

# The Entanglement between Traditions and Colonial Spatiality: The Resilience of Guinean Domesticities in the Ajuda Neighborhood, Bissau

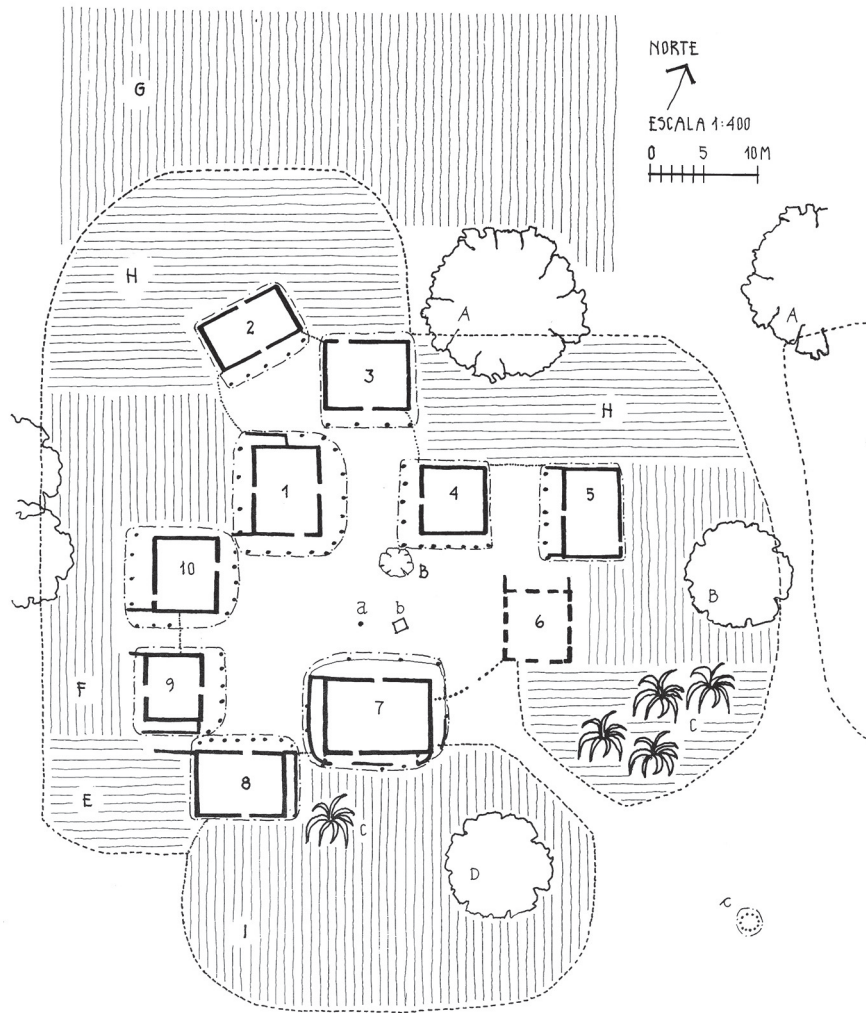
FRANCESCA VITA

Local traditions have always been endangered by colonialism and modernity. For centuries under Western systems of domination in Africa they were exploited for colonial purposes and even subverted, and in many cases they were reinvented under both modern and imperial discourses. Nevertheless, new traditions have also emerged from both colonial and modern legacies that today shape contemporary social and spatial landscapes. To explore these issues, this article examines the Ajuda neighborhood in Guinea-Bissau's capital of Bissau, which was built in the 1960s under Portuguese colonial rule to accommodate mainly public servants and their families from the African population. It aims to unveil how Guinean traditions related to dwelling space, reorganized within the colonial spatiality, have reemerged to shape and transform present-day domestic environments. Using the house as a critical tool, the article discusses how traditions may thus endure as long as they are negotiated in relation to new conditions that may derive from disruptive events, such as colonialism.

*Francesca Vita is an Integrated Researcher at the DINÂMIA'CET research center of ISCTE-IUL in Lisbon, Portugal, and a Ph.D. Candidate at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto, Portugal.*

Guinea-Bissau constitutes a case study par excellence with which to deepen understanding of the topics of rupture and tradition. The country is located in the precolonial region called Senegambia.<sup>1</sup> At the crossroads of cultures — nomadic and sedentary, Animistic and Islamic — it has a history marked by the convergence of different disruptive forces: immigration and invasion, slave trading, colonialism, wars,

**FIGURE 1.** Traditional *morança* from the Balanta ethnic group in the Quinara Region of southern Guinea-Bissau. Source: Blazejewicz et al., *Arquitetura Tradicional Guiné-Bissau*, 1983, p.59.



and emigration. Throughout the centuries, these forces have provoked processes of transformation, cultural disruption, and the ongoing negotiation of a diverse range of traditions, including those related to spatial practices.<sup>2</sup> Of the major events that have shaken the area of present-day Guinea-Bissau, however, Portuguese colonization, which lasted until the country achieved independence in 1974, was the one that most deeply transformed its domesticities.

The expression of Guinean domesticities is considered in this article to include a variety of spatial practices characteristic of the major ethnic groups of the region.<sup>3</sup> These practices originated in rural environments where populations lived mostly according to a communal way of life based on agriculture and/or trade. In this “rural African cosmology,” the enlarged family provided a basis for both the group economy and the settlement.<sup>4</sup> In particular, settlements were organized into clusters called *morança*, a term derived from the Portuguese word *morar*, “to inhabit.”<sup>5</sup> This was a unit of dwelling that facilitated the common activities of each extended family (FIG. 1).

Between the numerous ethnic groups that live in Guinea-Bissau, the *morança* today varies in extension and organization. It can be fenced or not; it can be more compact or dispersed; and the number of buildings and houses within it can differ. It can be made using different construction techniques and materials, and its built spaces may vary in decoration. However, regardless of ethnic group, the domestic practices that occur in each dwelling cluster occupy both interior and exterior areas, expanding across both private and collective space. The houses mostly consist of bedrooms, which are used not only for sleeping but also to shelter animals and store food and materials, while other domestic activities, which are usually shared, take place in outdoor spaces.

It was during the twentieth century that the clash between Portuguese and Guinean ways of life became most acute. On the one hand, Portuguese colonization directly forced local people to adopt a different way of life, both in rural and urban environments. On the other, it indirectly introduced new referential dwelling models, consumer needs, and private and social spatial practices, particularly as these related to a certain ideal of Western domestic space and urban life.

