

Smartphone doctors in the back streets of Quartier Koulouba in Ouagadougou/Burkina Faso

De nos jours, la simple évocation du nom de Koulouba fait penser systématiquement aux édifices impressionnants abritant la présidence du Faso, l'hôtel indépendance, certaines banques et chancelleries étrangères par exemple. C'est une image simplifiée d'une réalité bien plus complexe au double plan humain et morphologique.¹

[Nowadays, the simple mention of the name *Koulouba* makes one think systematically of the imposing buildings housing the presidency of Burkina Faso, the hotel Indépendance, some banks and foreign consulates, for example. This is an oversimplified image of a far more complex reality at both human and physical levels.]

Koulouba is an important commercial and administrative district in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. It hosts both the influential traditional chieftaincy of the Mossi and the presidential palace. On my first trip to this neighboring country with which Mali has languages and cultures in common, I arrived with fuzzy images, like the one left by a colleague who told me that Ouaga is Bamako without the Niger. The quip was somewhat short, to be sure. Ouaga is not just the absence of a majestic river; it is perhaps even more the presence of a significant body of water and a sizable forest in the heart of the city. The 100-acre woodland is protected and is home to an amazing variety of wildlife. The artificial lake would be more impressive during the rainy season, but even after receding, it reflects an act of defiance in the face of fierce elements; sticky red, exhausting heat, and looming drought.

Mamadou Lamine Sanogo, the linguist whose institute published this monograph on the heart of Burkina's capital 17 years ago, took me around the district. He was particularly enthusiastic about the will to protect the "lungs of the capital city" against voracious speculators, wheelers and dealers who, more than once, managed to sell the same piece of land to multiple buyers. He was particularly harsh on the previous regime that ruled the country for 27 years before being thrown out amidst a violent popular uprising in late October 2014. The scars of the dramatic events were still present, notably the National Assembly and neighboring Hôtel Azalaï burned down by the angry crowd. The representatives were meeting at the hotel to vote the law supposed to pave the way to a third term for the former president Blaise Compaoré. In the course of 24 hours, he would be forced to resign and later fly into exile in Côte d'Ivoire. My colleague's musings about the ruins of these prestigious buildings reflected his ambivalence toward the turn of events. The parliament belonged to the whole nation and symbolized all the efforts and sacrifices made to attain a minimal level of democratic expression, and it was terrible to see it still in rubble. The hotel is part of a small Malian chain, which has succeeded in running prestigious hotels in several West Africa capitals.

We drove past the official buildings toward the commercial heart of the district. It contained different concentrations of consumer goods. I was driven to one area with a vast array of shops and stalls displaying all types of electronic goods. As soon as I stepped out, I came face to face with street vendors who offered all kinds of smartphones and accessories. They stood afoot facing the road. Each stall was decked with rows of telephones. The vendors proposed the devices to passers-by and invariably promised to make a good price. I had an exchange with three standing shoulder to shoulder, with practically the same offers. I wondered why so many people could be selling the same wares, but this wouldn't be the only place to inspire such bewilderment.

¹ Moustapha Gomgnimbou, Maxime Compaoré et Pierre Claver Hien. *Monographie de Koulouba: recherche sur l'origine et l'évolution de la chefferie*. Ouagadougou : CNRST-INSS/Éditions de l'Avenir, 1999.

At this point my colleague and I parted ways as he decided to revisit a shopping block where the previous day he discovered specialized coffee shop, more like a supermarket offering an amazing assortment of coffees and teas as well as of coffee machines to buy to rent. I crossed the road down to the area that the street vendors indicated as the repairers' domain. It turned out to be a familiar stretch of stores selling telephones and various electronic devices. At the end of the shopping street, I found several repair stands placed in front of shops. At the first one, a group of four young men were sitting around a table. Two were busy with a simple mobile phone that they had completely taken apart. I walked on to another stand where an older repairman sat at the end of a long table. The display was interesting because it was made of small piles of objects. In front of him, there was a small pile of devices and a box filled with parts. He had a handful of tools within reach: a screwdriver, tubes and blades. I introduced myself and told him that I was interested in his work and the whole business of repairing and reusing smartphones. He seemed both surprised and enthusiastic as he quickly invited to sit down.

A short moment after, a younger man dropped by with an orange tablet. He took a seat at the table and started opening it while engaging a conversation that went back and forth between French and Moore. Soon he pulled the back lid off and checked connecting points. He handed it to the older repairer who also touched on a few spots before handing back the device. Two very young men came with a smartphone they had opened somewhere else. Apparently they got stuck at some point and decided to bring it to the elder. He took it out of the plastic bag and scrutinized it for a while before talking back. For now, he seemed to have decided to wait on this task. The two young men too returned the way they came.

I sat on the bench nearer the man with the pad. I was amazed by the agility of his hands as he rummaged through the intricate wiring of the device. He fixed the elements while in steady conversation with the elder in cheerful complicity. They often laughed without taking their gaze off the objects they were working on. The man put the tablet back together and turned it on. The screen lit up but only in parts. There remained a lot of dark spots. Still I could see from the animations popping up, sometimes in fragments, that it was a game for children. The elder asked to look at the screen and commented the issue. The other man walked over to him and the two sifted through the box of parts. The elder handed one piece to the other who returned to his post. He reopened the pad that had only been loosely stuck together. The repair work resumed, focusing on particular parts that were tested and corrected. A half hour later the screen displayed the full image of figures moving and talking all over.

At this point, the elder repairman set aside the device he had been working on, pried open the telephone left by the two young men and started picking at the innards. He then dipped his hand into the box of small disparate parts. The sun was setting by then, so I asked him if I could take a few pictures of the stand. He looked vaguely and, without looking at me, muttered, "Wait a moment." To be sure, I had been waiting all that time. I could wait; that wasn't the problem. It was rather that I noticed a change in his demeanor, as he pushed the stack of broken devices toward slightly aside, as if he was instinctively guarding a precious object against pilfering. It was a puzzling gesture from a person who opened up so readily at the beginning.

My colleague called to tell me that he had finished his shopping tour and was returning to the car. He could walk toward the repairers' place, or I could join him at the side of the road. I told him I would join him but continued to observe the workers at the open-air repair station. I

asked the elder repairman if I could take a couple of pictures, but he just looked on and kept working, at times looking up and smiling at me. I decided that it was not worth forcing his hand. There was a certain mystery in his noncommittal manner. He neither refused nor accepted my request. But I didn't see him either finishing any job. He was a sort of the fixture in the loose team of people coming, leaving and returning to drop devices or pick them up. He cast a warm look on people who came from different corners, including from the electronics shop just in front. He handled different devices handed to him for an opinion or a little help. His younger colleagues disappeared altogether at times. The model of organization intrigued me in the way it had the dynamics of a "colab" in which people hang around to experiment their individual ideas in regular exchange with others. At this particular workstation, he seemed to be the glue that brought and held very mobile people and objects together.

When I took my leave, he just said goodbye to me. Matter of fact... It was getting dusky, so I would look for another place before leaving Ouaga. I didn't have a single picture or even any complete statement from the apparent head repairman, but I left with some of the most vivid mental images of a workplace that was always in motion, stop and go, where except for the child game pad, no job seemed to have been done all the way through. Some devices arrived after being opened and dissected elsewhere, others were being reassembled from bits and pieces picked from a common recycling basket.