

TRADITIONS: BETWEEN THE INDIGENOUS AND THE INFORMAL.

Endogenia and heterogeneity in the vernacular architecture of São Tomé.

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“Tradition is not necessarily old-fashioned and is not synonymous with stagnation. Furthermore, a tradition need not date from long ago but may have begun quite recently.” Hassan Fathy²

Tradition consists in the repetition of a gesture that, due to its symbolic significance, existing resources or proven quality as a solution to a problem, has become relevant and ensures its permanence in time. Evolving from different origins and periods, each new tradition adds on to all its predecessors and contemporaries, resulting in a palimpsest, in the accumulation and depuration of transferred knowledge, into renewed traditions.

From the "indigenous" to the endogenous. Within the colonial context, the discussion over the status of the "natives" has come a long way to reach a recognition of dignity, specificity and endogenous knowledge. Although the Portuguese overseas policy might have been more permeable to existing communities in colonized territories than other colonial powers, and though successive restructuring and strategic changes in its ideology might have contributed to a progressive self-determination, the conditions for genuine emancipation were only met with the independence of the new nations. In this context of definition and construction of a collective identity, endogenous knowledge plays an especially important role, being essential to seek the roots and tools for an integrated development within the tangible and intangible heritage.

The Santomean vernacular and informal architecture. Within the context of São Tomé, vernacular architecture reflects the different economic and strategic cycles that took place in the territory. In its settlement strategies, in its dispersion or agglomeration, and in the choice of sites or construction solutions, the spontaneity of vernacular architecture reflects the constraints which it has been subject to, as well as the needs it has tried to respond to. The few records of "indigenous" structures suggest some clues for the interpretation of its current configuration. The Santomean territory, as most of the contemporary African continent, inherits the legacy of traditional references, of colonial settlement and technical strategies, as well as recent innovations of Westernization. Nowadays, all these influences overlap: the ephemeral is connected to poverty, and the traditional meets the informal.

¹ This paper is part of the ongoing PhD research of the first author, taking place at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Porto, Portugal, under supervision of the second and third authors. The research focuses on planning from micro to macro scale in Developing Countries, having São Tomé and Príncipe as case-study.

² Fathy, H. (1973). *Architecture for the poor: an experiment in rural Egypt*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Resilience and resourcefulness in building solutions. Thus, the constructive solutions adopted in self-construction by rural and urban communities in São Tomé are examples of adaptation, using references from diversified backgrounds. Despite their limited resources, the recurrent solution of elevation from the ground (supporting the dwelling space on wood posts or concrete pillars), or a portability of the buildings (allowing their dismantling and transportation to a different location) may point some traditional strategies of adjustment to local conditions.

The potential for development. Accordingly, ongoing research aims at identifying emergent potentialities within the territory of São Tomé, focusing on the investigation subjects of Architecture and Urbanism. By analysing traditional and informal constructions, their relationship with the public and collective space, as well as the construction of the territory, it tries to identify and highlight characteristics that may contribute to an integrated development, both at local and global levels. The individual and collective entrepreneurship (the role of self-help and self-construction as tools of emancipation), the potential of miscegenation (the versatility to assimilate and deal with references from different origins), the adaptability to climate and territory as well as the extensive potential of local materials, are some of the studied features that take part in the ongoing research, which are to be here presented for discussion.