Local traditions have always been endangered by Western colonialism and modernity. Scholars have explored how they were exploited for colonial purposes and even subverted by them.<sup>6</sup> Others have examined how they were reinvented under both modern and imperial discourses.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, new traditions have also emerged from both colonial and modern legacies.<sup>8</sup> Instead of studying whether processes of rupture and resilience occurred, therefore, this article will explore the ongoing entanglement between traditions and colonial spatiality. With regard to the domestic landscape of the Ajuda neighborhood in Guinea-Bissau's capital of Bissau, it seeks specifically to question the legacy of colonial influence. It will do this by investigating the relationship of contemporary domestic space to formerly imposed colonial norms, both in terms of the physical dimension of architecture and the practices activated by its use and resignification.

What this study primarily reveals is that the construction of contemporary domestic space in the Ajuda neighborhood has resulted from a process of negotiation. As Homi Bhabha has noted, "Negotiation, rather than negation . . . convey(s) a temporality that makes it possible to conceive of the articulation of antagonist or contradictory elements."<sup>9</sup> Among these oppositions, for example, are the colonial past versus the present, resistance versus appropriation, negation versus acceptance, and permanence versus transformation. The space produced by the negotiation of these conflicting dimensions can be considered hybrid space, a place of intersection that overcomes oppositions and categorizations.

In the case examined here, these oppositions can be rooted in dichotomies of vernacular and urban, past and present, and Western and African ways of life. Yet, as Nezar AlSayyad has observed, hybridity "does not simply involve the combination or merger of incompatible elements, but instead the insertion of a third possibility connecting originally incommensurable terms and irreconcilable realities."<sup>10</sup> By studying the processes of negotiation between the colonial legacy, Guinean traditions, and contemporary aspirations and needs, the article seeks to unveil this third possibility, a hybrid spatiality which informs notions of both tradition and heritage.

The investigation conducted here proceeded according to a method of ethno-architectural survey.<sup>11</sup> Oral histories were collected through nondirective interviews and photographic surveys were combined with drawings and first-hand observations to reveal the complexity of a hybrid domestic space — the contemporary one. In this attempt to understand the process of spatial transformation, the idea of photographic development (a process by which a latent image is transformed into a visible one) also provided a useful tool to reveal the entanglement between colonial and contemporary domesticity. This process operated first by transferring the colonial house-type contours from paper to notebook by carbon-copy technique and then by revealing appropriation processes that occurred within the space. The result, both on

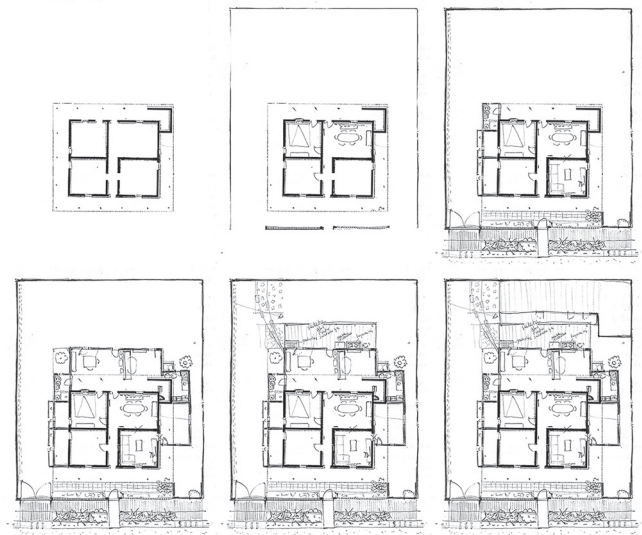


FIGURE 2. Survey drawings of the development of one house in the Ajuda neighborhood. Drawings by author, 2021.

paper and in reality, is a hybrid space, what Daniel Pinson has referred to as a "counter-type of house" (FIG. 2).<sup>12</sup>

#### DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE OF TRADITIONS IN GUINEA-BISSAU IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

During the period of Portuguese colonial rule, the house was the place in Guinea-Bissau where the negotiation of traditions mostly occurred. As an indicator of dwelling habits, it was also used as a tool of discrimination by the colonial administration. For this reason the house is a critical site in which to decipher the impact of the negotiation of traditions during the colonial period.

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries the house was an important symbol of self-identification in the region of present-day Guinea-Bissau. During this mercantile period of colonial influence, it was important to be identified as "Portuguese," because being seen as such granted the privileged social status required to engage in trade along the Senegambia coast. Portuguese identity was, however, not solely related with nationality. Rather, being "Portuguese" was associated with a range of attributes such as the Catholic religion, the occupation of trader, a spoken language (Creole), and the characteristics of the house one occupied.<sup>13</sup>

The house *à la Portugaise*, as it was known, was the building associated with those who could point to themselves as "Portuguese." This dwelling was a one-floor, dried-earth construction of rectangular shape, plastered with clay or lime to give an outer whitewashed effect and characterized by the presence of a welcoming vestibule and/or veranda.

As Peter Mark has noted, this peculiar form of domestic architecture was the result of a negotiation of traditions involving the “interaction between local construction techniques and building forms, and materials and techniques brought to West Africa from Europe.”<sup>14</sup> As a dwelling model, it was fashioned by Luso-African traders, but it was also appropriated by local merchants and leaders for the social status it provided.<sup>15</sup>

The *maison à la Portugaise* can be considered elucidative of how processes of negotiation between traditions have always characterized the production of domestic space in the region of contemporary Guinea-Bissau. And the widespread endurance of this particular hybrid dwelling form was still reported in a survey of the Bissau built environment conducted in 1945 by the architect-engineer José António Guardiola. Throughout his report, however, Guardiola condemned the promiscuous and precarious living conditions of the Portuguese officers who still inhabited such dwellings. In particular, he referred to their domestic spaces as “insalubrious” in matters of ventilation, light, ceiling height, room dimensions, and corridors.<sup>16</sup> What this survey thus indicated was that the model of the *maison à la Portugaise*, which had characterized the dwelling standard for Luso-Africans in Guinea-Bissau for centuries, had by then been rendered obsolete by a divergence in colonial policy. Specifically, this involved the expectation of a more rational, salubrious and clean domesticity based on “characteristic” Portuguese architectural features. This explicitly Western idea of domesticity had been introduced by the colonial state through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and it has affected the landscape of Bissau ever since.<sup>17</sup>

