Africa

Spectrum

Urban Life-Worlds in Motion:
In Africa and Beyond

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Abstract: Although throughout the history of anthropology the ethnography of urban societies was never an important topic, investigations on cities in Africa contributed to the early theoretical development of urban studies in social sciences. As the ethnography of rural migrants in towns made clear, cultural diversity and creativity are foundational and permanent elements of urban cultures in Africa (and beyond). Currently, two new aspects complement these insights: 1) Different forms of mobility have received a new awareness through the concept of transnationalism. They are much more complex, including not only rural–urban migration, but also urban–urban migration, and migrations with a destination beyond the continent. 2) Urban life-worlds also include the appropriation of globally circulating images and lifestyles, which contribute substantially to the current cultural dynamics of cities in Africa. These two aspects are the reasons for the high complexity of urban contexts in Africa. Therefore, whether it is still appropriate to speak about the "locality" of these life-worlds has become questionable. At the same time, these new aspects explain the self-consciousness of members of urban cultures in Africa. They contribute to the expansive character of these societies and to the impression that cities in Africa host the most innovative and creative societies worldwide.

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Cities in Africa are currently experiencing high dynamics in growth and are attracting people to an outstanding degree. Cities did play a salient role in the history of many African countries in pre-colonial times and during colonialism (Genova 2005) – in particular during the years of the independence movements (Coquery-Vidrovitsch 1991) – and they have also played an important role since independence. Urban societies will be highly relevant for the future, due to their nurturing of creativity and their innovative character. Cities in Africa contribute to the perception of Africa and of Africans beyond the continent.

On a global scale, African cities are the fastest-growing urban centres worldwide (Swiaczny 2005). In contrast to Asian cities with similar growth rates, this dynamic is not the result of a direct governmental impact, centralized planning or an official policy, but rather the consequence of spontaneous and unplanned population movements. The impressive growth rates cannot be explained by reproduction rates; they are the outcome of rural-to-urban migration and other forms of mobility, such as the high mobility of urban dwellers between different towns within the continent.

From a cultural-anthropological perspective, the issues of urban societies and their ethnography have somehow been neglected (Horn 1989; Wildner 1995). This is evident when we examine the history of the journal *Urban Anthropology*, which was established in 1972 and came to an abrupt, unplanned end ten years later (Al-Zubaidi 1998). However, cities in Africa are an exception to the more general tendency of disengagement of anthropology in urban studies. Since as early as the 1950s, the towns of the so-called "copper belt" in southern Africa (Zambia, Zimbabwe, etc.), but also some West African cities like Ouagadougou, Lagos and Freetown, have been highly relevant places of ethnographic research. Back then, anthropologists were interested in immigration from rural areas to the urban agglomerations. It is possible to argue that the anthropologists accompanied the people they studied on their way from the villages to the cities, where new job opportunities had emerged and new lifestyles were waiting to be discovered (Ferguson 1992; Moore 1994: 67-73).

The simultaneous character of inherited social institutions, often labelled "traditions" (in particular regulating the networks of kinship), and the so-called "modern" practices, which dominated the social life in the cities, led to a critique of some widespread assumptions concerning cultural change. The findings made clear that the rural–urban migrants were able to tie together both life-worlds: that of the village and that of the city. They did so at the level of their individual biographies, in particular by travelling back and forth between their village of origin and the city (Gutkind 1965; Gugler 1971), but also by creating new forms of "home town associations" and clubs within

the cities. The presupposition repeatedly articulated by the colonial administration and even by anthropologists (Skinner 1974) – that it will be necessary to discard inherited traditions in order to come to terms with modern urban life – proved incorrect. Studies on the new urbanites' social lives showed how the mobile members of the urban societies had been able to create new practices and new social institutions. New practices, traditions and urban structures were integrated into "creative manners" (Cohen 1969; Epstein 1961; Mitchell 1956; Mitchell and Epstein 1959).

