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RESEARCH

Urban Space in Benin : Contributing to an Ongoing Conversation on Urbanization Through Indigenous Linguistic Frameworks

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Abstract

This paper shows the value of local languages for grasping urban spaces in countries like Benin. It introduces *tòxò hùn nùkún*, a concept in the Mahi/Fon language meaning "a city with open eyes", to challenge the perception that Africa is only now becoming urbanised. Based on this descriptive metaphor, the paper reveals existing traces of local urban conceptualization that predate current development discourse. The paper's argument has been drawn from conversations about Africa's rapid urbanisation, African urban studies, secondary cities and literatures using terms and concepts in the languages of developing countries to theorise space without over-relying on Western social sciences. This research is based on a 12-month ethnography conducted in the Republic of Benin. It draws from semi-structured interviews with over 70 residents and actors of *Rue de l'Espoir*, in Tchinagbégbo district, Abomey-Calavi. Without having the aim of being universally applicable, taking language seriously points out that analysing places like Calavi with their wealth of linguistic diversity and history provides the possibility for the emergence and popularisation of locally grounded spatial concepts, challenging dominant urban theory. I show that although there has been confusion on the spatial nature of Calavi from Beninese and Africanist social scientists, Abomey-Calavi has always been urban; however, what has been described as urban has changed over time.

Keywords Precolonial · Urban studies · Secondary cities · Local language · Republic of Benin · Africa

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Introduction

Rue de l'Espoir is about 12 m wide. Everything but the *trottoir* (sidewalks) is entirely asphalted for up to 2 km, until the intersection with *Biḍosési* (Bidossessi) Street (See Maps of the street and Bidossessi). The street located in Abomey-Calavi, was named by its multi-ethnic first inhabitants in 1992, after having purchased land from the indigenous Ayizos and Fon landowners. Abomey-Calavi is located just under 20 km north of coastal Cotonou in the southern part of Benin. According to the latest census published in 2013, the wider municipality had a population of 800 000, but now it is estimated to be over 1 million. It has 149 villages and neighbourhoods covering nine districts.[1] It continues to be described as a dormitory town due to the large number of people who commute to and from Cotonou every morning and every evening.[2] I am referring essentially to Abomey-Calavi district when describing Rue de l'Espoir. Looking at the street from one end towards the other in the middle of the day, one had the feeling that it was vanishing into an infinity of unusual grey, darkened, cloudy sky for the *harmattan*.[3] The solar streetlights and the concrete-made electric wire poles followed each other in a single file towards the fading horizon. It was in this newly transformed urban landscape that I encountered some residents.

I met two women on *Rue de l'Espoir*: Mrs Hili and Mrs Assiyon. Mrs Hili was selling a small pile of tomatoes to a complaining woman who had her baby wrapped on her back. I waited for the woman to leave before introducing myself to Mrs Hili in Mahi and Fon, intentionally avoiding French. I realised later it was a good idea since she and her trading partner were Mahi speakers — (a language spoken in various parts of central Benin)[4] —. She quickly called her companion along and asked her to listen to me. I first started conversing with her associate, Mrs Assiyon, until Mrs Hili decided to join the conversation after sorting out some goods. It is with them that I received my first introduction to how people describe Calavi in *Fɔngbè* and *Maxí* (the Fon and Mahi languages). "*Calavi ɔ́*, *tòxò hùn nùkún wè é yín*" (Calavi is a city), Mrs Hili said. This expression not only refers to the presence of various infrastructures, but also to broader socioeconomic changes.

The ethnographic vignette exemplifies three key dimensions that are crucial for understanding local conceptualizations of urban change in similar contexts. First, it captures the contradictory nature of post-asphalting transformation presented in *"tòxò hùn nùkún"* —while the street gained new infrastructures (concrete blocks, ornamental trees, solar lighting, cleaning), it also introduced new challenges, including noise pollution from increased traffic, and speeding vehicles. Second, it demonstrates how approaching residents in Mahi and Fon rather than French reveals their sophisticated analysis of these very changes —Mrs. Hili and Mrs. Assiyon's willing-

[1] Abomey-Calavi, Akassato, Godomey, Glo-Djigbé, Hêvié, Kpanroun, Ouèdo, Togba and Zinvié.

[2] The municipality of Abomey-Calavi is bordered to the north by the municipality of Zè, to the south by the Atlantic Ocean, to the east by the municipalities of Cotonou and Sô-Ava, and to the west by the municipalities of Ouidah and Tori-Bossito.

