
Straddling the Divides: Remaking Associational Life in the Informal African City

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Introduction

The past decade has witnessed marked changes in the nature of African urban economies. There have been substantial changes in the role and operation of public sectors, a redeployment of resources and priorities, and an intensification of labor-intensive strategies for securing livelihood (Rogerson, 1997; Farvacque-Vitkovic and Godin, 1998; Economic Commission for Africa, 1999). With these changes have also come significant shifts in the configuration of urban associational life (Bangura, 1994; Kastir, 1998). New, formalized vehicles of association, most often in the form of community-based and non-governmental organizations, have proliferated (Tandon, 1995; Fox, 1996; Hoogvelt, 1997; Cleaver, 1999).

These associations have taken advantage of a generally more open climate of expression and for self-initiated organization in the context of increasing democratization (Sandbrook, 1996). On the other hand, the attrition of public sectors from service provision under the regimes of economic restructuring is also seen as responsible for the growth of new associations. Urban neighborhoods in many instances must now practice a kind of self-management if improvements in living conditions are to take place (UNCHS, 1996; Rakodi, 1997; Mitullah and Kibwana, 1998; Werna, 1998). The exigencies of such self-management have given rise to a variety of more loose-knit, ephemeral social formations. In this article, I wish to highlight how such social formations in three African urban settings serve as important sites for rehearsing capacities related to such self-management. Here, I emphasize capacities related to balancing divergent trajectories of what is entailed in 'making do' in urban Africa today.

My intention is to delineate the factors which contribute to these divergent trajectories. Following this sketch, I present three examples of such ephemeral social formations in different cities in which I have worked. I will then provide a brief analysis about what I think these formations accomplish, and conclude with remarks about how these formations might be further situated in terms of some emergent trends related to urban governance.

Trajectories of urbanization

The conditions which have been relied upon to sustain dynamic and stable urban quarters, fraught though most have been with major problems concerning urban services, ineffective management etc., are becoming increasingly strained (Dey and Westendorff, 1996; Monga, 1996; Tripp, 1997). These strains are sometimes political as quarters are

given more official responsibility to manage different urban services (Brett, 1996). This responsibility generates new modalities of collaboration, but also intensifies competition (Schübeler, 1996). In some instances, communities have become polarized along lines of social stratification that were more open-ended in the past (Al-Kenz, 1995; Devisch, 1995; Nyamnjoh and Rowlands, 1998; Douma, 1999; Diouf *et al.*, 1999).

The strains are also economic in that employment of any kind — formal, informal, self-employment — is increasingly difficult to access (Sethuraman, 1997; Collier and Gunning, 1998; ILO, 1998). As a result, formerly well-elaborated extended family and residential support systems find themselves overburdened (Kanji, 1995; Harts-Broekhuis, 1997; Robertson, 1997). It is estimated that roughly 75% of basic needs are provided informally in the majority of African cities, and that processes of informalization are expanding across discrete sectors and domains of urban life (van Arkadie, 1995; King, 1996). Whereas unemployment has long been a persistent reality for African cities, available compensations now require more drastic action (Lugalla, 1995; Emizet, 1998; Reno, 1998; Roitman, 1998). Floods of cheap imports made possible through trade liberalization shrink local production systems (Aryeetey and Nissanke, 1998; Mkandawire and Soludo, 1998). At the same time, various components of economic rationalization have opened up possibilities for the appropriation of formerly public assets — land, enterprises, services — by private interests, particularly for the emerging elite who are well-positioned in the apparatuses managing structural adjustment (Elbadawi and Ndulu, 1996; Phillips, 1999).

The convergence of structural adjustment, globalization, political change and trade liberalization has also extended and intensified unconventional cross-border trade throughout the continent. Here, often substantial amounts of capital and capacity are deployed to elaborate alternative practices and circuits for the movement of raw materials and processed consumables. Such activities bring together a melange of characters, including well-off formal businesspersons, soldiers and militias, middlemen of various nationalities and petty traders. Unconventional trade is most elaborated in states where chronic political crisis has undermined regulatory systems and where formal institutions increasingly function and retain some level of authority through their participation in such unconventional trading regimes (Dongala, 1993; Ellis and MacGaffey, 1996).

Power in African cities has largely centered on the capacity to mobilize low-cost labor and compliance, while cultivating loyalty on the basis of servicing the interests and opportunities of given clients (Bayart, 1992; Ekeh, 1994; Cooper, 1996). As the capacity of patrons to 'produce the goods' wanes, religious and ethnic obligations are reasserted (Young, 1994). As African cities have been long-term sites for dialogues or 'arguments' about how various components of tradition are to be valued and used, these arguments are getting shriller and in some sense less discursive (De Boeck, 1998; Watts, 1999; Bernault, 2000). In other words, the politics of claims and negotiation are becoming more narrow and violent.

