

## URBANISM AND ITS EXPRESSION IN THE AFRICAN CITY

### THE CENTER AND ITS QUARTERS

In European cities there is a clear-cut separation between center and suburbs. During the Middle Ages mainly the dictates of military strategy brought about the crowding of the population inside a belt of ramparts. Periodically this corset of walls proved too narrow, and consequently suburbs grew up along the roads leading from the city. These suburbs were in turn incorporated into the city, to be protected by a new enclosure, causing the older walls to become circular avenues. Paris is a classic example; with its three successive lines of avenues surrounding concentric areas.

Its enclosure brought about the city's unity. In many cases the medieval city was divided between several lords: the bishop had his own seat, and the temporal lord had his. However, all these "bishop's towns" or "count's towns" soon flowed together to recover the institutional unity that once marked ancient cities. The rigidity of the military enclosure generally ensured a distinct separation between city and countryside. Outside the walls another world came into being—what has today become

Translated by Susanna Contini.

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the suburb, with its ambiguous attitude towards the city, that both attracts and rejects it, needing its workers and vegetable produce, but criticizing its customs and small-town mannerisms.

In the cities of Black Africa, the schism is of a quite different nature. The plurality of neighborhoods strikes one first of all. The observer is given the impression of a clustered urbanism. Let us re-examine descriptions made by some of the first European travelers; in 1889 O. Reclus thus describes the city Segou: "probably 36,000 inhabitants people this sprawling city, composed of four small towns joined together by villages along the right bank of the Niger: Old Segou (Segou Koro), Paillette de Segou (Segou Bougou), New Segou (Segou Koura), and Segou Sikoro—the Sultan's seat."<sup>1</sup> The custom is undoubtedly a very old one, since in the Middle Ages el-Bekri thus describes Ghana: "Ghana is made up of two cities situated on a plain. The one inhabited by Moslems contains twelve mosques... The city in which the king lives is six miles from the former, and is called el-Ghaba, the forest. The territory between them is filled with dwellings. The buildings are made of stone and acacia wood. The king's home is composed of a castle and several huts with rounded roofs, all surrounded by an enclosure similar to a wall. The king's city is surrounded by huts, tree trunks and woods in which the nation's magicians, in charge of the religious cult, live. Their idols and sovereigns' tombs are also located there. Guardians of the woods prevent anyone from entering and finding out anything about what goes on within. The king's prison is located there as well."<sup>2</sup>

On examining a map, we find that Brazzaville is made up of two African quarters, located on either side of the administrative and commercial center—that is also the European quarter. In Bangui, several quarters are distributed around a vast area, of which a part can be flooded, where the old airport used to be situated. The commercial and administrative center, where many whites live, is perched on a hill perpendicular to the river. Upriver, along the Oubangui, a prized suburban quarter is taking shape, characterized by luxurious residences for ambas-

<sup>1</sup> O. Reclus, *La France et ses colonies*, T. 11: *Nos colonies*, Paris, Hachette, 1889, p. 320.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Mme. Désiré-Vuillemin, *Les capitales de l'ouest africain*, Documentation pédagogique, 1963.

sadors and higher functionaries. On the east side of the hill the natives inhabit a quasi-rural area, while the Kasai and Ngaragha quarters (military, bureaucratic, prison) are located where the hill meets the river. Downriver, around the port, the industrial area borders the center and extends along the bank towards the west. In the same direction is the Kouanga quarter, a group of modest homes built about fifteen years ago for the lower middle class of African functionaries. The "Kilo 6" (or kilometer 6) quarter around the mosque, Party headquarters, and market, forms an exact equivalent of the center. Fatima to the south, and Notre Dame d'Afrique to the east lengthen it, while Boy Rabe, located to the north, forms the boundary of the circle.

Kinshasa provides an even better example: the divisions are well marked, and the various quarters are called "cities," clearly underlining their urban autonomy. The residential quarters (Kalina, Limete, Ngaliema) are still separate from the "old cities" (Kintambo, Barumbu, St. Jean Kinshasa). The "new cities" (Kalamu, Dendale, Ngiri), dating from 1955, and the "planned cities" (Bandalungwa, Lemba, Matete, Ndjili), that are more recent, are beginning to be united by the mass of illegal squatting in the southern extended zones (Bumbu, Makala, Ngaba, Selembao), and the zones farther from the center, (Ngaliema, Kisenso, Tschangu, Masina, Kingasani). Military or leisure areas (golf course, stadium, acclimatization area) separate these quarters from one another, as do swampy-bottomed valleys.

This type of "clustered" urbanism is particularly visible in Yaoundé, that is set off from the land in marked relief: each quarter is built on a hill—government, health, university, and schools, the Catholic Mission with its colleges and seminaries, embassies (where the hypodrome marks the summit), the old Quarters (Mvog Mbi, Mvog Ada), foreign quarters (Briqueterie), and farther away, the prestigious Mont Febe, where the President receives his important guests in his summer palace.

One might believe that the arrangement of the city into separate quarters was imposed during the colonization period to assure the separation and protection of the whites. However, things usually prove to be more complex. Originally, in the colonial cities, both the master's and the servant's family lived under the same roof. This custom can still be seen in St. Louis,

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Senegal. Houses are built around a central court onto which open all the rooms. On the level of the main floor air vents open onto the street, while on the first floor there are narrow windows overlooking the street. On the main floor are storerooms and servant's quarters; on the first floor private chambers and reception areas. This kind of "feudal" construction obliges the population's mixing. It is interesting to notice that in today's Angola, even in Loanda, not one of the several quarters, even the so-called *Mucequé* (equivalent to what we call slums), has an ethnically homogeneous population. The central commercial and residential quarter has a population 26% Black and 10% Mulatto, while the most African quarter is 15% White and 5% Mulatto.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, in countries where apartheid is the government's policy, there is a total separation of housing.

