"Uma Guiné Melhor": the psychological action and the spatialization of population control in rural areas. The strategic villages in Guinea-Bissau between 1968-1973 ⬚

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"Uma Guiné Melhor" psychological propaganda. A twisted narrative between promoting and manipulating

In 1968, when António de Spínola landed in Guinea-Bissau assuming the political and military role of Governor General of the Province of Guinea, ruled until 1973, the Guinean War of Independence was running for 5 years across the whole Guinean territory[1]. On one side, the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), led by its leader Amilcar Cabral and supported by international aids (like the Cuban's aid), was strengthening more and more. On the other side, the Portuguese army was running an exhausting military and defensive strategy in order to resist in few occupied territories (Rodrigues, 2010).

The Governor General António de Spínola quickly realized the urgency to face with the "Guinean problem" not only by reinforcing military measures, but throughout a policy of social promotion and economic development. According to Spínola, the main issue in a *"subversive war"*, as he used to refer to the Guinean War of Independence, was *"to conquer the population"*, because *"the territory worth for the population living on it"* [2]. The War in Guinea could not be gained by the *"force of arms, but mainly by the force of reason"* and the conquest of the *"population's hearts"* would have been achieved through a social-promotion policy, whose effects would have encouraged the supporters, persuaded the undecided and discouraged the others, in favour of the Portuguese cause (De Spínola, 1970: 102).

The main arguments of António de Spínola's policy, were perchance based on the book entitled *O Exército na Guerra Subversiva* (The Army in Subversive War), published in 1963

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[1]   At the time António de Spínola arrived in Guinea-Bissau, the PAIGC already held more than a half of the Guinean territory turning the situation for the Portuguese army very critical (Rodrigues, 2010).

[2]   AHM/DIV/2/4/226, "Estudo da remodelação do dispositivo da Guiné" (Study on the Reorganization of the Guinean deployment). Directive n.º 20/68, Bissau 25-07-1968.

by the Ministry of the Army. The book consisted in a theoretical practical manual[3], regarding the Portuguese military doctrine and based on *"the essential elements of British and French doctrines and renditions of their experiences in Malaya, Kenya, Indochina, and Algeria, and a modest amount of U.S. material"* (Cann, 1997: 43). One of the main arguments of the reported counterrevolution doctrines was the "psychological action" and according to Cann, the Portuguese government was especially intrigued by the French strategy. In fact, in 1959 a study mission was accomplished in Algeria by the Portuguese Army in order to study the so-called "Algerian-case" with focus on the procedures and the effects of the "psychological action" employed by the French army[4]. The report of the Algerian mission sets the bases for the Portuguese psychological policy[5]. As it is stated in volume III of the book *O Exército na Guerra Subversiva,* the "psychological action" aimed to manipulate the public opinion in favour of the Portuguese cause, strengthening the determination of the supportive part, attracting the sympathy of the neutral ones and rejecting any adverse influence on both of them.

During the armed conflict in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, the "psychological action" was achieved through means of propaganda and counterpropaganda, such as pamphlets, printed advertisings, radio propaganda and public speeches (Afonso & Gomes, 2016), along with the "improvement" of native population living conditions and their control throughout the resettlements program and the self-defense villages policy.

In Guinea-Bissau, it was particularly under António de Spínola military administration (1968--1973) that the official propaganda focused on the effort to improve both social and economic conditions as well as "security" of the Guinean population. Soon after his arrival, under the slogan *"Uma Guiné Melhor"* ("A Better Guinea"), Spínola announced to the population several measures of social promotion and infrastructures improvements (De Spínola, 1970).

The socioeconomic development plan was very vast and ambitious and included the improvement of educational services and healthcare assistance in rural areas, to be achieved throughout the construction of sanitary posts and primary schools alongside with the upgrading of existing facilities in the main cities such as Bissau, Bolama, Bafatá, Nova Lamego (now Gabu), and Teixeira Pinto (now Canchungo). In the field of dwelling assistance, the plan comprised the creation of a Fund for the Construction of Economic Houses which would have supported the improvement of the living conditions of suburban and rural population. According to Spínola, the resolution of the dwelling problem was especially relevant *"for the direct impact it would have on the population education"*[6] or on its influence. In Guinea, since 1940, many surveys and studies on traditional dwellings were accomplished by public officers including the architects working for the Colonial Urbanization Office[7]. These researches also aimed to study traditional ways of living in order to design new dwelling typologies which

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[3]   The book is divided into five volumes: "Generalities", "Operations against armed bands and guerrilla forces", "Psychological Action", "Support to the civil authorities" and "Administration and Logistics".