Despite the concerted efforts at municipal restructuring and institution-building that have taken place over the last decade, many processes of city politics and administration have become increasingly informalized (Mabogunje, 1994). Many formal institutions now exist simply as a context in which a wide range of informal business and activity can be pursued (Mbembe and Roitman, 1996; Joseph, 1997; Ayittey, 1998). Thus, institutions lose the capacity they might have had to facilitate a shared public interest. Through the state's arbitrary actions, in terms of how decisions are made, resources applied and formalities distributed (licenses, permits, authorizations etc.), the uncertainty which already characterizes much of everyday urban life is intensified. African societies tend to combine an intermixing of heavily calcified social structures, networks of personal relations assuming varying but substantial roles in the elaboration of politics and accumulation, and highly mobile, varying relations among these structures and networks which are usually difficult to pin-down and specify (Bayart *et al.*, 1999).

While a vital energy is mobilized to make do, the insides of associations, households and institutions seem now to live with a nearly constant sense of edginess. The sense of generosity and moral responsibility evinced in African cities remains substantial. But, at the same time, corruption too is massive, as is the sense that anyone can pretty much get away with anything. These extremes of culpability make it difficult for ordinary citizens to get a handle on what is going on, to commit themselves to particular courses of action, or invest in aspirations, livelihoods or projects which require progressive, step-by-step planning and evolution. One is increasingly forced to move among various, and usually contradictory, modalities of getting things done (Chabal and Daloz, 1999).

Ensuring the suitability and sustenance of collective efforts, as well as deterring debilitating conflicts within important networks of social relations, becomes critical but also highly labor-intensive. The scope for independent action is potentially constrained in favor of maintaining ways of cooperating that are functional for the largest numbers of related persons. While this process doesn't rule out the capacity for innovation, changes can be subject to complex negotiations. These negotiations can themselves act as a deterrent for more dynamic or militant forms of collective action (Berry, 1995).

Ephemeral social formations

Given these conditions, this article explores a broad range of tactics and social formations being used to access livelihood opportunities in precarious urban situations. Now, more often than not, these opportunities are to be found outside life in the immediate community (World Bank, 1999). Tactics must be pursued which attempt to mitigate the potentially fragmenting and divisive impacts that such external orientations might have.

If African cities are increasingly informalized, how do urban residents from different walks of life acquire the capacities to deal with these informalities? How do residents with limited means use informality to expand their access to resources, opportunity and autonomous action? How do they rehearse a capacity to balance increasingly competing needs for social cohesion and access to opportunity? What kinds of sites or 'venues' are put together for these tasks? These are the questions that will be taken up here.

The notion of capacity-building I use here is a very specific one: it is a capacity to negotiate trajectories of urbanization which simultaneously move in two directions. On the one hand, the 'undoing' of the modernist trappings of many African cities throws many urban residents 'back' onto reinvented traditions of social cohesion (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993; Geschiere, 1997). This 'undoing' reflects the combined effects of economic structural adjustment and the difficulties entailed in relying upon nascent industrialization as a means to spur economic growth in an era of globalization (Bloom and Sachs, 1998). It also reflects urban Africa's increasing lack of confidence in modernization (Monga, 1996). On the other hand, these trajectories render such traditions problematic, as the pressures increase on residents to seek out new opportunities to make a living in a lot of different places where they will probably reside only temporarily (CINERGIE, 1995).

My contention here is that various ephemeral social formations are put together and used as sites for rehearsing a capacity to effectively deal with these divergent trajectories. These formations incorporate large measures of fluidity and malleability. But they also attempt to generate regularized practices of getting things done, of lending a measure of stability and confidence to precarious environments. Specifically, these ephemeral social formations attempt to balance the need for more exterior orientations, in terms of accessing greater opportunities for livelihood, while preserving experiences of local solidarity.

The ephemeral social formations do not necessarily replace the need for or belie the fact that substantial developments in formal institution-building and municipal governance are taking place. Nor do they necessarily compensate for the limitations of these developments. These more informal means of collaboration run parallel to, and sometimes intersect with, various aspects of municipal reform.

Before presenting several examples of these formations, I want to emphasize that I employ a limited use of the notion 'African' cities. I do not want to establish a geographical specificity, or a particularly 'African' modality of urbanization. The impacts of different pre-colonial forms of urbanization, colonial logic and administration, and postcolonial development on African cities make them heterogeneous in their character. Yet, in the face of global economic restructuring, the particular economic arrangements, cultural inclinations and forms of external engagement which largely made African cities different from each other are being unraveled.¹

These cities have also historically found themselves in the same boat when it comes to piecing together a functional sense of coherence and viability from a mostly haphazard collection of aspirations and livelihoods (Cooper, 1994; Davey *et al.*, 1996; Erbach and Gaudet, 1998; Farvacque and Godin, 1998). Many non-African cities may also be in the same 'boat'. So this grouping together of diverse African cities is more tactical than explanatory. African cities do share a region and are thus the objects of specific policy and program initiatives and administrative functions that are organized along regional lines and have a major impact on how cities are governed and developed. What distinct African cities make of this 'commonality' is, then, important for what happens to them in the future (Berry, 1994).

