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SOUTHERN MODERNITY - THE AGUDÁS' ARCHITECTURE ON THE BIGHT OF BENIN

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Abstract

A special chapter in the history of the art in Africa happened between the beginning of the 19th and 20th centuries, on the Bight of Benin, in an area which today is covered by Nigeria, Benin and Togo, when and where an architecture was constructed by a group called agudá, a term used in that region to designate Africans and African descendants who own surnames of Portuguese origin. Part of this group was formed by slave merchants of Brazilian origin who traded captives from that African region. Another part was formed by former slaves who returned from Brazil. Related to each other, slave-traders, former slaves, their descendants and their households, produced an architecture that was more than life environment. Architecture was a key element, along with other objects and practices (landscape design, photography, clothing, cuisine, sanitarianism, behavior), that helped the agudás to maintain links with their experiences in Brazil (as well as connect them indirectly with Europe and other regions), enrich, distinguish themselves socially and even sometimes legitimize their authority. With a strong and clear presence in urban space, this architecture functioned as a sign of modernity in its broad sense: formally, technically, socio-culturally. As an architectural manifestation of the trans-Atlantic sociocultural exchanges, the agudás' architecture configures an unique moment in the history of architecture, art and culture, singled out not merely by the binding of different waves of modernization, but, above all, because it rised, mainly, from a dynamic established between social groups in the South.

Key words: Agudá, Afro-Brazilian architecture, Afro-Brazilain culture

The image on the screen shows the pediment of Villa Esperança, which was formerly a private house and today is a restaurant at Lomé, Togo's Capital. It is an example of the *agudá* architecture, also known as 'Brazilian' architecture, which is a special chapter in the history of art in Africa that happened between the beginning of the 19th and mid 20th century, on the Bight of Benin, in an area which today is covered by Nigeria, Benin and Togo. This architecture was constructed by a group called *agudá*, a term used in that region to designate Africans and African descendants who own surnames of Portuguese origin. Part of this group was formed by slave merchants of Brazilian origin who traded captives from that African region. Another part was formed by former slaves who returned from Brazil. Related to each other, slave-traders, former slaves, their descendants and their households, produced an architecture that was more than life environment.

Referred to the architecture of the sugar economy in the Brazilian Northeast, this architecture was a key element, along with other objects and practices (landscape design, photography, clothing, cuisine, sanitarianism, behavior), that helped the *agudás* to maintain links with their experiences in Brazil (as well as connect them indirectly with Europe and other regions), enrich, distinguish themselves socially and even sometimes legitimize their authority. With a strong and clear presence in urban space, this architecture functioned as a sign of modernity in its broad sense: formally, technically, socio-culturally. As an architectural manifestation of the trans-Atlantic sociocultural exchanges, the *agudá* architecture configures an unique moment in the history of architecture, art and culture, singled out not merely by the binding of different waves of modernization, but, above all, because it rised, mainly, from a dynamic established between social groups in the South.

'Esperança' is a portuguese word that means hope. With this inscription on the pediment, the house owners expressed their expectations for the future, indicating how the return to Africa signified changes from their experience of slavery in Brazil. While the meaning of the word points to the future, the Portuguese language points to the past. As this architecture expresses feelings about the future, it can be seen as a positioning of its authors and owners with respect to their past.

Architecture is not usually understood as a narrative art. At first, it is not considered art, for being too tied to social and technical needs. Nor is commonly thought of as narrative art, as it distinguishes itself by creating spaces for life. However, when it goes beyond the empirical condition, becoming a significant object in the territory, architecture can be an art and express values, ideas, memories, stories. When it reaches this symbolic dimension, architecture has at least two features that make it an attractive mode of expression: the durability of the construction and its public condition, which guarantee continuous and extensive dissemination of meanings. Here, today, I will discuss the narrative dimension of *agudá* architecture. First, it will be addressed a specific situation in which architecture can be seen as an expression of an event. Then, I will discuss how, in general, the *agudá* architecture reports, indirectly, their owners and builders experiences as slaves in Brazil.