[4]   The study mission last 31 days in Algeria and 10 days in Paris, and it included the attendance of a Counter guerrilla and Pacification course in Arzew, a training course for officers into the Army Corps in Algeria, a visit to Sahara and finally a visit to the Centres d' Instruction à la pacification et à la contre-guérilla (CIPCG), to the French Head of Defense and to the 5th Rep. National Defense in Paris. AHM/FO/039/11/592/354-355, "Missão à Argélia" (Mission to Algeria), 1959. About the counterinsurgency agents, the training sites and the military headquarters established in the Algerian territory during the war for the independence see (Henni, 2017).

[5]   AHM/FO/039/11/592/354-355, "Missão à Argélia" (Mission to Algeria), 1959.

[6]   AHM/DIV/2/4/226, "Reordenamentos. Urbanização de aglomerados populacionais" (Resettlements. Urbanization of populational nucleus). Directive n.º 57/69, Bissau 14-07-1969.

[7]   After Orlando Ribeiro's geography mission in the territory of Guinea-Bissau in 1947, the first representative survey on traditional dwellings, including the first native neighbourhood in Bissau, was carried out by the 2nd lieutenant Avelino Teixeira da Mota and the civil engineer Mário Ventim Neves (Mota *et al.*, 1948); in 1950 the researches regarded mostly the city of Bissau and its suburban areas (De Oliveira, 1958); while in the sixties the research missions focused on the study of both the rural habitats (Schiappa, 1970) and the urban ones (Caria, 1966, Chichorro, 1968), aiming to solve the overpopulation emergency in Bissau suburbs due to the war. About the survey on the native dwellings during the last decades of the Portuguese colonization in Guinea-Bissau see the author upcoming article (Vita, 2023a).

Ilustração 01 – Bajocunda village after military occupation, before António de Spínola's policy

Source: AHM/DIV/3/47/AP2/19040.

Ilustração 02 – Buruntuma village after military occupation, before António de Spínola's policy
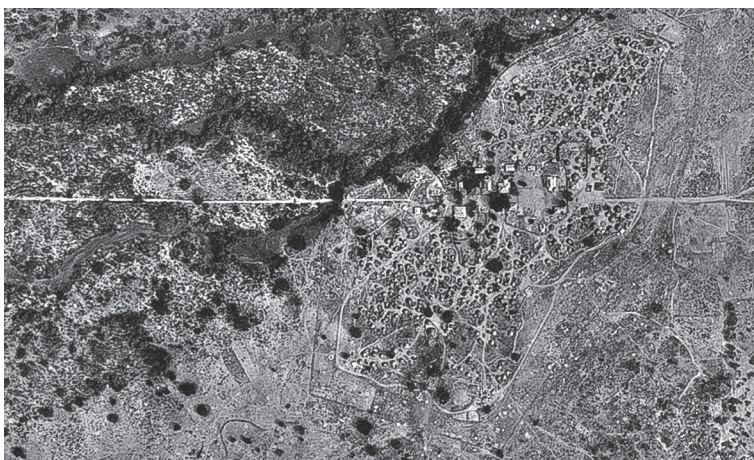
Source: AHM/DIV/3/47/AP2/19040.

would have encouraged the "process of assimilation" of European habits and culture by the autochthonous population, especially in an urban and suburban context where the housing emergency resolution was urging. The spatial manipulation pursued by colonial authorities, under the doctrine of "assimilation", had always been a strategic weapon to overpower the population, and during António de Spínola's Government, it became fundamental for his own policy success.

