Abstracts for the ASC study day ‘Exploring the Wealth of the African Neighbourhood’, to be held on 16 September 2004

1.
Filip De Boeck,
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The possibilities of the (im)possible: Kinshasa and its heterotopia

The riverbank along the port of Kinshasa is hidden from view by boats, lots of boats, but boats that do no longer float, dead bodies, cadavers of boats, old steamers and ferries, in every possible shade of rust-eaten brown. The port as cemetery: sunk, immobilized, stuck in the mud and entangled with floating carpets of hyacinth, these boats were dismantled and turned into squatters’ camps a long time ago. In large, colorful letters, the habitants painted names on the carcasses: “Satellite”, “The City of Jericho”, “L’Avenir” (The Future), “Tantine Henriette – Proverbs 13.11” (“Wealth hastily gotten will dwindle, but he who gathers little by little will increase it”). On one barque is written: “One day, the future will prove us right.”

In “Of Other Spaces” Foucault writes about boats as the greatest reserves of the imagination. But what if the imagination has been unmoored, and the ship itself has sunk? Even if, one day, the future proves the inhabitants of Kinshasa right, what will the shape of that future be? What elements, in an urban politics of the possible, could give form to the making and remaking of social life in such an urban configuration? The riverbanks of Kinshasa reveal a stunning material geography of failing infrastructure, a spectacular architecture of decay which constitutes the physical life of crisis, to paraphrase Mbembe and Roitman. At the same time, the boats’ names reveal the local production of zones of desire, of expectations and of hope. Similarly, the myriad activities and the whole web of informal economies that have spun themselves around the river and the city as a whole, have given birth to multiple technologies of fixing and repairing. They form a constant reminder of the productivity of degradation and its capacity at inventing new material structures and generating and mooring social ties.

In ongoing discussions concerning the nature of the African city architects, urban planners, sociologists, anthropologists, demographers and others devote a lot of attention to the built form, and more generally to the city’s material infrastructure. Architecture has become a central issue in western discourses and reflections on how to plan, engineer, sanitize and transform the urban site and its public spaces. Mirroring that discourse architecture has also started to occupy an increasingly important place in our attempts to come to terms with the specificities of the African urbanscape and to imagine new urban paradigms for the African city of the future. Indeed, one can hardly underestimate the importance of the built form and of the material, physical infrastructure if one wants to understand the ways the urban space unfolds and designs itself. However, as Kinshasa’s ports reveal, the city’s infrastructure is of a very specific kind. It is an infrastructure of paucity, defined by its absence as much as by its presence. Failing infrastructure and an economy of scarcity constantly delineate the limits of the possible, but also generate new social spaces. Where technologies remain silent or break down, these structures of lack and absence give birth to new spheres of social interaction, to different coping strategies and regimes of knowledge and power. The city’s topographies of propinquity bring people into physical proximity with each other, generate new (trans)urban public spheres, or enable to maintain and carry forward existing social landscapes, networks and affiliations under changed circumstances.

However, and in spite of its importance, I will argue that in this specific urbanscape the built form is not what matters most in the end. Its cultural status is rather modest. It is not the level at which Kinshasa imagines, invents, dreams about and authors itself. Rather, the city carries itself forward, tant bien que mal, through a whole range of much more invisible, immaterial infrastructures, moored in an urban imaginary (collectively shared but no less problematic for that). My paper will explore the various ways through which the city, often with great difficulty, continues to realize heterotopia, places of impossible possibilities, through which it can reinvent, or at least dream of the possibility of reinventing, a social body for itself.

2.
Piet Konings,
African Studies Centre
**Bendskin drivers in Douala’s New Bell neighbourhood: Masters of the road and the city**

The youth of New Bell, one of the largest and poorest immigrant quarters in Douala, have invented a new activity: using motorbikes as taxis. This is commonly known as ‘bendskin’, an activity that not only secures them a sustainable livelihood during the current economic crisis and structural adjustment but also makes a significant contribution to solving the neighbourhood’s critical transportation problem. Bendskin drivers are usually organised in small groups along ethnic and friendship lines, and form a social and spatial ‘neighbourhood’ within the New Bell neighbourhood as a whole. Nevertheless, they have also proved themselves capable of transcending group boundaries and rally round when one of their colleagues or their common interests are threatened by outsiders, such as other road users and, more particularly, the police. Due to their sheer number and ability to mobilise so rapidly, they constitute a powerful force, which has made them the ‘masters of the road’, and, on certain occasions, even the ‘masters of the city’.

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3. **Eileen Moyer**,  
ASSR, University of Amsterdam

**Not Quite the Comforts of Home: Instituting locality among Dar es Salaam street youth**

Working among street youth in Dar es Salaam demands recognition of both the transient and uncertain qualities that mark their everyday lives. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, they often expend great amounts of time and economic resources trying to establish networks of locality and feelings of belonging. Uprooted from their childhood homes and often isolated from rural support networks they work to develop support networks that provide safety and security from the treats of street life, protection from police harassment and, importantly, friendship and love. This paper will examine two “locations” that formed important loci among those with whom I worked in Dar es Salaam, the first tied to work and the second to leisure and relaxation. It will examine how these locales factor into the imaginaries of the young people who inhabit them, as well as into the imaginaries of more established residents of the city, focusing on contestation and social unease.

