

IMMIGRANT WORKERS HOSTELS: LIVING IN FRANCE WITHOUT BEING THERE

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A leftover from France's 1950s migration policy, immigrant workers hostels still continue to provide shelter for immigrants searching for a better life. Insalubrious and overcrowded, these ghetto-like hostels, such as the one in the rue de Lorraine, in Paris' 20th arrondissement, have created a parallel way of life, on the margins of society.

When he first stepped over the threshold of the Lorraine hostel, one year ago, Boubou Hammady was tempted to go straight back to Senegal: *"I wondered how I would ever be able to live here, in this tiny room, in such a filthy place. I could see people sleeping in the corridors... I was disgusted."* At dawn, he went to sleep on a mattress on the floor, in his father's little room, which his brother also shares. 10 m² for three people.

In the hostel's lobby, strewn with screwed-up papers and cigarette stubs, the residents come and go, chatting in Wolof or Bambara. Boubou is waiting for a hair cut. Every weekend, a former hostel resident comes to do their hair in a confined area behind the stairs. Boubou, in a tight-fitting T-shirt with a heavy cold chain round his neck, may have relinquished his comfort on coming to France, but not his appearance. Standing in line, he explains how he juggles between odd jobs, as his father did before him, and goes on to explain how hard life can be in the hostel: *"I'm ashamed of where I live. I don't invite any friends or girl-friends here, I don't want people just identifying me with this. It's not my home"*, he comments bitterly.

The hostel, a symbol of French immigration policy

Created in the Fifties to house Algerian workers – and later, in the Sixties and Seventies, immigrants from West Africa – the French immigrant workers hostels exist nowhere else in the world and even today continue to provide precarious housing for foreign workers. *"The system reveals a lot about the history of immigration in France"* explains Mahamet Timera, an anthropologist at EHESS [École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales]. *"These hostels are a way for the French State to say 'we want the manpower, not the men'. This isn't an immigration policy but a labor policy."*

For Boubou, who had no work and no official papers when he arrived, living in a hostel was the only option. Like him, many residents are the sons, brothers or cousins of another lodger. They all live in the same room, thereby slipping through the administrative net: *"The migration channels are family-based. The first person paves the way for the others"*, explains Mahamet Timera. A phenomenon that has led to overcrowding: although the Lorraine hostel officially caters for 186 residents – in terms of available beds – it actually houses *"at least twice as many"* explains the hostel's director, Boubou Diawara.

What started out as temporary accommodation has turned into a real home for many of these men. One of them is Wadiou Abdouha. This 40 year-old Malian arrived in France at 17. *"I know France better than Mali"* he reflects sadly. *"I certainly hadn't planned on spending the rest of my life in a hostel. But time goes by without you being aware of it..."*, he explains, perched on the edge of the bed.

The French authorities have failed to take this trend into account, allowing the hostels to fall into decay, which renders them totally inadequate as a long-term solution. The migrants have therefore

attempted to reproduce their own way of life here. And when one observes their daily lives, it does seem as though they have never really arrived in France: *“These hostels often reflect a postcolonial vision of Africa. The French State says ‘they’re used to living together, so why not put them together here?’”*, explains Alain Lounnas, regional coordinator at the social, medical and integration center AFTAM. This not-for-profit organization was founded in 1962 and runs 23 hostels in Paris, including the one in the rue de Lorraine.

“The hostel has become a kind of community headquarters”

Alassane Dieng is 63 but looks ten years younger. This Senegalese cook arrived in France in 1974 and has been living in the hostel since 1979. Although he won’t allow himself to complain, avoiding any mention of the constant elevator breakdowns and the daily overflow from the pipes, the existence led by these recluses and outcasts does come in for criticism: *“We Africans are always bundled together. Why didn’t they build more spacious social housing rather than these hostels? No, they just put us here, on the sidelines. If they want us to learn the laws of France and respect the country, they need to mix people together... Can you see a white man here? No. It’s just not right”*, he exclaims angrily.