"Clustered" urbanism has very remote roots, and is closely linked both to the most ancient traditions, and to some extent, to a clan philosophy. In this context blood relations constitute the only recognized kind of society. Those who are not descendants of a common ancestor are considered foreigners—even if they speak the same language. The only kind of bonds that can found a new kinship are those of alliance, exchange, or marriage: neighbors who are not "my brothers" are "my uncles." Undoubtedly Africans do hold an elastic view of such "kinships" and alliances. All kinship deriving from the mother is recognized, and in areas in which patriarchal law applies, the mother's, husband's, grandmother's parents, etc., are included in this category. Nevertheless the drawbacks of such a system are evident, and we find that each bloodline doubles back and separates itself from the others clearly enough to allow for its own autonomy. Thus a village's unity can sometimes be broken. The village is a federation of clans. It is divided into quarters, each of which is constructed along a clan bloodline. Sometimes this division is reflected in a physical division, each quarter being situated a few hundred meters from the others.

In Central Guinea, for example, an investigation was under-

<sup>3</sup> Ilidio do Amaral, *Luanda, Memórias de junta de Investigações de Ultramar*, Lisbon, 1968, p. 65.

taken intending to bring to light what links might exist between villages. It was then observed that most communities traced their origins to two founders: a hunter discovered a suitable location, and his friend settled nearby, for example. Thus the necessary plurality of clans in the village was justified. In fact, Africans practice complete exogamy between clans. Several clans must co-exist for the village to be a unit in which inter-marriage can be possible. Thus the separation between urban quarters has traditional origins.

The history of ancient cities confirms their polynuclear nature. "One of the first accounts attributes the founding of San (Mali) to a caravan of Mandingan merchants—the Koïta and Sékiné, coming from the south... According to another source San was founded by a Marka hunter, who allegedly discovered the sacred sea, Sankero. Following the Koïta and Sékiné, the first inhabitants were the Traoré, Markas, coming from the east. The three clans agreed to found a society whose president (nominated for his lifetime) was successively chosen from each clan."<sup>4</sup> In his description, the author notes that: "the group forming the four old quarters was once surrounded by fortified walls, whose only door opened towards the west. Inside the fortified enclosure the four quarters were separated from one another by narrower and lower walls, and by a central square at the middle of which was situated the Friday Mosque. Each quarter had a large vestibule opening onto the central square in which the quarter's business was transacted. Inside the quarter, living quarters were divided as follows: at the entrance to the vestibule was the chief's house, then his wives' houses, followed by the houses belonging to the other members of the family...'

Thus we find the quarters separated, not only by empty space, but by walls. This concept of urbanism probably originates from deep-seated beliefs that would be interesting to examine. Might the four quarters bear some relationship to the four dimensions of space...?

Along the Benin coast, in a region distant, but at the same time belonging to a culture possessing urban civilization since ancient times, researchers describe cities whose quarters are profoundly distinct, their boundaries being clearly set out on

<sup>4</sup> Bakari Kamian, "San," *Cahiers d'outre-Mer*, no. 47.

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the land. In Yoruba country, "along the streets the blocks form residential groupings into quarters whose entrance is on the street, the rear facing either unconstructed areas or blocks belonging to other quarters. The rear of the blocks may be delimited by paths constituting the borders of other quarters."<sup>5</sup> The same author notes that vague areas inside the city serve a strange purpose: "In many cities, some of the municipal altars are traditionally located within woods bordering constructed zones. Besides their function for defense and emergency agriculture in the event of a siege, these wooded areas are also used as shelter for semi-secret religious activities (masquerades, whirling dances, etc.). Many cities possess an area of wild brush vegetation used as a moral and spiritual sewer, where the bodies of sorcerers, executed criminals, debtors, and deformed persons are thrown. An aura of fear pervades these places." According to this description it would seem that the cities need to preserve a wild nature in their midst, in opposition to the inhabited zones, and thus the empty borders acquire a special significance.

The example provided by Kampala<sup>6</sup> gives us another explanation for the plurality and separation of quarters. In Uganda each king presided over a hill, and built his palace there. Then his successor took up residence on another hillock, and so on... It is then understandable that upon the arrival of missionaries, followed by representatives of the British government, the king also assigned them a hill, though he did not further indicate specific boundaries. Even today, the city is made up of a series of hills, each of which is used for a distinct purpose: Mengo is the residence of the king and his people. Rubaga was given to the White Fathers—the Ministry of Justice being located there as well. Nsambya Hill, symmetrical to Rubaga Hill in relation to Mengo, was given to the Congregation of Fathers of Mill Hill. On the northern side of this hill, railroad and police personnel are grouped together in an area designated for them. Instead, Kibuli is inhabited by Moslems. In 1900, one of King Mutesa's brothers, a Moslem convert, lived there, and his descendants remained—thus it is a Moslem quarter. The Anglican Mission was sent to Namirembe. The king's Prime

<sup>5</sup> E. Krapf Askari, *Yoruba Towns and Cities*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969, p. 51 and 49.

Minister lives there as well. When the English military forces arrived, the king assigned Old Kampala to them, where the Old Lugard fort was built. Nakasoro, another hill, was the seat of government, administrations, and large commercial firms. At its feet the Indian bazaar was built. On the Kololo hillock houses for functionaries were constructed. At last, another hill housed Makerere University, while the hospital was located on Mulago Hill.