Finally, the territorial development involved the consolidation of the main infrastructures of the country, such as water and electricity supply system, paved roads, airports, bridges and the development of the radio and telecommunication equipment, which also resulted crucial for the military logistic.

According to the plan of investments presented by Spínola on October of 1969 to the Legislative Council of the Province of Guinea (De Spínola, 1970), the economic efforts for the development of the country would have been implemented not only in the main cities of Bissau, Bolama, Bafatá, Nova Lamego (now Gabu) and Teixeira Pinto (now Canchungo), but also in smaller villages, located in strategic positions for a more capillary control of the whole territory, with focus on the borders and the fluvial connections: Sare-Bacar and Pirada close to the Senegal border, Cacine and Gadamael close to the southern border with Guinea Conakry, and Olossato, Mansabá, Bissum and Encheia in the core of the Portuguese controlled territory, today the Oio Region. Furthermore, strategic aerodromes were built e.g. in the southern region, mostly occupied by the PAIGC, and new river ports were settled in Xime and Bambadinca on the banks side of the Geba river, an important fluvial connection linking the interior city of Bafatá to the sea.

The document published in 1972 by the Junta de Investigações do Ultramar, (Board for Overseas Researches) entitled *Perspectiva do desenvolvimento económico e social da Guiné*, (Perspective on the socio-economic development of Guinea) clearly reveals the difficulty to achieve the several socio-economic measures due to economic constrain. On the contrary, in rural areas many actions were accomplished under the so-called Rural Improvements program, which comprised: the *reordenamentos populacionais* (population resettlements), the *tabanca em autodefesa* (self-defense villages), the "improvement" of traditional habitat and socioeconomic conditions of the rural population.

An attempt of territorial organization throughout the takeover of the traditional settlements started even before Spínola's Rural Improvements policy, under Arnaldo Schultz General Governement (1965-1968). According to several photographic documents founded in the Historic Military Archive in Lisbon, reporting aerial views of 60 villages, it is possible to observe that before Spínola's plan, the spatial strategy for the occupation of the rural areas was mostly achieved by occupying the pre-existent villages, fencing them with barbed wire and constructing military equipment within them, without manipulating the dwelling typologies or their implantation. Under Spínola's Government, many of these pre-existing camps were abandoned and their population and army were relocated into new strategic villages which provided better living conditions and also a more efficient spatial organization[8]. Encouraged by the "*Uma Guiné Melhor*" propaganda, it was actually under Spínola's administration that the population resettlements and the self-defence villages policy spread effectively in the Guinean territory.

The physical and psychological control of the Guinean territory: the struggle for rural areas

In rural areas, both the Portuguese government and the PAIGC struggled to gain support of the population and as a result of the territorial control. On one side, Amilcar Cabral understood that in the main cities the repressing actions achieved by the colonial authorities were too intense and exhausting to defeat (Ledda, 1973). As a consequence, the PAIGC's battle and propaganda shifted mostly to the rural areas, mobilizing a large part of the interior population, even by the use of force (Cabral, 1974). On the other side the colonial authorities realized the importance of *"subtracting the (rural) population and the richest areas to the enemy"*[9] denying any logistic and political support.

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[8] A paradigmatic example is the village of Madina do Boé in the North Eastern Region. While in 1968, Spínola ordered the Portuguese army to abandon the village by destroying any buildings and retriable material, 5 years later in September 24th of 1973, not far from Madina do Boé, the PAIGC self-proclaimed the independence of the country.

[9] AHM/DIV/2/4/226, "Estudo da remodelação do dispositivo da Guiné" (Study on the Reorganization of the Guinean deployment). Directive n. 20/68, Bissau 25-07-1968.

In the military directive *Estudo da remodelação do dispositivo da Guiné* (Study on the Reorganization of the Guinean deployment), issued on September 1968, Spínola affirmed that the Guinean territory would have been divided into areas based on the level of proximity the population had with the "enemy". As a result, the territory was classified in different areas: those with population under the Portuguese control, those with population under dual control (Portuguese and PAIGC) and those under the enemy control. Furthermore, *"according to the principle of resources concentration"*, the unoccupied areas had to be abandoned in order to converge the physical and psychological actions where the population actually lived[10].