During the 1960s this debate had a considerable impact on the sociology of the city in general. These ethnographic studies paved the way for the development of an improved theoretical framework because they acknowledged the relevance of cultural diversity within cities. As was evident in studies on places like Lusaka or Lagos, immigrants were living simultaneously in two socially and culturally divergent networks, one related to their traditions, cultures and places of origin, and the other related to their neighbourhoods and the contexts of their professional engagements. The theoretical dimension of this debate questions whether this link between two worlds was of a permanent character, or whether the intermingling was due to the migrants' specific situations and therefore only ephemeral. One of the noteworthy outcomes of this debate is the recognition of similarities between US and African cities regarding their rapid growth and their capacity to host a wide range of different cultures (Otiso and Owusu 2008).

New Approaches to the Study of Urban Life-Worlds in Africa

The following sections do not intend to reanimate these old debates. There are at least two new and complementary aspects that constitute innovative approaches to understanding urban life-worlds and which allow us to see the phenomena related to mobility in urban contexts in a more differentiated way.

One of these approaches is transnationalism, a concept which has been increasingly acknowledged over the last 15 years. Based on studies on migrants of Caribbean origin in New York, Nina Glick Schiller (1992) and others (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003; Vertovec 2009) have elucidated some characteristics of transnational people. The migrants maintain networks involving people at the place of origin and specific "fields of social action" at the hometown and destination of migration. An example of these "fields of social action" is the organization of funerals (Mazzucato and Kabki 2006). Professional activities in a wide range of domains may provide the basis for the economic survival in both places. This can be illustrated by

the activities of transnational individuals related to mobile telephony and communication centres (Hackenbroich and Vöckler 2007; Paragas 2005). Transnational networks have a direct impact on the urban life-worlds, insofar as the mobile people find places in cities like Paris and New York to articulate their esteem for both cultures, the one of the destination and the one of the place of origin. Very often, these networks are based on relations of kin. Remittances from the destination to the parents and children at the place of origin constitute a crucial aspect of these networks (Nieswand 2009).

The concept of transnationalism is also relevant for an appropriate description of urban life-worlds. Mobile individuals in a city who maintain ties to places elsewhere do provide a particular contribution to the city's image and to its specificity. This particular contribution consists of cultural, social and economic practices referring to the remote place. These contributions are part of a city's image. Investigations on the transnational relations of urbanites should start with actors like mobile groups or individuals, who have a very particular influence on the urban life-worlds (Smith 2005). The concept of transnationalism expands the framework of the study of urban life-worlds, insofar as it asks for a broadened perspective, transgressing the logic of one singular nation or city. It would be misleading to confine a city to a spatial approach which highlights just one culture and one nation (Smith 2001; Glick Schiller and Caglar 2009). Instead of the logic of places, an examination of the biographies of the actors is more relevant in order to bring the transnational actors into the focus of analysis. Their perspectives and networks – stretching beyond the spatial context of the current life-world and its time frame – need to be integrated into urban studies.

A second approach is closely related to these methodological requirements for an appropriate study of urban life-worlds. This aspect also transgresses the older debates' limited perspectives on urban societies. It deals with the images of the city that are important for the self-understanding of the people in the city. Generally speaking, the global images of African cities reflect their ambivalent evaluation. On the one hand, they are associated with the fastest-growing societies worldwide and are considered to be hotbeds of creativity (UN-Habitat 2003). There is no other place currently being exposed to such explicit expectations of innovation with regard to political and societal developments (Koolhaas and van der Haak 2005). Cities in Africa are also perceived to have an increasing relevance as centres of modern art and exhibitions. In some cases, like Dakar (Dak'art), Ouagadougou (FESPACO), Johannesburg (Biennale) and others, these cities already play an important role in the global discourse on new forms of art (Vincent 2005).

On the other hand, cities in Africa are represented in the global media as breeding grounds for violence and misery. This refers in particular to sites of civil war (Mogadishu, N'Djamena, Abidjan, Freetown), but also to unbearable mismanagement with regard to infrastructure – for example, the decay and congestion of urban roads, the deficient water supply and the malfunction of waste disposal. This deplorable state of affairs sometimes leads to the assumption that all cities in Africa are slums and that any further growth will lead to catastrophic situations (Davis 2006; Pieterse 2008).

The contradiction between the quite high esteem – as creative places – and the repeated reference to the fundamental problems should be read as an indicator of an insufficient understanding of urban life-worlds in Africa as such. Against the background of these contradictions, the challenge of a scientific description is to provide a more consistent basis for the understanding of these places and societies, linked to expectations and disappointments, and to experiences of creativity but also to those of despair (Murray and Myers 2007).