Balancing cohesion and opportunity

An introduction to three cases

Often, what different populations, sectors, groups and communities do in order to operate in the city is excessively disconnected. As such, collaboration faces real difficulties that exceed a question of simple political will (Halfani, 1996).

The reliance upon reciprocity, sharing of resources, social cooperation, familial or community obligations, highly codified moral prescriptions and open-ended information flow may be vital elements to preserve a sense of coherence under conditions of scarcity or social vulnerability. But there is also a need to be opportunistic and provisional (Bayat, 1997). Individuals must often guard information, circumvent the behavioral implications of their beliefs and morals, and take steps to undermine the capacities of others. Such steps open up economies of compensation whose objective is to generate opportunities for some form of gain, access or income. In any cursory scrutiny of poor communities, it is clear that there is social cooperation around the amelioration of misfortune for some, and substantial economies based on intensifying misfortune for others. The lack of health care, income, bonds, stability, cohesion and mobility gives rise to many practices to make up for these lacks — which, in turn, provide jobs, status and earnings for specific members of that community. The question becomes whether such cycles can be circumvented or overcome.

The following case materials concern sites and processes through which very different urban quarters try to work out a means of maximizing resources and opportunities. At the same time, they try to 'solve' actual or potential conflict situations generated by differences in capacities that often derive from such efforts. The materials

1 It is possible to see this in the way in which many states are 'giving up' on economic modernization and focusing almost exclusively on extraction of resources. Many African countries are narrowing attention to those aspects of primary production which, regardless of volatile price fluctuations, seem to have assured long-term demand. This usually means a concentration on gold, diamonds and oil. Large-scale gold reserves have recently been identified in Tanzania, Niger, Guinea, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Mali and (on and off) Senegal. While Uganda, Rwanda and Zimbabwe have scarce gold and diamonds of their own, they are heavily engaged in the mineral business via their participation in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Sudan, Chad, Mozambique and Cameroon are making efforts to widely expand their oil production. See, particularly, *Africa Research Bulletin: Economic, Financial and Technical Series*, volume 35.

are presented here as snapshots. They quickly try to hone in on a specific logic or dimension of the general task of balancing cohesion and opportunity. A more comprehensive analysis of the particular scenarios and practices depicted here would, of course, have to consider specific historical antecedents, geographical positions and political environments. But the objective here is simply to provide some indication of the breadth and diversity of efforts certain African localities make to access or create wider arenas within which to operate.

At times, an elaborate game of dissimulation is involved. Seemingly parochial spaces serve to mask wide-ranging collaborations among diverse actors both within and outside a locality. In other instances, many different networks and positions have to be engaged and manipulated so that a given set of individuals, households and groups can continue to live together as a 'community'.

The three brief case materials presented here stem from work I do for the African NGO Habitat Caucus.² The Caucus, made up of urban development NGOs in 15 major African cities, works collectively to establish context-specific platforms of dialog between local community associations and municipal governments within a select number of neighborhoods within each city. These platforms serve as a basis on which to negotiate specific partnership arrangements in terms of local planning, administration and service-delivery.

I have lived in the quarters in which these cases take place. My work in all situations was to assess what local-community and broadly developmental associations were doing, especially those involved in various forms of income generation, urban services or advocacy. In most cases, these associations were tied to established NGOs, both local and foreign. A major part of this assessment was to examine what participants in these associations understood about local economies, particularly how residents really produced livelihoods, gained access to opportunities, spent income, and organized local production and social support. As part of this process, focus groups, structured interviews and free-floating discussions were held. Additionally, specific informants were tracked as they moved around during their daily lives.

All of these Caucus-affiliated associations faced significant hurdles. There were problems of funding, managerial capacity, power-sharing and decision-making, and, most particularly, the pulls of participants to other activities. Discussions and deliberations that took place within these associations were spirited and thoughtful. The collaborative experiments in environmental management, housing construction and micro-enterprise, for example, were usually innovative and sustainable. Yet it always seemed that resolving problems, checking to find important resources and, in sum, doing the real work of making something happen, was 'referred' somewhere else, took place somewhere else.

