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MALTA CONTEMPORARY ART

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## THE TOFFINU AND THE LEBU: halfway between indigenous narrative and spatial resistance

Monica Coralli and Arthur Vido

The history of a place very often includes intentional added parts and inaccuracies. These 'inventions' have in general and above all the purpose of adding value to the origins of a people, of a group, of a family and consequently of the place that offers them shelter. The identity construction starts from this narrative, made up of fragments of true history, enriched with 'pieces' borrowed from legends or from the imagination of the individuals in charge of passing them on. Oral tradition makes any changes in this assemblage easier and conveys a certain flexibility to the narrative. It happens that this narrative, which includes signifying symbols at the time of its drafting, loses its meaning later on, becoming sometimes obscure and difficult to interpret. The process it generates opens in turn way to new versions.

In general, the potentialities of a place form the basis of credibility upon which oral history stands, in order to appear plausible. The geographical situation, favorable to human settlement and strategic for commerce, and the wealth of available resources are, in particular, elements which contribute to its elaboration. Author names are given when they are authoritative or add to the glorification of the people and of

the place, but mostly they remain unknown: reflection of a collective appropriation, history becomes shared memory. This shared memory includes, however, different versions which appeared at unclear times, but preserves some invariables, a sort of landmarks and their frequency enables you to recognize the global permanence of history. This way, the least credible versions will continue to be told but more like anecdotes. To appeal to the identity linked to a territory seems pertinent from the moment a narrative will have permitted to establish common references which make sense to a specific community and create a unifying consensus amongst its members. This is the case with Toffinu and Lebu groups.

The two communities we propose to study have formulated similar narratives in spite of the distance separating them (several thousand kilometers), the linguistic differences (Toffinu speak Toffingbè, Lebu speak Wolof) and their ways of building and inhabiting their dwellings so as to legitimize their presence in a given place and maintain their supremacy thereon. The narrative each of the two communities has elaborated has gained ground by acquiring force of truth and its own legitimacy. In this way, the originality and the challenge of this subject of research lie, in our opinion, in the new approximation of the two peoples and of their respective histories, as well as in the identification of the ties that sustain «the words and the things» (Foucault, 1966), that is to say the narratives and the spatial forms they build and inhabit.

Our interest in a comparative study of the Lebu and Toffinu groups derives primarily from the construction of the narrative of their origins. In both cases, an artifice arisen from the slow transformation of true history has partially erased their warrior and nomadic past in order to value their fishing activities and, in general, their relation with water and their relatively sedentary character. Their present image has hidden away their traces: nowadays they are considered «natives», «indigenous» from the territories they occupy and regard themselves as rural proprietors. Also, when considering the etymology of their respective names, their naming does not give an account of their history.

The common, identifiable elements between the two communities, namely in the causes for their withdrawal, and then retreat to water territories, do not make it easy to decrypt the reasons for their different destinies. In our study, combining the historical and the socio-anthropological approaches, we will question certain architectural forms and specific choices in terms of materials in order to explain the reasons for their evolutions which, in their essential, are the work of their dwellers.<sup>1</sup>

This research is just beginning. We are presenting here the first results, which are still provisional.

In Senegal, field work started in 2015, at the time an urban project workshop on social housing was taking place. In fact, reflecting on this subject in Africa, in Dakar in particular, and on the meticulous observation of the transformations operated by its inhabitants

1. In order to decrypt these transformations, our approach will follow afterwards with a retrospective, exhaustive study of the different living patterns which will complement our data.

during half a century in the dwellings<sup>2</sup> they beneficiary, has led us to look into 'traditional' forms of housing. Maybe they would probably make us understand better the transformations in more recent housing, of modernist influence, proposing a new life pattern, diametrically opposed to the lifestyles characteristic to the majority of the population.<sup>3</sup> In Benin, the elements presented here are based on secondary sources, relatively dated, except for one work, yet unpublished, the result of a study conducted between 2011 and 2012 by the archeologist Orazio Patti on the Aguégues.<sup>4</sup>

## TWO NARRATIVES, SEVERAL RECURRENCES

The different founding narratives on the rooting feeling of the Toffinu as Lebu, contribute to explain the links between past and present and allow us to understand the reasons for maintaining a certain form of housing and of inhabiting, as well as their own transformation, in spite of the advance of the real estate development. Our purpose will be to intersect these narratives with the specific and evolving spatial forms they produce. Their housing is, in our opinion, a remarkable example of resistance to globalizing forms of urbanization.

