

Premio Internazionale Carlo Scarpa per il Giardino

22nd edition, 2011

Taneka Beri

Wadi en-Natrun, Egypt

Carlo Scarpa Prize
2011
Jury report

The jury of the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens has decided unanimously to dedicate the 2011 cultural campaign, the twenty-second since the Prize was instituted, to a village in the region of Atakora in Benin. The name it is known by oscillates between the historical *Seseirhà*, “superimposed houses”, and the more recent *Taneka Beri*, “great Taneka”.

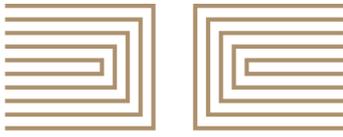
It consists of a thousand or so small constructions, used as rooms, barns, and for other purposes; most have a circular plan and a conical roof, with a diameter varying between one and three metres; they stand in small groups of ten or twelve around a multi-functional open space. Each of these groups comprises a residential unit in which lives an extended family belonging to the *Tangba* people, “great warriors”, who are also known as the *Taneka* people, “those of stones”.

The residential units in turn are variously grouped to form the four recognisable parts into which the village is divided. In colonial times they were called quarters, but they are in fact separate settlements (*perhó*) each with its own name, *Satyekà*, *Tyaklerò*, *Galorhà*, *Pendolou*; they are significantly independent of each other, to the extent that they are governed by different political authorities (*sawa*) and observe distinct rituals involving sages, hierophants and specialists. And it is the sacred places, the altars, burial grounds and spaces for ritual dances, together with the omnipresent stones and the huge trees, that mark out the land occupied by the village.

Of the approximately thirty thousand individuals that are estimated to make up the *Tangba* (*Taneka*) people, the community that lives permanently at *Taneka Beri* accounts for no more than three hundred, but the official statistics show a population of over ninety thousand; this is because all those who work and are domiciled elsewhere, in cities or the countryside, state that they are resident in the village and in fact return there for all the important collective ceremonies and other occasions. This sense of belonging is the result of a long process which has seen the creation, by pacific means, of a multi-ethnic and pluri-lingual community with a complex organization of interpersonal and intergenerational relationships based on a profound and spontaneous connection with their history and the land they occupy.

The four units that make up the village are arranged from south to north in sequence along a slightly curved line which is about eight hundred metres long and an average of about two hundred metres wide; but the area considered to be “within” the village is much bigger and has since the XVII-XVIII centuries been bounded by a small wall built to defend it from slave-raiders marauding from the south. The village is part of a cluster of settlements that were intended originally to provide refuge; they lie at a level of approximately six hundred metres a.s.l., in a range of hills that stand out from the surrounding territory. Access from the east is via a gentle, four-kilometre-long rise starting from the municipal centre of *Copargo*, which is about five hundred metres a.s.l.; punctuating the western approach, from *Taneka Koko* (*Dur*), is the steep, north-east/south-west side of one of the southern outcrops of the Atakora massif, a mountain system about five hundred kilometres to the north of the coast of the Gulf of Guinea. Watercourses flow from the Atakora massif north-east towards the River Niger, west towards the Volta basin and southwards into the River Ouémé, which rises between *Copargo* and *Taneka Beri* and whose basin comprises much of what is now the territory of the Republic of Benin, ex Dahomey.

Towards the end of 2010, the Italian anthropologist Marco Aime, who has worked in this field for over fifteen years, led an experimental visit of a group of European landscape experts intent on getting to know the shape of the place and its life, the community responsible for it and its



cultural and material heritage. The underlying idea of the initiative is to bring a different point of view to the scientific dialogue and to contribute to the general reflection on the irreducible nature of the differences with respect to a *mundus alter*. The issues in question include the sense of time and space, the concept of nature and the figures of myth and the sacred, the custodianship of memory, the transmission of knowledge, of arts and crafts, the stewardship of common property and care of the house.

The tools the working group inevitably and consciously used in its efforts to gather evidence and uncover clues were those through which we filter our knowledge and perceptions of our own world but its work is underpinned by a commitment to take full account of the questions that such a distant microcosm continues to pose to our culture and our mentality.

The audiovisual documentation, notes and surveys which the working group assembled *in situ* with the open-handed and -hearted help of the resident community, the schools and the local authorities served to enrich the reflections developed on various previous occasions around the theme of the "village" as a necessary microcosm, as an indispensable measurement of space and time, as a universal figure capable of assuming infinite variations, of giving rise to surprising connections between the archaic and the hyper-modern and of bringing into focus fundamental questions about the relationships between person and place and between place and community.

Bibliographic, cartographic and audiovisual research conducted before and after the study trip revealed the vast amount and depth of the work already done in this field, but also its manifestly sectorial character. Hence the group's conviction of the usefulness of dialogue and its wish to bring the viewpoints of different disciplines to the debate, from geography to landscape and from architecture to artistic drawing and craft-based design.

On the basis of its findings, the jury decided unanimously to focus attention on a subject that might seem impossibly remote but which is in fact a crucial and highly topical issue that is vulnerable to the various traps into which western European culture has fallen over the last century.

It ought not to be difficult, in 2011, to avoid the artistic infatuation and the salvific messianism that permeated the world of art in Europe and elsewhere a century ago. We also imagine ourselves to be immune from the missionary propensity that made it quite possible to ask, even at the end of the 1920s, whether «the education and transformation of an inferior race by a civilized people» was best achieved «by assimilation or by adaptation».

It is less simple to avoid replacing a society with one that we believe or would like it to be, as happened, for example, with the *Dogon* people, with the inevitable tourist-orientated aberration that this gives rise to. Still less easy is it to express spontaneous Third-Worldist thrust in a tone that is not patronizing, or worse still sanctimonious. It truly is difficult, in our day, to avoid the apocalyptic trap, so seductive and currently pervasive, apparently inexorable, intellectualistic and paralyzing, according to which the last of what we call primitive cultures will shortly (if it has not already happened) disappear from the face of the earth. In fact, the unification of all the ideas of community, of all the forms and lives of places seems to be growing less and less feasible by the day.

In its campaign for 2011, the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens offers an opportunity to reflect on *Taneka Beri* having taken a timely dose of the powerful vaccine discovered by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the mid-xx century. For us his 1952 work *Race et Histoire* remains the *essai par excellence* of anti-racism: no longer are there superior or inferior beings; no longer earlier or later historical periods. Only the irreducible essence of differences. Thus, even the trap of assuming that identity equates with local interest, which tends to confine every society to what distinguishes from others, is nullified.

We believe that every microcosm consists of an infinitely small part of an infinitely great universe; that every society, however miniscule, is an expression of a "concrete universal" and that *Taneka Beri* and its community stands before us as one of the infinite ways in which this "concrete universal" presents itself. This place is a living and radically different form, and as such it rebounds on our culture and helps us to understand ourselves better and to try and reassemble many different fragments into an organic vision of the human world.

In this spirit and for these reasons, the jury of the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens awards the seal of recognition and commitment to the *Municipality of Copargo*, representing the community of which *Taneka Beri* forms part.