The case materials here, then, are the results of moving away from these more formally organized community associations in order to identify various instances of where that 'somewhere else' actually was. In the process of engaging these associations over an extended period of time, it became clear that there were other, more provisional and ephemeral forms of association and collective activity that associational members also participated in, and which seemingly had a greater impact on their life. These case materials are thus first hand reports of scenarios and events which I have participated in and witnessed.

In some instances, such as the assembly in Gatati South Mayo, I was an active participant over the six months I lived in this quarter (1989). The situation described in Soumbédioune (1996) and Yopougon (1993–94) are instances of a series of similar events I also participated in during a one- and two-year period respectively. I have not broken

2 Special acknowledgment to Mohamed Soumare and Jerome Gerard of the Urban Popular Economy Programme, ENDA Tiers Monde (Dakar), Ousman Dembele, University of Abidjan, and Amina Rama, Afhad University, Omdurman, Sudan.

these scenarios down into constituent elements, nor have I interviewed other participants about what their participation actually means. The conclusions I draw from them are exclusively based on what was observed.

Gatati South Mayo (Khartoum)

Gatati South Mayo is a sprawling shanty town, accessible after 20 minutes along a dirt track from the last southern road in Khartoum. Although its 'official' population hasn't been counted in many years, reflecting various attempts by the state to 'clear out' the settlement, there are now roughly 40,000 residents. It was initially conceived as a place where the police could build large, inexpensive housing compounds, but quickly became a place where the police seldom ventured. For Mayo became a place populated by a cross-section of everybody too poor and too tough to make it elsewhere. The poorest of the Ansar from the western Sudan, who are the followers of the residues of the Muslim Mahdist movement, Nuba from the east, Shilluck, Dinka, Nuer and Azande from the south, as well as immigrants from Uganda and the former Zaire, all crowd into an often volatile but nevertheless functional cosmopolitan existence, trying to rely on their differences more as a resource than a threat. Much of the community lives off the proceeds of theft, most usually from trucks plying the main roads south of the city, alcohol brewing or are small-scale artisans.

During the last years of the Numayri regime during the mid-1980s, there was a half-hearted attempt to raze the area and displace the residents, but the community resisted fiercely, using weapons stolen from the local police station and spears. In 1989 (and again in 1992), the military went into one section, Dar Es Salaam, in full force, destroying tens of thousands of households. In other areas which were not cleared out, various forms of subterfuge were applied. For example, the ruling Islamicist party would subsidize prostitutes, usually working unobtrusively inside specifically known compounds, to ply their trade in a highly visible way in the main local markets just after sunset, providing an excuse for the local 'religious' police to shut down the shops of small entrepreneurs during their busiest hours.

There is a great deal of ambivalence about Mayo in Khartoum's popular imagination. On the one hand, it represents all that is perceived as dangerous to Sudanese cultural integrity, as defined by the current ruling regime. On the other, Mayo exists as a kind of 'out of sight, out of mind' place, which, if closed down, might disperse residents throughout other parts of the city.

One of the best known brothels was the 'White House' located on 125th Street (in an ironic play on US political culture). The White House was usually frequented by students from a large Islamic secondary school located some 5 kilometers away. The school drew students from all over the continent, in part because it was a way of gaining scholarships to universities in the Gulf states, and many of the students pretended to be Muslims. When local operatives of the National Islamic Front, the party in power, started manipulating the sex trade when coming to power in 1989, the White House lost most of its business.

But within weeks, the White House was converted into the US Congress — like the White House, in session from the last prayer at night to the first prayer in the morning. For the site was converted into a kind of municipal governance assembly. On some days the place would be packed with several thousand people; on other days, maybe no more than a few score. Although open to everyone, entrances were strictly regulated according to ethnicity, religion and age. For example, southern unmarried Animist Dinka men enter through a different space from that of eastern Muslim married Nuba women etc., but once inside, one enters into a process of endless 'legislative' deliberation, of making prescriptions for the running of the community — where 'running' is literally a sense of navigation and motion; not along a fixed course or track, but taking turns suddenly as speakers take turns speaking whatever comes to mind. For the rules and regulations always seem to be changing, are always subject to negotiation.

But this seemingly never-ending making of regulations appears to be just an excuse for a process where experiences, impressions and recommendations are all made regardless of who one is. Everyone can speak, and sometimes lots of people speak at the same time. There appears to be a consensus that there could be no consensus as to the production of specific rules and structures, and that the precariousness of the quarter requires a process of constantly outsmarting the various authorities. As is a common saying in Mayo, one always has to keep God guessing in a place that God acts as if he has forgotten. This is in contrast to what takes place just outside the walls of the Congress, where people have to be very careful how they appear to each other, what they can say and do with each other in a national context where racial, gender and religious identity count for so much.