### Resisting

This capacity to resist is, in our opinion, the proof that the Lebu have a strong identity linked to a given territory, through a narrative built to proclaim and reinforce their presence which continues to be influenced by external factors, by political and economic games of investors and by international partners,

2. Reference is made to the programs launched during '50s for the building of social lodgings in the Cap-Vert peninsula between 1950 and 1980.

3. The international workshops in Dakar are organized within the frame of the ENSA Paris La Villette's Master 1 urban project course, «Détour(s). L'infraordinaire des métropoles », coordinated by Olivier Boucheron.

4. The Aguégues are group of lands situated above water level, that are partially flooded, situated in the vicinity of Porto-Novo. The inhabiting communities live both on the river-lake lagoon waters and on the Oueme delta lands, as their activities are rhythmmed by the rise and fall of water levels.

imposing attitudes different from those pertaining to their culture. The Toffinu living on the shores of Lake Nokoué in Benin, in a territory situated between Cotonou and Porto-Novo, and the Lebu from Cap-Vert peninsula in Senegal have developed specific forms of resistance that have more to do with spatial and material form related to a specific location near water, inside water or between land and water<sup>5</sup>. With the Lebu, this is also combined with a very structured socio-political, religious organization.<sup>6</sup> «The contact with the Europeans [tells us Bourgoignie about the Toffinu, author's note], could have made them parachute in an intoxicating world and history made of the commerce of guns and mirrors, of precious fabrics, of *multifiori* (pearls in Venetian molten glass), and of alcohol which might have put an end to a development in autonomy.» The Lebu have traded with the Europeans and made their permanence possible on the peninsula but, in fact, both the Toffinu and Lebu knew how to preserve their autonomy and, even today, any decision pertaining to land cannot be taken without their consent; in this sense, they continue to be the «town makers»<sup>7</sup>.

### Building nativeness

The 'Building' of the autonomy has made essential, in both cases, a first oblivion to hide the fact that they have not been the first dwellers on the sites they occupy at present. In fact, we know that they have settled in successive migrant flows which explains, among other things, their persistent ties to the land, when they call themselves «water people», following the etymology of their naming. In the social construc-

5. This choice to live on marshlands, halfway between land and water, according to seasons, led O. Patti to create a neologism to refer to them. The term *terreaux* (*landwaters*) precisely indicates this adaptation of their lives and of their activities following the seasonal periods of the year.

6. We will not be able to develop here the different entities that organize the Lebu Republics.

7. This expression is very often used by all those interested in village manufacturing putting in the first place the creative dimension of the dwellers. We refer to, among others, the works of Pedrazzini, Bolay, Bassand (1996), Dorier-Apprill, Gervais-Lambony (2007), Paquot (2010).

tion of their communities, collective memory voluntarily detaches itself from real history in order to retain only the elements around which history left for posterity is then forged. Strictly speaking, there is no founding myth.

Three points seem to us essential in their comparison:

The first point is that in both cases they are fleeing warriors coming from the inland and forced to settle down on the shores (of rivers, of lagoons or of the sea). The second point has to do with the close relationship progressively established with water: inhabited at first as a refuge, it becomes a resource later on. Finally, the third and last point has to do with the sense of belonging: in both cases, they are an heterogeneous group made of several ethnic groups who entered into contact at successive periods.