In the most inhabited regions, the contact with the population had to be *"permanent and active"* in order to achieve a *"dynamic and efficient psychological action"*[11]. According to Spínola, the *"themes"* of the "psychological action", had to be different and *"personalized"* depending on population ethnic group and its proximity with the enemy[12].

The confidential "Propaganda Directive n.1", issued on September of 1968, included a detailed list of the most persuasive topics used to overpower the main ethnic groups (Fula, Manjaco, Balanta, Mandinga and Mancanha) to accept being regrouped under the Portuguese authority[13]. This indoctrination aimed to manipulate *"the world of superstitions and beliefs"* of the rural populations, promoting, for example, arguments that addressed religious concerns: *"Allah wants the victory of Fula and its religion"*, *"Allah wants the Mandingas to fight with arms for the peace and its religion"* or *"the irãs (traditional divinities) will protect the new villages"*; but it also aimed to empower the traditional authorities to *"orient better his population if it would be regrouped"*; or it leveraged the primitive aspirations and rivalries for lands ownership: *"the united Mandingas will finally own their chão[14]"*, and it promoted the improvement of living conditions and economic activities: *"in the new villages will not lack seeds that will be well stowed"* or *"the enemy steels the rice, the (Portuguese) army will help to transport and protect it"* [15].

The success of the "psychological action" in the rural areas, would have been mostly achieved by gaining the traditional authorities' support[16]. As a consequence, the army invested a lot of resources to please and persuade them by organizing brainwashing lectures and meeting sessions, by offering better house conditions to the chief representative of a group, by organising visits to "well succeeded" examples of resettled villages or even through cinema sessions in order to support the truthfulness of the propaganda. It was crucial for Spínola that the army and its command did not make false promises to the population, but instead proved the positive outcome of the resettlement villages: *"facts would replace words"*[17].

Under the pretext of protecting the population and improving its living conditions, through an easy access to water supply system, medical care, scholar services and better housing conditions, the policy of Rural Improvements aimed to regroup the disperse population, as how was perceived, into strategic villages, also known as *reordenamentos*[18] (resettlements),

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[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] AHM/DIV/2/4/226, "Operações psicológicas Alfa" (Psychological operations Alfa). Directive n.º 48/68, Bissau 29-10-1968.

[13] The Portuguese army may have derived this information from previous surveys of the rural environment and population conducted by geographers, anthropologists and architects (Vita, 2023a).

[14] For most of the Guinean population, *chão* means the sacred land on which a person was born and with which he has a sacred bond.

[15] AHM/DIV/2/4/226, "Directiva de Propaganda n.º 1. Reordenamento e Autodefesa" (Propaganda Directive n.º 1 Regrouping and Self-Defence). Bissau 30-09-1968, pp. 3-5.

[16] The social structure of the main ethnic groups in Guinea-Bissau, both Islamic and animistic, depends on the decisions made by the traditional authorities, the *homem grande* (old man) in the animist cultures, Islamic clergy in the islamic ones.

[17] Ivi, p. 6.

[18] In Guinea-Bissau the most common term for the strategic villages was *reordenamentos*, while in Mozambique and Angola those villages were mostly known as *aldeamentos* (Cann, 1997).

Ilustração 03 – Bambadinca area showing existing villages before Nhabijões resettlement plan
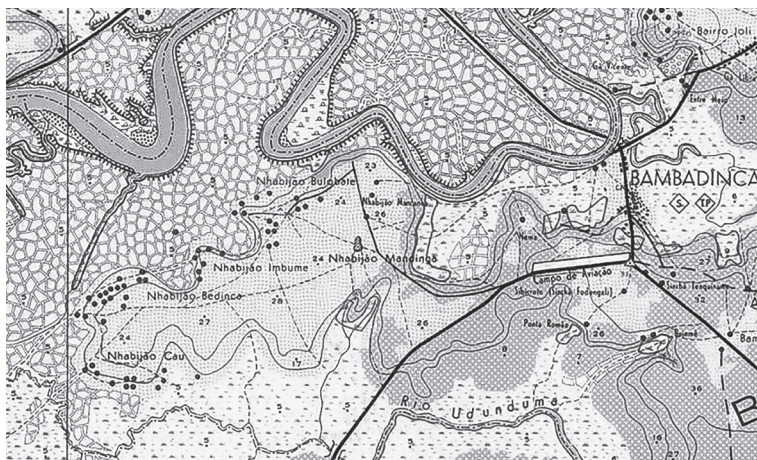
Source: AHM/DIV/3/47/AH1-6/18175-1a72.