[3] The Harmattan is a cool, dry wind originating from the northeast or east in the western Sahara. It is most intense from late November to mid-March, often carrying vast amounts of dust that can be transported hundreds of miles over the Atlantic Ocean.

[4] For a more detailed history of the *Maxi* (read Mahi), see Mulira (1984) and Anignikin (2001).

ness to engage stemmed from their desire to voice concerns about the transformations they have witnessed. Finally, it shows how residents like Mrs. Hili articulate their understanding of what constitutes urban space through locally-grounded concepts like *"tòxò hùn nùkún"* in direct response to these complex changes —suggesting that their conceptualization of Calavi as "a city with open eyes" emerges from their lived experience of both the benefits and challenges of urban transformation, not simply from the presence of formal infrastructure alone. While Abomey-Calavi is often dismissed in development discourse as a mere "dormitory town" for Cotonou, this ethnographic encounter suggests a far deeper urban trajectory. The gap in current African urban studies might not always be a lack of data, but a lack of linguistic attention to how spatial change is conceptualized by those living it. By taking the Mahi and Fon languages seriously, this paper fills that gap, showing that Calavi has always been urban; however, what has been described as urban has changed over time.

This paper argues that indigenous linguistic frameworks can fundamentally reshape our understanding of African urbanisation and are not merely local point of views. It reemphasized the analytical power of indigenous frameworks through ethnographic work conducted on *Rue de l'Espoir* in Abomey-Calavi. Through selective examples, I show that Calavi's urban character is a long-standing trajectory rather than a recent development discourse. I support that Abomey-Calavi has long been understood as *tòxò* (urban), even as the meanings associated with urbanity have evolved. Given the central role of *"tòxò hùn nùkún"* in the analysis that follows, it is essential to discuss the concept, provide some theoretical conversations, and situate Calavi theoretically before examining the other dimensions highlighted in the introductory vignette.

Highlighting Local Epistemologies: "tòxò hùn nùkún"

The expression *"tòxò hùn nùkún"* literally means "city belly open eyes" or "city pregnancy open eyes". However, breaking "*Calavi ɔ́*, *tòxò hùn nùkún wè é yín*" down implies that Calavi is a city (or country, or village) with opened eyes." The word *"tò"* has a triple spatial meaning. It could be a country, a city, or a village. Its size, whether large or small, is only clarified depending on the context. Neither of my interlocutors mentioned the size of the place they were describing. Instead, they emphasized that Calavi's 'eyes were opened'. For Mrs. Hili and Assiyon, the opening of these eyes, is tied to roads, and increased activity, as they emphasized "*Yes*, *Calavi has opened its eyes entirely. A place that has not opened its eyes*, *does not have roads. Without roads*, *coming here would have been challenging.*"

In this understanding, eyes opening therefore implies the presence of transport infrastructures. Likewise, Mrs Nuto, a craftswoman whom I met on a different occasion on the Street, repeated the same sentence. She said, *"Calavi has opened its eyes completely (…) it was impossible to work in my workshop till 8 pm (…) there were no streetlights and thieves were very rampant and aggressive."* In her explanation, the total "awakening" of Calavi is due to the decrease in motorbike theft, the increase in street lighting and population density, and the improved quality of transport networks

across the city[5] as mentioned earlier. Other informants voiced similar observations. However, other residents offer more ambivalent interpretations. Mr Glezor, an older farmer, officially retired, brought a different perspective to the faculty of *tòxò hùn nùkún* that the two women traders had endowed upon Calavi. For Mr Glezor, becoming aware and being able to see is not necessarily a sign of personal development, whether it has to do with a person or a place. Nor is it necessarily a sign of achievement, because it does not protect from stupidity (environmental pollution, noise…). These different perspectives reveal how different economic positions, professional situation and age, shape understandings of *tòxò hùn nùkún* —from infrastructure as opportunity to infrastructure as disruption.

I would like to point out that rather than claiming universal applicability, this research demonstrates how strategic examination of specific linguistic frameworks can reveal analytical possibilities for urban studies more broadly. The concept of *"tòxò hùn nùkún"* serves as one example of how indigenous spatial vocabularies might challenge and enrich urban theory, suggesting methodological approaches that could be applied to other linguistic and geographical contexts.

Defining the Urban in Fon and Mahi Before tòxò hùn nùkún

I approach the Fon and Mahi languages as elements of spatial urban perception and definition. The value of naming and referencing places in these languages underlines the value that language can have in any effort to perceive a place, urban or otherwise. The existence of the word *tòxò* implies that the appreciation of Calavi as an urban area or as a centre of important socio-economic and cultural activity is not recent. Calling a place a *tòxò* means describing it as central, or urban,[6] despite the presence of farmland *(gle)* and bush (*zunkàn*) — often presented as rural attributes — (Agossou-Voyeme, 2006). Therefore, a place, irrespective of its size, can be a *tòxò*, without being awoken (*hún nukún*). Calavi has been a *tòxò* for a long time, probably since the 1600–1700 s, and that justified the interest it raised from other ethnic groups.

