



## African Cities, By Comparison: Urban Land, Politics and Agency in East and West Africa

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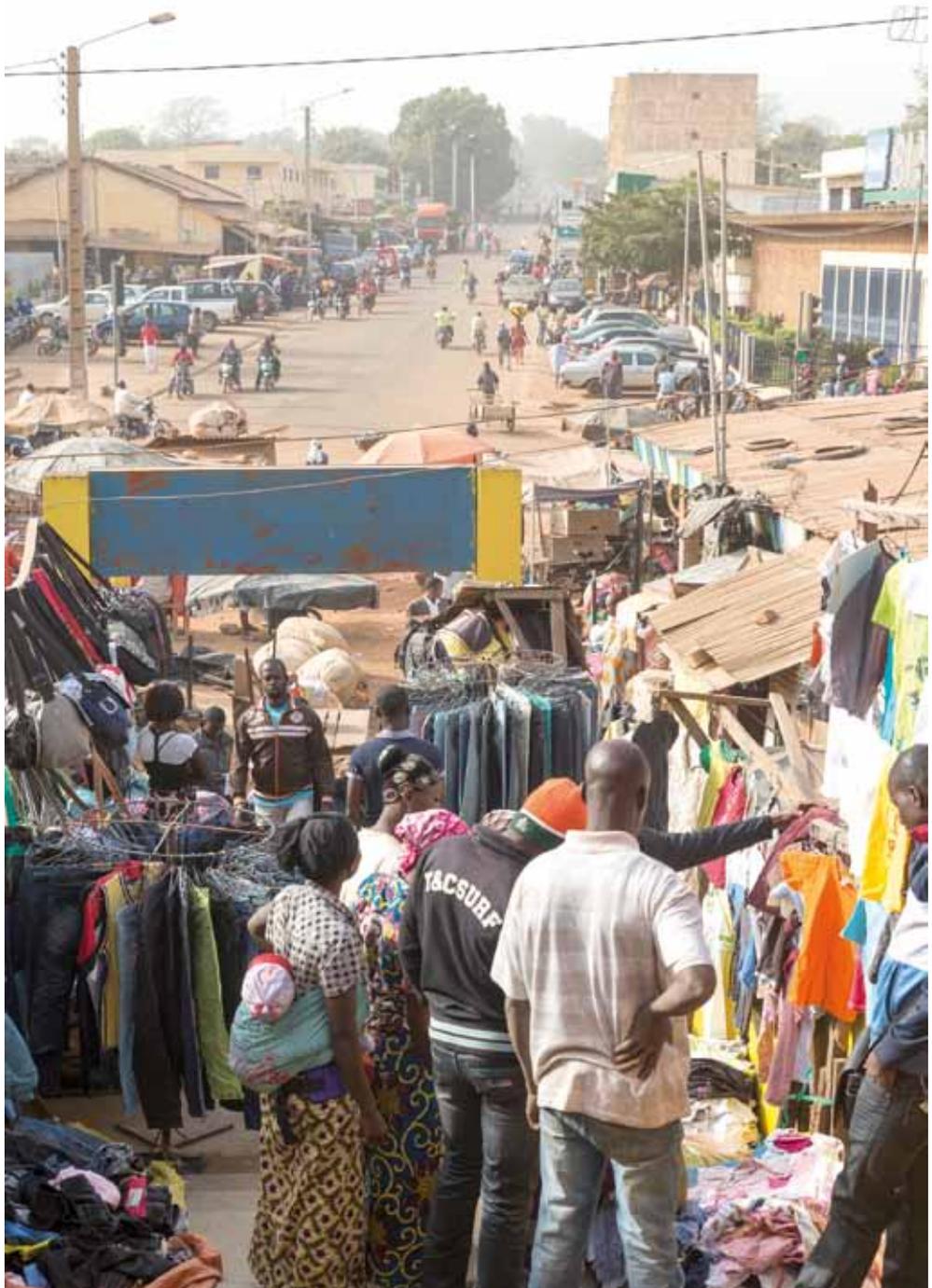
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*Quartier 14* was once an upmarket neighbourhood of Korhogo. Later, the inhabitants adapted the houses to their needs, for instance by opening walls and inserting small shops that open onto the streets.  
T. Förster, January 2017

Korhogo is an ordinary city in the West African savannah:  
The market and the main street leading to independence square.

