

Guinea Settlement

Before its historical shaping, Guinea was inhabited by the Bimbaches (first inhabitants of El Hierro), who were there until the Conquest. The Bimbaches lived with their animals and their belongings in volcanic tubes called "juaclos". Which were located under the settlement. One evidence of their existence is the great quantity of archaeological material that was recollected in this area. You will be able to verify it yourself by seeing the quantity of shells that exists in the settlement surface. Due to the arrival of the colonizers, the houses are moved to the surface, and the "juaclos" are used as a warehouse or to keep their animals, because of its good temperature. These volcanic tubes share very considerable lengths, and because of that, they are separated into several parts by Stone walls, in order to be used by more than one family.

Guinea Settlement

It is one of the oldest settlements of El Hierro, with "Las Montañetas" and "La Albarrada" on the North of the island hinterlands, and it was firstly inhabited in the XVII century.

"Guinea" did not have fix population, the inhabitants who lived in the villages on the north of the island.

"Guarazoca", "Erese" and "El Mocanal", moved two times a year, in winter to feed the animals with pasture, and in summer because of the vintage. The locals used the "Camino Real de la Virgen" (Virgin Royal Track) which arrived to the settlement, nowadays it only reaches Las Puntas area.

Despite of being peasants, the settlement was inhabited by people with different economic possibilities. Due to this, there existed differences among housing qualities.

In the middle of last century, because of the socio-economic situation in the island, such as the draught in 1948, the great locals emigration to South America, the postwar period, among others, caused the settlement gradual abandoning.

The fix population from "El Valle de Frontera" (Valley of Frontera), who came mainly from La Palma, was established since the 70's decade in the XX century.

Name Origin

The origin of the settlement's name is unknown, but there are two hypothesis. From the one hand, the first hypothesis is related to the African Slaves trade who came from Guinea.

On the other hand, the second hypothesis is related to the "guinea" English coin, which was introduced by the Wine English Merchants. Neither of both has been proved, yet.

Economy

"Guinea" inhabitants, such as the rest from El Hierro, lived in precarious socio-economic conditions. The economy was sustained by the agrarian sector, base on livestock and polyculture. It resulted in a subsistence economy, which was scarcely complemented with specific commercial interchanges and sharecropping ("medianería"), as a common system. This practice involved the working of a piece of land and the flocks care by a tenant, in exchange for a portion, usually half, of the crops or the revenue that they bring in for the landowner. In return for the work on the land, sometimes, the landowners supply the tenants and their families with living accommodations, seeds and fertilized, tools, and food that can be bought in a commissary, charging fairly high interest rates to the tenants. Sharecropping system involved the structuring of El Hierro society into two classes between the sharecroppers and the landowners, which meant: classism, economic dependence, caciquism and also political clientelism.

This system was kept in the island until the economic and social boom, which El Hierro undergone in the middle of the 70's in the XX century, although the emigration to Venezuela had been also considered a great blow to the island.

"Guinea", as a nomadic settlement, is a clear example of the locals subsistence strategies, who had to moved horizontally and vertically across the island in order to take advantage of the natural and agricultural resources that offered the soils of El Hierro. Looking beyond the simple architectonic techniques or materials used in Guinea is to see El Hierro since few decades ago. It was an island where the hardships led them to a famine period, or at least, to a subsistence period. The use of poor materials, which were abundant in the natural environment, and the use of all materials, that the "herreños" (locals) were able to obtain, supposed the most primitive example of the sustainable development. Domestic furnishings, the individual one, and the working implements are full of details and instances: sugar sacks, which cloth became clothes, oil or sardine tins were changed by the tinsmith into children toys, or domestic tools. These are some of the instances that Guinea shows.

Architecture

"Guinea" is the best example of El Hierro traditional architecture, where simple materials and common techniques prevailed, and it is a clear exponent of the natural resources maximization. The village is, as a whole, formed by several domestic places: the house, the yard, the tank ("aljibe"), the vegetable garden, and the farmyard to keep the animals.

The traditional house of El Hierro was built with simple materials got from the natural environment. The "Fuga de la Gorreta" quarry, placed in Guinea boundaries, is a clear example.

Simplicity is also evident in the house floors, rectangular or in "L" structure, looking for the sunshine. Dry-stone walls. Without mortar, and of scarce altitude and great thickness, provide more stability and insulate them from the climate effects (winter cold and summer heat). House roofs are an instance of El Hierro architecture evolution and a clear exponent of the island socio-economic progress.

The oldest vegetal roofs prevail in Guinea, specially the thatched ones (made of “colmo”, it is another instance of the use of natural resource); these grant their peculiar aspect and require technical solutions: side walls are lengthened until became them into gambles (“mojinetes”, it is a triangular finish form), in which the upper vertex will be support a central beam that, at the same time, will support the laterals ones. On this structure, the thatched roofs material will be spread and well fasten in order to avoid wind damage.

The flat roof is less common, it is mainly used in kitchen, and in the most modern and expensive houses. Its constructive typology is more sophisticated and requires a bigger economical and working investment. The building is made by placing transverse beams, that will be covered with torch (“tea”) or “Sabina” splinters (high quality and long lasting woods), on which a mass composed by whitewash and earth or volcanic gravel (“jable”) is spread. The house has not so many holes in its walls, scarcely in the entrance door, and some little windows, which, inside, are used as cupboards and domestic furniture.

The mortar mass (“enfoscado”) of the walls is usually irregular and scarce, because the whitewash, that is the used material, was so expensive, and due to that, they had to use mortar made by animals excrements mixed with vegetable materials.

Inside, the house used to be of scarce and austere decoration, furniture, and domestic furnishings. Scarcely, the minimum and necessary, there were domestic tools and implements together.

The tank (“aljibe”), which vas consider the solutions for water provisioning, is located next to the house, and it was an obsession for the locals, because sometimes it conditioned the house construction,, they used to build a circular tank, spread with whitewash and closed by a flat roof in which is used the arch system: stone arches fixed by its own weight.

The upper part of the roof is used a yard or place to desiccate the food, and also as water tank, where flows water gutters coming from several places of the house. The gutters carry the rain water into the tank, and the process is more visible in flat tile roofs. Usually we can find domestic furnishings in the walls or next to the tank, such a washing stone or drinking – trough for the animals.

The attached farmyards and henhouses were not of a high architectonic value, just the necessary thing to prevent animals from escaping, and to protect them from harshness of weather. The house was completed with vegetables gardens, where prevailed the polyculture: season vegetables, traditional medicine plants, fruits trees and spices among other.