In this process of deliberation, there are no final resolutions or endings; no votes are taken, no leaders appointed. During the deliberations, people circulate and barter objects and various kinds of assistance. Everything is witnessed, conducted side-by-side; there are no efforts to keep things hidden or to conduct secret deals in some distant corner. Rather, this 'side-by-side' activity articulates convictions to pray, drink, nurture, discuss, plan and argue in spite of the different meanings and implications of each activity, and with the fullest recognition of and indifference to each other. As such, the aim of the participants may be to try and see something not already 'there', to use each divergence to veer off into some new opportunity to survive and do more than simply survive.

Yopougon II (Abidjan)

Yopougon II is one of the largest sub-municipalities of the city of Abidjan. It is also one of the city's more cosmopolitan quarters. As such, it is the site from which many new forms of spiritual practice emerge. One such grouping broke away from a large branch of the Celestial Church in another suburb, Point Bouët, which combined an ecstatic Christianity with the already largely syncretic trappings of Mami Water cults which predominate along the West African coast. Instead of forming a new church, the group preferred to 'travel' across different neighborhoods, usually appearing at wakes, funerals and naming ceremonies. Although for purposes of description, this group could be considered a 'sect', it made no substantial efforts to institutionalize itself outside of these appearances at key life-stage ceremonies. The event described here is one of many appearances I witnessed of this 'nomadic' sect over a period from 1993 to 1995.

In early 1994, a large and diverse crowd gathered at the wake of a prominent academic in Abidjan. The marking of death at wakes and funerals has the function of reaffirming social ties across nearly all cultures. The wake here was no different in this effect. But what stands out in this instance is the particular ways in which such ties are marked and used. The eldest daughter of the academic had heard about this newly formed Celestial mission and the 'wonders' they were capable of performing. She arranged to have a group of about 20 of their 'members' officiate at the wake. As the father was a lapsed Catholic, the daughter was concerned that the wake should have some kind of spiritual presence.

At the beginning of this particular wake, a space was marked in the yard at the family compound where the wake was being held. Devotees of the sect were to offer gifts to specific spirits/gods with whom they expressed a particular association. These spirits/gods were in turn part of a larger pantheon of divinities to which the sect paid obeisance. Each devotee's 'affiliation' with a particular spirit was duly noted by the presiding 'priest'. From his position, the priest made a series of markings in the ground. These markings indicated a kind of tally of which spirit was aligned with which devotee. But more importantly, these markings also provided some rough indication of how these particular devotees would subsequently position themselves within the larger crowd, the majority of whom were, of course, not members of the sect.

After some time, the priest called the entire crowd to order. He proceeded to give a lengthy narrative of the events and circumstances which led to the academic's death. The story, however, was recited in terms of the conflicts, affiliations, intrigues and general activities experienced by the pantheon of spirits, divinities and their 'secular' associates. As particular devotees will call upon and identify with specific spirits, their devotion is construed as lending 'support' to the behavior of specific spirits. Devotion is thus a resource for spirits. Accordingly, the devotee is complicit in the activities of given spirits. If particular transactions among these spirits are seen as responsible for specific events, such as a death, then the devotees are co-responsible for these events. Devotees, who may have nothing in common but their shared devotion, are thus seen as fundamentally associated. Their activities and agendas are linked, regardless of what they may know about each other.

The priest's narration here mapped the interactions among spirits which 'produced' the conditions or causes through which the academic died. This narrative is not viewed as providing an exhaustive account. Rather, it establishes a general frame through which others gathered at the wake, both members and non-members of the sect, might orient themselves to the event. The priest asked the relevant spirits to now become present and use the marking of death as an opportunity to reconcile any lingering antagonisms. After the priest was finished, the crowd engaged in many hours of conversation, and in many different configurations. The conversations situated the death in terms of a larger series of actions and actors and enabled those gathered to situate themselves in the event. The situating was to be done in such a way that those present could 'collectively' start making the necessary adjustments in their behaviors and reflections so that subsequent deaths might be avoided.

Such situating may have been the explicit objective of this exercise. But, more importantly, there was a complex circulation of information, inquiries, testing the water, seduction, speculation, proposals for alliances and deals which occurred as a by-product. Such circulation occurs, in part, because the priest calls for sect members and non-members alike to lend protection to the household members of the deceased and reduce the vulnerability they have experienced by the death. This reduction of vulnerability for household members is to be accomplished by placing them in a new 'neighborhood' of spiritual alignments.