*T. Förster, January 2015*



# Introduction: Urban Land, Politics and Agency in East and West Africa

Lucy Koechlin

## Urban Land as a Fertile Trope of Research

This latest issue of the Basel Papers on Political Transformations is the result of a joint research project on corruption, conflict and cities in East and West Africa.<sup>1</sup> Our key interest is the formation of urban governance arrangements in African secondary cities<sup>2</sup> that have experienced violent conflict in very different contexts. The cities, Korhogo and Bouaké in Côte d'Ivoire and Eldoret and Kisumu in Kenya, are now rapidly growing urban centres, changing their shape and possibly their character with new investment projects underway and new neighbourhoods mushrooming. This growth of smaller cities that are often overshadowed by the economic and political dominance of the capital cities is part of broader processes of urban transformations in Africa. However, these cities play an important role in the political configuration of the countries. They experienced particular forms of violence because of their specific political history and position with the broader political setting of the countries. The expulsions, expropriations and lootings that took place during those periods have left scars on the relations between social actors, and have thrown up serious societal questions around justice, reconciliation and legitimacy. They are also significant given the fact that urban land is becoming both more sought-after and commercially valuable, raising the stakes with regard to access to and ownership of urban land.

For these reasons, we chose urban land as an entry point for our research, seeking to shed light on practices and discourses of urban land ownership. The claims and practices of social actors articulated around questions of identity and legitimacy related to urban land illuminate the distinctiveness of such articulations, pertaining to localised and contextual factors; an example from the following contributions is the way in which the rebellion in Côte d'Ivoire and the significance of Bouaké as headquarters of the rebels affected the configuration of new neighbourhoods after the rebellion (see Sanogo, this issue).

However, the articulations around urban land are not only important tropes of research to understand local practices and actors; they also provide fertile in-roads into a better understanding into the linkages between the 'local' and the 'national', i.e. into the linkages and dialectical relationships between localised and national discourses. Devolution in Kenya is a case in point, where discourses about rights, identity and belonging are played out around the new constitution, giving the legal and regulatory framework a renewed political dimension that also shapes conflicts around land (see Badoux, this issue).

1 See Förster and Koechlin (2011) and Koechlin (2015) for discussions of the conceptual framework of the project.

2 See Koechlin and Förster (forthcoming) and Ammann and Sanogo (2017) for contributions on the meaning and significance of secondary cities in Africa.

We argue, thus, that urban land merits more empirical and theoretical attention. Indeed, it has been systematically neglected in the shadow of longstanding interest in rural land.<sup>3</sup> As important as the findings regarding conflicts around citizenship, belonging, identity, access to and ownership of rural land are, they do not translate seamlessly into an urban setting. The formation of urban spaces and the interactions between urban social actors are distinct, and these distinctions are relevant for the claims and practices around urban land. At the same time, the discourse of belonging and citizenship in rural areas clearly is iterated and inscribed in ‘urban’ discourses – which underlines a further argument that ‘the rural’ and ‘the urban’ cannot be neatly separated. The two case studies by Aïdas Sanogo on Bouaké and by Miriam Badoux on Eldoret in this issue provide insights into these actors and practices around urban land. The urban articulations described here range from outright conflict to more subtle underlying practices of inclusion and exclusion. The articles also show-case the layers of meanings shaping social actors’ interactions around urban land, as well as the breadth of repertoires which social actors draw upon to shape these interactions.

## Comparative Methodology: More than a Gesture

In addition to illustrating the fertility of urban land as a trope of research, this issue pays particular attention to a discussion of the meta-dimension of comparative urban research, without which no scholarly harvest of even the most fertile tropes can be achieved. We believe, along with others (e.g. Robinson 2016), that this is an immensely important question, especially against the backdrop of rapid and, arguably, fundamental transformations of local and global urban landscapes.