The condemnation of vernacular-based houses, built in the city center or in its proximity, was also triggered by the necessity of categorizing colonial society into “indigenous” and “nonindigenous” for the purposes of determining who benefited from different rights. The Political, Civil and Criminal Act of the Indigenous of Guinea, Angola and Mozambique Colonies (1929) had defined “indigenous” people as comprising all individuals belonging to, or descending from, the African population, and who did not differ from their kin on the basis of appearance and customs.<sup>18</sup> “Nonindigenous” included all who did not belong to this group. To achieve this segregation of the population, however, it was crucial for the colonial administration to “code” and “categorize” the customs and habits of the indigenous African population. And this division was made largely based on the way people lived — i.e., in terms of the settlements, houses, and domestic environments they inhabited. Customs and habits related to dwelling space thus served as crucial evidence of belonging to one or the other category.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, this colonial administrative process was also indicative of how ignorant the central colonial apparatus, based in Lisbon, was of the autochthonous societies and cultures of Guinea-Bissau (as

well as in Mozambique and Angola). And in 1935, as a way to respond to the urgent need to unpack the specificities of both native populations and the country itself, Marcelo Caetano (then a young government official), would encourage a “new discovery” of Guinea-Bissau.<sup>19</sup> To do so, however, he characteristically evoked the importance of a “scientific occupation” of the territory, to “unveil Nature in order to subdue it, describe man in order to improve him, and assess economically usable resources so that greater wealth may be produced.”<sup>20</sup>

In line with this new initiative, over the course of a number of years during the mid-twentieth century, Guinean traditions, especially those relating to patterns of settlement geography and architecture, but also relating to means of subsistence, societal organization, and religion, were collected, categorized, coded, and subsequently used for colonial purposes.<sup>21</sup> For example, ethnographic surveys of 1918 and 1927 were aimed at collecting information to ensure a “better knowledge of the native populations by the administrative authorities,” in order to elaborate the penal code for native population.<sup>22</sup>

For the colonial system, the house in Guinea-Bissau also represented a tool to assess the negotiation of traditions between European and African culture. Great attention was thus given to it starting in the decade of the 1930s, when characteristics of dwelling came to be seen as a way to distinguish differences between native and European society. In 1933 the Colonial Act [Acto Colonial], which condensed the Portuguese colonial policy in foreign countries, was integrated into the Portuguese Constitution.<sup>23</sup> Among other things, it formally identified one of the fundamental purposes of Portuguese colonization to be the “civilizing mission.” Grounded on the idea that colonialism would provide an avenue for the transformation and social “elevation” of native populations, it would remain a fundamental aspect of Portuguese colonial discourse until Portuguese colonies gained their independence in the mid-1970s.

It was under the fever of the “civilizing mission,” that scientific expeditions were also launched to find evidence of the “assimilation” process. According to the Portuguese colonial narrative, “assimilation” was the means through which native population embraced European habits in daily practice. Of course, “assimilation” was only acceptable when it occurred from European to African society — never the contrary, which also happened. And the realm of the dwelling became the preeminent space in which to unveil and measure how the native way of life was being adjusted and reconfigured by means of contact with European culture, in a positive or negative way.

In Guinea-Bissau, Avelino Teixeira da Mota, a military officer hired as field assistant by Governor Sarmiento Rodrigues (1945–1947), subsequently became responsible for a range of surveys related to native settlements.<sup>24</sup> And his seminal 1948 book with Mário C. Ventim de Neves *The*

*Indigenous House in the Portuguese Guinea* contains several pages dedicated to the topic of the disruption of traditions within Guinean domestic space as a result of Portuguese colonization and contact with European culture. One of the examples that best illustrates this encounter involved the disappearance of traditional Manjaco patio-houses, which were characterized by multiple rooms facing an interior courtyard. As Teixeira da Mota reported, the cause of their disappearance was the tax known as “*imposto da palhota*” (*palhota* = native house with a thatched roof) that native people were obliged to pay to the colonial administration. Because the tax was based on the total number of houses and beds, Manjaco native groups started to simplify their ancestral dwellings and settlements to reduce the taxes owed to the colonial administration.<sup>25</sup>

Although Teixeira da Mota pointed to the decline in this type of house as a negative outcome of a rupture of tradition, he described other positive examples of negotiations of tradition within domestic space as a result of contact with European culture. Among these were the custom of using interior furniture (chairs, iron beds, tables, chests, etc.) based on Western dwelling traditions, the use of mosquito nets, and the decoration of house interiors by hanging propaganda pamphlets, portraits cut from newspapers, and old and new calendars. All these were symbols of Western civilization, and their appearance was considered to positive step toward adopting a Westernized way of life.

Of course, the Guinean people against whom the processes of disruption were directed were not passive in their interaction with them. Indeed, they were often active agents when it came to deciding which influences to embrace and how they might take advantage of the “assimilation process” for their own ends. This was the case, for example, with the dwellings of the Manjaco chiefs, who built Portuguese-style houses to please the colonial authorities and to bargain for privileged social status, even if they weren’t used at all.<sup>26</sup>

The later decades of colonial rule were thus characterized by an obsession with cultural contacts between the European and African population — either in terms of avoiding them or advocating for them for “civilizing” purposes. And in this controversial ideological frame, dwelling space played a crucial role. In architectural speeches and texts about housing projects for native population, it was thus common to find the idea that “in contact with the European civilization, the indigenous people would achieve a civilized mentality and habits.”<sup>27</sup> Likewise, it was “up to the European to instill in indigenous people the need for comfort and a higher standard of living.”<sup>28</sup> Housing projects for native populations also served the purpose of the “civilizing mission” efficiently, and the case study of the Ajuda neighborhood in Bissau was no exception.

## THE AJUDA NEIGHBORHOOD, BISSAU

The Ajuda neighborhood was built in 1965 during the Colonial War (1963–1974) in an isolated area about six kilometers from the center of the city of Bissau. In both oral history and archival documents, the reason for its construction is blurred and almost mythical. Apparently, it was meant to accommodate people in need who had been displaced as the result of a fire in one of the native areas at the center of the city. Indeed, *ajuda* in Portuguese means “help, assistance.” However, field research confirmed that only a small percentage of the families who originally moved to the neighborhood belonged to the affected population. The majority of those who settled there were public servants (nurses, agronomists, office workers, etc.) and their families belonging to the colony’s African population. In this sense, the construction of the Ajuda neighborhood might have been part of a larger “demagogic policy” that comprised a range of propaganda efforts on the part of the colonial state aimed at gaining support among the African population during the war.<sup>29</sup> One of these efforts was to supply “better housing conditions.”

