

## Entre la France et l’Afrique

### Between France and Africa

by Lauriane David

**Generous, welcoming and energetic, Clotilde, Thérèse and Laurence are all deeply involved in the Communauté chrétienne des Africains [Christian Community of Africans]. This is their account of their journey and commitment to others, in Africa and France.**

*“Whenever anyone talks about Africa, all you hear about is the poverty. No one ever mentions the African women who are thoroughly integrated in France and do so many things”* protests Thérèse. *“The African woman has a lot to prove. So watch out!”*

It’s Thursday afternoon at the Christian Community of Africans (CCDA), hidden away in a courtyard behind an immigrant hostel in Paris’ 19<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. There are two of them sitting at a table in the kitchen. Clotilde and Thérèse have given their association an English name: “African Ladies Creativity”. Its aim is to highlight women’s manual dexterity. *“Many of them are illiterate. And nowadays you need a diploma just to be a cleaner, so they just stay at home waiting for their husbands. But within the group, we’ve unearthed some fantastic skills.”* Today it’s the millinery and knitting workshop. On the table is a large bowl full of multi-colored balls of wool.



The two women have known each other for many years. Both from Cameroon, they were born in the same village. *“We’re almost part of the same family”* enthuses Clotilde, who met Thérèse at the airport when she first arrived in France thirty years ago. Both of them do a vast amount for their home country. *“We give up our time. We don’t have money, we don’t have gold but at least we have plenty of love to pass on”*, explains Thérèse, who is an active member of associations combating HIV in Africa. In the framework of the workshop, she has written a short story entitled *For the love of my daughter*. *“In Africa, each of us has at least one family member affected by Aids but the sick are just rejected.”*

For each of the causes she holds dear, Clotilde creates an association which enables her to collect donations and equipment in France. “Ici autrement” sponsors Cameroonian children through school, “Case maman” provides medical care for the sick in Africa... This energetic woman helps Africa as much as any one person can – but that’s not all. When she arrived in France in 1963, Clotilde threw herself wholeheartedly into supporting native Africans in Paris, mainly through the Rencontre internationale des femmes noires [International Gathering of Black Women] or RIFEN. Its aim: to help new arrivals adapt to the French way of life. Back in the 1990s the picture was already pretty dismal. *“We carried out a survey. Do you know how many Africans had been invited to dinner by an average French family? The result was almost unbelievable: 0.5%!”* Since then, the situation has deteriorated still further. *“We used to be made really welcome”* she sums up laconically. *“France colonized us with its schools and missionaries. It was in Africa that we became French. It was France that brought me here. So I just want to scream when they talk about integration.”*

This particular afternoon, a Muslim family has taken over the community’s kitchen to prepare a wedding feast. With its evangelical ceremonies and wakes with prayers for the deceased, where Muslims and Christians cross paths, the CCDA acts as a spiritual center but also a meeting place for the African community. *“We talk about everything. Our countries, our children, politics back home, politics here in France, the comments of the Interior Minister. We’re all French but from different backgrounds. We vote, we don’t all agree but we live together”* explains Thérèse. Open to all, the CCDA is a convivial venue where everyone can find support and advice. *“Although we’re a chaplaincy, we actually function like an association”* explains Father Yvon Crusson. Every month, nine representatives from the Ivory Coast, Congo Brazza, Togo, Benin, Burkina Faso, the DRC, Cameroon, Senegal and Cape Verde get together for a pastoral council. Two Sundays a month, the community holds a mass followed by a meal attended by around sixty guests.

At lunchtime on Sunday, in the CCDA’s little kitchen, Marie-Joseph, in traditional Burkinabe costume, is keeping an eagle eye on the tiep simmering in vast pans. *“Not many people have turned up today”* she comments, glancing over at the tables. Next to her, Mathieu is on edge, keeping a nervous eye on his cell phone. He’s receiving a lot of calls from the Ivory Coast. Around the table, the topic is launched. *“We should leave the soldiers to sort it out between them but we’re afraid they’ll attack the population.”* Céline suddenly breaks off the discussion when her phone rings. *“My sister lives in Deux Plateaux in Abidjan. She’s sleeping in the corridor with her children. At least that way she’s separated from the street by two rooms. That should protect them from stray bullets...”* In the main room, the atmosphere is less intense, more fun-loving. *“Your country’s just a country of bananas”*, jokes a Cameroonian to a Togolese.

*“When I tell my friends I live in the 16<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, they can’t believe their ears. But I actually live in an attic room”* laughs Angèle. This smiling young woman spends her days assisting an elderly person. *“In exchange her daughter has lent me a room on the top floor of the building. No elegant rugs and gilding for me!”* This Sunday she led mass with the Senegalese choir of Saints Peter and Paul. During the meal, the singers all find themselves at the same table, leaving the chat and music to Jacob and Francis. Today they are in praise of Africa. Several times during the meal, the guests all join in the Afro-flavored hymns. *“The choir is an extension of what I experienced and heard in Senegal as I*

*was growing up. There was never a mass without singing” explains Laurence, who is in charge of the community’s pastoral council.*

*This divorced hospital health officer had to fight hard to bring up her daughter on her own. “Now she’s twenty-four and she’s preparing a thesis in pharmacy,” she says, breaking into a smile. “I always used to say to her ‘When the French get 15/20, you need to get 18, because a jury is always going to take your roots into account!’” Yet Laurence admits she has never been a victim of racism herself. “I’m simply aware that it exists. With every Presidential election, I feel a pang knowing the issue of foreigners can tip the balance one way or the other. So I ask myself questions.”*

*A food processing engineer, Clotilde’s daughter has had to face the same difficulties. “She has always moved among French people but she was aware that people looked at her differently. One day, when she was an intern for Panzani in Nanterre, a manager who didn’t know her asked her to replenish the toilet paper in the restrooms. She was the only Black in the office and he just assumed she was the cleaner” recalls Clotilde. “Immigration is a resounding failure because there has been a superiority complex. It should be the person who is receiving, the one who believes he is superior, who makes the first move. It’s never the child who holds out his hand.”*

