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Deals with imaginaries and perspectives: reworking urban economies in Kinshasa

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Urban residents across Africa are neither simply the subjugated nor the purveyors of skilled survival. Rather they continuously navigate a world where no one set of assumptions or clearly delineated trajectory of efficacy and livelihood applies. In some Central African cities, such as Kinshasa, notions of economy concern practices of taking discrete people and things and interweaving them with others in relations that often have little familiarity, make little sense. Things that don't readily belong are assembled into provisional bundles. In this essay on an important retail market, urban agriculture, and a superblock development in Kinshasa, economy is demonstrated to be a way of keeping the value of things open to new uses and sites. Thus, to grasp the fierce ambivalence of many clearly impoverished urban districts requires an appreciation of the oscillations of value.

Keywords: Kinshasa; markets; value; urban food production; Cité de la Fleuve

Introduction

Until recently Kinshasa has been a city that has relied upon a few entities in order to manage its relationship with the rest of the world. These include two or three hotels, a couple of barely functioning banks, a few upscale residential neighbourhoods, and several well equipped telecommunications compounds belonging to the Chinese, the United Nations, the US and several other foreign missions. Even now, in the face of a substantial building boom, the profusion of new highways, banks, hotels and corporate buildings, there are fewer than 20 functioning ATMs in the entire city. As for managing the relationships of a population that everyone estimates to be somewhere between seven and ten million, there are hundreds of moribund offices replete with computers slowed under the weight of multiple viruses and stacks of dossiers whose function has largely been forgotten. Some quarters receive sporadic electricity a few times a month, and everywhere there is the image of decline so extensive that it seems no longer worth trying to keep up with repairs.

It is clear just how much a city like Kinshasa exists for and because of its inhabitants; how the propulsion of bodies outward in the arduous completion of basic tasks and in the pursuit of some unreasonable dream constitutes an economy of transactions, of continuously realigned affiliations and exchanges. This is particularly evident after midnight, when the streets empty out and much of the city becomes an exceedingly ominous landscape – where it is evident just how many factories and warehouses have been vacated and how many roads are in a state of disrepair as one's

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vehicle tries to maintain the speed necessary to avoid some diffuse interception, and how vast the city is.

At the same time, the instantiation of wealth also stands out in a way both exuberant and obscene. But the stories of the elite do not follow straight lines either. Some villas remain half-completed over decades; there are grand mansions where security is stringent, but inside the furniture and power are all gone, and then there are areas that have everything twice over, as if the fear of losing everything has to be protected by some inviolable double. Power takes its territory – whether it is in vastly oversized single residences or in army bases that compensate for the low pay by assigning every soldier a plot of land where he can grow what he needs to consume. Distances are thus unnecessarily long, and as the city continues to spread outward the prospect of ever being able to develop an integrated urban infrastructure becomes increasingly expensive and improbable.

With its surfeit of dilapidation and informality, Kinshasa is not cheap. What look to be slum quarters in the massive district of Messina (popularly called *Chine Populaire*) can actually be the *parcels* of physicians, lawyers and professors who have saved for years to buy a modest holding. Given these trajectories, the building boom of Nande traders, for example, from Butembo and Bunia, with their gaudy mountain chalet styles, demonstrates the amount of money that can be made off war and various forms of cross-border trade.

In light of these complexities, what does efficacy consist of? How do we make determinations about what works? There is a great deal of contemporary sentiment that usefully assuages the dystopian connotations that usually accompany the growth of slum life in urban Africa. Here, slums are a dynamic consolidation of a ‘real’ urbanisation that must become the platform of architectural and policy interventions. Yet too often, notions of the ‘dynamic’, the ‘efficacious’, the ‘sustainable’ and the ‘just’ are intertwined in mutually supportive roles without a clear sense of what is actually taking place. It is not easy to define a supportable ethical or political position that takes into consideration the way in which precariousness and possibility can be thoroughly entangled, and the ways in which things do work but are hardly just. It is one thing to appreciate the collaborative acuity of slum residents and another to face rampant trickery, manipulation and extortion head-on. If we are to valorise certain capacities of the ‘difficult’ urban quarters, then it is also important to appreciate the complexities of their economic manoeuvres but, at the same time, to see these complexities as not unrelated to those operative in other domains of economic life.

In the following stories about some select aspects of the Kinshasa urban economy, I want to first and foremost talk about how economic life can be constituted by manoeuvres of affective speculation – i.e. the playing with anticipations and the desire to see and be seen along shifting vantage points. Secondly, I want to explore how divergent scales and logics of economic practice come to rely upon similar speculative intersections of different materialities, uses and actors that posit little chance of integration, but which in the absence of integration manage to keep different prospective futures open.