The construction of a model neighborhood for African people would have fit these purposes perfectly. In fact, according to archival material, both the Public Works Department and the Bissau Municipality had been struggling to implement a 1959 plan for the city prepared by the architect Mário de Oliveira, one of whose main purposes was to solve a housing crisis among the city’s African population. To address this situation, the plan proposed relocating 9,000 people into three new neighborhoods. It further proposed designs for several elementary house-types which, according to the architect, were inspired by native, self-built urban houses.<sup>30</sup> However, the municipality refused “to force . . . the local population to build types of houses that they could not afford.” Instead, it accepted that “on the lots each person was free to build, as their own custom, a simple and rudimentary ‘hut’” according to “their possibilities and free will.”<sup>31</sup> In the end, the plan proposed by de Oliveira was never implemented. Nevertheless, the municipality agreed to build some of the model house-types as a way to encourage the suburban population to improve their own buildings and solve the housing issue indirectly, by imitation. And the Ajuda neighborhood offered a site on which to realize that ambition (FIGS. 3, 4).

The Ajuda neighborhood’s subsequent grid plan anticipated the *modus operandi* of resettlement villages later built in rural areas under the “A Better Guinea” propaganda campaign directed by Governor-General António de Spínola from 1968 to 1973. Its model house-type was also very simple, resembling designs in the 1959 Bissau urban plan by de Oliveira. As built, each house thus had a rectangular plan in which two bedrooms and the living room were organized around a central corridor, while a third bedroom could be accessed from the exterior veranda. Service facilities and the



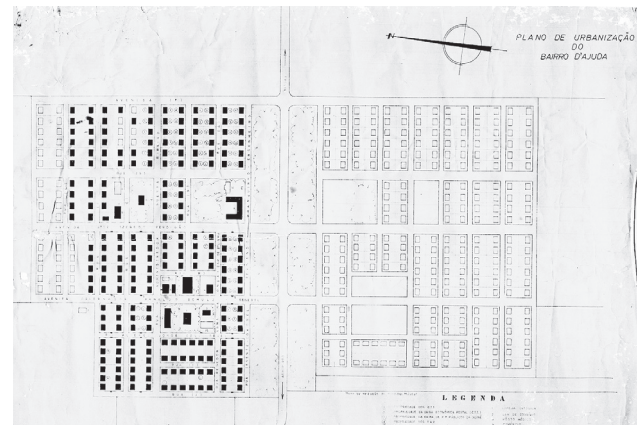
**FIGURE 3.** The construction of the Ajuda neighborhood, aerial view (1965–1966). Photo courtesy of Prof. Sandra Mula.

kitchen were located outdoors beyond a rear veranda, and the entire house was surrounded by a private garden.

During the colonial period these houses could not be modified by their occupants. Indeed, the intent of their design was to force Ajuda residents to behave in a certain way, especially when it came to their domestic activities. Thus homes had to be tidy, gardens clean and well kept, and beds properly made. Meals also had to be consumed using cutlery and on a table, and children had to be suitably dressed, especially with their shoes on. Disobeying these colonial rules might result in the expulsion of a family from the neighborhood.<sup>32</sup> Recurring patrols were organized by the colonial administration to monitor how people behaved and whether they were following all relevant rules of conduct. Moreover, the “cleanest family” was rewarded with amenities such as blankets or bed sheets, and as remembered today by residents, everyone aimed to be the cleanest family.

After national independence was achieved in 1974 emancipatory processes started, and traditional domestic practices began to (re)emerge from the interstices of the colonial spatiality, reshaping spaces and redefining ancient traditions. During the war people’s movements had been restricted and controlled, but when it ended, families started to rejoin, grow again, and reorganize themselves according to traditional Guinean kinship patterns. Free to inhabit the houses in Ajuda as they wished, residents found themselves in a position to adopt, transform and hybridize foreign traditions, symbols and habits with their own. Ajuda’s residents have transformed the space in multiple ways ever since. The result today is a hybrid spatiality that can be observed both in physical spaces and in daily practices, shaped by a negotiation between Guinean domesticities, the colonial legacy, social aspirations, and practical needs.

Nowadays, Ajuda is mostly inhabited by the original families who settled there in 1965, who are now into a third



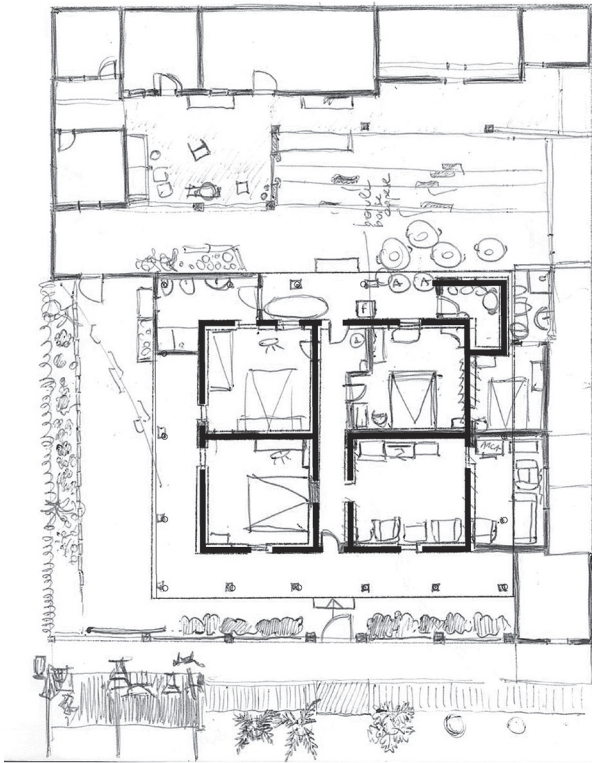
**FIGURE 4.** Plans for the Ajuda neighborhood (first phase on the left, second phase on the right), ca. 1965. Source: Ajuda Sporting Club, Bissau.

generation. The neighborhood could also be described as a middle-class area. Most families own their houses and possess private cars, and it is even common that they employ maids to help with housework. The first and the second generations of inhabitants were mostly employed as public servants but are now largely retired, while the third generation has been educated through high school and sometimes even to a university level. Additionally, people from the Ajuda neighborhood have family bonds that stretch to Europe (mainly in Portugal and France), and they are used to traveling abroad for health assistance or to study.

The neighborhood, however, is perceived as an exclusive residential area for other reasons as well. People in Bissau refer to it as an “urbanized” area, where “people are educated” and “know how to behave.” And this characterization is related to certain “formalities” or “customs” (terms used by Ajuda residents) rooted in colonial norms. Such behaviors have now been perpetuated by the residents in their public and private practices, fashioning a particular image of the neighborhood within the city of Bissau. Yet even if the Ajuda neighborhood still carries the reputation of being an exemplary neighborhood, its domestic spaces reveal a more complex story.