A special moment in the history of this architecture is what might perhaps be regarded as one of its beginning. In Abomey, capital of the kingdom of Dahomey, in the late 1810s, slave-trader Francisco Félix de Souza met Prince Gakpé in prison. The slave-trader had been sent there because, in collecting a debt, he dared to challenge King Adandozan. The King had also arrested Gakpé, his younger half-brother who had been appointed to succeed the father of both, King Agonglo, before he died in 1797. During the period he acted as regent due to the infancy of his

half-brother, Adandozan took his freedom in 1804, usurped his throne and even sold his mother to a slave-trader. Behind bars, Gakpé and Francisco Félix de Souza established a partnership, or, more precisely, sealed a formal pact – a blood pact. The prince would help the slave-trader escape while the latter would help the former in dethroning Adandozan so as to become King. Which actually happened, in 1818.

Free, renamed as Guêzo, the king kept a close relationship with the slave-trader until the end of Francisco Félix de Souza's life, respecting the principles of the blood pact in Dahomey: a spirit of solidarity, unlimited trust between contractors, and complete discretion regarding the terms of the agreement. Amongst other benefits, the King granted Francisco Félix de Souza the title of Chachá, designation and title which did not exist before and which marked the special condition he started to enjoy in the kingdom of Dahomey. In return, the Chachá offered the King a residence which was built within the royal court of Dahomey, in Abomey. At the same time, he built a similar house for himself in Ouidah, the main slave market of the kingdom at that time, which was unfortunately destroyed some years ago.

When constructed, these buildings immediately stood out in that context. If adobe construction did not differ from other buildings within the court, and the veranda was a common factor in the Dahomey royal buildings and the solars of sugar economy in Brazil, other configuration elements were key factors in their differentiation and in adding a novelty value to them. Beyond the windows with trellises, unusual ones in that context, a differentiating factor was the fact that the buildings were two-storeyed. Which was possible due to the introduction of unprecedented technology in the region, brought from Brazil, combining mud walls and wooden beams, contrasting them with almost all existing buildings in Dahomey, which had only one

floor.¹ Another highlight was the emplacement of the building just beside the entrance patio at the royal court, as many of the urban residences in Salvador. Which made the new construction differ from all other courtly buildings and determined another presence of the architecture in the territory, configuring a new public image of royal power, with more physical visibility in the landscape. It is no accident that this urban situation was repeated by the Chachá when building Singbomey, in Ouidah. A third distinguishing factor was precisely the homology established between the King's palace and the Chachá's residence. What helps to think about the reasons why the King and the Chachá cared about the two-storeyed houses built in Abomey and Ouidah.

Few saw when these two men, in prison, cut their respective wrists, joined them together and mingled their bloods, sealing a pact for life. Perhaps they were the only to witness this act. Therefore, it must have been important for the slave-trader, who held a special position, but not entirely safe neither high, to explicit the relationship of proximity and trust he had with Guêzo. The title of Chachá, granted by the King, is interpreted by many as having the status of a Viceroy. However, the slave-trader had a very prominent position, but neither dominant, nor calm.² Something similar occurs within the economic sphere, since he was a central figure in the transatlantic slave trade, held a first-option privilege, but not the monopoly of the trade in Dahomey.

The house built in Abomey could be a way of publicly express the gratitude he had towards the King. However, the existence of its pair in Ouidah was important, even essential, for the Chachá, because besides flaunting their wealth, it explicited the personal, political and economic connections maintained between himself and the sovereign. For the latter, the houses

¹ Amongst the very few exceptions were the entrance building of Fort St. John the Baptist, in Ouidah, and a building in Abomey, whose ruins are identified as remnants of the palace built by Queen Hangbe, who might have reigned between 1708 and 1711, being the only woman to have governed the kingdom of Dahomey.

² Francisco Félix de Souza was never Viceroy, nor Yovogan. LAW, Robin. "A carreira de Francisco Félix de Souza na África Ocidental (1800-1849)". *Topoi*, Rio de Janeiro, n. 2, v. 2, mar. 2001, p. 18.

exhibited publicly his alliances with the new group economic supporting the kingdom, at the expense of the traditional aristocracy.³ The union of open bleeding hands was certainly a fundamental act. But, as an act, it was brief. And could only be accessed through chronicles. The pair of houses, on the contrary, constantly punctuated the territory of Dahomey, uniting the space of the court to the city which was the main slave market, exhibiting and remembering publicly the political and economic bonds between the King of Dahomey and the slave trader. Therefore, it can be said that the pact between them, initially firm with blood, was tectonically reaffirmed.