Part one: the bloods of Kasa-Vubu

Kasa-Vubu, a quarter named after one of Congo’s most prominent political leaders, had been developed as a combined commercial-residential area just on the other side of the southern limits of the former colonial enclave. Its advantageous location

enabled it to develop a cosmopolitan edge, reflected in the various backgrounds of its traders and residents. The commercial area has been redeveloped several times, but each time such effort seems to invite more overuse and overcrowding. The surrounding residential areas have some of the highest density levels in the city and are places of rough conditions and rough characters.

For a crew of guys I know in Kasa-Vubu, it is hard to tell when the work really begins, or what it really is. The most intense activity seems to occur in the late afternoon in the crisscross of various satisfactions and apprehensions. There are some who are relieved to have made more than they had anticipated and can look forward to treating their friends to a beer. There are others who have barely sold or made anything and are reluctant to return home. There are those who will hide from creditors and those who will under-invoice the day's receipts. There are those who will attempt to bundle what they have left with the surpluses of others, and see if they can quickly pass off the package deal to those who roam the markets at this hour looking for last-minute bargains.

Cedric, Lumanu, Makoto, Bazana and Armando are the titular heads of the 'Bloods' in the quarter of Kasa-Vubu, just south of Kinshasa's central market area. With their red bandanas they have styled themselves around the American gang, and indeed are well informed of its histories, personalities and organisational structure. The K-V crew intends less to be a 'branch' of a global organisation than to appropriate certain 'themes' and ways of operating in order to insinuate themselves into the local economy. With the exception of Makoto, all are university graduates, and their grooming and eyewear convey the looks of young professionals rather than thugs. They all occupy a *parcel* left to Armando when his family unexpectedly departed for Europe without informing him, and when he needed to recruit his present 'associates' in order to hold onto it in the face of competing and aggressive claims from kin.

The crew spreads across Marché Gambela at the start of the trading day. They canvas the initial expectations – for a market is also a field of affective textures, from indifference to driven urgency, and these forces compel an array of discursive tactics and deals. In the decaying infrastructure of the market and the various clogging of the transport routes in which it is embedded, the trading day must also circumvent incessant delays – from gridlocked traffic to the wait for deliveries, the goods that are set aside for pick-ups that are slow in coming, sporadic supplies of electricity, and unanticipated arguments that are not resolved quickly. As marketing entails getting what one has access to out into the largest conceivable world of consumers willing to pay a good price, trading concerns the opening up of vistas of sight and perspective. It entails what the trader can actually see, but also what he or she can anticipate, what they imagine to be taking place beyond the immediate field of vision. To a large extent this is what the Bloods deal in. At the outset of the day, they try to get a sense of what the market, in all of its various individuated and grouped sensibilities, anticipates; of how the market 'feels' about how it is situated in a larger contexts of events.

With the swirling of hopes, anxieties, exigencies and indifference, each trader in the market interferes with the capacities of others. Whether crowding in or stepping away, each trader shapes the spaces of transaction, for it makes little sense in an overcrowded arena of small transactions to simply wait for customers. There is the need to circulate, to round up possible sales, to make certain products, services and prices readily available to someone whose intention was only to acquire a specific good and not others – and so they can be conceivably convinced of certain associabilities among discrepant items. While it is true that some traders stay still in the recesses of this

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mobility as a means of offering discretion and limited visibility, Gambela is a stage for showing cards for those who mostly do not hold them, but are convinced that once they are about to trade hands they know enough about where they are to make them appear almost immediately.

5 For the Bloods it is a matter of trying to assess how the traders they deal with think about their location at the start of the day – i.e. is this the day they have to pay off the big Lebanese creditors; is this the day that wives will collect from their *tontine*; is this the day that groups of buyers will come in from the distant suburbs beyond the airport. Then, traders in the market are rarely alone; they belong somewhere – and in Gambela there are the West Africans, who have been in this market for generations; there are traders with special affiliations to Chinese, Lebanese or Indian wholesalers or brokers, who can mobilise credit and connections to facilitate supply and advantageous prices. There are those who walk in various uniforms, and in the market the uniform tends to obscure rather than clarify representation as many try to invoke an authority from somewhere. There are traders linked to big politicians, and others to churches or to growers and brokers from provinces from which come the bulk of specific goods. In the efforts of traders to put together an expansive vantage point – i.e. a plane along which they can envision a ramifying series of events and people to whom to articulate what they have access to – the actions of others in the market assume a fundamentally ambiguous position, for they can both block and facilitate, elucidate and dissimulate.