These references to spiritual planes and alignments act as a catalyst to the construction of another narrative. It is a narrative which attempts to draw together those gathered 'beyond' the death through now implicating everyone in it. The academic was killed in a car accident; something which occurs with alarming frequency in Abidjan. But the story does not end there. The academic's driver, also killed in the accident (and perhaps its target), was the brother of a former associate of the ex-President's wife who had been involved in some massive corruption scheme, forcing him to spend several years in exile in Liberia. He had returned without fanfare to Abidjan the night before the accident. This event coincided with the first visit of the former President to his wife's village in 20 years. The story mushrooms with coincidences and connections as almost each person present contributes additional pieces to the puzzle, charts out the interconnections of seemingly disparate events, and eventually locates themselves and specific actions on their part to one or more aspects of the event. Members of the sect, with the map of the priest in mind, move through the crowd. They assess the various directions in which the narrative is going. They steer specific persons in the crowd into conversation with each other for the purpose of moving the narrative along in ways that might facilitate the spiritual realignments which they explicitly seek.

But in the meantime, as everyone is now being eventually implicated in and oriented to these series of events — allowing them to think 'carefully' about what they have done and what they are doing — those gathered begin to find out a lot they did not know about each other. There are intensely intimate conversations among strangers; direct

outpourings of plans, intentions and aspirations among social categories whose interaction would otherwise be highly regulated. Older adults are listening to the ramblings of children they would otherwise never allow themselves to listen to. Groups of middle-aged men are asking advice from young female adolescents. Important dignitaries are making plans to support the initiatives of street traders. In other words, the common social arrangements of Abidjan are being momentarily up-ended. As a sense of 'commonality' is affirmed, there is the recognition that opening-up potentially more viable courses of individual action requires realignments between self and others, and across the whole community. Such realignments will not be products of exclusively one's own doing or control. Rather, they also require facilitating new abilities in others to act correctly and expediently, a process which is increasingly seen within the crowd as the need for spiritual intervention. Members of the sect see it as their job to provide the right kind of spiritual intervention. These members are busy bringing different combinations of people together without necessarily doing anything else to insert themselves into what is subsequently discussed.

Existing social ties are reconfirmed. But, perhaps more important, an outward-looking practice of remaking those ties is cultivated at the same time. The death provides a locus for those gathered to be enjoined in a sense of commonality — which exceeds the sense of common loss. This sense of commonality is brought about through several ways of intersecting markedly different events and actors. No one should leave feeling excluded or exculpated. Enjoined in a common sense, those gathered thus have a platform on which to do things differently with various others without having to feel that they have to give something up or leave something behind. In other words, the wake acted as an arena for adding on capacities for those gathered to explore new exteriors and new 'neighborhoods' for the day-to-day agendas of seeking security and opportunity.

Soumbédioune (Dakar)

Soumbédioune is a historic Lebu fishing village, now incorporated as an extension of the Greater Medina in Dakar. Although the quarter still provides residence for several scores of individuals involved in the fishing trade and is the site of a key fish market, its proximity to the central city has greatly diversified its inhabitants and economic activities. Soumbédioune has become a highly dense quarter of approximately 10,000 people. They live in a wide variety of settings: those who continue to inhabit one of the first public low-cost housing schemes in the city, conventional compounds which include self-constructed wooden barracks, privately capitalized apartment buildings providing both low- and middle-income residence, student dormitories and several large residences occupied by politicians. Its abutment to the coast and woodworking and artisan shops has also brought a modest infusion of tourist money. The diversity of residential opportunities and its physical location also combine to have made the quarter historically available to occupation by large numbers of 'foreign' residents, mostly from other Francophone countries, most particularly Congo, Cameroon, Guinea and Mali.

In addition to activities which surround the fish market, the bulk of the local economy centers on small artisan workshops, tailoring, furniture making, vulcanizing, car repair, used clothing, telecenters and hawkers which line the length of one of the city's primary sewage canals. There are also large numbers of residents who work in the public bureaucracy and central city businesses. A multiplicity of guild organizations operate, and the area is an important site of political contestation in the ongoing struggle for influence waged primarily between the ruling Socialist Party and the Democratic Socialist Party. While community fora around issue-specific initiatives have been maintained which allow representation from various ethnic, guild, gender, age and religious-based organizations, both major political parties have impeded the effective establishment of more open-ended community associations.

The story here concerns the announcement of a project to manage the completion of a large housing estate which was being tendered by one of Dakar's top companies. The company was obligated to tender even though it clearly preferred and had every intention to keep the entire project 'in-house'. An architectural firm was to be hired, as well as a general contractor to secure materials and labor. In a cursory gesture to abide by the rules, an announcement was issued to a nearly empty conference center on a Thursday evening that tenders would close at seven the next morning. The selection of the evening was significant because Thursday evening is a time when many people participate in special worship at the mosques.