The linguistic richness in this case challenges previous Beninese scholarly assessments of spatial precision in Fon-related languages, particularly Igué's (2008) assertion about theoretical gaps in urban concepts. There are distinctions that one can make to specify different kinds of places of human concentration. For example, there are administrative considerations that give a group of houses (*kɔ́ xwé*) the nature of a village (*tò* or *tòxò*). In the urban-rural duality, one would perceive this mixing of *tòxò* (urban) and other spatial elements as contradictory. For a long time, places at the intersection of the urban and the rural have been presented as purely rural or non-urban. Or when they are analysed, they are frequently put within the periphery category. While the urban/rural binary has been effectively dismantled in contempo-

[5] I have used 'city or tòxò' to refer to Calavi, because I am referring to the space geographically while acknowledging its complex urban and non-urban natures.

[6] To be more specific, people might say *tòxò ɖaxó*, to mean a large city, and *tòxò* kpɛví, a small city. The use of *tòxò* nonetheless implies the urban character of a place.

rary African urban theory, it remains a pervasive colonial legacy in the administrative language and developmental records of cities like Abomey-Calavi.

Then there has been an increase in challenging these approaches to places (Brenner, 2013a; Krause, 2013) and going beyond divides between rural and urban (Myers, 2011; Schmid, 2018; Simone, 2004). Mahi/Fon presents the existence of that rurality as quasi-illusory through the existence of the *tòxò*. Translating *tòxò* to English or French despite the challenge in doing justice to the expression, indicates that the word describes an urban centre, or a city. In spoken Mahi/Fon, one may hear *tòxò ɖaxó* (big, or large city), or *tòxò kpɛví* (small city). Calavi, when referred to as *tòxò* (even up to 1900 s) did not reject the rural attributes then: bush, hunting ground, farming land, or religious temples. These places were never described as not falling under the jurisdiction of Calavi, despite the level of differentiation that some made in their speech when presenting some places as *tòxò* and others as bush.

Despite the characteristics that some will present as rural, the *tòxò* fully embraced its urbanity. Using *tòxò* to designate a place as purely urban would be a mistake. So is using *tòxò* to strictly define what must and must not be part of it. This combination of descriptions creates an illusion in attempting to define the urban and the rural under the term. Staying within the realm of the rural-urban divide, *tòxò* is urban, but can have rural features, or one might even say, rural, with urban features. It is, however, certain that the transformation of these spaces is not linear and would require further work for a full glossary of human agglomerations in these languages.

Grounding Agbǒmɛ̀ Kán ɖó fí (Calavi) Theoretically

African urban studies have adopted several approaches over time. For a long time, they were highly colonial in nature, with the objective of total and repressive control of colonized populations, especially in African contexts (Boahen, 1987; Choplin & Ciavolella, 2018; Garnier, 2013; Goerg, 2006; King, 1977; Kipfer, 2007; Mabogunje, 1990; Mignolo, 2011; Monroe, 2007, 2010; Ruche, 2013). They subsequently took a turn related to work, health, hygiene, but above all development, and concomitantly became increasingly linked to questions of planning, flooding, and modernity. This evolution took place in a context where existing African urban spaces were despised, sometimes under the pretext of African incapacity to produce such spaces, revealing a European divide deeply rooted in dominant theoretical approaches (Lawhon et al., 2020; Parnell & Robinson, 2012; Robinson, 2012). According to Fourchard (2004), the evolution of African urban history is characterized by a very late start and persistent structural gaps. Neglected almost entirely during independence debates (1950–1970) due to the focus on political/economic questions that de facto sidelined urban questions and the late arrival of urban history in Western historiographical traditions. The discipline only experienced its real take-off from the late 1970 s (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2006).