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20 In a city of intense scarcity and constantly shifting belongings, where there is a limited number of games and resources to work with, success is often a matter of slowing others down to allow one the time to get to some piece of information, some money, some customer before others have a chance. This means throwing up detours and deviations. At the same time, straight paths, while often enabling speed, have their own limitations. For when people are forced into deviations and circular paths they have the possibility of paying attention to scenes and people they otherwise would not think twice about, and in these encounters discover unforeseen possibilities. Here, regardless of the spatialisation entailed, a straight path will mean little if the person is unable or unwilling to move fast, and the circuitous path will mean little for those unable to be patient enough to take in the view. All of these factors are the ‘materials’ that the Bloods will work with.

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35 But at the beginning of the day, they simply try to ‘take it in’ – i.e. get a sense of the intensity of aspirations, the willingness of certain traders to assume various ways of seeing and figuring, and the way that the market is ‘coming together’ – the interactions of transports, goods, stalls, affects and openings. They spend no more than an hour at this, and then they go back to sleep, as if the dreams, if there are any, will become an important modality for designing what they will attempt later.

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45 The crew will return to Gambela in the late afternoon, just as things are both winding down and thus speeding up. It is a time when the tendency to desperately try to unload, to make some money, is at its peak, and this feeling intersects with the accruing patience of those who feel they have done as well as possible, and that it is important to sit tight and not make any mistakes, not to go out on any limb. It is a time when the market is also most a mess. Not simply because it has been ‘worked’ all day, and the mess is a sign of that work. But also because traders have been holding goods for others, bundles may have been proposed but are not going anywhere, and things now have to be disentangled, returned to their proper places, but just as they are on their way back, something else may intervene to convince them of still other possible last-minute destinations. This is one facet of what the Bloods do. They wait until the last

minute and try to force through different kinds of ‘alliances’ between these goods on ‘their way back’. Given what they observed in the morning – the various assessments of location, the different moods and expectations, the different opening prices and bottom lines – the question for them is where are these sentiments, expectations and assessments now, now that the trading day is almost at a close.

Additionally, no matter how much a trader has made at the end of the day, the reality remains that they owe something to someone – creditors, family members, fellow traders, patrons. They need not be paid today, but at least in the abstract something must be set aside. But what the Bloods do is to ‘suggest’, and sometimes ‘compel’, this extra to be put into ‘play’ – i.e. help fund a last-minute purchase, help cover an urgent debt in return for a favourable volume of a certain good or service, or join in a collective purchase of a service, such as protection, or expedited delivery, or circumvention of tax or duty, or help fund someone who is travelling and who has a good jump on a favourable price of some bulk purchase. Because the Bloods have nothing easily discernible to buy or sell, they devote all of their attention to reading the potential willingness of traders to engage in actions they would not readily consider, and to reading the sense of how traders think they are connected, not only to each other but to wider scenarios. Where, for example, relations between Lebanese wholesalers and Gambela retailers can be characterised by the latter’s docility in the face of manipulation and sometimes extortionate merchandising, the Bloods will identify ways to try and ‘go backdoor’. Here, they might arrange thefts from warehouses or make sure that a wholesaler’s kid goes missing for a few days, or capture a competitor’s wife in some compromising position, or spread rumours about how certain big merchants are holding back on payoffs to their guys in the government. While reluctant to use violence, they find it necessary to maintain a reputation for violence as a kind of guarantor of an authority in the market that cannot rely simply on threat or extortion.

For at the end of the day, the task is to work with the loose ends, to concretise potential futures from what is left over, not as the only horizon, but to use the task of working with leftovers as a means of reconfiguring relations within the market and beyond. Cajoling, seducing, steering, sometimes pushing different actors forward to gain each other’s attention, the Bloods will ‘suggest’ ways of packaging leftover food, some recently arrived bundles of clothes, and ‘diverted’ electronics that didn’t quite find their way to the expected pick-up into a nearby van that could quickly arrive at a planned mega-prayer meeting in Matete, and park near the bevy of food sellers that would catch the pre- and post-meeting multitudes. As everyone rushes from the market into the crowded thoroughfares and mini-vans and buses, a Blood or two will be making sure that certain vehicles are able to jump the queue, as long as the drivers are willing to make room on their rooftops for a few bags of cement delivered for free to a group of construction workers willing to do a few hours of underpaid overtime at a trader’s little satellite shop in the suburbs, in return for a connection he has with the ministry handling a big project in Gombé.