If this pair of buildings narrated an event of liberation and change of social situation of two individuals occurred in the kingdom of Dahomey, the agudá architecture expressed a similar dynamic, but collective and processed over more than a century between Brazil and the Gulf of Benin.

In addition to regional differences, as time went by, builders incorporated other references, keeping pace with the changes then processed in architecture, so as to preserve the value of modernity. Technically, after pleading adobe reinforced with wood, they began to use bricks and shingles that they produced, and then used concrete. Residences, funerary monuments and temples (mosques and temples of worship of orishas and voduns) were configured with architectural and ornamental elements in ancient Greco-Roman language, according to changes in academic historicist architecture. This architecture was composed of elements manufactured in Africa or imported, mainly from Brazil. Furniture, framed photographic prints hung on walls, balcony balustrades, railings of staircases, decorative use of plants in indoor and outdoor spaces were also elements that differentiated this architecture in that context. Quite different, those buildings determined localities in the coastal territory from the Gulf of Benin

³ SINOUE, Alain. Apud GURAN, Milton. *Agudás: os "brasileiros" do Benim*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2000., p. 29.

particularly identified with Brazil.⁴ With a strong and clear presence in urban space, this architecture functioned as a sign of modernity in its broad sense: formally, technically, socio-culturally. Besides configuring spaces relevant to a certain way of living that was appreciated, and beyond ensuring a source of income and wealth, this architecture helped to recognize and distinguish that group of slave traders and former slaves in the social context. By contrasting the *agudás* with other groups, their spaces, ways of life and action, those signs of order and Western civilization helped them in gaining and maintaining social prestige.

The decision to reproduce in many ways the slave-masters' type of life in Brazil can hardly be a cause of surprise in the case of slave traders, because they referred to the lifestyle of its partners across the Atlantic. But it is, however, somewhat contradictory in the case of former slaves returned to Africa, because by doing so they assumed the signs of their former masters in America. Obviously, those people wanted to forget their experiences in captivity. Moreover, they wanted to keep in Africa the knowledge and the lifestyle they had learned in Brazil. Therefore, the *agudás* built an architecture they understood as *Brazilian* and as a sign of renew in their lives. "It served as a diacritical signal" emphasizing wealth, authority, *status quo* and social prestige.⁵ Being a sign of wealth, as well as expression of Western knowledge, refinement, civilization and modernity, this architecture indicated indirectly the historical particularity of the *agudás*. Despite being a sign of transformation and helping to build a new social status for them, this architecture expressed their experiences in Africa and Brazil. However, if it referred to the experience of

⁴ Environments more or less characterized by these differences are bound to be found in neighborhoods called Adjido, a contraction of "God helped me", in the cities of Aneho, in Togo, Agoue and Ouidah, in Benin, and Badagri, in Nigeria. Neighborhoods identified with the Brazilians are also the Bè, in Lome, Togo, the Brazil block in Ouidah, Fila and Avassa in Porto Novo, Benin, and the "Brazilian quarter" in Lagos, Nigeria. Apud CUNHA, Marianno Carneiro da. *Da senzala ao sobrado : arquitetura brasileira na Nigéria e na República Popular do Benim*. São Paulo: Nobel; Edusp, 1985, p. 175.

⁵ CUNHA, Marianno Carneiro da. Op. cit., p. 99.

slavery, it not fixed them as slaves. With those signs they remembered how they had lived and won slavery, being able to return to Africa as free and socially prominent people.

While the pair of buildings built by the slave trader remembered a particular event in the lives of two people, helping to strengthen their social positions aiming at economic exploitation and maintenance of political power, the architecture of the former slaves also served to enrich a few individuals, as well as the social distinction of a heterogeneous group, narrating positively their experience of slavery in Brazil.