Secondary Cities – The Urban Middle Ground

Carole Ammann
Aïdas Sanogo

An Introduction

Do African cities such as Sikasso, Sfax, Gulu, Port-Gentil and Gweru ring a bell? Do not worry; you are probably not alone in that respect. Four out of the five cities mentioned above are the second most populated cities in their respective countries. They all have played a crucial role in the history and have central economic and political functions in their countries and regions. Sfax, Tunisia, and Port-Gentil, Gabon, for instance, are considered as the backbones of their countries' economy. Sfax and Port-Gentil owe their economic power to the various industries and seaports that they host. Gweru, a city located halfway between Harare and Bulawayo, the first and the second most populated cities of Zimbabwe, plays a large role in the country's internal population movements (Grant 1995). Despite their significance on the national and regional level, these cities do not typically resonate and invoke distinct images as Cairo, Johannesburg, Lagos, Kinshasa and Addis Ababa do.

When in early 2016, we, Aïdas Sanogo and Carole Ammann, scanned the literature on African cities, we noticed the lack of research on our own researched sites, Bouaké in Côte d'Ivoire and Kankan in Guinea, and on secondary cities in general. This led us to set up a secondary cities' reading and discussion group at the Institute of Social Anthropology, Basel, in June 2016. After several meetings, we decided to further dwell into the subject and initiated two projects: Firstly, we planned to edit this special issue on secondary cities. The second project was to organise a workshop, during which junior and senior scholars gather and conceptually rethink secondary cities. We ultimately aim at creating and maintaining a dynamic network of scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds, who will continuously enhance the research on secondary cities, by focusing on their specific social, economic and political contexts.

Few authors have thoroughly conceptualised secondary cities – also referred to as mid-sized or intermediary cities (Haddis et al. 2014; Bolay 2016). Since the late 1930s, urban sociologists used three characteristics that defined the urban, namely population size, population density and heterogeneity (Wirth 1938). In such studies, cities are typically ranked in urban hierarchies – also based on other criteria such as their central functions or the presence of administrative services. Therefore, cities between 100 000 to 500 000 and even up to three million inhabitants are labelled as secondary cities. This illustrates that there is little consent where to draw lines on each end. Such a comparative dimension is also encapsulated in the designation 'secondary' and needs to be taken into account. One should then be careful as to which criteria are used to designate and what exactly gives secondary cities their character. The urban hierarchy logic underpinned in the adjective 'secondary' wrongly suggest that all the cities labelled as secondary bare the same attributes.

As Jennifer Robinson (2011) mentions, cities have prolific overlapping interconnections, but they remain distinctive in terms of outcomes. The diversity of features within and across cities then forces us not to limit ourselves in the structure of formal comparison tools, i.e. comparing cities of the same size or with the same political regime for instance (Robinson 2016). Beyond size and demography, the city's role and func-

tion within the wider cultural, economic, political and social landscapes are also highly relevant. When rejecting conceptualisations that focus solely on size, secondary cities are difficult to grasp. For this double issue of the Basel Paper on Political Transformations, the term 'secondary city' then refers to cities which might not be able to compete on the demographic, economic and infrastructural level with megacities within their national or regional territories. As the contributions will show, these ordinary urban centres nevertheless play a significant role within the network of cities in their countries and regions.

Most studies on urbanity in Africa focus on megacities whereas secondary cities, the unspectacular middle ground between metropolises and small towns, have largely been neglected (Bell and Jayne 2009; Hilgers 2012; Marais, Nel and Donaldson 2016). However, as the World City Report by the UN (2016) demonstrates, the number of secondary cities and the people living therein increase. Here in this double issue, we explore aspects of cities that are not considered as megacities in their respective countries: Kisumu in Kenya, Kankan in Guinea, and Korhogo and Bouaké in Côte d'Ivoire. The aim is to study secondary cities in their own right, that is, through various modes of interactions that take place among urban dwellers. Based on specific empirical data, we illustrate that everyday urban life in the four presented cities is as urban and probably even more ordinary than in larger urban centres because the former lack the national, regional or global ambitions metropolises usually embrace.