The end of the day also requires impression management. The appearance of success is critical. Traders will often mask their desperation and insist upon certain prices until the end. But this adamant attitude can also be thrown into the mix; it can hedge those that want to get rid of something for almost any price because they need something for the dinner table that night. The work of the Bloods is to bring together the divergence of expectations, desperation, patience, as well as those who think long and short, those who see far, wide, and only the immediate area around their stall. The ‘today I will do for you, if you will do this tomorrow’ is founded on these very discrepancies. For there

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will be those who can wait to be paid a month, two months down the line because they see the fluctuations in the supply chain and know that they can afford to have someone hold something now – a good, a price, a service – because they know its value will be markedly different later on. There are those who know that a few weeks from now, a client or a potential customer will probably need a certain quantity of an item just when supply is constrained, and thus are willing to acquire it now and hold on. Then there are those who are willing to take a chance on an item or class of goods that they would not have considered before, but can now easily acquire, and simply put into play as an instrument to affect the price of something they really want.

For the Bloods, work is the choreography of these intersections and exchanges. What counts first and foremost is extricating a good or service from the use and value that is anticipated for it at the beginning of the day, seeing later on the extent to which this ‘hold’, this association between a good and its framing, has been maintained, and whether there is now flexibility to dislodge the equations that link trader, good, price and use and set other connections in motion. Again, there are goods that are left over, those that arrive late or never come, those that come in the wrong quantities or are delivered into the wrong hands. There is spillage and scarcity; things that had circulated during the day to assume advantageous locations and bundles, and are now on their way back to their ‘proper’ owners. In the first instance, the Bloods attempt to link these materialities – food, wire, cement, cloth, hardware, pharmaceuticals – regardless of the significations of their use. They are simply things that are making a particular last-minute appearance/disappearance in the market, and the objective is to interrupt the flows normally suggested by their marketing to carve out transactions that may have little to do with how many actual or potential customers there may be for a particular type of commodity, either now or tomorrow.

This practice follows from the recognition that, clear or not, useful or useless, urban bodies are entangled with such collections of materials (Colebrook 2002). For many, habitation takes place in environments where the inputs for producing life have no consistent supply chain or vehicles of evacuation. Bodies are intimately entwined with scrap, fuel, rain, heat, waste, sweat, tin, fire, fumes, noise, voices and odour, on the one hand, and in multiple stories, generousities, violence, arguments, reciprocities and fantasies, on the other. There is no bringing all of this into a single account, into a predictable means of calculating opportunities and reasonable futures. This is the kind of implicit recognition that the Bloods work with, utilising the sense that at the end of the trading day it is perhaps impossible to draw up a viable account, and then using that as the basis for speculating on other possible outcomes.

Of course, all these materialities in circulation belong to someone, have actual or potential value to someone. They are someone’s property and possibility. Things are not easily dissociable from these significations. Once held, then exchanged, it is not always clear under what conditions they can be replenished. In a city where the institutions of mediation are weak, claims to authority suspect, and predictable trajectories of input and output usually provisional, there can appear to be little room for manoeuvre. Such conditions would seem to emphasise the need for steadfastness, trust and stringent codes of reliability. These characteristics are certainly on display in the market. At the same time, in a city where individuals try to implicate themselves in the lives of others and where performing consistently in any endeavour is fraught with unforeseen contingencies, since people are weakly anchored in ongoing institutional roles, keeping goods and services within strict parameters of specific uses is difficult and often not in people’s best interests. Things have to be converted into unexpected



uses and values in order to keep them moving, and to use that movement in order to maximise a person's exposure to a wider playing field.

This is precisely what the Bloods trade on: using the circulation of objects, infused as they are with various intensities of expectation and guile, as a means of piecing together relationships that promise, if never guarantee, a widening of the field of vision. The 'promise' is that the trader can have access to contacts and experiences he or she otherwise may not encounter, and the first step is to disinvest in the particular sentiments and calculations with which they have approached the things that pass through their hands. Such opportunities ensue only if they can let go of the particular meaning that these things have, and let them exert their 'own forcefulness'. At the same time, things are imbued with meaning, and this disjunction is not something to be reconciled or negotiated. Instead it produces volatility, a moment when things could go in many different directions; it is this volatility that the Bloods attempt to both provoke and steer.