In the Lorraine hostel, a faded gray building built in 1979, all the residents originate from Sub-Saharan Africa: Mali, Senegal and Mauritania (67 000 Senegalese and 54 000 Malians were living legally in France in 2005, according to the latest statistics from the national institute INSEE). This failure to provide a mix places the Lorraine hostel in AFTAM’s “community” hostel category. Most of the men here are Soninke, an ethnic group from the valley of the Senegal River, on the borders of Mali, Senegal and Mauritania. When they moved into the French hostels, they began organizing themselves into villages, choosing their chiefs from among the older residents: *“That’s how the hostel became a kind of headquarters for the village community, with monthly meetings”*, explains Mahamet Timera.

In the 1970s, the migrants introduced a fund-raising system within the hostels, pooling their resources in order to build schools and dispensaries back home: *“When I left my village in Senegal we were still drinking polluted water from the river but now, thanks to the money we’ve collected, they have installed a pumping system and our children have access to drinking water”*, declares Alassane with pride.

On the ground-floor, a waft of spices comes from the kitchen. Built only recently, it provides mafes and other typical West African dishes for a few Euros. Everything here is prepared in the halal tradition, the vast majority of residents being Muslim. A mosque has even been set up on the premises. On every floor, a series of doors painted a dull and depressing red lead off from the long corridors with their faded yellow walls. They come in threes, with a common area containing a single run-down bathroom for six people and a basic kitchen, containing a sink and two electric hobs in a state of disrepair.

Every week there is a “soup day”, a communal meal organized by the villages. The residents pay for it, with the wage-earners subsidizing those without work. All together, in a party atmosphere, they eat with their hands, standing up, in the corridors or the rooms, all sharing the same dish: *“I don’t join in”*, explains Boubou. *“It doesn’t interest me to live like in Africa. At weekends I’d rather see my friends and go clubbing than stay here.”*

And this weekend – like every other – the hostel is full to bursting. It’s here that the African community gets together, in a venue which is familiar and reassuring to many. They come with their families, to visit an uncle or a brother, to keep in touch with their homeland and catch up on the latest news from their village. They even celebrate weddings, births and deaths here.

A refurbishment program to break with communitarianism

In this life of exile, solidarity is crucial. Boubou Camara, an elegant and attractive 37 year-old Mauritanian, lived in the hostel for seven years. When his wife and three children arrived, however, he had to move into a cheap hotel. But the nostalgia never leaves him for a second: *"I can't forget this place. My friends are here, we have a laugh together, we go to the café next door for a chat... so I'm often round here even now"*, he says, suddenly interrupted by a friend who comes up to tweak his beard. They laugh. *"I lost my job ten months ago so I'm pretty depressed. My friends in the hostel pay for my meal and give me ten Euros so that I can buy some food..."* For him, the hostel has become a second home; it's also had a beneficial effect on his rather volatile personality: *"because in the hostel you have to keep a hold on yourself and respect others."*

But in the hostel one also has to change because there's no alternative. *"As immigrants, we have to accept whatever we can find. So yes, I've changed because I've accepted to live with people I would never mix with if I didn't have to. But we don't have a choice"*, explains Wadiou. The noise at night when one needs to sleep, the rows, the rats, the roaches, the insalubrity, it's a lot for the residents to cope with. *"If a young guy told me he wanted to come here, I would warn him first: this isn't heaven, it's hell. It's no use pretending, we're worse off here than back home"*, reckons Wadiou.

To improve living conditions, AFTAM has finally launched a major refurbishment program which will turn the hostels into "social accommodation". The Lorraine hostel will be rebuilt in 2014, and will feature a bedroom, small kitchen and private bathroom per person. Officially, the aim is to put an end to the residents' isolation. But the bottom line is that AFTAM wants to gain greater control over its housing and break up the pattern of community living that so many residents hold dear.

For the social exclusion suffered by the residents of the hostel – who also exclude themselves – prevents them from envisaging any kind of future in France, like Alassane: *"I want to return to my village. I've got crops of corn and millet there, I'd like to go back to my real job as a farmer"*, he says with a smile. But for Boubou, home seems a long way away. He would be happy to go back to Senegal... but only for a holiday. *"I'm not like those old guys who only have one dream, going back home. I'm planning to put in an application for social housing and see myself building a life here, starting a family. With a French girl, perhaps?"*, he adds mischievously.