Ilustração 04 – Nhabijões resettlement aerial view, (1969-1971)
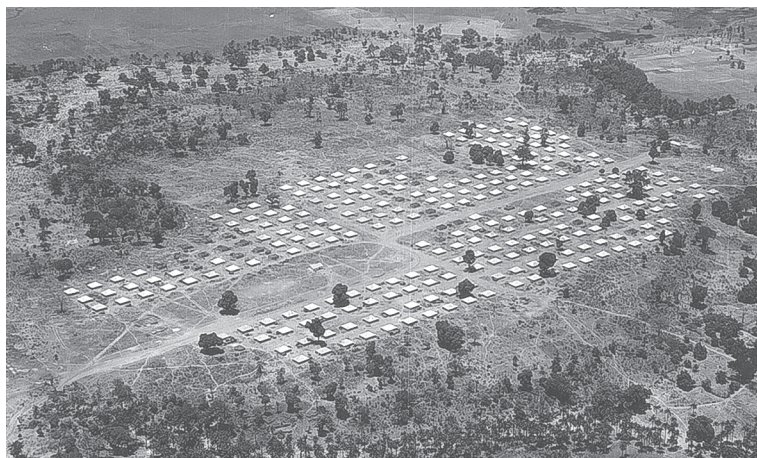
Source: AHU – PTDC/AUR-AQI/104964/2008.

or to provide to the existing villages basic self-defence weapons and equipped militia, in order to transform the traditional settlements into self-defence militarized nucleus.

The *reordenamentos* consisted into the "*deliberate alteration of the pre-existing population's distribution in a territory*"[19] throughout the concentration of several traditional settlements into a single larger village settled in a more strategic position. In a territory, such as the one of Guinea-Bissau, characterized by an irregular distribution of traditional settlements, a policy of concentration of people and resources would, on one hand, have facilitated the government's assistance to the population and its military defence against revolutionary's party, on the other hand it would have increased the socioeconomic policy impact on the

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[19] AHM/DIV/2/4/124/15, "BEng447". 1973.

population, transforming the *reordenamentos* into "poles of progress expansion" for the rest of population (De Spínola, 1970: 179).

One of the examples of population resettlement was the Nhabijões[20], nearby Bambadinca, in an area that was under the dual influence of both Portuguese and PAIGC. The Nhabijões resettlement was implemented between 1969-1971 and it involved the regrouping of four traditional villages (Nhabijão Cau, Nhabijão Bedinca, Nhabijão Imbume, Nhabijão Mandinga) of which three belonged to the Balanta group (mostly Animist) and one to the Mandinga group (mostly Islamic). The new village arose not far from the existing ones, but in a more "secure" area, far away from the Geba river banks which were patrolled by PAIGC. Within the resettlement two thousand people were approximately displaced into a camp of three hundred houses.

According to official documents, the population was not forced to abandon their traditional houses and villages, it was persuaded through an *"insistent and progressive"* psychological action, *"on the necessities"* and *"the benefits"* of moving or being dislocated to the *reordenamento*[21]. However, according to several colonial reports, people were very reluctant to abandon their *chão* (sacred land), they were scared to lose their belongings and, in many cases, they were reluctant to share the same space with other ethnic groups. In addition, traditional chiefs were concerned to lose their authority influences within the new social context. Once the population was displaced, the traditional villages were destroyed erasing any natives' marks that linked the people to their land, to their house, their objects, to their worship places and to their buried ancestors. Finally, they were forced to live in a new context where the traditional notions of public and private space had been completely altered, most likely affecting the social inter-relationships within the group and the traditional habits.