By means of this somewhat tedious list, we can discover the reasons for the separation of quarters. In successive waves, the important tenants spread themselves out comfortably, and the small people endeavored to find a place near the "power" they deemed most likely to sustain them. Since the division came about quickly and with relatively little thought to precise boundaries, the lower, less visible areas were not affected, and formed a separation between quarters.

In ancient cities, the disappearance of these vague areas confirms our hypothesis: the most favorable areas for construction are occupied first, but the less favorable areas are divided up in turn. Thus, in some of its quarters, Libreville particularly gives the impression of a city with no racial or social segregation. More precisely, different levels of the population mix there, and the differences between rich and poor, whites and blacks, can be measured by the proximity to paved public roads, and the availability of water and electricity. The roads were built along the crests of the hills. The houses bordering the roads are well built and comfortable, in accordance with European standards, and are rented to Europeans at fairly high prices. A bit farther from the road and somewhat lower down are more modest houses, or wooden pavillions inhabited by Africans possessing some means; while the valley bottoms are dotted with traditional houses made of earth and wood, or split planks. People of modest means live there, a few hundred meters from the well-lit roads, travelled by important people.

In other cities, where hygiene and urbanism were dominant aims, separations between quarters are clearly delineated by ravines, streams or swampy lowlands. However, these valley

<sup>6</sup> Southall, "Kampala," *Miner City in Modern Africa*, London, Pall Mall, 1967.

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bottoms have not been invaded by men: the municipality has reclaimed them. The humidity of a swampy area can be diminished by planting eucalyptus trees. By damming a stream, a swamp can be turned into a pond that can be easily poisoned to inhibit the breeding of mosquitoes.

Porter's description of Freetown shows an historic evolution linked to the prestige of various quarters: "During the 19th century, the most distinguished quarter in Freetown was the one situated near the center of debarkation of the Poor Blacks in 1787, and the first establishment of Nova Scotia (Black loyalists to the American war for independence), Settler Town. In 1800 Marroon Blacks (fugitive slaves from the Antilles) were installed to the west (Marroontown). Still farther to the west a zone was reserved for the Krous in 1816—a quarter in poor standing. Slaves freed by the cruisers launched against the treaty were established towards the interior. In their struggle against malaria, at the start of the 20th century, the whites retired to Hill Station, to the west, that was easier to drain. The social distance was thus doubled by a physical distance, and the Creoles became poorer as they could no longer rent houses to Europeans. It is becoming elegant to live to the west, outside the city limits..."<sup>7</sup>

The center of town is generally a residential quarter for the wealthy section of the populace. It is the European quarter. However, as is the case all over the world, the center is congested. As it is full of offices and shops, it attracts intense traffic during rush hours. Usually the buildings are modern enough to provide good equipment and services. In European cities, many of the old quarters are poorly adapted to modern needs, and are left to a poor population obliged to content itself with mediocre housing. This kind of degeneration of the central quarters is not yet evident in Africa.

Nevertheless, an element of change can now be observed: faced with the intense activity of the center and crowding in apartments, some inhabitants are choosing to move to more distant quarters, only to frequent the center during office hours. Bypassing the peripheral quarters already densely populated by Africans, elegant "suburbs" are springing up in Dakar, in the

<sup>7</sup> Arthur T. Porter, *Creoledom*, Oxford University Press, 1963.



Fann quarter in Yaoundé, near Bastos, and at Cocody on the north-east limits of Abidjan. Often suburban living only consists of week-end retreats to which one goes to enjoy the beach: near Abidjan, stretching along nearly 10 kilometers of the Bassam road, some whites have rented coconut groves bordering the beach, and built *apatams* (temporary shelters made of thatch and planks of wood), or else small villas. Near Dakar, the Hann Bay is lined with villas, and the Almadies, Ngor and Yoff beaches are crowded on week-ends. At Libreville, Cape Esterias, at the exit from the estuary, fulfills the same function. Almost everywhere an end-of-the-week migration can be seen, characteristic of modern European civilization. Africans have certainly taken notice of this desire for peace and solitude. According to Ogo, the European stereotype is personified in *Oyinbo orioke* (the white man alone on a hill).<sup>8</sup>

The opposition between “quarters” and “center” is not articulated along the same lines in Europe as in Africa. In fact, the center plays a unique part in the economic and political life of the state. However, the majority of citizens is not aware of this fact. The man on the street in Abidjan or Bangui does not really feel affected by what goes on in the center. For him the center, where he deals with his personal business, is “Kilo 6” or Treichville.

One might ask oneself whether many African cities are not bicephalous, made up of two juxtaposed cities. The first moving in rhythm with the modern world—the city of whites, and those Africans whose education, qualification and tastes mix with modern life. The other is the African city, whose needs, means and aims have remained in a traditional framework. Actually, all the people, consciously or not, have been launched into the modern adventure.

Some quarters have a secondary center. However, what characterizes them is the residential role they play. An investigation carried out in Bangui in 1971, among school children, clearly showed the emotional coloration surrounding the quarter. All the children possessed a good knowledge of the city as a whole, and the center in particular. They are familiar with all

<sup>8</sup> Ogo, *Yoruba Culture, Yoruba Palaces*, University of London Press, 1966, quoted by Krapf Askari.

