

THE CITY : A DIFFERENT IMAGE

René de MAXIMY

It is commonplace to assert that the African city is « a large village », or « a conglomeration of villages » ; it is less certain that this point of view is still valid. I would like to reflect for a moment on this subject.

Cities are the creations of men, the social and spatial expressions of communities. In them, history lays down its stratifications which intermingle or completely blend together or remain entirely separate, making the urban composition a true and always unique secretion of society. The result is that cities differ from each other morphologically, in their order and in their aspect, as much as societies do. This is why the cities of Western Europe — a region which has known urban civilization for a good while — display the massive, hierarchical and functional aspect with which we are familiar. Intertropical Africa is not at all the same. Most of the large cities there are young, expressions of the last colonists and of various incarnations of the spirit of independence. Nevertheless, the aspects of some cities which grew out of the next-to-last wave of European and Christian colonisation — Sao Paulo do Luanda, Mombassa, Saint Louis in Senegal — or of Arabic and Islamic colonisation — Dar-es-Salaam, Kano, Mopti — speak of different events, different histories. One also finds a few cities, such as Kumassi in the Kingdom of Ashanti, which reflect true Black African traditions.

The City : a Conglomeration of Villages ?

This is why the persistent view of the city as a « conglomeration of villages », which may have been valid twenty years ago, now must be considered to be no closer to reality than the safari image. Nevertheless, there remains a bit of truth in this simplification.

When one travels by car across the savannah, over the mountains of West Cameroon with their bocage land-

scape or through the dense equatorial forest, the small cities one encounters resemble each other in certain respects. This is so even though the landscapes differ entirely from one another. In one place they are closed, limited by rows of trees, and the only linear perspectives which can be glimpsed are those of dark rivers ; in another they are relatively open, with variegated panoramas of hills, rare trees or thickets of mango trees, baobabs and oil palms, signs of a human presence, above a wall of grasses. The resemblances between the cities one encounters are not so much due to the morphology of their environment as to the precarious aspect, reflecting poverty and hope, of the few roads which are suitable for motor vehicles, which form their administrative and commercial centers. This also holds for the landscapes of savannah-park regions (such as those in Kenya, Tanzania or Angola). The small localities of Maquela-do-Zombo and of Damba (in Angola) seem to me particularly significant in this respect.

I am referring here more to a general impression than to any precise morphological observations. All of these small intertropical cities — on the Indian and Atlantic coasts and in the continent's interior (though we might exclude the cities of sultans) — spring upon one, unannounced by a more humanized landscape than those we have indicated. The arrangement of their equipment and the use they make of their environment express a certain urban, functionalist sensibility. Sewer ditches and electrical poles line the streets beside box like structures of cement blocks with concrete beams, heavy-pillared structures roofed with light sheet metal, verandas marbled with ocher or grey dust depending on whether the site is characterized by laterite or basaltic substrates... These are often embryos of cities, rather than true cities. Their share of urbanity resides more in the hope of future urbanisation than in the present.

When one approaches a larger city the sights are completely different. One notices two types of human settlements : 1) more numerous villages around the city ; and 2) increasingly dense suburbs.

The villages are more numerous and more consequential around the city than « in the bush » or « in the forest ». The city's proximity renders them, as it were, sensitive, and also relatively attractive. It also modifies them : their houses walls are stronger, circulation is facilitated (the roads are often asphalted and there are bus terminals) ; roofs are generally of corrugated iron ; parcels and concessions are more clearly delimited, and so forth. Nevertheless, these villages retain their independent aspect and their agricultural functions. They cannot be considered similar to the distant suburban villages of European cities, which are specific extensions of the urban phenomenon.

Villages or Outlying Urban Districts ?

The true suburbs, on the other hand, bear no resemblance to villages. Their agriculture is residual, limited to a few fruit trees, a few millet sprouts or ears of corn, banana trees beside the streams, central fountains which are still quite frequented, palms from which palm wine is drawn and which consequently lose their leaves, goats attached to posts and, almost always, stray chickens. These suburbs lack, however, the urban characteristics of the small cities described above. In certain very large cities (e.g. Kinshasa) one speaks of « extensions », just as in Latin America one speaks of *barrios* and in France, previously, one spoke of *faubourgs* (which were located at the « barriers » of preindustrial cities). But this analogy must not be pushed too far : the genesis of these settlements and thus their urban significance bear no relation with those of the *faubourg*. The big African cities are penetrated by these « extensions ». The most distant « extensions » are called « eccentric » in Kinshasa, which connotes the idea of marginality, difference, anormality, if we care to reason in the manner of Lacan. Their monotony is remarkable in Kinshasa as well as in Luanda, which is entering a cycle of urban growth similar to that which has characterized the capital of Zaïre since 1960. But this monotony is becoming apparent in Douala, too. One cannot, therefore, speak of a « conglomeration of villages » here. Nevertheless, the safari image which I referred to at the beginning of this reflection does have a basis. I perceived it — or perhaps I should say I *felt* it, for the impression was not merely visual — in Brazzaville, Libreville, Yaoundé, Bangui and in a number of less important cities like Lambaréné (Gabon), Bafoussam or Bamenda (in Cameroon), Matadi or Banza Gungu (in Zaïre), as well as in Malindi (Kenya) and Arusha (Tanzania).