The effort to define the urban and its theorization has followed different trajectories since then. As Myers (2011) emphasizes, there exists a significant literature on African urbanization that began more than sixty years ago (Epstein, 1958; Mabogunje, 1990; O'Connor, 2013). However, the need to define the urban has not diminished as a result. For example, Zeiderman (2018), while recalling the efforts of different

geographers, referred to Scott and Storper (2015) and Brenner 2013b; 2015) to argue that defining the urban may require theorisation, but that its generalization will pose problems if methods are not changed. Without endorsing Zeiderman's methodological approach, I echo his methodologically call modestly. I position myself in the trajectory of Lawhon et al. (2020) and others before her (Baumanova et al., 2019; Chirikure, 2020; Hull, 1976b; Karpat, 1976; McGee, 2021; Myers, 2011, 2016, 2018; Tarver, 1993) who emphasize the importance of better understanding urbanization in regions other than those of the economically and geographically defined North (Lawhon et al., 2020; Mbembe & Nuttall, 2004; Simone, 2020).

Consequently, in the effort of evolutionary definitions that also responds to the demands for better understanding of African urbanism, Myers (2011) proposes a comparative approach between African cities themselves, recognizing that African societies urbanize in ways that challenge prevailing theories and models of urban geography, sociology, anthropology and planning while remaining certainly cities in a world of cities (Brenner & Christian, 2015; Lefebvre, 2003; Robinson, 2011). Building on Myers's call for comparative approaches among African cities, this research extends that logic by demonstrating how indigenous linguistic frameworks can contribute to urban theory through the specific case of Calavi.

In this logic, I position myself in an approach to explaining African urban space, starting from Benin, and specifically Abomey-Calavi, and making selective use of linguistic expressions useful for understanding Calavi's space, thus showing the revealed part of an iceberg, whose discovery would be highly recommendable. The recognition of Calavi as *"tòxò"* since the 1600–1700 s fundamentally challenges dominant narratives that position African urbanization as a recent. This historical continuity suggests that what one observes today is not the emergence of urbanity in Africa, but rather the transformation of existing urban forms. It is a shift from understanding African cities as products of colonial intervention solely to recognizing them as sites of ancient urban complexity that have continuously evolved. This temporal depth repositions discussions of contemporary African urbanization within longer trajectories of indigenous urban development.

Methods

I conducted an urban ethnography-inspired research on the Street. As Ferguson said in his investigation of modernity in Zambia, *"[he] knew [his] informants in the way most urbanites know one another: some quite well*, *some only in passing*, *others in special-purpose relationships that gave me detailed knowledge of some areas of their lives and almost none of others"*, Ferguson (1999, p.21). I relied on snowball sampling to recruit participants, but received only two recommendations from over 120 attempted in-person interviews. By fieldwork's end, I had interviewed 75 participants and urban actors. Most interviews were in French, Fon, and Mahi. French interviews were transcribed and translated into English, while Fon and Mahi interviews were translated during transcription, with key expressions retained in their original form where translation risked loss of meaning.

When recording was possible, I transcribed them verbatim. For unrecorded interviews, I took rapid notes when conditions allowed, or quickly recorded verbal summaries when note-taking was impossible. I coded materials in NVivo, distinguishing perspectives by participant type—vendors, or residents. I organized data by separating observations from interviews and categorizing images from extended fieldwork walks. While the demographic composition of my broader research was predominantly male, the conversations presented here reflect the voices primarily of women traders and entrepreneurs who engage daily with Calavi's transformed urban landscape. I conducted this fieldwork during COVID, after "convincing the university ethics review board that I was not going to study in an unsafe, unknown environment and a lengthy approval process, review, travel authorisation, and safety checklist. I should recall here that all names except for the street and some administrations have been anonymised. My presence in the field varied depending on my health, and my meetings with the Street's residents and other urban actors of various kinds.

This research employs a methodological intervention that positions local language categories as analytical tools for understanding African urban dynamics (Anderson & Rathbone, 2000; Caldeira, 2000; Chirikure, 2020; Ese & Ese, 2020; Kroeker, 2023; Masquelier, 2019; Murimi & Thieme, 2025). Scholars worldwide have demonstrated the analytical value of local indigenous spatial concepts for understanding urbanization processes that exceed Western theoretical frameworks (Amankwah-Ayeh, 1996; Bernard & Mury, 2020; Croese & Wood, 2024; Dorries, 2023; Edensor & Jayne, 2012; Escobar, 2018). Rather than presenting a comprehensive lexical study, this article demonstrates how indigenous spatial vocabularies reveal conceptual frameworks that can also contribute to urban theories. This approach of valorizing local linguistic expressions reflects a deliberate methodological choice that responds to Lawhon and other scholars' calls for better integration of vernacular vocabularies in urban analysis (Lawhon et al., 2020; Simone, 2020). The focus on indigenous language categories over French vernacular expressions (*Rue de l'Espoir*) represents a conscious methodological choice grounded in Lawhon et al.'s (2020) argument that if everyday meanings of urban vocabulary shape and are shaped by ideas of the city, and ideas are conjoined with the production of cities, they thus ought to be integrated into urban analysis. Despite acknowledging French's undeniable pervasive presence in contemporary Benin—functioning as a bridge language among the *Rue de l'Espoir* community, facilitating communication among ethnically diverse actors, and enabling my fieldwork as a researcher—its extensive use methodologically, and to theorize African urban spaces, creates an analytical gap. By prioritizing underdocumented indigenous vocabularies, this approach addresses what Lawhon identifies as the need to examine urban vernacular vocabularies that reveal spatial meaning systems invisible to conventional methodologies, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how residents themselves conceptualize and articulate their urban experiences.