Secondary cities act as nodal points between the rural and the urban. They are often characterized by what they lack compared to megacities. Nevertheless, they are not mere copies of metropolises, but fully urban in the way that multiple forms of "encounter and distanciation" take place on a daily basis (Förster 2013). Their networks stretch far beyond their rural hinterlands, they cross borders and continents. Furthermore, due to decentralisation processes most African countries underwent since the 1990s, the political and financial independence of many secondary cities increased (Koechlin 2015, 5). There are countless differences among secondary cities regarding inhabitants, infrastructure, accessibility and their outreach; differences at the political, geographical, social and economic level. Still, one of the typical features of secondary cities in Africa – if they are not the capital – is their hierarchical and (most of the time also) geographical distance to the heart of the State, the highest administrative level.

Since the 2000s, the body of literature on African cities has grown (e.g. Howard 2003; Murray and Myers 2007; Myers 2011; Pieterse 2011; Pieterse and Parnell 2014). Studies have emphasized a variety of themes in and about metropolitan centres worldwide: Historical formation (Anderson and Rathbone 2000; Freund 2007), the various impacts of growing urban populations (Vertovec 2015), the causality effects between built environments and social changes (Krase 2012) and cities' identities (Bell and De-Shalit 2011). Besides these general contributions, authors have written about specific African megacities such as Johannesburg or Kinshasa (cf. Simone 2004; Nuttall and Mbembe 2008; De Boeck 2012, 2015; De Boeck and Baloji 2016).

Secondary and smaller cities might be more accessible to ethnographic research than large urban centres (Koechlin and Förster forthcoming). Recent studies mostly look at secondary cities in South Africa: While the report by John (2012) uses an economic approach, the books by Marais, Nel and Donaldson (2016) and Roberts (2014) both focus on development. Among the relatively small number of studies looking at cities "beyond the metropolises" (Bell and Jayne 2006), few draw on ethnographic data to portray and analyse secondary cities, by adopting an urban dwellers oriented perspective. Theoretically, secondary cities have typically been approached through metaphors; for example by labelling them as "shadow cities" (De Boeck, Cassiman and Van Wolputte 2009) or, following the devastating effects of structural adjustment programs most African countries underwent in the 1990s, describing them as "disappearing into ruin and decay" (Murray and Myers 2007). Yet, we fully agree with Bell and Jayne (2009) who state that small and secondary cities are as urban as metropolises. If we overlook urban forms that emerge in secondary cities, the image of urbanity is incomplete.

Inhabitants of secondary cities constantly compare their place of residence with the country's metropolis, but also with other larger and smaller cities, both at the national and regional level. They incorporate and rearrange modes of living from the rural and the urban area. Thus, Matthieu Hilgers aptly notes that "life in a secondary city is, partially, determined by the exterior, but the external contribution and the transformations that it produces are always reappropriated, reconfigured, reinvested according to the logics of a pre-existing and locally constructed urbanity"[1] (Hilgers 2012, 37). By doing this, urban dwellers create and recreate a unique image of their city.

The four scrutinised cities in this special issue are all explored through different analytical angles. The contributors address secondary cities under the scope of claims made to the city, the use of public space, and the image of the city. The following questions are addressed all along the articles: How do urban rhythms and various forms of encounter and distanciation in secondary cities look like? Which are the resulting sutures (De Boeck and Baloji 2016) and conjunctions in the social fabric, and how do city dwellers situate themselves in such constantly evolving social spaces?