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the "modern shops, decorated with windows that we can stand in front of and look at all the goods inside." They are familiar with the various administrations, and can easily show that they know on what occasion one collects the "family allowance" or goes to the "Treasury." Imposing buildings are well known and are described according to their ornamental features. Bokassa market is more often cited on the basis of its architecture than for its commercial function. The thirteen story Safari Hotel is often mentioned. The children are conscious and proud of their city's international role. They feel it is indispensable to welcome foreigners. If the airport is listed, it is not because it makes one aware of the technological feat that permits a body heavier than air to fly, but because it attracts and receives foreigners, and informs the whole world about the Central African Republic and its people... A comment on the Safari Hotel: "the skyscraper built to accommodate those who come from far away," clearly illustrates their hospitable feelings.<sup>9</sup> The desire to open the country up to the outside world may seem alien to the material needs of an under-developed nation, but it represents an important element for their "intellectual well-being." The city and its inhabitants do not exist on their own, but because foreign witnesses consecrate their existence. The population also attaches importance to equipment it will not profit from, even indirectly, but as it creates a link with the outside world, it gives them some kind of self-confidence.

Aesthetic considerations have an important part in the city's scenery. Beauty is the citizens' main wish for their city. Europeans sometimes question the luxury of some of the official buildings. Well acquainted with the African soul, President Hauphouët-Boigny once said that the people needed this luxury. Lacking any kind of superfluity in his personal life, the citizen needs public monuments, avenues, and majestic squares. This luxurious setting is at the same time a publicity showcase. In this context, an inauguration speech for Urbanism Day in Abidjan is worth quoting: "Works that many have considered purely prestigious have actually acted as the starting engine for our capital's development. The presidential Palace has illustrated the old

<sup>9</sup> J. Binet, "Image de la Ville," *Bulletin trimestriel du Secrétariat des missions d'urbanisme et d'Habitat*, no. 68, January, 1972, p. 3-18.

saying that says that one should only lend to the rich. In spite of the fact that it seemed so large in 1957, the Hauphouët-Boigny Bridge could no longer keep the traffic moving 10 years later, having therefore to be doubled in size. Inaugurated in 1963 with 200 rooms, the Ivoire Hotel had to increase its capacity to 500 rooms six years later. By the time the international airport of Port-Bouët was completed, it was already necessary to plan its extension..."<sup>10</sup>

The aesthetic elements of their city that strike the Bangui children may seem unusual. The jet of water and the Boganda statue are seldom mentioned, and the color of buildings seems to go unnoticed. However, cleanliness is an important theme. The aesthetics of line and measure is emphasized. The pavement "that shines like iron," the telephone poles lined up like soldiers in Indian file, the trees lining the streets, give the urban landscape a rhythm and order. Such mention of regularity cannot help but surprise those who have noticed the extent to which the severity of geometric forms appears boring and barren to Africans. Perhaps it is the very severity that is appreciated in this case. It testifies that one is in the city, in a new world, no longer one of emotion and intuition, but of reason and modernity.

While scenes of the city's center are associated with modern culture, scenes depicting the quarter are on a completely different emotional level. According to the works examined, it would seem that the quarter is a substitute for the village, with all its aspects of the traditional, familiar, and return to a "maternal" nature. The evocation of domestic animals, fruit trees, and cultivations illustrate this point. Since the children attached drawings to their work, it is relevant to note that the houses of the quarter are drawn as round houses. Actually, in the city of Bangui, homes are usually square or rectangular, the roof having four or two slopes. The traditional round houses are very rare. Regarding his quarter, the Bangui child does not draw a real house, but the archetype of a house, just as the Parisian child draws a house with a roof and chimney, even though this kind of house is rarely found in the city. The drawing reveals

<sup>10</sup> Galy Kouassi, ministre de la construction, *Fraternité Matin*, 10 November, 1969.

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the traditional and nostalgic values associated with the residential quarter. The attachment to the quarter does not seem to be linked to the family, that is rarely mentioned as such. In fact, many children in the city live far from their family, in the narrow sense of the word. They often entrusted to some "tutor," an uncle or cousin, as is often the case in Brittany, their family preferring them to be near the schools. However, the population of the quarter is imagined as possessing ideally familial traits: the children appreciate their neighbor's calm, "good nature," the fact that there are no squabbles or quarrels. Love for the quarter is linked to the desire to find in it a shelter, a protection from the violence of the outside world. It is not peace in itself, nor silence that is appreciated, since the children describe the quarter's liveliness. The quarter is "sweet" because thefts are rare, and because the inhabitants "obey the chief well." The quarter thus becomes a kind of retreat into paternalism, next to an indifferent, great, but terrifying world.

Do the adults have a similar attitude to that of the children? Do they have that kind of emotional attachment to their quarter? They do not hesitate to leave their quarter to look for homes more suitable to their needs: the rate of mobility is very high everywhere. On the other hand, it can be observed that many people make purchases in their quarter that often could more profitably be made in the center. However, this phenomenon may be explained in several ways: for one thing movement from one place to another is not always easy, and besides, conditions of sale (credit, very little care to details) are sometimes more favorable in the small shop of the quarter, in spite of a higher price level. In addition, all the quarters have a minimum of commercial equipment.

Time spent in the center of the city is limited to professional needs, the attraction of wandering about through the streets, some administrative procedures, or to specialized purchases.

The quarters are not only residential centers—they function as autonomous nuclei with their markets, retailers and artisans in shops...The city's growth is not manifested by the intensification of the commercial functions of the center, but by the creation of secondary centers. In Abidjan, the two oldest quarters, Treichville and Adjamé, each possess a very busy center in which all kinds of commerce and handicraft are represented.

Other centers are taking shape; one at the "220 houses," and the other at the Koumassi crossroads... The poly-centric aspect of African cities is still a stable characteristic.