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4. **Basile Ndjio**,  
ASSR, University of Amsterdam

**Expectations of modernity among Cameroonian youths: the feyment’s case**

Feymen or Cameroonian swindlers, who drive fancy cars or wear smart clothes, are undoubtedly the embodiment of “occult economies” or fantastic ways of accruing wealth from nothing or yielding value without effort. Through the practice of feymania, which includes deception and different sorts of traffics, these young people who for the most part come from the underprivileged, have succeeded in accumulating unimaginable fortunes in little time, to such an extent that the youths now regard them as role models, and the ruling class as a threat to the established order. However, even though feymen have become dominant figures of success, prosperity and better life, and that many Cameroonian view their extraordinary promotion as the hope to get out poverty and misery, still the enigmatic and mysterious origins of their wealth sometimes arouse alarming rumours that are generally expressed through the metaphor of sorcery and occult-related practices.

This paper, which is based on ethnographic research in Cameroon, seeks to decode the ambivalent perception of these nouveaux riches. More explicitly, I want to understand why their extraordinary success is generally associated with what is called moukoagne money (fortune obtained through occult means), and why at the same time these feymen attract more and more young Cameroonian. In the first section of this presentation, I will try to gain more insight into witchcraft rumours that are generally levelled at these young people. The second section will examine the feyment’s bid not only to legitimate their wealth, but also to position themselves as the leaders of their community, or as new role models for urban youths.
5. Deborah Pellow, Syracuse University

Sites of Consumption: a Neighborhood Coheres

The capital of Ghana, Accra is an administrative and commercial primate city, with an international airport, several four-star hotels, and an outward looking Western ethos. It is also home to a diversity of populations and of neighborhoods, many of which do not “fit” Accra’s cosmopolitan profile. In this paper, I look at the core neighborhood of one migrant community, Sabon Zongo, founded almost 100 years ago by Hausa from northern Nigeria. While its population has diversified considerably, a heavy Hausa Muslim influence endures and it also continues to be home to people who are strangers to Accra. My paper illustrates the spatialization of identity, as manifest in everyday of social and cultural life. I focus particularly upon practices of consumption – of food, recreational activities and political events – to show how they are embodied while helping to produce neighborhood identity.

6. Charles Piot, Duke University

Virtual Neighborhoods

One of my current projects is on Togolese diasporics in the US--on what happens to their sense of identity/citizenship/Togoleseness when they are in exile (an exile that is as much political as economic, in that it’s often motivated by their opposition to Eyadema) and, simultaneously, what happens to Togo itself/the homeland when much of the country is in exile (real or virtual).

Some of this research has entailed following those Internet sites established by members of the opposition (those in exile in Paris, Toronto, New York), and the e-exchanges that took place on these sites around the time of the Togolese Presidential election last summer. Among other things, I became interested in those new forms of sodality and relationship - a type of virtual "neighborhood," perhaps - that were established among these exiles, often among those who’d never met before (and without regard to ethnicity or gender). Moreover, I’ve been intrigued to find that many of these relationships endure beyond the event which brought them into being (in this case, the election).

I could certainly do something along these lines - further exploring the nature of these "virtual neighborhoods," eg. - if you think that would be appropriate and relevant to the theme of the conference.

7. Katja Werthmann, University of Mainz, Germany

Urban space, gender, and identity: a neighbourhood in Kano (Nigeria)

This paper explores an emerging collective identity in an African urban context. Many studies in or about African cities have focused on the formation of migrant communities, which is often connected with the assertion or defence of “ethnic” identities. The role of women in shaping these processes of identity formation has received too little attention beyond the domain of marriage strategies. While West African women traders, for instance, have been described as powerful economic actors in their own right, their social relations seem to centre on marriage and kin. Women in urban Africa, however, do not only interact with family, friends, or customers, but also with physical and social space. On the basis of a case study about a neighbourhood of Muslim women in Nigeria, the paper points out that women may develop a sense of community that relates in a very specific way to the actual physical and social space they inhabit.
Kano is the largest city of northern Nigeria, a multi-ethnic urban centre of about two million inhabitants. The centuries old town wall, although today only existing in fragments, still represents not only a physical, but also a cultural barrier between the ancient Muslim quarters and the more recently built parts of the city. Many inhabitants of the Old Town rarely venture into the residential areas where non-Muslims and non-Nigerians settle, and many Kano citizens such as southern Nigerians, Lebanese, or Europeans have never set foot into the Old Town. In this socio-spatial context, a housing estate for policemen that was built inside the Old Town in the 1950s was a kind of anomaly: at its inception these police barracks neither resembled older quarters nor was it a zongo (stranger’s quarter) as they exist in many West African cities. Unlike “traditional” quarters in the Old Town of Kano or zongos in other cities where neighbourhoods are often formed according to common clan or ethnic origin, the bariki are characterized by the absence of networks based on kinship or ethnicity.

Many inhabitants of this housing estate are non-locals, but all of them are Muslims. Although some families only stay for a couple of years, others have lived there for a long time. Especially among the women, close relationships have developed that are vital for everyday needs such as borrowing and lending household items, food, or money, or leaving children in a neighbour’s care while making visits. Some women have formed bond-friendships that continue to exist even after one of them has moved away. The women of this particular urban neighbourhood call themselves matan bariki, ‘women of the barracks’. Thus, they stress their sense of community and their difference vis-à-vis other groups and milieus of women in Kano. However, bariki is a highly ambivalent term for many Hausa speaking Kano Muslims, indicating ‘modernity’ and ‘westernisation’ mostly in a derogatory sense. By redefining the term matan bariki as signifying the positively valued membership of an urban middle-class, the women of the barracks create a specifically urban identity that is not predicated on ethnic or regional origin.