To manage this challenge, the focus on mobility appears to be particularly helpful because it refers to the experiences and expectations of many urban dwellers. Thus, cities are intermediate places, representing a transitory stage for many of their inhabitants, whose biographies refer to rural contexts or to other cities. At the same time, cities are places where people stay during their preparations for the next step of a journey which might lead to another city on the continent, or to a place beyond Africa. Cities are not confined places, but rather segments in networks that link them to other cities. In the framework of this expanded understanding, the city might therefore be approached as an "invisible city" (De Boeck and Plissart 2004).

This kind of contextualization refuses the prioritization of an exclusive link to singular places or images and has quite concrete consequences for urban life-worlds. Cities in Africa are full of references to forms of urbanity and lifestyles which can be associated with European, US or Asian cities (Malaquais 2004; Weiss 2002; Weiss 2009). However, mobility does not just address the question of the factual access to other cities, places and urban cultures. In this extended definition, mobility is a strategy that makes a particular use of names, practices and images associated with towns on other continents and thereby creates linkages (Salazar 2010; Syed 2007). Mobility and the esteem of other places have an outstanding relevance, reaching beyond the urban life-worlds in Africa; it also explains the "African character" of some neighbourhoods in Paris and New York (Copeland-Carson 2004; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000; Stoller 2002).

Obviously, it is not unproblematic to identify this imagined mobility with a life-world, which could still be related to Africa (Garcia Canclini 1995;

Nutall 2004). But it is important to question any exclusive or privileged relation to an "African character" (whatever that might mean). This idea of "not being exclusively African in character" is the reason these unchained urban life-worlds are perceived as having such an outstanding dynamic and vitality. Furthermore, it is precisely this affirmative attitude to the hybrid character and the very often enthusiastic appreciation of cultural phenomena from all parts of the world that generate the power for the cities' moments of expansion. Thus, cities in Africa should not be understood as devices of (cultural) integration, but merely as heterogeneous, expanding and sometimes aggressive cultural entities (Behrens 2007).

Recently, there has been debate about whether the notion of transnational communities can be associated with a concept of "locality" at all. Some authors argue that – in spite of the transnational character of the social groups in question – there is a struggle over power that defines the superior relevance of one particular locality (Lentz 2001; Smith 2005). Others define the "transnational community" in a more complex framework and insist on the intermingling of interests and powers of different levels. Locality could then only be identified through a process of "scaling", where the local is the bottom end of the scalar effect, including translocal and transnational phenomena (Levitt 1999; Glick Schiller 2005).

One consequence of the decision to transgress boundaries and to self-consciously adopt new cultural elements is the difficulty of delimiting cities in Africa spatially. For this reason, it is appropriate in many contexts to speak about the "deterritorialization" of cities in Africa. These agglomerations grow at such a speed that it has become sometimes unclear whether a settlement in the vicinity is part of the city or not. Therefore, the study of the peri-urban has become a field of its own, investigating the question of specific contributions by these "in-between" areas to the urban life (Drechsel, Graefe, and Fink 2007).

The territoriality of cities in Africa has not only become questionable due to their rapid growth; the difficulty in delimiting a city is also linked to the problem of identifying a "centre". Very often a given city has several centres, depending on whether economic activities, cultural life or traffic are considered main criteria. But, even if such a scale is defined, historically we have seen that peripheral places have sometimes very quickly turned into central locations, and old city centres have sometimes lost their relevance (Heeg 2008). Therefore, it becomes sometimes impossible to delimit the space and structure of the urban in Africa (Guèye and Fall 2005; Boesen and Marfaing 2007).

Methodological Implications

The two aspects presented here can only be related to each other through in-depth studies on a micro scale. Such studies should highlight the entanglement of people and places without neglecting the meaningful aspects that relate them to other places. This should be done through a phenomenological approach linking the immediate character of a situated perception with the chronologically deeper horizons of past experiences (Waldenfels 1997). Compared to other approaches, the phenomenological perspective simultaneously grasps the current, past, and expected mobility in urban life-worlds in concrete contexts (Pelican and Tatah 2009). An example of this is the detailed documentation of moments of departure or arrival of migrants (Klute and Hahn 2007). In these moments, the hidden dimensions of mobility become clear. This refers not only to the persons who actually migrate, but also to the families or other persons present in the moment of saying goodbye or welcome.