It is often said that in European cities the center plays the part of a filter. Newcomers attracted by the city's fame live there long enough to become accustomed to city life. Later they move to peripheric quarters or to the suburbs. Undoubtedly some African cities function along these lines. It seems that in Kinshasa, for example, an important section of the inhabitants of the farther "extensions" made stops in more central quarters before acquiring the means to move into their own modest home. In Dakar or in Abidjan one could certainly show examples of similar movements. The modern, but more distant quarters of Baobab and Liberté in Dakar, and the "220," Deux Plateaux, or Koumassi in Abidjan have a clearly more wealthy population than those of Adjamé or Treichville, Champ de Courses or Medina.

The multiplicity of quarters thus seems to be a constant characteristic of African cities, and therefore the problem of the center's obsolescence must be posed in a different manner.

#### THE CITY'S EXPRESSION

Like all human works, the city is the expression of its creators. Who is speaking through it? How can thoughts or feelings find the means to express themselves? What then, is the city trying to tell us about itself? These are three kinds of questions that can be raised.

Sometimes the city's plan expresses metaphysical beliefs. Already cited in connection with its habitations, we find this conception again in its urbanism. A. Masson Destourbet gives an excellent example<sup>11</sup> regarding Kotoko cities bordering the Logone: "The prince from the north (Makari) is a descendant of a conquering hero whose power is based on the killing of a mythical serpent, whose place he takes. This sacrifice allows for the arrangement of the urban space around a center... The prince from the south (Logone Birni) traces his genealogy to the wise man who, at the beginning of time, erected his dwelling on the privileged space separating the north and south quarters, that follow a linear plan."

<sup>11</sup> CNRS lecture, *La Personne en Afrique*, October, 1971.

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In the European city the whole community expresses itself, since, with the passing of time, both rich and poor were able to leave their mark. This is not the case in Africa. The "authorities," in particular the public powers, build and organize the city according to their own needs and aspirations. Limiting ourselves to Abidjan, we can find certain examples of "urban planning." The existence of a presidential palace that the public can visit is one of the first elements that shows the providential importance of the Chief of State. The ministerial block, a sober building surrounding a rectangular court, gives evidence of an effort towards coordination and synthesis. The "Caisse de compensation du Cacao," that houses all kinds of services and agricultural offices, is the tallest building in Abidjan—this is not by chance. The Finance Building will become a complex structure, attractive and rich in symbolism.

Technocrats, architects and urban planners express some of their ideals in their work. Nevertheless, they cannot express themselves freely, as they are tied down by programs imposed on them. As regards the inhabitants, only those wealthy enough to build in a lasting manner can leave some trace. Many whites, both individuals and firms, play a part in the city's evolution. However among the blacks, a considerable mass passes through without leaving a mark: urbanism is not affected by the miserable shelters made of wood planks and tar paper that form the slums. Nevertheless, if the expression of this mass were to disappear together with the precarious building materials it uses, it would play no less of a role on the urban scene.

The plan and the arrangement of space constitutes the first means of expression of the city. It speaks a language of planning and volume, alternating empty spaces with occupied spaces, blocks of buildings with squares, avenues and parks, commercial areas or industrial zones. The space is not inert: it is animated by the movement of traffic, that reverses its direction according to the time of day. Bridges, embankments, and trenches illustrate man's ability to impose his roads on the territory. All along the lines of traffic beats a rhythm that allows us to listen to the pulse of the modern world: the roads and crossroads, squares, porticos or markets where the crowd gathers or forms small groups. All that can be called "urban furnishings" provides elements charged with meaning to enrich the city's expression:

trees that line the roads and shade people strolling along, fountains providing water, streetlamps, sidewalks that protect the pedestrian, benches, bus shelters, stalls and shop windows. Even the absence of some elements is significant for those used to Western cities: there are few posters, and clocks or belfries are rare.

We must, however, delve further into the question so as not to limit the urban scene to an abstract plan. A city is also a sculpture, even though it is not always easy to see it in this light. Buildings are more or less tall, more or less large, more or less dense. Mineral and vertical in the center, the city spreads itself out over a wide area. Trees and gardens hide the villas and traditional houses of the rich quarters. The poor quarters and slums possess less greenery, and their rooftops spread out chaotically. Color is used for smaller buildings: its intensity and variety show the extent of the desire for originality. However, the large buildings are still grey or white. Mosaic designs are still quite rare. Noises compose a characteristic symphony of each quarter: the deafening clatter of the railroad, the scream of sirens, horns and motors, and the creaking of heavy weights. Especially in African quarters, traditional music spills over into Afro-Cuban or Zairan music. The noise of the crowd around the markets testifies to the city's power, while the incongruous crow of a cock or sheep's bleat recalls the African countryside next door.

Smells also contribute an element to the tableau. The smell of petrol is one certainly found in every modern city, but there are also the smells of peanut or palm oil, according to the local industry. There is the smell of palms trees or cocoa, the smell of fried food prepared and sold in the streets, the strong smell of smoked or dried fish, or the stink of gutters overflowing with rubbish from the markets, the smell of wood smoke from modest kitchens at dinner time.

The combination of all these elements provides us with an exact description of the city and a foothold within it. It even allows the observer to discover serious problems. For example, doesn't wood smoke point out the danger of deforestation around such an agglomeration of homes? Doesn't the smell of gutters signify an overly small water consumption linked to a low living standard?...