#### THE ENTANGLEMENT BETWEEN TRADITIONS AND THE COLONIAL SPATIALITY

Nowadays, houses in the Ajuda neighborhood intertwine public and private dimensions, indoor and outdoor spaces, African and Western habits, and urban and vernacular ways of life. In order to study the contemporary domestic space and to discuss how a negotiation between traditions has occurred, both in the built environment and in the spatial practices, the article will now focus on three elements of the domestic space: the plot, the kitchen, and the dining room.



**FIGURE 5.** Example of contemporary house organization in the Ajuda neighborhood. Drawing by author, 2021.

*The plot.* Since independence, the original colonial house-unit in the Ajuda neighborhood has been expanded and fragmented into a more complex dwelling landscape that is more able to accommodate the typical polynuclear Guinean family (FIG. 5). This transformation of dwelling

space is largely invisible from the street, however. The reason is there now exists a strong polarization between the front and the back facades of the house, between what is visible from the exterior and what must be protected in the interior of the dwelling space. The street facade in most cases has thus been kept as it was originally designed so as to denote a certain will to conform to the collective “image” of the neighborhood. But the back facade has undergone a process of radical transformation. In fact, the main house-unit has typically grown outward here so that it now occupies the perimetral veranda and other areas at the back of the house.

This extension of the house toward the rear has allowed for the creation of new rooms connected by means of an outdoor patio. And the generous dimension of the colonial parcel has allowed families to expand the house by adding new construction in what had previously served as the backyard garden. These added spaces, in most cases rooms for young male members of the family, have provided new domestic areas for a polynuclear family, which typically now comprises on average ten people. Those attached spaces, together with the main unit, have also changed the focus of the house so that it is arranged around a central patio where a wide range of collective functions take place: washing and preparing raw materials, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, etc.

The vibrant reorganization of the back yard of the plot may be seen as an adaptation of the traditional settlement unit, the *morança* — but in a form that allows it to be realized within a more confined urban space (FIG. 6). Not only has this dwelling practice displayed its resilience by being re-created in the backyards of the Ajuda houses, but it has become a common feature in the design of dwellings in other parts of the city as well. Today this adaptation of a traditional way for families to join together in small clusters within the



**FIGURE 6.** View of a courtyard in a house in the Ajuda neighborhood. Photo by author, 2021.

urban fabric is insufficiently studied. But it is safe to say that it embodies a hybrid urban spatiality based on the importance of community living, low-density organization, and outdoor activities. The enlarged family continues to represent, even in urban areas, the pillar of Guinean society and economy, while the low-density organization denotes a preference for an outdoor dwelling experience, even in the city center.

Such a hybrid dwelling organization already existed in urban areas of Guinea-Bissau during colonial times. In the 1960s an urban housing crisis aggravated by the Colonial War triggered a range of studies on urban space and dwelling environments in Portugal's African possessions. Its intent at the time was to find a way to relieve population pressure in the main cities there. Yet, while it found that the cities of Luanda and Maputo were characterized by self-built, high-density neighborhoods, the urban densification of Bissau was found to be below the United Nations (ONU) recommended standard for African cities.<sup>33</sup> According to the 1968 "Study on the Bissau Habitat," it was even judged to be possible to "achieve higher population density" without implementing housing programs that would displace existing residents, a recurrent practice during colonial times.<sup>34</sup> As reported by the author of the report, the relatively low-density environment of most the neighborhoods in Bissau was a product of their organization according to the traditional family unit, which privileged common outdoor space as the location for most daily domestic practices. And even if population growth in Bissau's urban environment now means this must take place at a smaller scale, the hybridity between a vernacular and an urban organization is still common — and has even been studied by a few scholars (FIG. 7).<sup>35</sup>

*The kitchen.* In the search for contemporary dwelling practices in the Ajuda neighborhood, habits around the preparation and consumption of meals constitute a fertile area through which to understand the negotiation of traditions. In a traditional rural Guinean settlement, the functions typically thought to take place in a kitchen — preparation of raw materials, cooking, washing, food conservation, etc. — are scattered around the house or take place on the veranda. By contrast, the modern kitchen, characterized by a single furnished room, where all functions are concentrated in a *unicum* space, is a recent domestic innovation. This is true even in Europe, where its development was related both to the development of an urban way of life and to spatial limitations.

In the Ajuda houses, the space of the kitchen has now been fragmented across multiple locations according to the need to best accommodate the elementary functions of preserving, washing, cutting and cooking (FIG. 8). As in traditional settlements, the location of the kitchen within the domestic space and its organization must thus take into account the fuel used to cook each meal, the dishes cooked, and the ingredients needed. Additionally, meal preparation, the places where it occurs, the equipment used, and the fuel needed may vary depending on the time of day these activities occur, and sometimes even the season in which it takes place. Of the many factors influencing the space for meal preparation in Ajuda houses, however, the most relevant is the type of dish to be prepared and consumed. In modern European cooking, every dish may no longer need to be prepared differently. But in Ajuda the needs of the dish undeniably influence both cooking methods, the