Reordenamentos populacionais: reshaping the public and private life of rural populations

In Guinea-Bissau, the department in charge of the population resettlements was the *Serviços de Reordenamentos Populacionais* (Services for the Population Resettlement), which was based in Bissau and directly depending on the Command Chief. These Services guaranteed the execution of the resettlements, by coordinating the rhythm of construction of the strategic villages, by monitoring the materials supply and their distribution, besides providing construction knowledge to the soldiers who were in charge of the construction field of the strategic village (Magro, 2005). Furthermore, the Services for the Population Resettlement cooperated closely with the Batalhão de Engenharia (Engineering Battalion), the BEng447. The BEng447 unit was supposed to be only in charge of the military construction operations, however, especially under António de Spínola Government, it served mostly as technical support to the population resettlements program. For example, it provided materials supply on the ground and their distribution to the different building zones and it was in charge of delivering the drawings of resettlements' plan, whose directives were provided by the Command Chief through the Services for the Population Resettlement (GEAEM, 2014). The BEng447 was not in charge of the construction of civilians' dwellings or of the others collective buildings inside the *reordenamento*, for this task simple soldiers were recruited and trained in

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[20] In Portuguese language the suffix –ões stands for plural terms. In this case "Nhabijões" would mean the plural term of Nhabijão, which was the traditional name for several existing villages in the areas (Nhabijão Cau, Nhabijão Bedinca, Nhabijão Imbume, Nhabijão Mandinga), that have been destroyed after the resettlement action.

[21] AHM/DIV/2/4/226, "Directiva de Propaganda n.º 1. Reordenamento e Autodefesa" (Propaganda Directive n.º 1 Regrouping and Self-Defence). Bissau 30-09-1968.

Ilustração 05 – Fula dwelling typology surveyed by the architect Mário de Oliveira in 1958
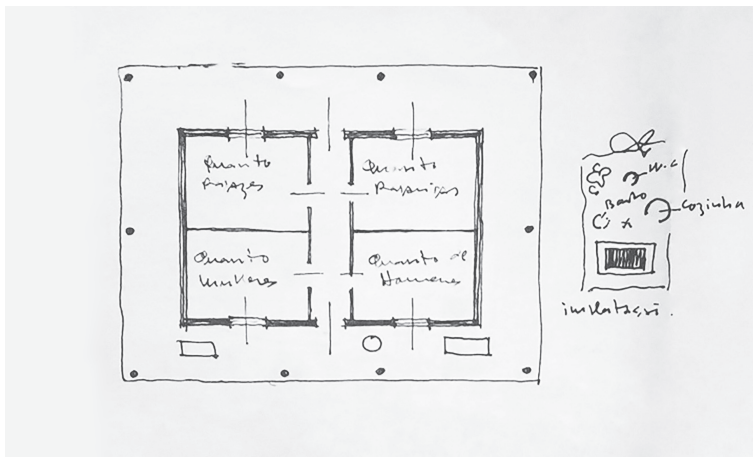
Source: AHU/IPAD/MU/DGOPC/DSUH/2073/01004.

order to learn and to provide the basic knowledge of construction on the field. According to Fernando Magro[22], the recruited soldiers were meant to spend few days in the Engineering Battalion headquarter in Brá-Bissau, in order to learn and practice on the construction of some on-going cell-houses (Magro, 2005). Once in the construction field, the qualified soldiers were in charge of coordinating the construction of the house-types and of the others buildings (sanitary post, primary school, warehouse, etc..), which in the end were built mainly by the population itself. The dwelling typology implemented by the army for the strategic villages was an economic and efficient solution perhaps inspired by previous researches, such as the survey conducted by the architect Mário de Oliveira in 1958 on suburban traditional dwellings in Bissau, or by other dwelling experienced addressed to the African population[23].