Our own research project implied multiple levels of comparison. Although the individual case-studies can be read as classic ethnographic approaches, the first layer of comparison is inherent in the research undertaken in different parts, neighbourhoods and *quartiers* of a city. Are the claims and practices of access to urban land in an informal settlement the same as the ones of a rich neighbourhood in the same town? More interesting perhaps are the degrees of difference between neighbourhoods, which cannot necessarily be seen, let alone understood at first glance. How are issues of land ownership resolved in areas built up during a violent conflict, for instance, in comparison to older or, on the contrary, new and emerging neighbourhoods? Do social actors of a particular estate make use of the law to address conflicts in different ways than social actors of another estate? The questions emerge out of empirical findings, and from an ethnographic perspective can only be fixed in advance for heuristic purposes. Both the questions as well as the findings which emerge within different parts of a city, however, are highly significant contributions to a more diverse, differentiated and relevant urban theory.

The second level of comparison is on a national level, i.e. between cities within the same country. It is remarkable how different the configurations of cities are that, to all intents and purposes, from part of the same nation and the same history. Here, an understanding of specific conditions and historical urban contexts becomes highly relevant. Beyond a deeper understanding of these conditions shaping relations and interactions between urban social actors and the formation of political spaces in particular cities, on a more general level these insights shed light on the texture and fissures of national politics.

3 For important contributions see for instance Lund (2011), Jacob and Le Meur (2012), Peters (2013), Boone (2014), or Lund and Boone (2015).



The Marine Office of the Kenyan Police in the almost abandoned harbour of Kisumu, Kenya.  
T. Förster, February 2017

The third level of comparison is between cities in different countries. Is it useful and meaningful to lump cities of one country into a different bracket than cities of another? Or cities that function as agricultural centres into a different bracket than administrative centres? Or cities that have experienced more vicious levels of violent conflict with each other, as opposed to cities which experienced a lesser degree of violence? Again, neither the questions nor the answers lend themselves to a response *a priori*. Lines of comparative enquiry open up with the findings on a more local level, and may indeed be surprising. Patterns and regimes of urban political articulations may become visible among unlikely suspects, or rather among unlikely aspects. Or again, it may become clear that the emergence of seeming similarities across cities may be due to fundamentally different processes (for a critical discussion, see Förster, this issue). In this sense, and across and between all levels of comparison, we join a growing choir of scholars calling for a more explorative and less pre-determined, normative approach to urban comparison.

This brings me to the third contribution in this issues, which dwells on comparative methodology. The dynamics of critical and new approaches to comparative gestures<sup>4</sup> in urban studies has freed up a lot of creative energy, but there are still many theoretical questions which remain neglected. Till Förster (this issue) seeks to address some of the main shortcomings of current approaches from an anthropological perspective, and sketch out more than a comparative gesture that incorporates actors and articulations.

4 The “comparative gesture” was coined by Jennifer Robinson in an important article on comparative methodology in urban studies (cf. Robinson 2011), which she has since reframed in terms of “comparative tactics” (cf. Robinson 2016).

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# "Tell me who your neighbour is and I will tell you who you are"<sup>1</sup>: Settlement Patterns in Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire

Aïdas Sanogo

## Introduction

It was 1pm. The sun was just at the right temperature: for once, since the beginning of this week, it was actually not "biting" me. Let the record show that a walker, I am definitely not. I miss my bike and motorbike so much! How can a Ouagalaise – born and raised – eagerly take public transport and walk all day long instead of riding? There are taxi motos, but it's just not the same. Anyway, this friendly sun lifted up my sour mood a bit, after a not so great morning. Sir Konan<sup>2</sup> stood me up (again) for the third time in a row. I waited, and waited, and waited, until his secretary took pity on me after three and a half hours, and advised me to come back tomorrow at 7am, right before he goes out for his rounds. Here I was then, a woman on a mission, in the market of Bolomakoté, rejoicing in advance for the good *alloco*<sup>3</sup> that I would reward myself with, once I got home. I was told last week that I talk and walk like a "white person", so since then I am doing my best to walk more slowly. I don't really agree with the talking part, maybe they are not familiar with the Burkinabe accent? I try to speak Jula systematically whenever possible now, because so far no one told me that my Jula sounds "whitish". After passing a couple of stands, I spotted a bunch of *alloco* on a table, calling me by my name. Armed with my best smile, I approached the table. The lady seated behind it reminded me a bit of my grandma. So, taking the teasing tone that I use whenever I ask a favour to my granny, I addressed the old lady in Jula:

"Good afternoon Mama! How much is the *alloco* please?"