A Brief Urban History of Calavi

Faced with access to rich oral histories, one can only proceed by putting together the bits that appear sporadically in archival records. In this case, despite the lack of readily available data on the history of Calavi, there is evidence of place-making practices, whether one decides to describe them as urban or rural, or as belonging to the *tòxò*, or not. Some participants referred to ancient Calavi (See Map 1) as "Calavi-Ville" (Calavi-City), while others in Cotonou were describing the same wider area as rural. This divergence reflects not only differences in perspective but also the persistence of external categorizations that do not fully capture local spatial understandings. (Fig. 1).

Map 1 The Mangeot Map (1928) Depicting the Historical Core of Abomey-Calavi

Colonial and postcolonial developments introduced new forms of infrastructure (administrative, health units, transports networks). Contemporary Calavi has seen similar developments. Several Beninese and non-Beninese authors have specifically investigated the country's urban question. Some did so before it was known as Benin (Akinjogbin, 1963; Le Hérissé, 1911; Mondjannagni, 1977; Ronen, 1968). Others were writing at a time of relative political stability, but primarily focusing on the larger urban areas of Cotonou, Porto-Novo, Abomey, Ketu (N'Bessa 1997; Grisoni-Niaki 2000; Coralli 2005; Dansou 2005; Monroe 2007; Agossou 2007; Igué 2008;



Fig. 1 Map 1 The Mangeot Map (1928) depicting the historical core of Abomey-Calavi

Chabi 2013). In these accounts, Abomey-Calavi often appears indirectly or as part of broader regional dynamics. More research decided to approach the urban question on a wider regional and spatial scale (Akiyo et al., 2016; Banon & Jehling, 2020; Charles-Dominé, 2013; Juhé-Beaulaton, 2010; Simonneau, 2016), analyzing planning, environmental resources, informality, and land reforms (Choplin and Ciavolella 2018; Bio Bigou 2018; Choplin 2019; Igué 2019; Delville 2020). They tend to overlook the historical specificity of places like Calavi as urban centres in their own right. There is logically more information about Abomey, Ouidah, Oyo, Kumasi, the Ashantene (Hull, 1976a), and some other major coastal centres of activity because they were at the heart of socioeconomic life (Choplin, 2020b, 2020a).

Early Settlements

Examining the history of Calavi therefore reveals a connection to a deeper past. The literal translation of the Fon name *Agbǒmè Kán ɖó fĩ*, is "Abomey Cut Put Here". A better translation would be "Little Abomey". Some people even said *Agbǒmè Kpεví*, which means "Little Abomey" (Choplin and Ciavolella 2018, 22). One possible translation of *Agbǒmè* is "within the rampart" possibly made of natural vegetation, while another is "within the fortifications." The absence of any remnants of manmade fortification surrounding Calavi suggests that the natural rampart hypothesis is more likely as in other Beninese kingdoms, like Ketu (Filippello 2017; Igué 2008).

Slave Trade Era 17th –18th

Agossou Voyeme (2006) presents Calavi as a slave transition and selling spot for the Kingdom of Abomey. Iroko (1988) adds some crucial details to the list of slave markets mentioned by Agossou-Voyeme (2006): Togbohouè or Tokpahi, Godémènou, Glo-Dénou, Mitoko, Hadjannaho, Glo-Houèto, N'Gbèhouè, Messahounsou. He stressed that, as far as the sale of captives in Abomey-Calavi is concerned, "oral traditions provide information only in bits and pieces, and sometimes in contradictory ways, making cross-checking often difficult. Certain realities are deliberately disguised by the descendants of slaves bought on these markets." He concluded by saying, "…in the end, one is reduced to only a few certainties, but to many hypotheses and doubts" (1988, p. 378). Nevertheless, the author emphasises with certainty that the creation of the slave sales post and the origin of the Calavi market (Tokpahi or Togbohouè) are intimately linked. [7] The market was trading items in its early days, and it was only later that a slave trading post called Godémènou, in memory of the living pregnant woman who was buried there in sacrifice, was created.[8] The success

[7] Iroko describes that the market would opened every two days - three days for the locals - near Lake Nonhoué, on the public square known as Agbagbodji, in the Tokpa-Zoungo royal district (Iroko, 1988).