Furthermore, the phenomenological approach has the advantage of detaching the experience of mobility from the present, linking it with the experiences of mobile life. Being mobile, having the personal and immediate experience of moving from one place to the other, is part of the biographies of most urbanites. This method suggests that motion is the combined outcome from the bodily experience of "being on the move" and the biographical dimension, i.e. having the experience of past migrations (Kastner 2010). Both of them refer to the level of the individual as well as to the expectations of the social environment, as has been stressed by the approach to migration as part of a "migratory project" (Boyer 2005).

In this framework, it is important to consider the different rhythms of mobility. Mobility of urban dwellers can refer to their daily itinerary from a place outside town or a peripheral sector to the city's centre, a path that is travelled in both directions on the same day. Mobility also includes periods of immobility, when someone prepares for the moment he will have the necessary means and networks to engage in labour migration. The wide range of forms of mobility is further illustrated by the example of forced resettlement of slum dwellers from the city's centre to the periphery, something currently happening in many cities in Africa. The fourth example of a particular rhythm of mobility in African towns is the search by mobile traders for more promising locations, for markets that might reveal higher turnover and more profit.

An appropriate description of urban life-worlds in motion will not only address the different forms of mobility, it will also consider the intermingling of these forms of mobility: None of these forms exists without the other. Each one is – although to different degrees – a precondition for the

others. It is only the sum of all these kinds of mobility that draws an accurate picture of the cultural dynamics in African cities.

In his work *Rhythmanalysis*, Henry Lefebvre (2004) proposed a methodological paradigm addressing the connections between these different levels of mobility. He integrates his suggestions precisely into the context of urban life-worlds. He furthermore underlines the importance not only of the actual migrations but also of the expectations and experiences of mobility and in particular the possibility of changing one's own life through migration. All these aspects are relevant for the constitution of transnational communities within cities.

The context of an individual's evaluation of himself depends on whether at a given moment his "migration project" to the intended destination appears to be possible or not (Carling 2002). Vice versa: Someone self-consciously stating that he has the means and knowledge to move to any place he desires can be decisive for his identity. Thus, the image of a city is determined by the perspectives of the people who live there, but also by those who consider another horizon, extending beyond the city as part of their life-worlds. For them, the city is a "stepping stone" on their journey to somewhere else (Sinatti 2008). This might appear to be an abstract statement; however, it has been impressively evidenced by Idrissou Mora Kpai's film (2005) about the Northern Nigerien town of Arlit. Mora Kpai shows the migratory biographies of the portrayed persons; each of them understands his role in the city by reference to his story. Every man, every woman, every family has an experience of mobility from the past. Some found a profitable business in Arlit, and many of them expect to move to Europe. Some of the expectations become reality, most of them fail. Independently from this, everyone in the city has an idea of to which other place (back to the village of origin, ahead to Europe) his journey might lead. In this perspective, the city becomes a crossroads of pathways following different rhythms.

Lefebvre (2004: 5ff.) called his approach a "critique of the thing", thereby distinguishing his method from approaches that consider cities to be a kind of material object, or a collection of objects (buildings, roads, places, etc.). This is a valuable clarification on the methodological level; it can be understood as supporting the above-mentioned argument about the deterritorialization of the urban life-worlds. However, there is a particular "materiality of mobility" which contributes to the understanding of urban life-worlds. The materiality of mobility can be a matter of fact on a macro-economic scale, as is the case with the slum and the seemingly unacceptable dwellings of its inhabitants. Poverty is a material fact, and many decision-makers in municipalities in Africa are convinced that "getting rid" of the

slums' materiality is only possible by forced resettlement (Marris 1961; Pellow 1991, 2002).

The materiality of mobile moments in urban life-worlds can be found also in other places that serve the movements of urbanites, such as bus stations, taxi points, hotels or market places. These places have been categorized by James Clifford (1988: 237) as "chronotopes". Clifford thereby refers to the temporal character of these items, which may be considered indicators of the temporality and the "rhythmization" of urban life-worlds. The list of objects and places indicating the mobility of life-worlds could be extended to include luggage, electronic devices associated with travelling, mobile people and, last but not least, clothing. A closer look at many different kinds of objects indicating mobility gives ever more evidence to the materiality of migration (Basu and Coleman 2008).