I was not expecting the look I received in return: the right mixture of disdain and exasperation. She had probably casted the same look to other people before me, because its perfection could only be reached by a long-term practice. She seized me up for a few seconds in silence, and then answered harshly in Ivorian

- 1 "Dis-moi qui est ton voisin et je te dirai qui tu es" (Discussion with a Bouaké dweller, Mr. Konaté, Bouaké, December 2014).
- 2 Sir Konan is one of my key informants. All the names have been changed in the whole text, to protect the informants' identities. The fieldnotes and the citations throughout the text have been translated from French and Ivorian French to English, by the author.
- 3 Banana plantains or cooking bananas are called *alloco* in Côte d'Ivoire.

French while looking in another direction:

“It’s 200 – 200!”

Surprised and caught off guard, I handed her a 500 CFA coin, to which she replied in the same cold tone, and still in Ivorian French:

“There’s no change.”

I dug in my bag, found a 200 CFA coin that I had saved for my taxi ride, gave it to her, and picked my allocos in silence. On my way back, I heard one of the ladies that I had passed before, whisper mockingly to her neighbour in Jula:

“Instead of buying our allocos, she went to the old Baoulé witch. And she was stupid enough to speak in Jula! What she was looking for, she found it!”

Note to self: Not everybody speaks or wants to speak Jula in the market, so learning a few words in Baoulé is not facultative, it’s a must. From now on, I will first address people I don’t know in French, and if and only if they reply in Jula, will I impress them with my “non-whitish” Jula accent. Today will definitely not be reminded as my favourite day in the field ... but I still love my life.<sup>4</sup>

- 4 Il était 13 h. Le soleil était juste à la bonne température : pour une fois depuis le début de la semaine, ça ne me croquait pas. Let the record show (Claire Huxtable’s voice): la marche n’est décidément pas mon fort. Mon vélo et ma moto me manquent. Comment on peut demander à une Ouagalaise ori-gi-gi d’utiliser les transports publics ou de marcher au lieu de se déplacer en char? Il y a des moto taxis, mais walaye kélén tè! Back to my notes: donc le gentil soleil m’a apaisé un peu, après un matin gaspillé à jouer «Luxor». M. Konan m’a encore posé un lapin ! Pour la troisième fois ! J’ai attendu jusqu’ààà... moins un j’allais me briquifier là-bas. Sa secrétaire a eu pitié de moi au bout de trois heures et demie, et elle m’a conseillé de revenir demain matin à 7h avant qu’il ne commence ses tournées. Donc voilà moi en train de gratter, dans le marché de Bolomakoté, avalant ma salive à l’avance parce que j’avais décidé de me consoler avec de l’allocos quand je vais rentrer. On m’a dit la semaine passée que je chôgôbite et que je marche comme une toubabou, donc depuis j’essaie de marcher plus lentement. Je d’accorise pas avec le chôgô là. Peut-être qu’ils ne connaissent pas l’accent Burkinabè? En tout cas, now j’essaie de parler Jula autant que possible parce qu’on ne m’a pas encore dit que je chôgô en Jula. Donc j’ai dépassé quelques tables, et puis j’ai vu un tas d’allocos that was calling me by my name. Armée de mon plus beau sourire, je m’approche. La dame assise derrière la table m’a fait penser à mémé. Je m’adresse donc à elle en utilisant le même ton chaque fois que je veux “siinmi” avec mémé:  
 “An ni tlé N’na! Loco yi djoli djoli?”  
 Tchiéé! Erreur de gaou! Façon la bonne dame m’a lorgné quoi! Walaye je suis sûre qu’elle s’est entraînée sur d’autres cobayes avant moi parce que wayiii! Elle m’a regardé de bas en haut pendant quelques instants, et puis elle dit sans même me jeter:  
 “C’est 200 – 200!”  
 J’étais tellement kabako que je n’ai rien dit, je lui ai donné 500, elle me répond sur le même ton:  
 “Y a pas monnaie!”  
 J’ai eu l’impression d’être à Dantokpa chez mes dearest tantes. J’ai fouillé dans mon sac, trouvé 200 que j’avais prévu d’utiliser pour le taxi. Je lui ai donné son argent, pris mon allocos, et j’ai ramassé mes deux pieds et puis je me suis cherchée. En repassant devant les tables que j’avais zapé, j’ai entendu une femme murmurer à sa voisine d’un ton moqueur:  
 “Yan ni a ka an ka loco san deh, a tara Baoulé soubagamoussou ni fè. Et puis a naloman ba ni tara julakan lo fô moussou kôrôba man! A toun bi min yinini ni, a yo sôrô!”  
 Note to self: C’est pas tout le monde qui parle ou veut parler Jula au marché, donc apprendre quelques mots en Baoulé n’est pas facultatif, c’est un must. A partir de désormais, je vais m’adresser aux gens que je ne connais pas en Français, et si et seulement si on me répond en Jula, je vais unleash mon Jula ori-gi-gi et les impressionner. Aujourd’hui c’était vraiment pas mon jour ... but I still love my life. :-)  
 (Fieldnotes, Bouaké, 10.11.2014).