[8] The burial of the unfortunate pregnant woman, who was of Nago origin, was carried out according to occult procedures designed to ensure the protection and prosperity of the new point of sale. Godémènou means pregnant woman in the Ayizo language. According to Iroko's description (Iroko 1988), the pregnant woman was covered with sand taken from the Vèdo and Djègan market plazas in Hêvié (another Ayizo locality), making Godémènou a slave selling post built on the ruins of the two previous markets, since the sand transfer ritual involved a transfer of vitality.

and strategic position of Calavi, which was considered to be one of the pivotal points in this part of the coastal zone, and its political weakness that made it an easy prey for the Kingdoms of Ọyọ as early as 1754 and *Danxomè* post-1770s (Akinjogbin 1963, 146; Iroko 1988, 382). Be that as it may, Godémènou was so prosperous that *Ọyọ* in the 18th century and *Danxomè* in the following century successively made it an extension of their economy, in other words, a veritable outlet for their captives, destined above all for trading and the Atlantic Slave Trade.

Colonial Period Late 19th

From the perspective of my informants, the urbanisation of Calavi was seen through their eyes as citizens of the 20th and 21 st centuries, often without an appreciation of the local historical realities of the place. It is not surprising, therefore, that most historical works described Calavi as exclusively rural. The rurality is reinforced by the scattered practices of urban occupation, which may appear disordered, but which at their infrastructural core bear the hallmarks of a real indigenous order witnessed by religious structures and consistent with local understandings of *tòxò*.

In the colonial era there was farming of cocoa and palm trees (Choplin and Ciavolella 2018, 20). Godomey was a centre of industrial economic activity along with Savi, Ouidah, Pahou, Porto-Novo, and Calavi (N'Bessa 1997, 49). Archival images from the late 1800 s and early 1900 s show family compounds without a particular geometrical shape. However, houses seemed rectangular, made of red clay, and varied in length, with wide and tall roofs of hay (Fig. 2). There were of course, some architectural specificities, planning rules always putting markets next to palaces, and some temples outside the main city centres (Igué, 2008).



« Vue prise à Abomey-Calavi (Dahomey) - août 1887 », *Album de dessins originaux exécutés au Dahomey*, Théophile Tralboux, 1886 – 1888, Collection Zinsou

Fig. 2 "View taken from Abomey-Calavi (Dahomey)", (Choplin & Ciavolella, 2018)

In the image above, depicting Abomey Calavi in the late 1880 s, the presence of a considerable portion of greenery is reflective of the proximity between houses and vegetation.

Colonial Mapping 20th Onwards

Early cartographic representations, such as the 1928 Mangeot map, illustrate the spatial concentration and organization of Calavi's settlements. The Mangeot Plan was drawn three decades (1928) after the surrender of *Gbehanzin* (Behanzin),[9] the last King of independent *Danxomè* (Fig. 3).

Colonial projects and governmental objectives have both contributed to the building of various infrastructures in the region. The private constructions were set up both by Calavi's population and by foreigners in the city. Still, land allotment and relocation programs never affected the historic city thanks to the Calavi's indigenous population's desire to preserve their historical compounds. Therefore, the core historical markers, especially the palace, the market, and some historical family houses, are still present.

Contemporary Changes

Migrants to Calavi played a considerable role in making the city. It is important to acknowledge that they would not have been able to do so if natives (first Ayizo, and later migrants from Oyo, and Abomey) had not sold their lands to in-comers. Ancient Calavi was organized around the palace and covered both sides of the inter-state road. Calavi was divided. Natives lived in one part of the city, near the palace on the east side of RNIE 2, while others settled elsewhere. Occupation by non-natives (not Ayizo or affiliated) started in Togoudo (1970–1980 s), a district of Calavi which is closer to Cotonou compared to the Rue de l'Espoir area (Chabi, 2013; N'Bessa, 1997). For *Rue de l'Espoir*, located in an area that used to be called *Adjidján dònù* (porcupine's den), one has to wait till the 1980s. (Fig. 4).

For example, Mr Atadji, moved to Calavi from Cotonou in 1984. He asserted that Abomey-Calavi – the ancient city – was located close to the shores of the Nokoué (*Nɔnxwé*) Lake, on the East Side of the Cotonou-Parakou Interstate Road (Map 2). By the early 20th century, Calavi had thus evolved from its original Ayizo settlement into a multi-ethnic urban center, with successive waves of migration from different parts of the country, and the wider African region each adding new layers to the city's spatial and social composition.