The Bloods can only do the work they do – trying to put things into play, trying to use them as instruments to bring different scenarios and actors into an unanticipated proximity – because they don't care about what these things mean. While they may be bearers of intensities of expectation, disappointment, need and imagination, these sentiments are important to the Bloods only because they signal a difference from something else, some other sentiments and uses, one which then opens up an opportunity for a deal, a deal in articulation.

While I only really skim the surface here of complex micro-economies, what I am trying to illustrate is the importance of broadening the usual notions of livelihood. Livelihood as a domain and problem has been too often reduced to considerations of employment, business or discernible production activities. It is about the amassing and deployment of material resources and money, usually in terms that refer to the effective management of households. But livelihood also would seem to concern a field of manoeuvrability, the acts of creating spaces where living can be exercised and deployed. Life seeks to enhance its ongoingness and stability through producing conditions that bring its critical details into view, and minimise the uncertainties inherent in the stretching of its capacities. The increasing complexities and aggrandisements necessary to secure life can undermine its largely improvised efficacy.

These operations in the market, performed repeatedly as much as they can be, also act as ways of taking things apart – and some of these things are long-established relationships and organisations that persist, but increasingly with varied 'half-lives'. If what the Bloods attempt to do is to circumvent the affects that actors and things have in the market according to particular redundant arrangements, the 'stuff' of the market is also catapulted or returned to a different phase of existence – not necessarily transformed but rendered in form, making it available to different calculations, and sometimes simply to the 'highest bidder'. This constitutes a particular limitation on the productivity of experimentation, for it comes to devalue certain hard-won accomplishments of consistency. It could problematically signal that all that has been accomplished – through negotiations and practice over years – can be simply superseded by an 'experimental moment', and that the problems of legitimacy and available resources in the larger society authorise experimentation for its own sake (McFarlane 2007, Lindell 2010, Mahon and Macdonald 2010).

In Kasa-Vubu, the Bloods have no job, official position or discernible future. After the time spent with them, I am not even sure how in the end they get paid. They have money, but not large amounts. They exert some kind of authority, but it is not

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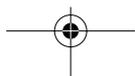
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clear exactly what. Sometimes what they do works; more often they are laughed at or met with complete indifference. They are a highly visible presence in the quarter, but only for short spurts of time. They never socialise locally, and are apprehensive about being too exposed. Some are wanted for crimes and make a big deal about avoiding the police, but at other times couldn't seem to care less. Clearly a particular kind of force field is being 'played' here – i.e. the ebbs and flows of intersecting ambitions, constraints, claims, losses, hopes, calculations, tactics, impressions and manipulations. Kinshasa is a city full of tricks and deceptions, as well as grinding boredom and limited options. How speech, dress, words, gestures, timing, speculation, reading and intuition are deployed become critical aspects of livelihood – of making a 'hood' for life, a place, a cover, and a performance that interweaves with various instantiations and expressions of living in order to move it somewhere else, if only for the time being.

Part two: down by the river

Cité de la Fleuve is a project to develop a new central city in the delta areas, the Malebo Pool, formed as the Congo River takes its bend. Within days of the project having been officially announced by the government, construction began to create the protected islands on which the city would be situated, accessible only by a private bridge. Proposed to house 25,000 residents in an array of 200 villas and 10,000 units of commercial office space – four times more than presently exist in the city – the sheer ambition of the project seemed totally out of place in a city where the metropolitan budget averages US \$25 million a year. Although the construction equipment on site, as well as the volume of the workforce and pace of the initial construction activities, seems to suggest a considerably scaled-down actual version, the Cité remains something seemingly out of place in Kinshasa. This perhaps is in the end its primary purpose – i.e. as an instrument which actively seeks to displace the realities of the city and to concentrate the savings of the local elite, consolidate upscale residence, and centralise the relationships of the city to the larger world in an enclave disarticulated from Kinshasa as it now exists, making the city, in the words of Filip de Boeck (2009), peripheral to itself.

Of course such spatial enclaving would seem to repeat colonial designs. But more important, here, is the emphasis on dimensions that hover in a volatile conceptual space between the colonial and the postcolonial. The experimental engagements of colonial powers with African spaces had to eventually produce segmented territories that relied upon the logics of sovereignty in order to manage relationships of individuated domains. Now, experimental engagement by powerful emergent actors in particular will use the fixing of assets from investment and spheres of influence as a means of respatialising and recalibrating opportunities. In other words, investments not only seek to pin down property, but to use property as something more fluid, open to various mixings of finance and use, as a way of rehearsing cooperation and synergy that could be applied elsewhere in places and sectors that have no connection to the original property or asset. These practices then seem to both reinforce and disperse colonial sentiments. The ambiguity is heightened by the often opaque managerial structure of the project management itself. Cité de la Fleuve is managed by a hedge fund, Hawkwood, previously involved mostly in agricultural investments in Zambia and some limited property development in Lusaka. What available records exist point to Hawkwood's management of the Yew Tree Fund and Mukwa Fund, both in turn



linked to UK-based funds Landsdowne and Marshall Wace, both with some prior history in the diamond trade.