This extract from my fieldnotes of November 2014 represents a vivid illustration of the social cleavages that can be observed among Bouaké dwellers, a few years after the 2010 war in Côte d'Ivoire. I thought that as a Julia<sup>5</sup> and French speaker, I would blend in without any linguistic barrier, no matter the circumstances, and I was proved wrong. Languages represent a powerful tool of inclusion or exclusion everywhere in the world (Parmegiani 2012; Wodak 2012), and my field site was no exception to the rule. In this article, I draw on names and terms given to specific neighbourhoods in different languages in Bouaké, to show how neighbourhood formation can be observed and analysed through urban dwellers' everyday practices. During my first weeks in Bouaké, I was struck by the languages used by children in their playground, from one neighborhood to another: In neighborhoods or parts of a neighbourhood that were mainly inhabited by a specific ethnic or cultural group, children would play football in the specific local language spoken of that group. In neighbourhoods or parts of a neighbourhood inhabited by a diversity of cultural groups, children would play football in French, rather than in their respective mother tongues. Drawing on the various reasons why dwellers would group or settle in one neighbourhood rather than another, I analyse the impact that these various groupings has on the city's expansion on the one hand, and on the relationships between urban dwellers from diverse cultural backgrounds on the other hand.

Several names and expressions (sometimes pejorative) are used by urban dwellers to designate and categorise neighbourhoods' formation. The most common expressions I encountered in Bouaké were linked to the place of origin and the economic status, such as "Bousmani", "Kanga", or "Nouveaux riches". "Bousmani" is a pejorative term mainly used by urban dwellers who identify themselves as "Northerners", referring to all the individuals or communities in Côte d'Ivoire, whose place of origin is everything but the savannah. In this context, the savannah region, mostly characterised by plains and dry heat, is opposed to greener regions with dense forests and humid heat. "Bousmani" particularly designates "Southern Ivorians" and nationals from other neighbouring coastal Western African countries such as Liberia and Ghana. The name is believed to come from the English language, "Bushman". In Bouaké it mainly relates to Baoulé people and anyone else not from the "North".

The name "Kanga", on the other hand, is a term mainly used by urban dwellers that identify themselves as Baoulé people, and refers to a pejorative way of naming a slave in the Baoulé language. "Kanga" designates anyone who is not from the Akan culture. In Bouaké, "Kanga" is mainly associated with nationals from Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, Niger, Guinea and "Northern Ivorians". The third and last distinction observed in terms of neighbourhoods' formation is designated by the term "Nouveaux riches", or "New rich", when literally translated from French to English. The expression "Nouveaux riches" is mostly used by Bouaké dwellers to designate neighbourhoods with the highest rate of land speculation. Most of the time, such neighbourhoods are developed by Bouaké inhabitants who got rich during the rebel-held decade from 2002 to 2011, and invested in real estate. The "Nouveaux riches" neighbourhoods' inhabitants are then mainly tenants rather than houses owners. Together, the "Bousmani", the "Kanga" and the "Nouveaux riches" neighbourhoods symbolise three core elements of the tension surrounding land issues in Bouaké, as described further down.