According to a military document, issued in 1969, and describing the guidelines for the resettlement plans [24], the dwelling typology implemented in the field, could hypothetically have been inspired by a traditional or a European model, although this latter solution was the most widely executed. The European-type dwelling was an elementary one-floor house, characterized by a surrounding veranda and a simple organization of the interior space arranged with one central entrance placed in each street façades leading to the main corridor which distributed symmetrically four rooms. Each unit could host hypothetically eight people, but maybe more, and the dwellings were settled according to a grid layout implantation. The distance between one house unit and another one had to be fifteen meters, while between two housing blocks twenty meters. The housing block could include four, six or eight houses unit, though the one of six houses was the one which occupied less surface. The units were built in adobe blocks, with a roof structure made of *cibe* tree (a local palm tree abundant in rural areas) and covered with a thatched roof or a tin roof, depending

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[22] Fernando Magro arrived in Guinea in 1970 and returned to Portugal in 1972. According to his published book of memories "Memórias da Guiné", as soon as he arrived in Bissau he was placed in the *Serviços de Reordenamentos Populacionais* (Services for the Population Resettlement), initially in the planning section into the Command Chief Department, then he was in charge for the *reordenamentos* services in the BEng447.

[23] We believe that the Ajuda Neighbourhood in Bissau (1965) might have anticipated the resettlement typology in rural areas during the war. For deeper insights on the construction of the Ajuda Neighbourhood and its relation with military purposes, see the PhD thesis by the author (Vita, 2023b).

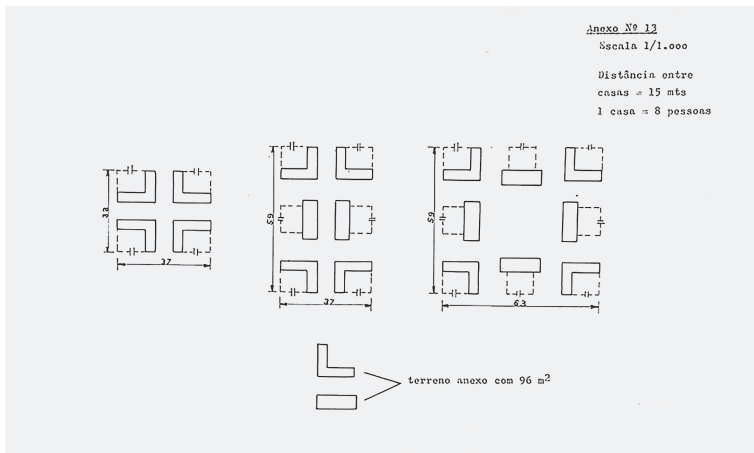[24] INEP, B.1.2/13, "Reordenamentos" (Resettlements), 1969.

Ilustração 06 – Dwelling typology implemented by the army (1969)
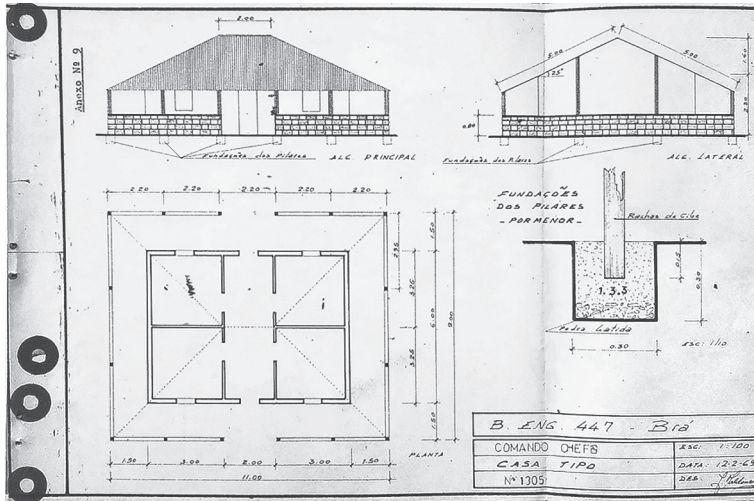

Source: INEP/B.1.2/13.

Ilustração 07 – Housing blocks typology implemented by the army (1969)

Source: INEP/B.1.2/13.

to which category the house-type belonged to. The European-type dwelling was divided into three categories based on the quality of the finishing materials, from a basic solution (Type-1) with adobe floor and thatched roof to upgraded ones with exterior plastered whitewashed walls and tin roof (Type-2) or with cement floor, exterior plastered whitewashed walls and tin roof (Type-3). The type-2 and Type-3 houses were usually proposed to traditional authorities or relevant members of the village in order to please them by providing better housing conditions, however analysing several photographic materials it is clear that these latter typologies were the most executed.