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A look at an aerial map allows us to observe the opposition between the way space is used in modern quarters (in fact or culturally European) and the way it is used in quarters culturally African. The different scale of buildings, streets, and squares is remarkable. The slum's plan appears to be a living tissue whose cells overflow into one another, and whose roads are established according to the needs of repeated pathways—not according to a decision agreed upon *a priori*. It grows by degrees, and if a geometric shape could be recognized, it would be a spiral rather than an orthogonal one. The following description of a Soninké village clearly demonstrates the process of its development: "The *misidé* (mosque) is a central point. Around it, chosen at the creation of the village, the inhabitants arrange their houses... The form can be read as follows: the founders live on one side of the mosque at the beginning of an imaginary line that unwinds in a spiral shape whose last turn includes the homes of permanently established foreigners, and descendants of slaves and castes."<sup>12</sup>

We must nevertheless take note of the fact that Kinshasa's new quarters seem to have assumed a modern urbanism, even though they were constructed outside of the official avenues. New lots were given out on the basis of purely customary agreements, bypassing any intervention on the part of administrative authorities, on lands upon which the roadways had not yet been marked. However, the chiefs of the quarters made certain that the new lots extended the old ones, and above all that areas be set aside for the future roadways along the axis of already marked roads. Urbanism's needs have been well assimilated: these quarters, that might have become nothing but slums, are made up of reasonably sized parcels (according to legal norms), spontaneously aligned, but that unfortunately run the risk of causing erosion for not having taken into consideration the slant of the land when the roads were planned!<sup>13</sup>

Road alignment sometimes comes up against other obstacles:

<sup>12</sup> Eric Polet and Grace Winter, *La société Soninké Diabunu*, Free University of Brussels, Sociology Institute, 1971.

<sup>13</sup> Ducreux, "Croissance urbaine et démographique au Kinshasa," Verhasset and Van Wettere, "Quelques aspects de l'expansion de Kinshasa," *Colloque sur la croissance urbaine en Afrique et à Madagascar*, Bordeaux, CNRS Edition, 1970.



in Timbuktu "the facades of houses never face east or west, the direction of the dominant winds, out of fear that bad luck and evil spirits might enter the house. Two categories of roads are the consequence: those facing from north to south, narrow and mysterious, squeeze themselves between blind walls whose lack of alignment causes frequent detours. Such a retreat is sometimes used for a door opening, facing north or south. Another subterfuge consists in arranging a supplementary vestibule opening directly onto a central road, where the actual front door of the house opens laterally."<sup>14</sup>

The difference in the conception of space between urban planners and architects, of Western training, and the African user is particularly noticeable when we observe the roads. Small merchants set up their goods on a table, and when night falls they remove them or leave them in a nearby house, leaving the table in its place. Night watchmen set up temporary shelters in front of these tables, and sleep there. All kinds of peddlers use space in the very supple way that nomads do. In the covered markets the opposition is even more striking, since it takes place within a rigid structure. Within the volume the architect planned, the African merchants have arranged themselves in small niches: platforms and curtains are used to display the objects, and solidly barred cabins protect everything when night falls. The opposition between dimensions, materials, and even shapes is striking. The plasticity of wood and the vegetal irregularity of the sometimes uneven poles, are in opposition to the mineral solidity of cement, and the rigidity of straight lines.

While the utilized surface captures our attention regarding habitats, the conception of space, in the most metaphysical sense of the word, is of particular importance with regard to urbanism. The notions Africans have concerning space (and time) are similar to those all agricultural, nomadic and hunting people have. Direction is determined according to astronomic points of reference, according to the rising or setting sun, geographical points of reference, the direction of the sea or of the forest, that are often determined by water movements (downstream or upstream). The Fang tribe of Gabon and South Cameroun determine time and space according to the apparent

<sup>14</sup> P. Castelnau, *Le Soudan français*, 1953.

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movements of the sun. "Time and space flow from east to west in a descending arc. The east is *oku* (upstream, high, male), west is *nek* (downstream, low, female). In relation to the axis of reference East-West, the north is to the right *Mbo nnom* (male side), the south is to the left *Mbo ngal* (female side). The border between north and south is *Osoe mnanga*, the albino coast, that is also the rainbow. We can thus determine two opposing areas on the compass: the north and east quadrant, male, and the south and west quadrant, that is female. The others appear to be neuter. The diameter north-east, and south-west, forming the bisectors of two opposing angles, gives us the migration axis, *mfa'a man*, towards the sea... During the *bilaba* (a kind of potlatch) male goods come from the female side and vice versa... the contradictions should become resolved by the application of the principle of double symmetry, or sexual complementarity."<sup>15</sup>

However, an emotional element always enters into the perception of space. Sometimes a county is traced according to an ancestor's wanderings, sometimes the countryside takes the shape of the reclining body of a demi-god, sometimes trees, rocks, streams or hills are believed to be shelters for spirits. There is a basic division between inhabited space—villages and fields—and natural space—forest or brush country. Man does not consider himself a dominator, or nature's master, but rather a sometimes timid host. This attitude is manifested by agrarian cults that worship the earth.<sup>16</sup>

In a similar cultural framework we can understand how religion can enter into the layout of a city plan. Often the cities of Sudan, like those of Benin, were surrounded by walls, with a limited number of gates. Various travellers describe cities with six, or sometimes seven gates, plus one for the traffic of slaves and provisions. Historic tradition relates that human sacrifices were sometimes performed at the founding of a city: it is said that in Djenné, a young girl was buried alive in the surrounding wall of the city.

All these beliefs show that the city is impregnated with the sacred. Nevertheless, little is known of the symbolism related to these rites.

<sup>15</sup> Alexandre and Binet, *Le groupe pabouin*, PUF, 1958, p. 114.

<sup>16</sup> J. Binet, *Psychologie économique africaine*, Payot.

Certainly there are both auspicious and unlucky places. However, people coming from all over meet in the city. No tribal tradition can hope to impose itself. According to the turn of events urban beliefs grow up. In Abidjan, a certain crossroad is believed to be dangerous, because the spirits of the lake distract drivers' attention, causing numerous accidents.

