H. Alami, *Art and Architecture in the Islamic Tradition: Aesthetics, Politics and Desire in Early Islam* (I. B. Tauris, 2011); A. Laroui, *L’Histoire du Maghreb: Un Essai de synthèse* (Centre Culturel Arabe, Casablanca, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> See, J. Attali’s enlightening historical novel, *La Confrérie des éveillés* (Fayard, 2004).

defining symbol of Seville (see the picture below).

Furthermore, among the other notable architectural projects undertaken by al-Mansour is Hassan Tower which, like Koutoubiya, refers to the minaret and the mosque at the same time. Hassan Tower is the minaret of an incomplete mosque commissioned by al-Mansur in 1195 to mark his victory over the Castilian king Alfonso VIII. He had the intention of building a larger mosque than that of Koutoubiya and perhaps even the largest mosque in the Islamic world entirely. Unfortunately, his dream was not fulfilled as he died in 1199. Nevertheless, the space and framing structure of the mosque with its 348 well dispersed columns had already been laid down and similarly, the 44-metre shaft considered to be half the measurement for the intended minaret, was already accomplished. The basic structure of this grand mosque is an undeniable reflection of artfulness and distinctive character of Almohad sense of craftsmanship.

Unfortunately, no further work was resumed by subsequent rulers and up until today this historical site is just as it was left by al-Mansour. It remains a precious historical monument frequently visited by local people and tourists. Looking closely at the above images, it can be observed that all of the three minarets share a resemblance in their respective shape and ornament. They equally point to an unwavering continuity in the Almohad's conscious reliance on the use of mathematical and religious reasoning; yet they also mark a shift in the caliphs' perception of architecture and design. While Tinnal minaret may be considered rudimentary in its outlook, Koutoubiya, La Giralda and Hassan Tower are more sophisticated and epitomise the Almohad developed taste and creativity which since then had been regarded as a canonical form perpetrated by posterity in Spain and in the Maghreb, specifically in Morocco.

It is Koutoubiya minaret which is commonly considered as the start of Almohad architectural style par excellence. As its picture shows, there is an artistic arrangement of forms laid in the different sides of the square minaret. The shaft itself displays four inlaid square panels on each façade. The bottom part of the shaft comprises three double and unornamented horseshoe arched windows. The second panel exhibits one large lobed arch enclosing yet another frame inside of which there are three small pointed interlaced lobed arches. The third panel is smaller in width and similarly contains frame within a frame with one large plain arch encircling two small pointed arches. It is the two pavilions on top that contain more ornamentation and creative design. The first pavilion has got small and thick multifoil arches supported by tiny columns with loud speakers peeping through the open arches. These loud speakers serve as carriers of the sound of *adhan*, the call to prayer.



Figure 8. Koutoubiya Minaret, Marrakech.

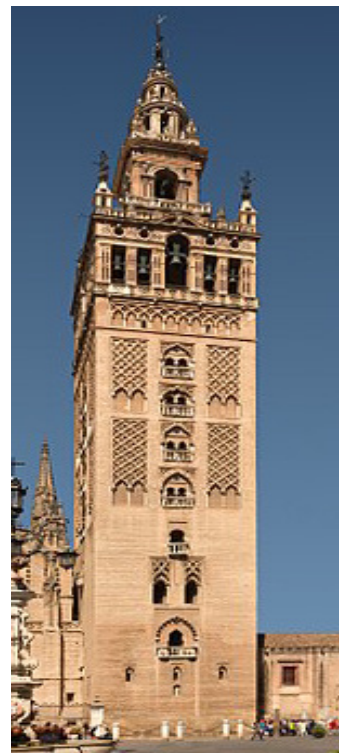


Figure 9. La Giralda, Spain.



Figure 10. Hassan Tower, Rabat.

The grouping of polylobed arched windows present on the four sides of the minaret are topped by a frieze of mosaics crafted in white and green motifs symbolising peace and Islamic faith. The top structure is a miniature of the long shaft; it is characterised by the presence of tiny paired arches on each facet headed by a carved net of repeated geometrical figures. In Islamic architecture this ‘net’ is referred to as *sebka*, which is a decorative motif quintessentially invented by the Almohads. ‘Sebka’ consists of infinite interlacing lozenge motifs referred to by local craftsmen as “darj wa katif”, literally meaning ‘step and shoulder’ to visually convey the position of lines and their symmetrically balanced art.<sup>30</sup> A smaller mosaic frieze encircles this last part of the minaret. And a miniature dome with golden spheres constitutes the final touch to the whole minaret. Koutoubiya, La Giralda and Hassan Tower share a striking architectural resemblance. As the pictures show, the square structure of the minarets, the geometrical forms, the multifoiled pointed arches, as well as the *sebka* and the symmetrical windows are reproduced in the minarets of the Great Mosque in Seville, La Giralda, and Hassan tower in Rabat. It can be maintained, therefore, that Abd al-Moumen’s son and grandson have managed to initiate a new opening and revolutionary assessment of how far artistic vision can help celebrate ambiguity by becoming liberated from limiting concepts such as one’s ‘identity’ and one’s ‘culture’.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Almohad architectural style, as exemplified by Tinmal mosque and the three minarets, present a unique synthesis of religious devotion and artistic innovation, reflecting the dynasty’s broader cultural and political ambition. Indeed, this essay was an illustration of Almohad’s transformational architecture, one whose simplicity suggests rather than lavishly exhibits its philosophical and religious-political message. This in fact brings the Almohad’s movement full circle marking a sharp contrast between their harsh and violent beginning with their founder Ibn Tumart and to a lesser degree his disciple, Abd al-Mumin and, on the other hand, the later rulers, Yusuf and his successor, al-Mansur. The latter welcomed and practised philosophy<sup>31</sup> and showed much greater interest in architecture as a means to shake the mind’s complacent ideas encouraging the viewer to read and understand the abstract rationality it provides via its forms and geometrical lines and shapes. In thus approaching architecture, the Almohads have made it possible to relate differently to religion, to its visual manifestation in mosques and minarets and, more critically, to educate oneself in thinking humbly of one’s culture as being part of the whole rather than the dominant and crashing one. By knowingly and wisely employing architectural elements borrowed from Andalusia, Greece, the

<sup>30</sup> A. Paccard, *Le Maroc et l’artisanat traditionnel islamique dans l’architecture* (Edition Atelier, 1981) Tome 2.

<sup>31</sup> Their best friends and teachers were poets, mathematicians and philosophers, mainly Ibn Tufayl and Ibn Rushd.

Middle East and Iran, Abd al-Mumin and more strongly, Yusuf and Yaqub, have instructively brought to light the fact that Islamic architecture is not an independent and self-sufficient entity. Even its ambiguous and hesitant artistic style, namely to be strictly conservative or open-minded, has proved to be a venue to be explored and celebrated rather than condemned. It can be deduced that the crucial message conveyed by the three caliphs consists in showing and acknowledging that Islamic architecture does stand on the shoulders of previous giants but that it also is capable of introducing its own conceptual discernment and aesthetic judgement in generating its religious edifices.

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