CHAPTER 12

Conclusion: African cities in the world of today and tomorrow

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In African cities, the music is relentless – AbdouMalik Simone, 2004

How do we imagine the past, present and future of Africa's cities? With what images of *the* African city might we choose to work? Is it Djenne, Mali, and its earth-walled grand mosque? Is it the postcoloniality of Bamako, contained in its avenues, post-independence buildings or fluid markets? Does the sweep of the waterfront of Luanda, and the murky, oily bargaining in its reemergent hotels capture the spirit of urban Africa? How does the focus change as the skyline of modern, central city Nairobi gives way to the garbage in its alleys or the decay in its buildings? Does the postmodernity of Johannesburg's suburban architecture reveal something exceptional, something repetitively global, or just possibly something of wider significance?

How do we think and read African cities? Are they mostly sites of chaos, or zones of sharp clashes between modernity and tradition? Are these the capitals of corrupt elites or the spaces of freedom and opportunity longed for across the continent? Do they offer promise of different futures or seem bound by colonial pasts and betrayed independence?

This book approached African cities through three perspectives: those of the national, the popular and the global. Here we reflect on and seek to refract through these themes, without claiming that we are at all close to exhausting the terrain.

The national

The nation came late to Africa, and usually in a form very different from the European. It was united, not by language, culture or religion, but by a common history of colonial occupation. Most, if by no means all, capitals and major cities were colonial creations, in many ways segregated from the rural African societies. Colonial cities were often referred to by the colonised as 'white villages.' However, in some other respects, many

African cities include an ancient, pre-colonial, pre-modern pattern of authority not found in cities of other continents, the authority of chiefs. Important, but very variable in resources and competence, as Philippe Ibaka Sangu shows us from Kinshasa.

The widespread colonial novelty of cities has stimulated a particularly strong African urban innovation of new capital city constructions. Gaborone in Botswana and Nouakchott in Mauritania had to be built because the new states had no urban colonial centre within its boundaries. Others have resulted from political choice, for various reasons and with diverse outcomes. Abuja has become the full political centre of Nigeria; Dodoma is rather a seasonal political capital of Tanzania. Yamassoukrou has survived the death of its patron and become a significant city of its own; but not the capital of Côte d'Ivoire, Abidjan. The new Ciudad de la Paz or Oyala in Equatorial Guinea is still under construction. Sometimes, existing smaller cities have been upgraded to capitals instead of the inherited colonial centre, like Lilongwe in Malawi and currently Gitega in Burundi. The contemporary construction of a new capital in Egypt, replacing ancient Cairo, might have drawn some inspiration from sub-Saharan Africa, but is actually more akin to Asian plans of de-congesting old capitals such as Tokyo and Seoul. With one difference: the military plan of a new capital for Egypt is unhampered by parliamentary politics and an independent judiciary, which in the end stopped or stymied (in Korea) the East Asian plans.

The ethnic diversity of African nations has not disappeared with urbanisation and modern class formation but remains a major force of structuring urban social and political relations, from dwelling concentrations and employment networks to electoral vote banks and occasional political violence. (See further the profound study of this by Noah Nathan 2019, centred on Accra.) As ex-colonial cities, African cities share the issues of decolonisation most immediately with Asian cities but also with the ex-settler states of Latin America, more than of North America and Australia where the native communities were almost exterminated, as well as of South Africa. Issues ranging from name-changing and commemorations to urban layout and planning. Above we have a previously little studied example of Yaoundé, presented by Jean-Pierre Togolo.

In Africa, as on other continents, the establishment of a nation-state could be a gradual, negotiated process or a rupture with the pre-national rule, more or less violent. Africa has had its experience of both, and urban monumentality remembering one or the other. Two nations and cities out of the former French empire express the alternatives with extraordinary clarity. The capital of the Republic of Congo is keeping its colonial name, Brazzaville, and the recent centenary of the arrival of the French-Italian officer Brazza and his expedition was commemorated in an imposing statue of him dressed rather like a pilgrim. In Algiers, by contrast, the statue of its colonial conqueror general Bugeaud has been taken down, and his square renamed after the leader of the anti-colonial resistance, Emir Abdel Kader, now tall on horseback with drawn sword.