It would be necessary to catalogue all these beliefs in order to discover whether an urban folklore is coming into existence.

In the Benin civilization, these beliefs have left their mark on urbanism: "According to the myth, the world was originally an island surrounded by water, where the first chiefs wandered about aimlessly. Olorun came and said: 'Eshu, sit down behind me, you, Shango, in front of me, and Ogun on my right... the city will be called Ife... sixteen gods have come with me, and they will give birth to children who will live around you...'" Froebenius adds: "It is clear that the celebrated hill in the center of Ife was once the center of the world, according to the Yoruba belief. Ife was at one time composed of 17 quarters, one central one, and four at the cardinal points..." The ancient Yoruba city is thus situated around the king's palace: "the classic plan gives the impression of a wheel, with the Oba palace as the hub, the walls as the frame, and the streets as spikes, starting from the palace and connecting the city to other cities... the central palace, surrounded by walls, occupies a vast surface: 1 to 8% of the intra-mural city."<sup>17</sup>

Abeo-Kuta, or Ibadan, is an example of a more complex plan, having a network of crossroads more or less connected together. Each of these crossroads has an important enclosure and a market. History shows that this disposition was not in the least casual. In the 18th century, during a Peul invasion, several tribes belonging to the Yoruba people took refuge near the Ibadan hill, or the Abeo-Kuta rock. They settled there, one next to the other, protected by a common wall. Each tribe has remained grouped around their chief's palace, thus giving the city the shape of a constellation, and betraying their federal origin. A special altar belongs to the urban collectivity, while each group has one of its own.

It would be interesting to investigate the city's symbolism,

<sup>17</sup> E. Krapf Askari, *op. cit.*, p. 39-42.

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and the significance it may consciously or unconsciously effect on the spirits of the inhabitants. If European psychology performed a test on the village, it might facilitate a comparative approach to the problem.

Ancient Yoruba royalty was sacred, uniting both religious and civil powers: its central location was therefore logical. The cities founded by Peul conquerors of North Cameroun or Niger also gave proof of the foundations of social life. The saré (palace) of Lamido is in its center. However it is not alone. The principal mosque and the market are also situated there, in order to demonstrate that the chief's power was entrusted to him for the good of the community of faithful. It is true that the Peul chief enjoyed absolute authority, but by looking behind appearances one can see that rites and institutions recall his descent from a feudal conqueror who had "received a banner" from the Moslem preacher Ousman dan Fodio, commissioning him to convert to Islam the section of the country from which he intended to cut out his kingdom.

Urban toponymy also reveals something of the feelings animating the inhabitants. While monuments and roads provide spatial symbols, names of quarters provide verbal ones. We must begin by pointing out the opposition "city-village" more often made by whites than by blacks: "city" designating the center and wealthy quarters, and "village" applied to the African quarters—in spite of the fact that the enormity of their population renders such a designation ridiculous. Such is also the case in the very general use of the word "plateau" or in Senegal "landing place," unrelated to any river or airport.

The names of some famous cities are sometimes used to designate quarters. Thus Libreville has a "London," "Little Paris," and "Batavia." The existence of a quarter called "Kumasi" indicates the extension of the Ashanti culture in Abidjan. There are many cities in Cameroun which, as in Douala, have a quarter named "New-Bell." In this case the accent is not on any relation to a famous city, but on their similar functions: the "New-Bell" quarters are very mixed ethnically. Many cities have quarters whose names recall an ethnic group, (Yaoundé Quarter) for example, either because this ethnic group is actually in a majority in the quarter, or, as is more often the case, the quarter was given the name in homage to some important person who

lived there. In Cameroun, the name "Mokolo" has a very different origin. Mokolo, a northern city, was once the location of a prison, whose inmates were condemned to long sentences. The southern people considered the climate of Mokolo terribly hot. Thus this name given to a quarter evokes a place where life is very difficult.

A series of names testifies to the inhabitants' pride in their quarter, from the "chic quarter" of Pointe Noire or "Akébe come see" of Libreville to "Asikafe Ammantem" (the rich come later), "Apembrom d'alle" (where those who are worth millions live), "Mpem Mum" (5,000 pounds minimum), listed by Abboh for the South-Ghana region. Others indicate a desire for development, as in Cotonou, "Evenoumédé" (if you love me, come with me), "Misebo" (come nearer), "Awanlo" (the geometers will all come). The name sometimes signifies that the inhabitants are Moslem, like the innumerable "Medina," "Dar es Salam," "Misidé" (mosque) or "Misira," "Hamdallay." Christian names are also characteristic: in Ghana we find "Salem," "Kristom," "Broni Krom" (City of Whites). In Bangui "Fatima" or "N.D. D'Afrique," that are the names of the parochial churches.

The example provided by "Pikiné," one of Dakar's satellite cities, is interesting because all kinds of toponymic combinations can be found there. Some names are descriptive: "Crabs" (earth crabs are numerous), "Gueye Waye" (the sea sings, and we hear the surf), "Wakh Kenan" (dig down and drink, the water bearing layer is nearby). Other names are of historic origin and refer to the first inhabitants, "Gorey Fatou Maïga" (the baobab of Fatou Maïga), "Korinag" (the Moor's sea). Names have also moved with the inhabitants: after the demolition of the Dakar slums and the transfer of the population to Pekiné, we can find names of Dakar's quarters in the new location: "Gueule tapée" (a lizard swamp called gueule tapée), "Niamzat," "Clobane," "ouagou Niayes..."