Ilustração 08 – Dwelling typology designed by António Moreira Veloso (1970)
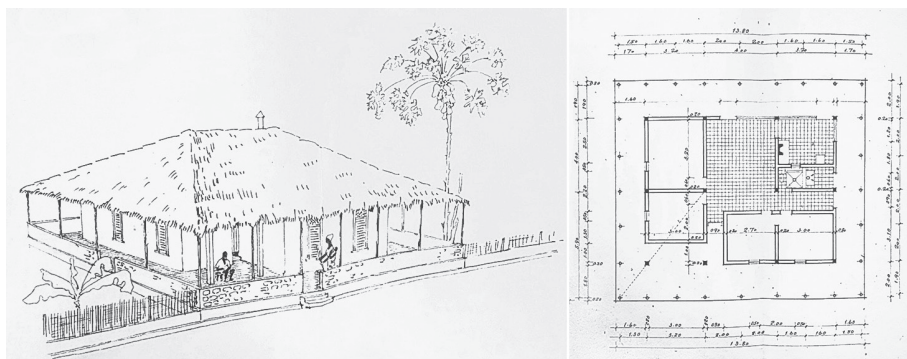
Source: AHU/IPAD/MU/DGOPC/DSUH/1972/00857.

The resettlement solution accomplished by the army did not consider, for example, the variety of traditional ways of living of the main ethnic groups, neither the importance that the spatial organization of the house and its implantation had in social and family inter-relationships. The resettlement plans resulted in a profound violation of the rural environment (interior and exterior) through a logic of spatialization control which employed the standardization of both the dwelling unit and the settlements' implantation.

In 1970, the *Grupo de Trabalho de Urbanização da Província da Guiné* (Guinea Urbanization Working Group) led by the architect António Moreira Veloso designed a solution which would suit to the traditional way of living of the rural population, without undermining the efficiency and economic viability of the military solutions (Milheiro, 2017). The dwelling typology developed was characterized by a less rigid interior space organization than the one implemented by the army, with hygienic facilities and kitchen attached to the house and covered areas for communal activities[25]. It remains uncertain whether the Guinea Urbanization Working Group dwelling typology had been implemented or not[26]. In any way, the revisited settlement's implantation proposed by the Guinea Urbanization Working Group responded to a spatial strategy of order and control that did not differ much from the logic of the army implantation, and to a different extent would have affected the traditional ways of living.

Between 1968 and 1973, under the António de Spínola's propaganda policy "A Better Guinea", approximately 8,300 houses[27] and more than 110 strategic villages were built, regrouping almost 66,500 people, corresponding to 24 % of the rural population. The impact of the resettlement plan in rural areas had been significant, especially in a territory where before the outbreak of the War of Independence had experienced few direct contacts with the colonial authorities (Ledda, 1973).

Officially, the Governor General António de Spínola was encouraging the construction of a "Better Guinea" for a renovated Africa, while at the same time and under the same slogan he was confidentially ordering the army the control the Guinean population and the territory through physical and psychological actions. Regrouping, controlling, persuading, distancing,

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[25] AHU/IPAD/MU/DGOPC/DSUH/1972/00857. Report of the study mission by António Moreira Veloso, 1970.

[26] A dwelling-unit designed by António Moreira Veloso Guinea Urbanization Working Group was implemented in Farim in 1970. We do not know if more units were implemented. AHU/ID-OP/OP12497, "Experiência de loteamento a partir do 'habitat' natural" (Parcelling experience from natural 'habitat'), Guinea Urbanization Working Group, 1970.

[27] AHM/DIV/2/4/124/15, *op. cit*.

were some of the words that were recurrently used by colonial authorities in confidential documents. Under António de Spínola Government (1968-1973), civil and military purposes were very tight together and the border between promoting and manipulating, developing and controlling the territory and the population remained very blurred.

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