### HISTORICAL NARRATIVE AND THE BUILDING OF THE TOFFINU AND THE LEBU FOUNDING MYTHS

The Toffinu are called «Water people». /*To*/ means a body of water, /*fin*/ expresses the action of stealing, taking away, or monopolizing and /*nu*/ designates whom does it belong to. *Toffinu* literally means «people monopolized by water» (Bourgoignie, 1972). They fled from the Danhomey *razzias* and chose the marshlands as a refuge to settle down. Afterwards, they spread all along the shores of Lake Nokoué, of the Zou Valley and of Porto-Novo Lagoon. Some of them migrated towards Badagri (nowadays Nigeria), in the vicinity of Lagos Lagoon, in search for waters richer in fish, at the time fishing went down in Nokoué. In the sixties, the pop-



ulations once called Toffinu coast people, left the old lake villages of Awansouri and Afotonou<sup>8</sup>, respectively destroyed in 1910 and 1923. However, the Toffinu kingdom also includes lands not flooded all year round or not flooded for long periods of the year. The history of the Toffinu plants its roots into the past of the city of Tado. Like all other peoples from South Benin, they consider this town as their original cradle. Three brothers, Gangbo, Hunsu, and Ejè, from the Ajawa clan had to leave Tado and made a stop at Adja-Honhué which means «refuge home for Adja fugitives». This place is situated to the West of Lake Ahémé, some kilometers South of Bopa, almost facing the village of Dodomè (nowadays Tokpadomè village) on the Eastern shore of the lake, one of the stopping places of the Agasuvi migration (Mondjannagni, 1963). Not feeling completely safe, they continued roaming until they ended up at a marshy place which they reckoned to be sufficiently distant and safe. They named it *Ahuansè* which literally means «the war has ended» (*Ahuan*, war ; *sè-si*, to end), from where the name Ahuansori (Awansouri) derives. This was how the Ahuansori village was founded during the second half of the seventeenth century, on the South shore of Lake Nokoué, next to the lands already occupied by a *xwla* population from Djèken-Godomè.

The Toffinu were tormented for more than half a century by repeated attacks from Goun soldiers (Dunglas, 1967). It was only gradually that they started to co-operate with the men from the different plateaus around them. Nowadays, this community shares these lands not only with the Wémènu but also with the Gun,

8. According to Prudencio (1969), *Afotonou* means «on water where feet cannot step anymore».

the Yoruba and the Aïzo. The village toponyms evoke the wars (or their end), in contrast, their names evoke water, in their case a synonym of restored peace, because of the shelter it provides. The connection with fishing is evident, though not explicit. But they continue to be, depending on the times of year, stockbreeders and farmers.

The Lebu would be «reclusive, particularistic, coherent people», as in their description by Balandier and Mercier (1946, p. 11) who conducted an investigation within the Lebu fishermen in 1946.<sup>9</sup> Were they a population of fishermen since the very beginning? They doubt it:

«(...) did they already have this character before settling down in Cap-Vert and Petite Côte? Legends offer some contradiction on this matter. One of them, apparently more recent, is about a fish-woman, captured by a brave, sea fishing pioneer who, once brought in among men, would have taught them the fishing techniques and religious practices, and would have united with them. A legend that tends to attribute to a marine inheritance the qualities of the Lebu fishermen.» (*idem*: p. 17)<sup>10</sup>

The connection attributed to large Lebu families and marine creatures in different versions of their history allows us to date far back in time the moment when they learned fishing. Also,

«Traditions speak about their relationship with the *Tyubalo*, fishermen native from the river (...). These *Tyubalo* are Toucouleur elements, not a people but a caste of fishermen. They would have been the masters of the Lebu in the art of fishing. (...) This way, the Lebu would have made their

9. This study represents for its authors the first contact with Black Africa and «living» sociology. Our interest in the unknown forms of resistance they have developed corresponds to (and finds confirmation in) the interest these authors have already lent to this community because of its fighting back external influences. They have studied their reactions to the contact with Islam and with two important urban centers, Dakar and Rufisque. Nowadays the Lebu interest us because the territories of certain villages, such as Yoff or old Ouakam, resist to the absorption by the Dakar urban area, and their *penc* are key elements of their social and spatial organization.