This contradictory urban expression is most striking in cities which occupy hilly sites : the topographical contrasts accentuate the hierarchies and call attention to the cleavages. Thus in Yaoundé the term « village » has become the standard way of referring to certain precarious districts which are dominated by stuccoed and unstuccoed houses of *poto-poto*. But we cannot confirm the appropriateness of this term without first delimiting its meaning. The word is particularly appropriate in describing two types of observation : pictorial observation of the ambiance and of the mechanical practices in these « villages », and social observation, including the cultural dimension. No ethnic or economical sense of the term « village », however, would seem acceptable.

First, the pictorial view. I am employing the term « pictorial » in its first sense, which refers to the concept



Downtown village people in Addis Ababa

of a painting or drawing ; but I would also like to suggest a larger sense, a more cinematographic sense, implying movement and allowing for the concept of practice.

The roads which cover the flattened hilltops of Yaoundé are of good quality ; districts are developing along them ; these districts become relatively linear as one travels away from the city center. Their urban character is evident in the quality and continuity of construction, the equipment used in the infrastructures, the number of roads, and so forth. On the hillsides and at the bottom of the valleys a mosaic of small quarters is illegally coming into being : each of them appears to have its own personality and seems relatively homogeneous in its landscape. This is due to the simultaneous origin of the twenty to fifty houses which compose these quarters, and to the « natural » organization which governs their development. This « natural » phenomenon of organization is also precisely the source of their village — like aspect. By « natural » we must understand « that which proceeds from the social nature of the group which constructs the buildings », in other words, which proceeds from the living habits (from the common and transmitted forms of behavior) of the property developers.

I will dare here to advance a wholly hypothetical rather than verified explanation : these forms of behavior translate the nature of the customary ways of life of the new populations who settle without authorization. It is generally a question of rural populations which bear few usages in common with one another and which tend, if only through the solidarity of marginalized groups, to penetrate each other and become mixed together in a sort of unity, in order to confront the unfamiliarity and the hostility of the city to which they « parasitically » attach

themselves. The cohesion and the spirit of the district are based in this situation. The spatial composition which is established therefore consists of a landscape which preserves village — like characteristics, but at the same time severely modifies them.

Village-like Practices

Next, social observation, including the cultural dimension. These districts are perfectly « apt » : in legal terms, since they are assumed to be illegal ; technically, in the art of their construction ; and socially, in their marginality, which stems from the marginality of their migrant populations. They are entities, secretions, *concretions* of a certain type of city dweller which European society no longer bears a trace of except in its slums and in those districts of our large agglomerations which are sometimes called « medinas » or « chinatowns ».

Further, these city dwellers feel that they belong to the place where their domestic life is established, and they feel a pride in this. They are pleased to designate their little quarter by the term « village ». Thus they contrast it with the bustling, well-constructed and wealthy city whose development does not reflect its origin, since the city is a fruit of « mimesis » and of fascination with the over-equipped and affluent countries of Europe and North America.

Daily practices reinforce this sense of belonging. Relationships are established around the food-to-go bar. This is where people drink together at the end of the week, where at the end of the day people play dominoes or cards, where they meet around a transistor radio to listen excitedly to a football game. In a relatively flat place approximately as large as a courtyard — whatever such place is at hand — children struggle through interminable games of football while friendly, encouraging, and idle passers-by look on. Along the nearby highway which marks the village's boundary, housewives haunt the little crepuscular marketplace which is invariably set up under flickering oil lamps.

This situation — where « city » means business and administrative center, streets with shops and opulent districts, industrial tones and massive, public equipment ; « village » means marginal quarters ; and terms like « extensions », « excentrics », « towns », and « quarters », refers to places which are being built up and urbanised, which are marked by little morphological contrast, which are constantly changing, where the urban elements which are henceforth to be considered characteristic of African cities are becoming established — such a situation, then, reflects one moment in the phenomenon of urbanisation. But alongside this

phenomenon, and not entirely independent of these new urban forms of expression, true villages subsist, retaining their pre-urban appearance and their socio-cultural arrangement. These villages nonetheless tend to be modified by the pressures which accompany urbanization and by the temptation to speculate which assails their land-chiefs, their clan-chiefs, their traditional chiefs. Pseudo-villages have similarly come into being : they reflect the newly arrived populations' relatively generalized tendency to form subgroups according to shared cultural affinities — in particular, language and lineage — or to maintain an independent attitude which is supported by the traditions of the original chiefdoms. However, if this phenomenon is affirmed in a sense of belonging and in maintained or reinvented village — like relationships, it almost never secretes a spatial structure which resembles that of a true village. In any case, and apart from these considerations, these « villages » — if they are indeed easily perceived, or supposed to exist in the urbanized space — only constitute a small percentage of that space and of the city-dwelling population.

Thus, viewing the urban phenomenon only partially, one can refer to the cities of Africa as conglomerations of villages... But this notion of « village » must be investigated further, and the meaning which the word itself is meant to include must be determined. In the meantime, I think that this is the occasion to denounce, yet again, the danger of confused ideas which result from instant descriptions, tourists' views and those of some journalists, as well as the Eurocentrism of first encounters.

African cities are not « conglomerations of villages » any more than their « loose women », their « wild » women are whores working within a social and economical context called prostitution ; nor any more than African societies are feudal, or situated in some phase of an evolution which Europe has already traced ; nor any more than European colonization was nothing but a capitalist abomination.

One may, however, perhaps admit that it is time for us Europeans to accept the idea that the concept of « city » covers a wide variety of social and spatial forms of expression. The cities of our old continent, so burdened with its past, only represent one highly determined and localized series of urban events ■

CITÉS AFRICAINES AFRICAN CITIES



N°2 janvier — mars 1985

FRANCE 50 — zone CFA 2.500

B17.797 → B17.812 ed1