Regardless of the specificities of this project, urban infrastructure investment throughout Africa in part has an experimental dimension. The rationale for African investment on the part of emerging powers – China, India, Brazil, Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, Russia – is not only to acquire assets in extractive and processing economies. Africa also acts as a locus of intersection among complementary interests, financial modalities and risk assumption (Broadman 2007, Zafar 2007). As an exterior in ‘need of investment’, where both risks and potential profitability are high, and where regulatory frameworks are weak, potential synergies among diverse financial streams, competencies, sectors and networked positions can be explored without long-term commitments or intensive scrutiny.

Infrastructure serves as a vehicle of articulation among diverse economic actors. It brings them into a proximity of relations that may be specified by certain contractual responsibilities, investment shares and tasks but need not be restricted to them. If regions, investment streams, regulatory architectures and production lines are to be articulated in a given place, specific spaces must be configured to facilitate that articulation, as that articulation also exerts a specific range of spatial effects (Orr and Kennedy 2008). When different flows of capital, factories, services and communication systems enter a country or urban region, provisions must be made to deploy these inputs in ways that potentiate maximum multiplier effects on national and local economies, accommodate the specific conditionalities and aspirations associated with those inputs, and attenuate conditions that might constitute barriers and impediments to the potential productivity of these inputs (ECOWAS-SWAC/OECD 2006). Therefore, to put it simply, they are accorded their space. Theoretically, these spaces attempt to mediate divergent and potentially conflicting trajectories of accumulation and sectoral interests, as well as integrating investments into an overall economy while at the same time engineering spaces of relative autonomy – sometimes through a wide range of exceptions and exemptions related to law and regulatory regimes. Practically, then, the concretisation of these ‘projects of articulation’ may have nothing to do with the realities of any particular city.

As infrastructure investment in Africa begins to encompass new circuitries of capital, commodity, service and knowledge flows in addition to extraction and agriculture, critical questions surface regarding relationships between participation and operational modalities. As the complexion of investment instruments diversifies – from concessional loans to equity development funds, joint ventures with private financial institutions, regional networks (often coordinated by multilateral banks) and private-public partnerships – decisions on risk and profitability entail considerations as to how assets are actually used, what actors assume the risk of demand for use, and the characteristics of both local public institutions and entrepreneurial networks associated with such projects. As such, profitability and viability are often contingent upon the ways in which infrastructure is ‘folded into’ other development activities as critical components. Cité de la Fleuve in Kinshasa exists, in part, to be folded into the intricate negotiations concerning massive hydroelectric investments as a potential administrative nerve centre and upscale, protected residential area, even though it is not explicitly being developed as an ‘appendage’ of such projects.

At the same time, portions of such investment in infrastructure operate as ‘designed distraction’ – i.e. where the content of the project, as well as its design and use, become an occasion to make visible the financial capacities of a wide range of

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local actors, who otherwise subject their accumulation and use of resources to large levels of dissimulation. Projects act as a locus, not only to bring out ‘money from under the mattress’, but to compel the display of various competitions, complicities and collaborations among different actors. Questions about who will use Cité de la Fleuve, who will buy property, who will attempt to dominate local commercial and political relations, become critical to what it actually becomes.

On top of these considerations, there is a great deal of speculation that Cité de la Fleuve is linked to plans to finally proceed with the capitalisation of the long dormant rehabilitation of Congo’s hydroelectric infrastructure. These plans are centred on territories surrounding the Inga Falls, 225 km downstream from Kinshasa, and the world’s largest single point source of hydropower. The Congolese government has announced plans to repair existing dams 1 and 2, continue the development of Inga 3, and start the construction of the Grand Inga hydroelectric dam (Mbuere ua Mbuere and Musaba 2004). With funding from the World Bank, repairs are expected to double turbine capacity. With partnerships among Congo, Angola, South Africa, Namibia and Botswana, one-third of the US \$6 billion needed to fund the 4300 MW Inga 3 project has been secured. Construction of a 40,000 MW Grand Inga is also under discussion and planned for completion in 2025, with anticipated annual revenues of US \$15 billion.