Conclusion

"Mobility" in this larger sense is the key to understanding the notion of the deterritorialization of urban life-worlds (Casey 1996). The concept of a city as a spatially bounded locality proves to fall short with regard to the self-understanding of many urbanites and their mobile life-worlds. The protagonists taken in focus – transnational groups and mobile people – understand their actions in contexts, which draw their relevance from aspects far beyond the place of the current event. This contribution also proposes a pathway to the methodological consequences of this insight. It is no longer possible to limit studies of urban life-worlds to one single city; what is needed, rather, is a consideration of the interconnectedness of cities. This does not mean we should do away with the ethnography of particular places (Hahn 2004); however, these local ethnographies need to be complemented by more complex strategies that also take the cultural settings of other places into account. Deterritorialization may be a clue for a better understanding of cities in Africa. Through the diversity of linkages and rhythms, there is still the idea that the reference to a remote place contributes to the strength and vitality of any local, urban life-world.

Transnationalism and the esteem of globally circulating images of urbanity constitute substantial innovation in the study of cities in Africa. Compared to the methodological milestones of situated emergence of urban networks and the creation of new social forms of everyday life and rituals during the 1960s, the current reframing of urban studies is of equal relevance. At that time, authors like Mitchell, Epstein and Cohen provided methods to study culture beyond the culturally bounded spaces of villages and "ethnic territories". Currently, authors like Glick Schiller, De Boeck,

Malaquais, Nutall, Weiss, and others provide an innovative framework for dealing with locality in a new way. Their studies on cities in Africa acknowledge the role of urban cultures in the context of understanding African societies, and they expand the methodology of ethnographic studies in general. They urge Africanist scholars to reconsider the connectedness of different – and sometimes distant – places around the globe.

However, this contribution does not come to a definite conclusion about "what African cities are". In contrast, it is more appropriate to refer to the dynamics of expansion of urban life-worlds as a characteristic which does not imply a specific notion about the actors' "Africanness" and their networks. This is actually one of the reasons that it is possible for African urbanites to become cosmopolites and to redefine "Africa" as a topic, as a set of practices, something also done in Europe. Questions about African cultures are no longer answered only in Africa but must also be linked with Dubai, Paris and New York, among other places. This new dynamic takes urban life-worlds in Africa as a starting point; the new perspective adopted thereby will probably play a decisive role for the future understanding of African societies in general.

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Städtische Lebenswelten in Bewegung: In Afrika und darüber hinaus

Zusammenfassung: Auch wenn die Ethnographie städtischer Gesellschaften in der Geschichte der Ethnologie nie eine große Rolle gespielt hat, leisteten doch Untersuchungen zu urbanen Lebenswelten in Afrika einen wichtigen Beitrag zur frühen theoretischen Entwicklung sozialwissenschaftlicher Stadtforschung. Wie die Ethnographie von Migranten aus ländlichen Räumen in afrikanischen Städten schon damals deutlich machte, sind kulturelle Diversität und Kreativität grundlegende und dauerhafte Elemente urbaner Kultur in Afrika (und weltweit). In letzter Zeit haben zwei wichtige Aspekte diese frühen Einsichten ergänzt: 1) Verschiedene Formen der Mobilität haben durch das Konzept der Transnationalität neue Relevanz gewonnen. 2) Zu urbanen Lebenswelten gehört auch die aktive Aneignung global zirkulierender Bilder und Lebensstile; sie trägt wesentlich zur kultu-

rellen Dynamik afrikanischer Städte bei. Beide Aspekte sind ursächlich für die außerordentliche Komplexität heutiger urbaner Lebenswelten in Afrika. Daher steht infrage, ob es noch angemessen ist, von der „Lokalität" dieser Lebenswelten zu sprechen. Zugleich erklären diese Aspekte das Selbstbewusstsein der Angehörigen urbaner Gesellschaften in Afrika. Sie tragen zum expansiven Charakter dieser Gesellschaften bei sowie zu dem Eindruck, städtische Gesellschaften in Afrika gehörten zu den innovativsten und kreativsten weltweit.

Schlagwörter: Afrika, Stadtentwicklung, Kulturanthropologie, Transnationalismus, Globalisierung