Nevertheless, and subsequent to this announcement, the night is busy with a proliferation of visits among architects, engineers, laborers, politicians, deal-makers, marabouts, soccer clubs, youth organizations, artisan guilds, and scores of their relatives who all discover pathways of influence to the person who will award the contract. Although the official who will award the contract no longer resides in Soumbédioune, one of his sisters occupies the family compound. While she receives many visits, most of the activity pervades the surrounding area, as neighbors, friends and purported social connections are sought out and hold discussions with each other. Hundreds of thousands of CFA (African Financial Community) francs change hands, scores of sexual scenarios are played out, as are prayers, family injunctions, pleas, reiterated obligations and 'chance' encounters. Invoked are a broad array of rhetorical strategies, memories of past infractions and promises, personal knowledge, cultural etiquette, political procedure, technical know-how, sorcery — all are circulating in various constellations marking gaps and hybrid conjunctures.

While professional firms unofficially joined the fray, there were also people looking for any opportunity to affiliate with the project. Even if they could not design, build or supply any relevant inputs, they knew others that could and thus hoped for possible in-kind 'finders fees' or opportunities to parlay information into other opportunities.

By morning, there are no official submissions of tenders but it becomes clear to the company that there are hundreds of options to choose from, and, theoretically, hundreds of different housing estates could be built from this nocturnal deliberation. Dakar has roughly 100 architects to choose from and a lesser number of contracting firms who could handle a project of this size. The political and religious loyalties of these players are commonly known. But with a flurry of activity crossing boundaries of all kinds and producing various constellations of possible alliances, workforce compositions, inputs and cash-flows, it was not clear what the possible implications of any choice might be. People known to be unwilling to work together now express their willingness. Best friends part company for the moment to broaden their chances. There is an opportunism and a proficiency for cutting across social divides, networks and alliances that cannot be absorbed by any formal representation. The company asks for more time to weigh the decision that probably had already been made a long time ago.

Managing a 'beyond'

How are these diverse practices and affiliations to be understood in the larger context of the various processes of informalization at work within African cities? Each of these situations combines an uneasy mix of calculation and desperation.

There is an apparent promiscuity of participation, where life in the quarter tends to propel an incessant opportunism to make use of all kinds of knowledge, all kinds of relationships and positions in multiple social networks in order to access some kind of opportunity to consolidate one's position. Here, the practices of being what one needs to be at any given moment wavers with the need to be someone specific in the city. Here, too, opportunism must not be allowed to get out of hand, to give specific persons more advantages than another.

In what follows, I want to briefly elaborate on why such ephemeral social formations are important in a context both of increasing urban informalization and where economic opportunity increasingly requires a more extensive and differentiated engagement with various domains external to local urban quarters. As contemporary urban realities entail many facets that can't all be kept in mind at the same moment — i.e. from the need to have significantly larger amounts of disposable cash at certain times of year, to warding-off competition for limited employment possibilities, to 'stringing together' collaboration among diverse actors in order to make improvements in the neighborhood so that local economic actions can be more productive, to fending off political manipulation — local practices and institutions can't be too 'set in their ways'. Flexibility and the process of 'rolling with the punches' are not characteristics inherent in the urban 'personality'. Rather, they must be worked at and practiced. They must be practiced within arenas that are both available for such rehearsals and also capable of being changed through the very process that is rehearsed.

Given the difficulties most African urban households face in 'making do', the contexts which provide the sites of rehearsal must also be available to being the objects of that very rehearsal. They must serve as affirmations that change is possible, that it is worth being engaged in efforts to try and change things. They must function with a sense that there is a wider world of possibilities for action and being that is not 'out there', far removed from the details of everyday life, but immediately accessible through the steps people take in local contexts.

What is there to draw on for this task? As I stated in the introduction, the reproduction of customary ways of living largely become compensations for both the difficulties the 'customary' faces in the city in the first place, and the lack of a sufficient economic platform to extend and sustain other forms of urban identity (Rowlands, 1995). The pursuit of so-called 'modern' ways of being in the city — the pursuit of responsible civil behavior and investment in one's own individual capacities — too often leads back to heightened dependence on collective forms, i.e. extended family references and obligations that themselves are often viewed (correctly or incorrectly) as impeding the ability to get ahead.

Efforts at social experimentation, even if popularly viewed as desperately needed, can be viewed as dangerous. Despite the substantial changes underway in the African economy, politics and culture, still, one does not 'play' with the state, the family, the religion — even if they are, indeed, already being 'played with' in significant ways. Therefore, concerted efforts at experimenting with social roles, practices and values must, to a large extent, mask the process, act as if it is not taking place. Accordingly, if such dissimulation is necessary, it is these more ephemeral sites which enable the experimenters to assess the efficacy of their efforts without making a formal or irrevocable commitment to the changes brought about by such experimentation or without looking as if they are explicitly trying to make changes in family, institutional or political life.