The existence of such layers could make one think of the various politics which affect Calavi culturally and politically. While Calavi is a multi-ethnic space where Fon serves as the dominant lingua franca, it would be reductive to view this dominance solely as a form of southern political imposition over residents from elsewhere (North, South, East, West). The most acute perception of domination is actually found among the indigenous Ayizo, who struggle to assert their identity against both historical Fon hegemony and the contemporary influx of "foreign" residents from

[9] Gbehanzin means "the world which holds the egg". "[…].



Fig. 3 King Behanzin (Albéca & Photographe, 1894). The last King of Danxomè (Agbǒmè/Abomey) before French colonization (1890–1894)



Fig. 4 Map 2 key streets and roads around Rue de l'Espoir and in the wider historical area (Author: made with openstreet data)

across Benin. Furthermore, interviews suggest that tensions are more often articulated through infrastructural and economic inequalities than through language alone. For these residents, the dominance of the south is felt through the uneven pace of urban development rather than the use of the Fon and French languages as main language in the south.

Discussion: Understanding Urban Change Through Local Eyes

The women's statement that "Calavi is a city with open eyes" came directly from what they saw and experienced on *Rue de l'Espoir* and in Calavi. One of these changes is illustrated by the asphalting program, which considerably changed the face of the Street through the installation of tarmac, solar streetlights, and ornamental trees, while also contributing to increased road traffic and various forms of pollution. This daily encounter with contradictory urban transformation reveals why *"tòxò hùn nùkún"* offers a novel framework for understanding African urbanization than conventional urban studies approach as part of a wider old debate about theorising Africa.

Unlike Western urban theories that have presented development as linear progress, *"tòxò hùn nùkún"* captures what residents actually experience - that infrastructure improvements bring both opportunities and challenges simultaneously (Anand et al., 2018; Filippello, 2017; Harvey & Knox, 2015; Mains, 2019). Mrs. Hili and Mrs. Assiyon were not simply celebrating urban change. Instead, they were demonstrating

an analytical framework that acknowledges an aspect of urban change lying within the wider complex conversations of urban places. Mr Glezor rightfully pointed to a few aspects of that complexity. Their understanding shows that *tòxò hùn nùkún* is about gaining awareness of new realities, both positive and negative. Beyond this immediate awareness, placing the concept of *tòxò hùn nùkún* at the center of this analysis reveals an urbanity in Calavi that is significantly older than current development discourse suggests. However, this 'opening of the eyes' of the city reveals a more brutal truth: urbanization is intrinsically an act of prioritization that imposes perceived or lived toponymic or spatial denials across geographies (Yeboah, 2008; Bigon, 2009; Geschiere, 2009; Côté & Mitchell, 2017).

Why Language Matters for Urban Analysis

The fact that these insights only emerged when I approached residents in Mahi and Fon rather than French reveals a crucial methodological point for urban studies. When researchers use colonial languages, they may miss entirely different ways of understanding urban space. The concept of *"tòxò hùn nùkún"* cannot be properly translated into English or French without losing its analytical power. This is because it emerges from a different way of thinking about what cities are and how they change. It belongs to a different group's point of view (Geertz, 1974; Malinowski, 1978).

Taking language seriously also reveals that language is a site of power and concealment. What is at stake in Calavi is a combination of linguistic and spatial domination. By using Fon to theorize space and challenge Western frameworks, we must also recognize that Fon itself has acted as a veil over the indigenous Ayizo language. Today, Ayizo identity is present but, Fon has effectively masked the memory of the Ayizo land without erasing it. And now *Rue de l'Espoir* has masked the memory of Fon language, by replacing a not well known name *"Adjidjan donu"* (den of porcupines) by a French toponym in total unawareness of the history of the area. In this sense, language also matters for what it reveals, and the domination it can expose.

This language choice also affected who was willing to talk to me and what they were willing to share. Mrs. Hili and Mrs. Assiyon's openness came from recognizing that I was trying to understand their perspective in their own terms, not imposing external categories. This suggests that much urban research may be missing crucial local knowledge simply because of the languages used to conduct them (Baumanova et al., 2019; Chirikure, 2020; Hull, 1976b; Karpat, 1976; McGee, 2021; Myers, 2011, 2016, 2018; Tarver, 1993).