10. For a detailed presentation of the different myths and legends, we refer to Mercier and Balandier text (1946).

apprenticeship as fishermen on the banks of the Senegal river. Fishing practice in these regions must date back to a very remote period: the remnants of fishing engines, collected from the middle of the Sahara and used during the pre-desert age, can prove it. Would the Lebu be linked to these populations of archaic fishermen? Has the name Lebu always designated a population of identical composition? (...) The Lebu are Wolof, the Lebu are Sérère, the Lebu are Sossé (Mandinka)». These different answers, given full of confidence by the Lebu themselves and by their neighbors, «would suffice to prove the mixture in their present population.» (*idem*, p. 18-19)

Where do they come from? If the last stages of their migrations can be clearly identified, their ancient past raises numerous uncertainties. The Lebu are described by Cheikh Anta Diop (1967, p. 271) as «hordes of Barbarians who swept across the coasts of Africa » and were forced to flee towards the West into present Libya - of which they would come to be the founders - by the Egyptians of the Nineteenth Dynasty at the time of the Indo-European invasions in the second millennium,<sup>11</sup>. This «wild country» they occupied was called *rebu*, and *lebu* would be one variant thereof. C. A. Diop tells us further down that «the main concern of these hordes (...) was hunting» (*idem*). In fact, he drew very eloquent correspondences between Egyptian and Wolof languages, in particular */reb/* means «hunting », « hunter » or « to hunt » and */rebu/* indicates the «place where to hunt» or the «hunting country». The word *lébu* would mean «challenge, warrior», *lubu* «aggressive warrior». This etymology is contradicted by another version, also accepted by the Lebu: their name could derive from *lebe* «to tell, to tell a tale», in

11. Sylla (1992, p. 7 ff) states that the Lebu would have come from India and would have spent some time in Arabia before reaching the Mediterranean coasts. He also draws striking comparisons between Dravidian and Wolof languages. The similarities are surprising.

the sense of «cunning», they would be then those who conceal their thoughts.

The Lebu settlement on Cap-Vert peninsula would be the result of migration flows coming from Eastern Africa between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries or could have stemmed from the displacements of Black populations occupying present Mauritania from where they were progressively chased out between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. In any event, not enduring any sort of domination, they went through numerous displacements and, after a rebellion in the eighteenth century, they were able to found a Republic, the first one to have contact with Europeans. They were recognized by the Cayor authorities, other inhabitants of the peninsula, and by those on Gorée Island (French settlers) before the end of the eighteenth century. From then on, the notion of Republic reflects a unity feeling around the Lebu identity. Being a mixed group, it could have disintegrated when in contact with the European populations. But all the sources agree in the definition of their tenacious character, which will rebel against any form of colonization (be it religious, cultural, economic, political...).

These two case studies prove once again that it is not only possible but also necessary to revisit history, to adjust our look thereon, to «reconsider the Grand Narrative of the development of Western civilization, a triumphant celebration of the achievements accomplished by the West» (Burke 1998, cited by Goody 2006). This cultural superiority of Europe, of Western eyes who imposed their reading on the rest of the

world, has neglected these groups who are hardly ever mentioned in the official written history transmitted in handbooks. Presented as 'marginals' and 'minorities', their destiny would be doomed to disappear. If the history of the human settlements in these territories was to be rewritten, they would have a relevant place. According to the European-centered vision, whenever they are «given value», this happens within the frame of tourist circuits offering 'experienced' visitors a detour «tradition», facing large urban conglomerations associated to the image of the Western metropolises or, in particular, to other models from China, from Dubai...

This journey back to the past of the Toffinu and Lebu opens line of thought which will be further developed shortly: the one dealing with the spatial solutions adopted, which could derive directly from mental representations, namely their past of warriors, provides us with the information about forms and modes of resistance set up because of the new water environment; the other dealing with practices which also cannot be explained, without knowledge of the past. In Toffinu environment, for example, the ancient connection to land is restored at the end of life when, at the time of the burial, the choice is systematically to bury the dead on dry land.

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Cover Design:  
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Edition:  
Centro de Estudos Arnaldo Araújo, ESAP-CESAP

Printed by:  
NORPRINT Artes Gráficas, S.A.

First Edition: Porto, March 2017

Print Run: 200 copies

ISBN: 987-972-8784-70-6

Depósito Legal:

This book was funded by national funds through FCT - Fundação para a  
Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., within the project UID/EAT/04041/2016

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