Another issue which has been neglected in contemporary urban research is the creation process of artistic expression in African secondary cities. In arts, all attention is given to large urban centres; secondary cities are not even considered to be sites of arts. Frederik Unseld draws on empirical data collected in Kisumu, Kenya. He shows how secondary cities force us to reconsider our conceptualisations of arts and the formation of political spaces. Departing from an emic understanding of arts, Unseld focuses on runway modelling among other artistic expressions, and shows how it serves actors as a form of peer-education, but also as a way of addressing a general neglect by the state.

Carole Ammann analyses how Kankan's dwellers in Guinea relate, either simultaneously or alternatively, to conflicting images the imagery of their city contains, namely the 'traditional' and the 'rebellious' one. Thanks to the welcoming character of the city, Kankan's inhabitants not only portray their hometown as an open minded one, but they also legitimise to a certain extent, their city's efforts to remain true to itself, when comparing it to metropolises where the inhabitants have, according to this interpretation, lost their authenticity by embracing a 'Westernised' life style.

Based on data generated through "thick participation" (Spittler 2001), Till Förster examines the use of the Sacred Grove, a very popular public space in Korhogo, Côte d'Ivoire, where all the city's inhabitants intermingle. One of Förster's main arguments is that secondary cities do not merely copy the urbanity of capitals or other megacities but produce an independent urbanity; an urbanity, that is as ordinary as any but at the same time more modest than the urbanity of the metropolises like Abidjan.

Lastly, by first taking a closer look at its historical becoming, Aïdas Sanogo hints at the images that Bouaké dwellers, in Côte d'Ivoire, have of their city. These images differ according to the actors' past experiences, their future dreams, and their present life trajectories. Sanogo argues that taking a closer look at these images can inform us about how and why comparison is systematically engrained in the study of secondary cities.

As Förster (2017) notes, the making of the city as a cultural and social entity is noteworthy because it brings individual and collective creativity together. Such creativity is at the heart of the making of cities, large and small, and is experimental in character. In brief, we plea for more research that takes secondary and small cities as laboratories (De Boeck, Cassiman, and Van Wolputte 2009, ii) for dwelling into issues of gender, religion, nationality, ethnicity, age, education and locality.

---

1   "[…] la vie d'une ville moyenne est, en partie, déterminée par l'extérieur mais l'apport externe et les transformations qu'il engendre sont toujours réappropriés, reconfigurés, réinvestis en fonction des logiques qui leur préexistent et d'une urbanité construite localement."

References

Anderson, David, and Richard Rathbone, eds. 2000. *Africa's urban past*. Oxford/Portmouth: James Currey.

Bell, David, and Mark Jayne. 2006. Small cities: urban experience beyond the metropolis. London/New York: Routledge.

Bell, David, and Mark Jayne. 2009. "Small cities? Towards a research agenda." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33 (3): 683–699.

Bell, Daniel, A., and De-Shalit, Avner. 2011. *The Spirit of Cities. Why the Identity of a City Matters in a Global Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bolay, Jean-Claude. 2016. "Prosperity and Social Inequalities: Montes Claros, How to Plan an Intermediary City in Brazil." *Current Urban Studies* 4 (2): 175–194.

De Boeck, Filip. 2012. "Spectral Kinshasa: building the city through an architecture of words." In *Urban theory beyond the West:* a world of cities, edited by Tim Edensor and Mark Jayne, 311–328. New York: Routledge.

De Boeck, Filip. 2015. "'Divining' the city: rhythm, amalgamation and knotting as forms of 'urbanity'" *Social Dynamics* 41 (1): 47–58.

De Boeck, Filip, and Sammy Baloji. 2016. *Suturing the City. Living Together in Congo's Urban Worlds*. London: Autograph ABP.

De Boeck, Filip, Ann Cassiman, and Steven Van Wolputte. 2009. "Recentering the City: an anthropology of secondary cities in Africa." *African Perspectives*: 1–10.

Förster, Till. 2013. "On Urbanity. Creativity and Emancipation in African Urban Life." In *Living the City in Africa*, edited by Brigit Obrist van Eeuwijk, Veit Arlt and Elísio Macamo, 235–252. Basel: LIT Verlag.