Although the various instantiations of the Inga projects have long promised to generate sufficient electricity to power all of Africa and beyond, the scope of financing necessary (US \$80 billion in the case of the Grand Inga project) plus security issues have impeded any substantial actualisation of even the most modest upgrades. Mega-scale infrastructure projects have long proved unpopular and unwieldy. Prevailing wisdom for long has argued for the rescaling of infrastructure projects to more manageable, region-specific projects better adapted to ecological specificities and the financial viability of host states and partners.

While speculation focuses on Cité de la Fleuve acting as an administrative centre for the management of ancillary activities related to the development of this hydroelectric infrastructure, it is not so much focused on the viability of such projects in their own terms. After all, the repair schedule, the number of turbines to be repaired, the development of new capacity and transmission lines, as well as the anticipated construction of new facilities, are revised several times every year – with completion dates constantly being pushed back. Yet the plans remain on the cards, and this is because of the imminent mushrooming of the carbon offset market. As the World Bank has been promoting hydro dams as sources of clean and renewable energy, they become eligible to receive lucrative carbon credits (Africa Energy Portal 2010).

The World Bank is facilitating this cash grab by promoting hydro dams as clean and renewable – making them eligible to receive lucrative carbon credits. It becomes a way for high-emission countries to accrue Clean Development Mechanism credits to offset their emission levels. So keeping open the financing mechanisms for Inga-related developments, regardless of their viability, repair or completion schedule, becomes an important financial event in its own right, and as long as this is the case, the development of Cité de la Fleuve has a prospective economic future to underwrite its ongoing development, even if only a few bulldozers are presently on site. Not dissimilar to the work of the Bloods, it is a matter of steering discrepant materialities toward each other, regardless of existing underlying uses or property arrangements.

Cité de la Fleuve is not the only game on the river, particularly as the river has a long history of being pushed back. In 1980 legislation regarding land use was implemented that reserved large tracts of riverine territory for active cultivation. This laid



the foundation for substantial land reclamation projects carried out entirely through the local organisation of cultivators. Three decades later, some 6020 square hectares of former swamp land are under cultivation. The Chengu, Mfunata Nzola, Messina Rai, Mpela, Lolcali, Chenge Messina and Chenge Nzola areas now supply 15% of the agricultural produce of Kinshasa. This, too, is the accomplishment of a particular intersection of scales, logics and actors. Smallholdings under individual cultivation have been organised into a block system, involving some 2300 units. Blocks are, in turn, organised into associations based on geographical location and collective interests, such as an association of women farmers. The system has been organised to facilitate the individual cultivation of small tracts of land, and is thus amenable to absorbing large volumes of household labour. Workers come from all parts of the city, particularly from catchment areas of the more recent migrants to Kinshasa. Thus the area operates as a series of food production factories, simultaneously incorporating the practice of individual cultivation – with the autonomy to choose crops, hours, labour – and cooperative management, which organises the transfer of holdings, the maintenance of pathways, technical support and water.

This system is the product of years of negotiations, technical training and experimentation among local producers and various local and international agencies, including the FAO, IDRC and the EU. At the same time, the architecture of the farming area self-consciously tries to minimise the traces of these variegated affiliations. The entire system attempts to operate with a sense of peasant egalitarianism – each to his own, regardless of prior eligibility – and the apparent neutrality of the workplace – i.e. cultivation is a job, the produce is marketed to a wide range of possible distributors, and there are no fixed, privileged deals. On the other hand, there is a need to convert the considerable effort that went into making all of this happen into a collective force able to ward off, for example, the intensification of claims of indigeneity by the purported original inhabitants of the land. In some districts, so-called customary authorities have arbitrarily seized land and sold it on secondary markets, with the complicity of government officials.

The Union of Market Garden Cooperatives of Kinshasa (UCOOPMAKIN) was established in November 1987 and acts as the umbrella organisation for agricultural cooperatives in the city. Each agricultural cooperative manages the interests of its members and also an agricultural centre, and each centre occupies a given market garden perimeter and manages all the market gardeners working on-site. UCOOPMAKIN currently has 32 cooperatives, corresponding to 32 agricultural centres (Symposium des Organisations et Dynamiques Maraîchères 2004). While this provides some institutional mechanism to act in the interests of cultivators, it does not necessarily harmonise practices across the fields. Part of the success of the development of the riverine region is that it was able to incorporate the labour and sensibilities of a large number of urban residents coming from different parts of the city, with their differentiated networks, marketing contacts and ways of doing things. Location of plots and their integration within larger schemes was not contingent upon cultivators coming from a similar place of belonging or residence. Common territorial affiliation was not the predication of working together; in fact, it was the basis for allowing a highly differentiated patchwork of plot size and marketing capacity.