The popular

There is a paradox of the popular impingement on African cities. On the one hand, it is obvious and overwhelming, as major parts of the cities are built and maintained by the people outside the establishment, the 'informal' settlements, housing the bulk of

the population in many African cities. A legacy of the colonial urban duality, between the centre of the colonisers and the settlements of the colonised, between '*la ville*' and '*la cité*' in the Francophone colonies, a duality lopsidedly expanded after independence with the same centres overtaken by the new nation-states and their meagre resources and, on the other hand, the popular settlements now hugely swollen by massive urban immigration. Occasionally, popular informality erupts in massive, spontaneous rioting, for example, 'IMF riots' against imposed 'structural adjustment' policies, or against sudden governmental price hikes, like petrol prices in Nigeria.

As already cited in the Introduction, Garth Myers (2011: 198) noted '[s]trangely, political science seems only an occasional presence in African urban studies, when it ought to be a central field in our analyses, because these are such fascinating years for urban politics in Africa'. The conference of which this book is largely a product reflected that situation and trod lightly over popular political and related organisation. With notable exceptions, even (trade, industrial) union organisation escapes much scrutiny in the city literatures, and popular organising, whilst an ever-present theme, plays second fiddle to issues of administration, governance, planning and institutional matters. One searches indices in general volumes for the most part in vain for references to popular struggle, community-based organising and union activity. Yet popular movements have a long and significant history across the continent's cities.

However, cases of popular power in the 'formal' city are rare or even absent. Formal city power itself tends to be weak – 'the absence of a strong local state with a clear and unchallenged mandate to manage the city' is one of 'the leitmotifs of African urbanism today' according to Pieterse and Parnell (2014: 10). Formal popular power tends to require autonomous and city-wide popular organisation which is difficult in African cities, with their ethnic diversity and, in some instances, chiefs, their mostly embryonic or fragile class formation, and their pervasive patterns of Big Men patronage and clientelism, although 'populist' electoral strategies are sometimes employed by successful politicians (Resnick 2014). In some cities with developed institutions of local urban administration there can emerge local formal urban resistance and contestation of national policies more distant from local popular experiences and concerns. Margot Rubin gives us insights into such processes in Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni. On occasion, organising is along divisive lines, by language group, or other forms of ethnicity. Popular action dissolves into attacks on members of out-groups. The September 2001 events in Zaria, Nigeria provide one of many unfortunate illustrations (cf. Adetula 2005: 228).

In between the informal 'slums' and the institutional city power, there are movements struggling for basic urban services, like water in Mathare, Nairobi as studied by Wangui Kimar, and in the informal settlements themselves a kind of popular urban government may develop, as may also be spotted in Nairobi. One popular sphere common to Africa's cities is that of waste. Pickers on dumps and trolley pushers symbolise the enormity of engagement in this sector: but it seldom appears to lead to substantial social organisation, though there are exceptions, such as that briefly portrayed by Grest et. al. (2013: 128) in the case of Associação de Água e Saneamento do Bairro Urbanização (ADASBU) in Maputo. But the emphasis in the literature remains one of governance, and relationships between largely individual even if substantial 'groups' of social actors and the state or government remain open

to exploration. The trope that dominates is that of 'informal economic activity' rather than popular organising for change.

As Ngondzashe Marongwe highlights in this volume, international urban popular movements too have their refractions in Africa, as in the case of the Occupy movements which began with targeting Wall Street in New York, mutating into Occupy African Unity Square in Harare.

The global

African cities have always been caught between the global and the local. In this way they are no different from the world's other cities. But the tension between the two seems especially acute in Africa. That tension expresses itself in a thousand ways, none more dramatic than the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of formal and informal ways of doing things.