It is widely seen that concrete opportunities for local economic development require an extension and diversification of networks external to individual localities (McLeod and Goodwin, 1999). Accordingly, local economic development means developing the networks a locality has with the larger world. The process of developing these networks has many different implications. On the one hand, if sectors, interests, populations and groups don't get along, the availability of an expanded range of external linkages reduces their need to deal with each other (Berry, 1995; Webster, 1998). This is true except when access to contacts, opportunities and resources demands local cooperation. This lessening of local contact does not necessarily spell out a good or a bad outcome. Just because distinct groups share what has administratively or politically been designated as a common locality, it does not necessarily mean that they have to deal with each other or that dealing with each other at some point will produce benefits for all.

The strength of any community is not only reflected in the degree of interchange among differences or social harmony, but also in its ability to be indifferent to different groups acting on their differences (Mingione, 1991; Augé, 1998). Local conflicts usually ensue when groups feel undue obligation to have to take what the other is doing into consideration, where the actions of others are necessarily interpreted as having something inevitably to do with one's life chances or situation (Smith and Blanc, 1997; Anderson, 1998). The availability of external networks increasingly provides a locus of solidarity that does not rely upon concepts of territoriality, and is therefore much more flexible (Bridge, 1993). If a group can be convinced that they are rooted in the world, that they have a sense of belonging no matter where they might be located in space, then it is more possible for groups to share space with those who are construed as different from them (Appadurai, 1995). Without such a sense of 'rootedness' that goes beyond a specific locality or territory, those differences have a greater chance of becoming an incessant source of threat (Marden, 1997).

In some circumstances, groups limit what they do because they know that they have to deal with another group with which they share interests, territory, membership or common location. While negative actions, such as violence and manipulation, may thus be constrained, enterprise, initiative and creativity may also find themselves diminished. On the other hand, the availability of external linkages supportive of the interests, agendas and operations of local groups may harden their 'negotiating' position when dealing with other local groups, lessen their ability to take the other's experience and viewpoint into consideration, and prompt attitudes where one group will refuse to 'play' if they don't get their way (Filion, 1998).

Thus, residents who share a quarter must often find ways of not locking themselves into fixed commitments with each other — so as to pursue their own livelihoods and aspirations — but, at the same time, engage each other in ways that maintain some semblance of local stability, interaction and cohesiveness. The workings of ephemeral social formations, as these cases exemplify, prove potentially effective vehicles for balancing these divergent, yet interconnected needs.

Conclusion

It is important to go beyond rudimentary divisions of formal and informal, the cosmopolitan and the parochial. Rather, it is crucial to look at the interweaving of potentials and constraints which activate and delimit specific initiatives of local communities to maintain a sense of cohesion, exceed how such cohesion is put together at any one time, take advantage of unforeseen opportunities, and mitigate the negative effects of being as opportunistic as possible.

Given this urban complexion, the first task of municipal governance is to ensure that spaces are maintained for diverse formations and initiatives to arise and to constantly search for arenas in which they pay attention to each other. The point here is not for actors to defend, mask or hide, but to see each other as co-inhabitants of a particular space, as markers of uncharted, unclaimed and undominated spheres of activity and maneuver. What is important is a relational approach to urban management and governance that mobilizes the way people-in-relations realize procedures and activities. In this activating work, an organization is connected to, and embedded in, the web of relations, a social ecology, which forms the social environment of the various participants.

Municipal actions should therefore focus not just on the provision of goods and services, or enabling others to do so, but on the building of links, both in social relations and in discourses, between the relational webs in the urban arena (Healey *et al.*, 1995). The notion that local government leaders should define their leadership role in terms of the building of relational webs is not only new, but it effectively means that

they will have to learn about what it will take to do this in practice on a day-to-day basis.

A critical aspect of this practice is, then, for the proliferation of recently established negotiating fora across the continent to become spaces of experimentation. Such spaces would be ones where people can observe and talk to each other without the pressures of an agenda, without feeling that their actions will be necessarily picked apart and judged, and where people are accorded greater room to interact with others without feeling that such interactions will be necessarily judged as manipulations or betrayals. Key to former understandings of the public sphere was the notion that it was the place to interact with strangers, where one could act as a stranger. Even if individuals knew who each other were, in terms of their family, ethnic, economic and political identity, they would be under no obligation to perform or represent such identities within this sphere.

The public domain would be the place through which individuals and groups could try on or invent new 'social performances', which could then be deployed only in this context, or elements of which could be incorporated into other aspects of the individual's life. In this way, a multiplicity of varying impressions and information is produced that makes the judgments different sectors of the community may have about each other more varied. The boundaries or divides which may impede information exchange and cooperation in other areas are 'softened', while the conviction on the part of more people that they have useful contributions to make to the community is strengthened.

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