After the appealing experience of purchasing banana plantains, I got a better understanding of what some of my interlocutors had explained to me, when we talked about the effects of the Ivorian crisis in Bouaké in general and in their daily lives in particular. According to them, the reasons and motivations behind neighbourhood's

5 I solely focus here on the linguistic attributes of the term "Julia", which is one of the most used languages in Bouaké and in West Africa in general. It is also commonly referred to as a "traders' language" by Bouaké dwellers. For more about "Julia", see Mahir (2004) and Konaté (2016).

formation have not changed, but have rather been reinforced as expressed by this sentence that often came up: "Tell me who your neighbour is, and I will tell you who you are". It is important to note that what is examined in the following lines is not a new phenomenon. I shed light on a process that was already established. It however became more and more visible not only in the daily interactions among dwellers, but also in the relationships between urban dwellers and various authorities (state and non-state ones) regarding the city's urban governance in general, despite the discourse on reconciliation broadcasted in the Ivorian media since 2011.

The paper is organised around two main sections. The first one provides a background review of the Ivorian crisis at the national and the local level in Bouaké, with testimonies from a variety of social actors. In the second part, I present settlement patterns as strategic signs of the urban space's formation, coupled with a growing social malaise. The paper is based on empirical data collected through interviews, informal discussions and observations carried over eight months from 2014 to 2015 in various neighbourhoods of Bouaké. I interacted with Bouaké dwellers from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds living in the three kinds of neighbourhoods above mentioned. Whether they were shop owners, businesswomen, civil servants, electricians, contractors or religious leaders, my interlocutors related to their place of origin as much as to their professional occupations or their economic status to explain their own choice of neighbourhoods. However, in their accounts of the crisis decade, how they experienced it and how it affected the settlements' choices, the place of origin was the most dominant criterion taken into consideration.

## The Ivorian "Crisis:" Official Landmarks and Insiders' Perspectives

A brief narration of the socio-political crisis that rocked Côte d'Ivoire from 2002 to 2011 is essential to a better understanding of the current state of settlement patterns in Bouaké. In this segment, divided in two, I draw on official highlights and parts of a few Bouaké dwellers' narrations, to summarise the events that led to an accumulation of suspicion and frustration.

Regarding the Ivorian crisis at the national level, many academic articles and books have dealt with the Ivorian crisis' causes, as well as its consequences in terms of generational conflict and identity issues within the Ivorian society in its whole (LeBlanc 1998; Chauveau 2000; Dozon 2000; Ero et al. 2003; Akindès 2004; Banegas 2007; Arnaut 2008a,b; Gadou 2009; Förster 2010; Freund 2012; Bjarnesen 2013). The post-crisis' effects in urban settings have been covered in a few Ivorian cities, namely Man, Korhogo and Abidjan (Förster 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c; Koné 2011; Yeboué 2011; Heitz 2014). However, the impact of the crisis on the city of Bouaké and more particularly the nuances between "official" urban governance and urban dwellers' practices have not been much documented. What is now referred to as "the Ivorian crisis" or "the war" is analysed differently according to authors (Akindès 2004; Marshall-Fratani 2006; Gagou 2009; Förster 2010, 2014; McGovern 2011; Hellweg 2012). When the crisis starts is already a question of political articulation. From the country's first president Félix Houphouët-Boigny (1905–1993), to the current one, Alassane Dramane Ouattara, named ADO, (b. 1942), several social, political and economic factors have to be taken into consideration: (1) The single party regime of most of Houphouët-Boigny's rule, during which demands for independence from the Western part of the country were rejected, (2) the thriving economy primarily based on the culture of cocoa and coffee coupled

to the attraction of labour coming from neighbouring countries (mainly from current Burkina Faso) to sustain the agricultural sector, (3) the crisis of raw commodity prices in the 1980s, (4) the implementation of the "Ivoirité" ideological project<sup>6</sup> in the 1990s, and the consecutive social and identity crisis. All these factors have led to the division of the country into two parts in 2002, with Bouaké chosen as the headquarters of the armed (FAFN<sup>7</sup>) and the civilian forces (FN<sup>8</sup>) of the rebellion.