How do Africa's cities fit in to the 'fragmented, hierarchical' features of Henri Lefebvre's 'geographies of globalisation'? or the 'satanic geographies of globalisation and uneven development in the 1990s'? (Brenner 1997)

African cities came late both to the first, national, and to the current, capitalist wave of globalisation. The continent was not part of the time when the globalisation of nationalism generated capital cities 'worthy of the nation' looking to Paris of the Second Empire. International Style Modernism was an inspiration to several figures of the first generation of African – as well as Asian – national leaders, like Nkrumah, for instance. But actual implementation was limited.

After the millennium shift, several African cities are now eager to enter the competitive field for global imagery and foreign attraction to real estate opportunities, business locations, and upscale conventions and tourism. Dubai appears to be the most popular model, although Singapore and Shanghai are also points of reference.

Skyscrapers are important indicators of this ambition, once a symbol of the rise to supremacy of US capitalism, after 2000, a world race, first of all between China, with East Asia, and the Arab Gulf states leading the trend. Africa is about to enter the fray. Kenya is leading for the time being. Carlton Centre in Johannesburg is, at 201 metres, still the tallest building in Africa, built in 1973; but the Kenyans show more drive to the top. Kenya's tallest completed building is the Britam Tower in Nairobi at 200 metres, but by 2020 the Pinnacle Tower is to be completed at 320m, and the 370m Palm Exotica in the beach resort of Watamu. Cairo is building an Iconic Tower slated to be 385m. In Nigeria, the political capital Abuja is vigorously competing for the skies with the economic centre, Lagos. Dar es Salaam and Luanda have recently started to build vertically, though still on a globally modest scale, with the Tanzania Ports Authority from 2016 at 157m and Luanda with its 2018 IMOB tower at 145m (www.skyscrapercenter.com). Like in the rest of the world, these developments seem driven primarily by local and national global aspirations, rather than by foreign investors.

A world-class city image usually has to include other elements than skyscrapers. In Addis Ababa searching for an imagery was, as Meseret Kassahun's careful study shows, a major reason for the adoption of an expensive light rail transit system in Addis, stopping the already started much cheaper Brazilian-type bus rapid transit. It may be added, though, that the second reason invoked, that the bus system would not

be able to cope with the city's population growth and relocations, was probably correct. The most famous such system, that of Bogotá in Colombia, was soon overtaken by surging transport needs.

Waterfront developments are frequent features of recent urban upgrading ambitions, whether the water is a river, a lake or an ocean. In Luanda, it is of course the ocean at the Bay of Luanda, with its renamed Avenue of February 4 (in 1961, the start of the war of independence), across the ocean from the Avenida Atlântida of Rio's Copacabana. In her study of Luanda, Sylvia Croese also takes note of another aspect of current urban globalisation, the invention of traditions and the use of historical pastiche. The latter is here deployed in a strikingly post-national, globalist way: the new 2015 National Assembly building is modelled after a landmark of colonial Luanda, the (Portuguese) National Bank of Angola.

This century has started well in Africa and there is immense urban construction and renovation going on all over the continent, even in a failed state such as Kinshasa, Congo. However, African cities still have handicaps to overcome, stemming from their uncompleted tasks of nation-state consolidation and of popular upliftment in terms of rights, resources, and cohesive trust. Attempting to build a 'smart city' out of a city where half the population has no direct access to electricity is not very promising, or it may mean building a still more divided city of exclusions, as the chapter on Lagos points out. 'Gated communities' are another prominent feature of global cities, which entered postcolonial Africa in the late 1980s (Morange et al. 2012). The economically most developed African country, South Africa, already harbours some of the world's most unequal cities, an urban inequality on par with that of the planet as a whole (UN-Habitat 2008: 72; Milanovic 2005: 142).

However, as Agunbiade, Olaide, and Bishi also stress, the resurrection of Lagos in this century, out of chaos and decay, is an impressive example of creative urban leadership and innovative energy. The city's fascination with the Dutch star architect Rem Koolhaas, who studied it in the transition period of 1998–2001 is understandable, without sharing his peculiar perspective of hype and dystopia (Koolhaas et al. 2001: 652f).