Förster, Till. 2017. "Envisioning the City in Africa: Anthropology, Creativity and Urban Culture." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Creativity and Culture Research*, edited by Vlad Petre Glăveanu, 449–471. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Freund, Bill. 2007. *The African city: A history*. Vol. 4. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grant, Miriam. 1995. "Movement patterns and the medium-sized city: Tenants on the move in Gweru, Zimbabwe". *Habitat International* 19 (3): 357–369.

Haddis, Alemayehu, Tadesse Getahun, Embialle Mengistie, Amana Jemal, Ilse Smets, and Bart Bruggen. 2014. "Challenges to surface water quality in mid-sized African cities: conclusions from Awetu-Kito Rivers in Jimma, south-west Ethiopia." *Water and Environment Journal* 28 (2): 173–182.

Hilgers, Mathieu. 2012. "Contribution à une anthropologie des villes secondaires." *Cahiers d'études africaines* 205 (1): 29–55.

Howard, Allen M. 2003. "Cities in Africa, Past and Present. Contestation, Transformation, Discourse." *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue canadienne des études africaines* 37 (2–3): 197–235.

Koechlin, Lucy. 2015. "Conceptualising Corruption, Conflict and Cities in Africa. Towards a Typology of Urban Political Articulations." *Basel Paper on Political Transformations* 9. Basel: Institute of Social Anthropology.

Koechlin, Lucy, and Till Förster. forthcoming. "Secondary Cities and the Formation of Political Spaces. Urbanity and political articulation in West and East African cities." In *Palgrave Handbook of Urban Ethnography*, edited by Italo Pardo and Giuliana Prato. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Krase, Jerome. 2012. *Seeing Cities Change. Local Culture and Class*. Urban Anthropology Series. Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Marais, Lochner, Etienne Nel, and Ronnie Donaldson. 2016. *Secondary Cities and Development*. New York: Routledge.

Mbembé, A.-J., and Sarah Nuttall. 2004. "Writing the world from an African metropolis." *Public Culture* 16 (3): 347–372.

Murray, Martin, and Garth Myers, eds. 2007. *Cities in contemporary Africa*. Houndsmill: Palgrave MacMillan.

Myers, Garth. 2011. African Cities: *Alternative Visions of Urban Theory and Practice*. London: Zed.

Pieterse, Edgar. 2011. "Grasping the unknowable: coming to grips with African urbanisms." Social Dynamics 37 (1): 5–23.

Pieterse, Edgar, and AbdouMaliq Simone, eds. 2013. *Rogue Urbanism: Emergent African Cities*. Auckland Park: Jacana Media & ACC.

Pieterse, Edgar, and Parnell, Susan, eds. 2014: *Africa's Urban Revolution*. London: Zed.

Robinson, Jennifer. 2011. "Cities in a World of Cities: The Comparative Gesture". *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35 (1): 1–23.

Robinson, Jennifer. 2016. "Comparative Urbanism: New Geographies and Cultures of Theorizing the Urban". *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40 (1): 187–199.

Simone, AbdouMaliq. 2004. "People as Infrastructure. Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg." *Public Culture* 16 (3): 407–429.

Spittler, Gerd. 2001. "Teilnehmende Beobachtung als Dichte Teilnahme." *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 126 (1): 1–25.

UN-Habitat. 2016. Urbanisation and Development: Emerging Futures. In *World Cities Report*, edited by United Nation. Accessed 29.01.2017 under https://unhabitat.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/WCR-%20Full-Report-2016.pdf.

Vertovec, Steven, ed. 2015. *Diversities Old and New. Migration and Socio-Spatial Patterns in New York, Singapore and Johannesburg*. Global Diversities. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wirth, Louis. 1938. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American journal of sociology* 44 (1): 1–24.

Kankan's ancient air-port: Today a space for learning to drive, tomorrow a wealthy neighbourhood?
C. Ammann, December 2011