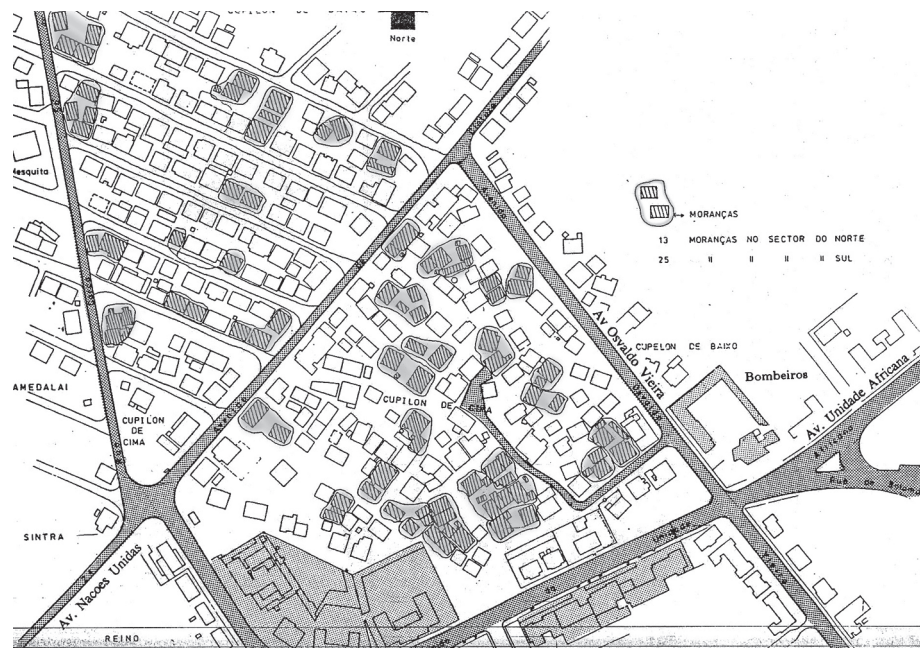


FIGURE 7. Traditional morança setting in the central area of Bissau, 1993. Source: C. Acioly, *Planejamento Urbano, Habitação e Autoconstrução: Experiências com Urbanização de Bairros na Guiné-Bissau*, 1993, p.308.





**FIGURE 8.** Meal preparation at a house in the Ajuda neighborhood. Photo by author, 2021.

place where they occur, and the tools used. To this end (and to accommodate both traditional and modern diets), the kitchens in Ajuda houses are in the most cases split between an interior and exterior space, each with different purposes, objects and tools.

The exterior space is equipped with small charcoal grills, called *fogareiro* (from *fogo* = fire), which may be set on the ground or mounted on a base. The role of the Western kitchen counter is here assumed by small tables that can be easily moved according to need. A variety of objects and tools may be scattered on the tables, but these may also be stored in a small room inside the house, which typically served as the original colonial kitchen. This exterior space for meal preparation is also recognizable not only on account of the presence of grills, but because it is usually covered by a roof (but one that allows for smoke to escape naturally), and because it is always located close to a water source. Sometimes the outdoor kitchen can also occupy the space of the rear veranda. The dishes cooked there are those of Guinean tradition based on rice, grilled vegetables, meat, and large amounts of fish.

The interior kitchen, by contrast, is marked by the presence of a gas stove, which may be located in different places inside the house — from the original indoor kitchen inherited from the colonial house-type, to the living room, to an enclosed veranda. The gas stove is used mainly for warming up dinner, usually composed of the daily leftovers, or to heat up soup. It may also be used to put together a quick breakfast, to heat milk for children, or occasionally to bake a cake. Even if some people justify the scarce use of the gas

stove for economic reasons, others confirmed that the cost of a bottle of gas is competitive with that of a sack of charcoal. Of course, the gas-stove kitchen observed in Ajuda houses is not very well designed, lacking, for example, an efficient means to exhaust smoke. However, the real reason why families have not abandoned cooking with charcoal likely relates to the resilience of traditional cooking practices.

The example of the kitchen space in the Ajuda neighborhood thus reveals how different domesticities may coexist and complement each other as a matter of daily practice. And it indicates how this has been reconfigured as the result of an encounter of dwelling cultures.

*The dining room.* If kitchen usage provides an example of a general hybridity of cultural practices, the dining room reveals a more specific tension between colonial legacy and Guinean tradition, and between social aspirations and practical needs. In many Ajuda houses dining functions have been doubled into two well-defined rooms: the “formal” dining room and the “small” dining room, called the *saleta* [small room] (FIGS. 9–10). The latter is located at the back of the house, usually in one of the spaces resulting from the expansion of the veranda. This small dining room is a bright and informal space, linked to the backyard garden and to the kitchen(s). Not much attention is given to its decoration and furnishing: sometimes chairs from its dining table may be missing, and in other cases evidence of its use as an eating area is simply given by the presence of a table covered with a tablecloth. In fact, it is typically a very flexible and functional space, used both for dining, relaxing, children’s homework, and general gathering in adverse weather conditions.

By contrast, the formal dining room is part of the original colonial plan, and is usually equipped with formal pieces of furniture and other items: laced tablecloths, cabinets for glasses and crockery, centerpieces, framed family photos, etc. Its static nature is what gives it a sense of formality, suggesting that a family gathers there for the main meals of the day, and that they consume their meals according to established rituals, using tools derived from Portuguese dining practice. But that imagined family does not correspond to the actual Guinean families that today inhabit the houses in Ajuda. These are typically larger than suggested by the room’s decor, and they do not follow the Portuguese habit of gathering together for daily meals. In fact, the routines of different members of a family in the Ajuda neighborhood are typically unsynchronized; everyone, from adults to children, follows his/her own routine, rarely meeting up for mealtime.

Additionally, while in Portugal the favored family meal is supper, the sacred moment when all family members gather after a long day of work, in Guinea-Bissau the main meal is lunch. The food for this meal is usually cooked in the morning by a servant or by members of the family, usually women. And once it is prepared, it may be consumed at various times of the day according to each person’s schedule.



**FIGURE 9.** *Formal dining room at a house in the Ajuda neighborhood. Photo by author, 2021.*

The entire Guinean family gathers only occasionally or during festivities, and rarely does this happen in the formal dining room, which is too small to accommodate everyone. Rather, in Guinean tradition, meals are consumed by hand from a common bowl in small groups, sitting on the floor or on little benches, often outdoors.

Even for rituals of eating, Guinean traditions have found ways to seize back domestic space in Ajuda, overcoming the rigid functional categorization typical of European culture. Thus, lunch has regained its prominence and is consumed in different places and by different members in an unsynchronized way. And dinner is not a relevant meal; it is quickly warmed up in the gas stove and commonly consumed in each individual bedroom.

However, even if Guinean habits have thus subverted modern notions regarding the specialization of rooms, families living in Ajuda have in most cases maintained the formal dining room for its symbolic significance. Under colonial rule, Ajuda residents were forced to adopt European domestic customs, including the use of a dining table, chairs, cutlery and dishware. And after independence they have continued to retain this colonial legacy, even if they don't practice it. Indeed, this is one reason why the image of the neighborhood as exclusive has been preserved until today.

The maintenance of formal dining room, together with the front facade of the house, thus denotes the desire of Ajuda residents to maintain a special social status — even if this element of the former colonial order was once established using the regulation of the domestic environment to establish systems of categorization and discrimination.