There is, in addition, a scholarly and research connection with the global across Africa's cities. 'The conditions under which urban knowledges are produced are changing' (May & Perry 2005: 347). What do readings of African cities offer to understandings of African society, to reimagining Africa? What do they offer to thinking about and indeed, living in, cities across the world?

African cities form a marginal category in the global urban literatures, which mirrors the minor attention which African society at large receives in much 'global' literature – that is, western-sourced scholarship on the concerns of the contemporary world (Ferguson 2006: 25–27). Aidan Southall, despite his own history as African anthropologist, devotes no more than four pages to Africa in his global urban history *The City in Time and Space*. Peter Hall, celebrating *Cities in Civilisation*, implied that African cities are not very civilised. Every reader of this book will be aware of growing debates on this matter. But perhaps 90% of African urban publication (at least in English or French) is still north American and western European.

Of course, the book is based on a shared notion of the connectedness of African city life with points and patterns in and through other continents: something perhaps becoming more likely inversed to infuse writing the city in the northern hemisphere.

The major advances (with limitations) thus far have been made in a few historical studies, and in postcolonial literatures which form part of broader culturalist work. An indication of the possibilities can be found in a couple of pages provocatively titled '*Cosmopolis: de la ville, de l'Afrique et du monde*'²⁶ (Malaquais & Marchal 2005). The postcoloniality of cities including London, Paris and Rome as well as those of Asia and Africa and (sometimes) Latin America seems more widely imbibed, though not endemic, in northern and western spaces of urban scholarship. At least there is now an elaborate foundation for thinking cities across the world simultaneously, as Anthony King, followed by more recent authors such as Jenny Robinson, have prominently demonstrated. In other words, African cities are becoming part of the global cannon of research and scholarship rather than being a curious and neglected backwater.

To close

African urbanisms are longstanding (Freund 2007; Coquery-Vidrovitch 1993, 2006). African cities were key points of interaction in their own regions and way beyond the continent for centuries. But once subjected to colonialism they became secondary to European and to other cities in their networks, Asian in some cases, and American later, perhaps Chinese in particular today. African cities also transmitted forms and images, materials and people, to cities of every other continent, over very long historical time. African cities also fostered resistance to colonial rule which ultimately broke them free – only to be submerged in new nation-states with generally nationalistic developmentalisms, over time once again subjected to western-centred linear development thinking which has only recently begun to vacillate. The cities nevertheless have continued and survived. They have faced, and still face, dangers of being swamped by 'imagineered' nationalism (within ex-colonial boundaries and frequently parasitic elites) and/or failed developmentalism (punted more or less vigorously since late colonial times with minimal understanding of city possibilities).

There is, though, a deepening sense, in Africa's cities as well as in the literatures concerned with them, that the cities will be more and more the place where Africa's futures are decided (Freund 2007: 196) – partly because urbanisation is much more than a century long process and it still has a long way to go with no certain result.

Africa is making its own, specific urban experiences and practices, and that is exemplified across all of the chapters in this volume. But it makes sense seeing them as refractions of tendencies and challenges common to urban modernity worldwide. The continent has just entered into the beginning of a large-scale urban transformation, promising a fascinating field of observation and learning to urbanists of the world for decades to come. The urban arm of the UN, UN-Habitat, was prescient in locating itself in Nairobi.

One of the exciting prospects of Africa is that it remains the least urban continent – thus Africa is the key continent of urban growth to come – along with parts of south Asia. Urban growth and change are being globally, as well as locally, shaped and there may be rising popular movements also reshaping trajectories. The urban obsessed politicians have not yet emerged, but their constituency may be forming – and it may

²⁶ '*Cosmopolis: On the city, on Africa, on the world*'

not merely be a poor one. The rising cosmopolitanism of African cities; with their own knowledges and creativities which Africa did not have to wait to be given and will not wait to be given from beyond; the fluidities of African cities – which may in some respects prefigure an urban future of the world (Coquery-Vidrovitch 2006: 1118).

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