Different Positions, Different Understandings

The research revealed that different residents use *"tòxò hùn nùkún"* differently based on their daily experiences. Mrs Hili and Mrs Assiyon, as traders, focused on how new infrastructure affected their business — better roads meant easier access to Dantokpa market, but increased traffic created noise and safety concerns. Mrs Nuto, as a craftswoman, emphasized how streetlights allowed her to work later. Mr Glezor, as an older farmer, questioned whether "opening eyes" always meant real progress, drawing on traditional wisdom about the difference between education and intel-

ligence and the value of having asphalt instead of pavement blocks that were less speed-permissive and easier to maintain.

These different perspectives show that *"tòxò hùn nùkún"* is not a fixed concept but rather a framework that residents use to analyze their specific experiences of urban change. Through the bottom-up naming of places, residents actively choose to "open their eyes" to a different multi-ethnic future. This flexibility is actually a strength — it allows people to articulate contradictory, sometimes complex feelings about transformation critically.

Challenging Academic Assumptions About African Cities

The historical evidence that Calavi has been recognized as *"tòxò"* since the 1600–1700 s fundamentally challenges how urban studies approaches African cities (Ajayi, 1996; Hull, 1976a, 1976b; Lovejoy, 2013; Mondjannagni, 1977; Ogot, 1999). *"Tòxò"* shows that indigenous urban frameworks existed long before European contact and have continued to evolve, even in places like Abomey-Calavi. This means that what we see today is not Africans learning to be urban, but rather indigenous urban concepts adapting to new circumstances.

Methodological Lessons for Urban Research

This research demonstrates several important methodological points for urban studies. First, the choice of research language fundamentally affects what researchers can learn. Second, extended ethnographic work is necessary to understand how residents actually conceptualize urban space (Karpat, 1976; McGee, 2021; Murimi & Thieme, 2025; Ogunyankin, 2019). Third, historical depth is crucial for understanding that African cities have long traditions of urban thinking that continue to shape contemporary experiences (Myers, 2016). *"Tòxò hùn nùkún"* also shows the analytical value of taking indigenous concepts seriously as theory, not just data. Rather than simply describing what residents say, this approach uses local concepts as frameworks for understanding urban processes. This suggests that urban studies could be enriched by engaging more systematically with indigenous knowledge systems globally, especially in underrepresented geographies.

Broader Implications for African Urban Studies

This research contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize African urban studies by centering indigenous epistemologies aware of the complexities of such endeavours (Táíwò, 2022) that cannot be addressed here for a lack of space. The concept of "tòxò hùn nùkún" provides a concrete example of how local knowledge systems can offer analytical tools that exceed Western theoretical frameworks. It also demonstrates that African cities have always been sites of sophisticated urban thinking, not just recipients of external urban models. More broadly, this approach suggests that African urban studies should focus more on understanding how African societies themselves conceptualize and analyze urban change, rather than imposing external frameworks, while remaining in conversation with other geographies. This does not mean reject-

ing global urban theory but engaging in more equal dialogue between local and global knowledge systems. The research shows that residents of places like Calavi are not passive recipients of urban change but rather sophisticated analysts who have developed complex frameworks for understanding urban transformation. Urban studies have much to learn from engaging seriously with these local analytical traditions.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that indigenous linguistic frameworks can help us understand African urbanization in ways that conventional approaches cannot. By placing "tòxò hùn nùkún" at the centre of the analysis, and by listening in Mahi and Fon to women traders and other residents on Rue de l'Espoir in Abomey-Calavi, we see that urban change is not simply about new infrastructure appearing on the ground. It is about how people live through, make sense of and respond to complex transformations. It is how residents describe the arrival of new infrastructures, services, and administrative attention, together with new risks and tensions that come with them. It re-centres local expertise. The concept emerges from the daily experiences of those who work and live on the Street. The meanings of "tòxò" have evolved, but the city's urban character has a longer trajectory. Recognizing this longer history helps us avoid the idea that African cities are late or incomplete versions of somewhere else. This article is by no means a comprehensive account of Calavi. It focuses on *Rue de l'Espoir* and on selected residents, with a strong emphasis on some. Not all neighbourhoods or social groups are represented equally and as I have mentioned, translation choices always involve some loss. It would be beneficial to explore similar concepts in other languages in Benin, or similar settings. Besides, having a deeper account of familial history could reveal more insight about the occupation of Calavi throughout its urban history.

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Author contributions E.A. is the sole author of this work.

Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethical considerations The study adhered to ethical principles to protect the rights and well-being of participants. Approval was obtained from the Ethics Board of the University hosting the PhD, and information about the study was transmitted to the required authorities in the Republic of Benin.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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