**FIGURE 10.** *Small dining room, or saleta, at a house in the Ajuda neighborhood. Photo by author, 2021.*

#### CONCLUSION: A NEW PLURIVERSALITY

During the colonial period Ajuda residents were forced to live according to the Western patterns and behavioral rules. However, since the country achieved independence, the neighborhood has undergone a process of transformation, which has entailed a negotiation with its colonial past. In the aftermath of independence, as Pierre Bourdieu observed elsewhere, “any innovation introduced by the West could (can) be adopted without its acceptance being considered as an expression of allegiance.”<sup>36</sup> And the contrary has also been true: the adoption of Guinean habits and customs has been made possible without discrimination being attached to it.

This analysis of the contemporary house in Ajuda has revealed precisely how — through a process of negotiation between the past and the present, the former colonial spatiality and revitalized Guinean domesticities, urban and vernacular spatial organization, and aspirational and practical needs — the process of establishing new traditions has managed to produce a space “in between.” This hybrid space has overturned certain colonial norms while retaining others, resulting in a new domestic environment characterized by a “pluriversality” of the domestic experience.<sup>37</sup>

By approaching hybridity “in the context of everyday practices,” the Ajuda house can be interpreted as a collage of dwelling models and usages.<sup>38</sup> The addition of new rooms and attachments thus corresponds to daily practices rooted in the Guinean vernacular way of life. And yet the maintenance of the original dining room reflects a will to conform to certain codings of social status inherited from colonial times.

Meanwhile, a more informal space for eating has emerged that belongs neither to colonial nor vernacular tradition, being a space “in-between.”

This same negotiation has occurred with regard to the expansion and reorganization of the building lot. On the one hand, the polarization of the front and back facades somehow reflects a “‘desire’ of protection and isolation, a necessity of self-identification and self-affirmation” typical of some European suburban universes.<sup>39</sup> Yet, on the other, the way the backyard garden is now typically organized stresses the preference for an outdoor dwelling experience present in vernacular Guinean domestic environments. The intertwining of Guinean and European domestic habits is further evident in the multiplication of kitchen spaces. The result is a meal-preparation experience that may conform either to European traditions or Guinean ones.

Domestic life in the Ajuda neighborhood condenses the past, the present, and the future, “overcoming the given grounds of opposition . . . [in a way that] opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity,” in Bhabha’s words.<sup>40</sup> It is thus difficult to categorize Ajuda domestic space into one or another category. The Ajuda house is neither urban nor vernacular, Western nor Guinean; all these dimensions exist simultaneously and are activated by the daily practices of its inhabitants.

The house is thus urban not because of its location, but because some of the domestic rituals that take place in it belong to urban society — such as neighboring rituals, including shared vigilance. Yet the house, to some extent, also facilitates a vernacular experience, since life there is characterized by communal and outdoor living as in a rural context. Its original plan (even if very simplified) was conceived according to a modern Western idea of dwelling space. Domestic activities were thus intended to be largely confined within the interior of the house;

functions were separated and well defined within different compartments; and doors and windows were fundamental elements to make the house a civilized dispositive. By contrast, the appropriation of the original plan today has resulted from a negotiation between interior and exterior boundaries and between different functional spaces. It is thus not uncommon for the living room to take over parts of the kitchen, and for the bedrooms to function as places to consume meals. The process of the Ajuda house’s hybridization has revealed overlapped stories; it has unmasked a new common sense in the area of domestic practices; and it has challenged the notion of domestic function according to a Western point of view. Ultimately, it has revealed that tradition is a much more dynamic, resilient and fluid category than what the colonial, modern or contemporary worlds have made it out to be.

Additionally, this analysis of the contemporary house in the Ajuda neighborhood has shed light on the lingering aspect of the colonial legacy. In fact, negotiation with the colonial spatiality within the contemporary domestic environment unveils the hybrid dimension of the notion of heritage itself. Colonial architectural heritage may thus be seen as a pluri-dimensional space of confrontation. In the context of the Ajuda neighborhood, it contributes to the construction of an elite social status, which is valued by its inhabitants. But it also constitutes the ground on which to fashion new domesticities, and these might inform future research on the dwelling landscape of Bissau.

Finally, this study of the entanglement between traditions and colonial spatiality in the contemporary domestic landscape in Guinea-Bissau has also provided a reminder of how notions of tradition and heritage cannot be generalized. Various research efforts with regard to these issues can only gain meaning when related to a particular context, circumstance, group of people, and their story.

## REFERENCE NOTES

This article has been developed within the project “ARCHWAR — Dominance and mass-violence through Housing and Architecture during colonial wars. The Portuguese case (Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Mozambique): colonial documentation and post-independence critical assessment” (PTDC/ART-DAQ/0592/2020).

1. Senegambia was a region of West Africa located between the Sahara Desert and the tropical zone, extending from the Gambia River in the north to the Geba River, which flows through Bissau, in the south. Nowadays Guinea-Bissau borders Senegal to the north and Guinea (Conakry) to the south.

2. One evidence of the negotiation of traditions in Guinea-Bissau may be the Creole idiom, which resulted from a long process of *metissage* between local languages and foreign ones. On this topic, see M. Vale de Almeida, “Portuguese Colonialism and Creolization,” in S. Charles, ed., *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007).

3. The last survey published about the vernacular architecture of the main ethnic groups in Guinea-Bissau was in 1983 and resulted in D. Blazejewicz, R. Lund, K. Schonning, and S. Steincke, *Arquitetura Tradicional Guiné-Bissau* (Estocolmo: Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency [SIDA], 1983).

4. C. Lopes, *Etnia, Stato e Rapporti di Potere in Guiné-Bissau* (Bolonha: GVC, 1984), p.112.

5. In Creole, *moransa*.

6. P. Bourdieu, *The Algerians* (Boston: Bacon Press, 1961); and G. Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

7. S. Henni, “From ‘Indigenous’ to ‘Muslim’: On the French Colonial Assimilationist Doctrine,” *Positions E-flux architecture* (2017); and K. Cupers, “The Invention of Indigenous Architecture,” in I. Cheng, C.L. Davis II, and M.O. Wilson, eds., *Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2020), pp.187–99.