Other quarters have been named after their chief. Bamako gives us the best example, since three quarters still carry the names of the three men that three centuries ago founded the city. This anthroponymy is clearly important, as it enables us almost infallibly to single out the natives who are the true owners of the land. If, in Yaoundé, some quarters are called "Mvog Ada" or "Mvog Mbi," it is because the "Ada" or "Mbi" clans live

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there, while "Elig Belibi" signifies the Belibi resting place.

Besides its establishment within a territory, and its concrete functions, the city also has a symbolic significance.

The observer who is anxious to understand its real situation, accords particular importance to the city's adaptation to the role it plays in state organization, in commerce, in religious cults, in leisure activities and in transportation. The opposition between center and quarters is emphasized. Municipal authority is examined. However, there is some hesitation regarding the city's expression.

The problem is more straightforward regarding habitations. The owner expresses himself through his home to the extent that he adapts it to his tastes. Otherwise, it is the "dominant culture" that is expressed. In urbanism, many different personalities intervene both immediately, and historically—no matter how short a period of time this may be.

By means of the project one can trace the evolution or passage from colonial to national authority. One can often follow changes in the technical environment; such as the removal of certain groups of hotels from the port area towards the airport, or the modification and completion of a commercial center that was originally a porters' caravan near the railway, may find a new location near a heavily used roadway.

Let us try to retrace the conclusions that the observer may come to. The separation between the center of the city and the quarters, and between the quarters themselves is one point. We are given the impression of a schism, or rupture between different aspects of life. The city associated with the state and its administrations is distinct from the economic and religious city. This situation probably symbolizes a serious discomfort, against which the Western man has long since become immunized, but which threatens to strike the African, who used to live in a harmoniously united universe. One is often impressed with the distance separating the political and administrative authorities and the people. It clearly demonstrates the citizen's position. In the village, an authority is always present: father or patriarch, notable or chief. In suburbs or small cities everyone is acquainted with the chief or authorities. In the city, persons in responsible positions are often unknown. Only the president enjoys a prestige that lends strength to the presidential palace, a building

that is usually centrally located and a remarkable monument. Mayors or police commissioners might represent authority at the level of the quarters, but actually, the chief remains a popular figure, thus contributing to the reconstruction of a kind of village in the heart of the city.

The distance separating the authorities has still more serious consequences: the citizen may no longer be able to see the relation between authority, responsibility, and work.

The man on the street is affected by the pomp that surrounds public life. In some countries, demonstrations and parades organized by the party are incessant. In addition, summit meetings, "international conferences," and presidential visits are very numerous. Parade avenues are not just for grandiose decoration—they are in frequent use. Bunches of drapery clattering in the wind have almost become a part of the daily scenery of the city center, the airport, and the roads connecting one to the other.

If we inquire into the city's expression in the economic realm, we find the same idea of prestige in its pure form, distinct from function and efficiency. The city gives out a general impression of great material wealth. Nevertheless, the stores do not contribute to this image. Most of the inhabitants are not familiar with the interior of commercial firms, thus never appreciating the nature of the work going on there. In the village, or in traditional quarters, artisans can be seen at work: weavers, shoemakers, or dressmakers set up work in a square or on a verandah. In a modern city, work is actually hidden from view. Assembly and maintenance takes place inside workrooms or in courtyards. As for bureaucratic offices, the public is only familiar with the local ones, that may seem luxurious in comparison to the miserable condition of the quarter. The few factories are seldom situated in the heart of the city, and are not much of an indication of the city's economy.

The city's prosperity is nevertheless evident, especially as seen from the point of view of a newcomer, who never tires of looking at the automobiles, lights, crowds, the quantity of goods, though often of poor quality, that fill the shops. There seems to be an inexplicable prosperity. Posters are not yet a very developed form of publicity. People are not yet as assailed by the world of shapes and colors promoted by posters, as in Europe. The consumer society, with its pressure to make purchases, is still weaker than in the West.



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In the city-dweller's world, objects are of prime importance. For the villager, everything is on a person-to-person basis. Authority is exercised by a man, commerce creates bonds between two people—the exchange of goods, services, or money is only one aspect, though a dominant one, of this relationship. The farmer before his field is not confronted by a simple object: the land belongs to his ancestors, fertility is a gift of the skies, and sometimes even the earth is considered a divinity. On the other hand, in the city objects take on a value of their own; independent of their maker...

The network of roads is striking and new. This time it is not wealth manifesting itself, but an appropriation of space. Africans are aware of this mastery. As master of space, man is also master of the day: roads are unaware of night. Nature submits to their order, as trees line up along the roadsides.

These are not inventions dreamed up on paper. A study undertaken in Bangui confirms the impressions gathered from several cities. According to the 484 children questioned in 1971, the most important elements of the city are, in descending order, the streets (cited 244 times), schools (216), shops (200), trees (194), city lighting (193), houses (158), markets (158), the hospital (137), the water supply (130), the Bokassa Market with its original shapes (127), dance halls (116), the Safari Hotel with its 14 stories (110), the stadium (101), cleanliness (100), the airport (98), factories (98)...<sup>18</sup>

It is not easy to judge how urban space is reflected in the eyes of the inhabitants. Do they mentally follow the precise outlines of monuments, or do they have a more global view of the surface? One might think that the children could have only a limited knowledge of their city—that is considerably spread-out—and that they would have difficulty relating their quarter to the center and to more distant quarters. This is not at all the case. Their knowledge is quite comprehensive. However they do make a distinction between the quarter—village-like, intimate and rustic, and the center—modern, and marked by important monuments.

As is often the case in African studies, we can see the outline of a double life taking shape, both traditional and modern, European and African.

<sup>18</sup> Secrétariat de mission d'urbanisme et d'habitat, *Bulletin trimestriel*, no. 68, January, 1972.