At the same time, access to technical assistance was necessary, and part of the deal involved was for urban farmers to buy into certain organisational schemes that the ‘experts’ believed were not dissociable from the productive capacity of the farming itself. So in the end, very different logics had to be steered toward a workable proximity

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with each other – not because they could eventually be integrated but because their sometimes volatile intersection could produce new vantage points, could allow participants to view themselves in a wider scheme of things. For some of the farmers, cultivation is simply an occasion to have an overview of how things are marketed in the city, and then other family members are assigned to engage in a kind of arbitrage in the local produce markets, manipulating small changes in prices. This became clear one afternoon as a haggard woman farmer, knee-deep in the mud of her fields, handed out large wads of cash to three daughters, all at university, to fan out to different markets in the city and purchase variable items of particular produce that then would be sold in front of their house in Ngiri Ngiri later that evening. For some, cultivation is the only thing that keeps a family from abject poverty; whereas for others it is a means of interweaving various lives of members within a cooperative to act collaboratively in acquiring assets beyond the fields. For still others, it is a means of supporting a particular church congregation, or a way to break into the world of NGOs and civil societies.

Cultivation thus becomes the production of goods that themselves are put into play in the service of various agendas. On the one hand, it is a crucial facet of keeping Kinshasa fed. But because it assumes such importance, the fields become a domain for other kinds of speculation. Now it remains to be seen how the big project up-river, Cité de la Fleuve, will change all of this.

Conclusion

In the work of the Bloods, Cité de la Fleuve and the urban cultivators of the reclaimed river, economy is not a simple matter of buying and selling. Neither is it a simple matter of trying to manage impressions or shape meanings. These dimensions are always present in these three ‘economies’. But more importantly, it is the expectation itself that such are the fundamental underlying dimensions of economic life that is engaged. To deal with the need to earn a living, the need to accumulate, to save, to get the best price – all are the outcomes not simply of supply and demand or of political regulation or market distortions, but of knowing that what one has access to is situated within shifting spaces of transaction and perspective.

The concern of many Africans I have known during my work over the past 30 years has not been with ‘where am I and how did I get here and how do I get out of here’, but rather with ‘how do I turn wherever I am into some other place, whether I am in constant movement or standing still’. We know that we live in a fiscal world based on the tremendous expansion of capital disarticulated from any fundamental underlying asset. Money is made by the extensiveness through which an object can be made to circulate through different networks, connections and uses, regardless of whether or not the object is actually mobile itself. Derivatives have been the instrument of such circulation, and they have enabled the intersection of phenomena that need not be dependent upon their meaning, use, history or prior valuation. Things are intersected not to acquire fits or compatibility but to generate motion and volatility that propel the components of contracts and deals into still other experimental relations (Lee and LiPuma 2004, Pryke 2006, Cooper 2010).

In cities like Kinshasa, the institutions of mediation no longer provide an adequate anchorage for all the bits and pieces of bodies, experiences, words, objects and memories circulating through the city. Institutions are increasingly incapable of specifying normative practices of planning and transaction enabling actors to work toward a viable future. In these conditions, everyday life becomes intensely experimental, full

of hits and misses, but, more importantly, the hits and misses become the very materials with which to speculate on reorienting valuation to new composites – of actors, goods, services, positions, hopes, feelings, cognitions.

I am not claiming that the logics of a ‘disoriented’, ‘improvised’ or ‘worn down’ city are the same, or even homologous to the topological instruments of finance. Rather, as modalities of speculation diverging from the normative expectations of rational economic decision-making, both occupy a space of relative freedom from the prevailing norms of governance, regulation and planning, and both exert an important force in reshaping contemporary African cities. It is a freedom not won by virtue of some alternative path or ability to be impervious to the predominant forms of rule. Rather, it is a space opened up by virtue of turning uncertainty into a resource, into the fundamental conditions of decision-making rather than a field of interference that must be reduced. As such, whatever relations might exist among the Bloods, the urban cultivators and Cité de la Fleuve are a matter of experimental intervention. Instead of identifying them as either contradictory or compatible positions, or as mutual threats, or parallel, thoroughly individuated tracks, efforts should perhaps be expended to find ways for them to ‘reach each other’.

Notes on contributor

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