8. H. le Roux, "Lived Modernism: When Architecture Transforms," Ph.D. diss. (Architecture), Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2014; and H. le Roux, "Designing Kwathema: Cultural Inscriptions in the Model Township," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 45 No. 2 (2019).
9. H.K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 25.
10. N. AlSayyad, "Prologue: Hybrid Culture/Hybrid Urbanism: Pandora's Box of the 'Third Place,'" in N. AlSayyad, ed., *Hybrid Urbanism: On the Identity Discourse and the Built Environment* (Westport, CN: Praeger Publishers, 2001), p. 3.
11. Ethno-architectural survey is a multidisciplinary methodology that combines architecture research tools with ethno-sociological ones in order to study inhabited space. On this issue, see D. Pinson, "L'habitat, Relevé et Révélé par le Dessin: Observer L'espace Construit et Son Appropriation," *Espaces et Sociétés*, January 2016, pp. 40–67.
12. I borrow the expression "counter-type of house" [*contre-type de habitation*] from Daniel Pinson's study of the transformation and appropriation of "colonial inspiration" Moroccan economic houses. See D. Pinson, *Modèles D'habitat et Contre-Types Domestiques au Maroc* (Tours: URBAMA, Université de Tours, 1992).
13. P. Mark, "Portuguese" Style and Luso-African Identity: Precolonial Senegambia, Sixteenth-Nineteenth Centuries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).
14. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
15. The historian Peter Mark has defined Luso-Africans as the offspring of the unions between emigrants from Portugal who settled in Africa and women from native societies. Mark, "Portuguese" Style and Luso-African Identity.
16. J.A. dos Santos Guardiola, *Relatório Sobre o Inquérito a Bissau e Outros Centros Populacionais da Guiné* [Report survey on Bissau and Other Population Centers in Guinea], 1945. [AHU/DSUH/2070/00994/00994].
17. On this topic, see A. Vaz Milheiro, "Africanidade e Arquitectura Colonial — a Casa Projectada Pelo Gabinete de Urbanização Colonial (1944–1974)," *Caderno de Estudos Africanos*, No. 25 (2013), pp. 121–39; and F. Vita, "Domestic Architecture in Dialogue: The Role of Portuguese Colonization in the Production of Domestic Spatiality in Contemporary Guinea-Bissau," Ph.D. diss., University of Porto (unpublished).
18. Decree n. 16.473 of February 6, 1929, was also known as the Political, Civil and Criminal Act of the Indigenous of Guinea, Angola and Mozambique.
19. M. Caetano, "Uma Crónica Nova da Conquista da Guiné" ["A New Chronicle of the Guinea Conquest"], *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa* 1 (1946). Caetano would go on to serve as head of the Ministry of Colonies between 1944 and 1947. As prime minister from 1968 to 1974, he would also succeed António Salazar and become the second and last leader of the Estado Novo.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
21. The author is currently researching this issue for the article "Between Coding and Decoding: Inquiring on the Late Colonial Need for Surveying the Native Settlements in Guinea-Bissau," which will be presented at the September 2023 Society of Architectural Historians Conference in Montreal (virtual event).
22. A. Teixeira da Mota, *Inquérito Etnográfico* [Ethnographic Survey] (Publicação Comemorativa do V Centenário da Descoberta da Guiné Bissau: Centro de Estudos da Guiné Portuguesa, 1947), p. 7.
23. Decree-Law n. 22.465, Acto Colonial [Colonial Act], 1933.
24. Teixeira da Mota, *Inquérito Etnográfico*; A. Teixeira da Mota, *Classificação e Evolução da Casa e Povoamento Indígena* [Classification and Evolution of Indigenous House and Settlement] (Bissau: Centro de Estudo da Guiné Portuguesa, 1948; and A. Teixeira da Mota and M.C. Ventim de Neves, eds., *A Habitação Indígena na Guiné Portuguesa* [The Indigenous House in the Portuguese Guinea] (Bissau: Centro de Estudos da Guiné Portuguesa, 1948).
25. "The shape of the dwelling used to be circular, but as a house of this type always had more than two rooms, the manjacos of Caió began to notice that the collection of the indigenous tax was applied on the greater or lesser number of rooms, hence this type fell into total disuse and was replaced by the rectangular one." A. Martins de Meireles, "Habitação indígena dos Manjacos de Caió" ["Indigenous House if the Caió Majacos"], in Teixeira da Mota and Ventim de Neves, eds., *A Habitação Indígena na Guiné Portuguesa*, p. 293.
26. Teixeira da Mota and Ventim de Neves, eds., *A Habitação Indígena na Guiné Portuguesa*.
27. E. Gonçalves Machado, *A Habitação Indígena em Angola: Subsídios para o Estudo do Problema* [The Native House in Angola: Subsídies for a Study of the Problem], 1952, p. 2.
28. V. Vieira da Costa, *Luanda Plano para a Cidade Satélite n.º 3* [Luanda plan for the Satellite City n.º 3] (Porto: ESBAP, 1948), p. 26.
29. Lopes, *Etnia, Stato e Rapporti di Potere in Guine-Bissau*, p. 32.
30. M. de Oliveira, "Relatório da viagem à Guiné" ["Report on the trip to Guinea"] (1958), manuscript AHU/DSUH/2073/01004.
31. Correspondence between the Bissau City Council and the Public Works Department about the "Study of popular dwellings in Guinea — letter 1234 from the Municipality of Bissau," 1960, [AHU, PT/ /DSUH/2073/08297].
32. In Guinea-Bissau this type of policy was already implemented in the Santa Luzia neighborhood, built in the 1940s, to accommodate "people in the process of assimilation of European habits." Teixeira da Mota and Ventim de Neves, eds., *A Habitação Indígena na Guiné Portuguesa*.
33. The United Nations report "L'habitat en Afrique" (1965) is cited in M.A. de Sousa Chichorro, *Estudo Sobre o Habitat de Bissau* [Study on the Bissau habitat], 1968.
34. De Sousa Chichorro, *Estudo Sobre o Habitat de Bissau*.
35. As reported in C. Acioli, *Planejamento Urbano, Habitação e Autoconstrução: Experiências com Urbanização de Bairros na Guiné-Bissau* (Delft: Technische Universiteit Delft, 1993). Evidence of this dwelling organization can be found in the photographic survey in Bissau by the architect Manuel Fernandes de Sá (1988). Additionally, the author has also observed the endurance of this peculiar organization during field research on dwelling space in Bissau (2019, 2021).
36. Bourdieu, *The Algerians*, p. 158.
37. In contrast to a global order based on a monocentric, universal, unilateral objectivity and truth, Walter Mignolo has suggested the idea of "pluriversality" as being "a universal project to which all contending options would have to accept." I question whether it is possible to consider, in contrast with a universal idea of house, a plurality of dwelling space. Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 23.
38. AlSayyad, "Prologue: Hybrid Culture/Hybrid Urbanism," p. 2.
39. Referred as the "monde pavillonnaire," in H. Raymond, N. Haumont, M.-G. Dezès, and A. Haumont, *L'habitat Pavillonnaire* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001), p. 16.
40. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 25.

All translations from original documents in Portuguese are by the author.