The absence of diversity on the political scene since the 1960s for over three decades and the censuring of any tentative opposition political party till the 1990s nurtured resentment towards Houphouët-Boigny, whose opponents accused him of blatant patronage unfavourable to the citizens from the Western part of the country. Migration from various West African citizens to Côte d'Ivoire (before and after the 1960s) was strongly encouraged first by colonial and then by Ivorian authorities to sustain the Ivorian economy. The migration waves were however not concretely coupled to an "integration policy" in the country. This situation led to a growing number of "undocumented" citizens, who turned out to be the first targets of the economic recovery policies initiated in the 1990s following several raw commodity prices crises in the 1980s. The economic recovery policies, together with various political games and their subsequent hidden agendas, in turn, have brought up the creation and the implementation of the "Ivorianness" ideological project in the 1990s. This project aimed at defining who was an Ivorian or not, and most importantly, who could benefit from several advantages linked to the Ivorian citizenship: land ownership for instance, or other immovable and movable properties, as well as the right to vote. All these triggers that favoured the subsequent Ivorian crisis had an important outcome on Bouaké, more particularly so from the 19<sup>th</sup> of September 2002.

Bouaké, the second most populated city of Côte d'Ivoire, is located in the centre of the country, at 350 km from the economic capital, Abidjan. During the Ivorian crisis from 2002 to 2011, the city was the headquarters of the rebellion's both components: the armed wing and the civilian wing. For about ten years, Bouaké dwellers experienced profound transformations on several levels, with some changes more visible than others. Their city's landscape was modified mostly during the first five years of the rebellion, from 2002 to 2007. A considerable number of buildings and roads deteriorated gradually or were destroyed. Other distinctive characteristics of the alterations brought to the city's scenery were abandoned houses, mainly in the Southern part of Bouaké, and the expansion of newly built neighbourhoods, considered by most of my interlocutors as the concrete investment of "the spoils of war" from the rebellion main actors. On a slightly less visible but not least important scale, the relationships among individuals and communities were also altered. September 19, 2002 marked the official start of the rebellion that would last till 2011. For Bouaké dwellers, this decade meant many and different things at the same time. However, despite the diversity of experiences, most of my interlocutors agreed on the fact that the crisis has reinforced an existing seclusion and general feeling of suspicion.

The beginning of the crisis is remembered differently, depending on the political affiliation and ethnic or cultural background of each dweller. Those who were supporters of the former president Laurent Gbagbo feared for their lives when the rebellion

6 Implemented in the 1990s by the former Ivorian president Henri Konan Bédié, the "Ivorianness" ideological project was used as a political tool to determine the criteria to be fulfilled before being considered and accepted as a real Ivorian. For more on the "concept d'ivoirité", its origins and its impact on the Ivorian crisis, see Dozon (2000), Banégas and Losch (2002), and Loada (2006).

7 FAFN stands for Forces Armées des Forces Nouvelles.

8 FN stands for Forces Nouvelles.

settled its headquarters in Bouaké. Aside from the political affiliation, the identity crisis that had existed in the country for decades, and that fuelled the open armed conflict in the early 2000s, brought a hint of "Northerners' revenge on the system" to the rebellion. This situation then divided the population of Bouaké into four: those who did not feel safe enough to stay in Bouaké, those who welcomed the rebellion, those who were not really concerned by the ethnic or cultural tensions but feared the violence and had the means to leave Bouaké, and finally, those who did not fear for their lives, but mainly stayed in Bouaké because they could not afford to go somewhere else.

Mr. Traoré and Mr. Kouamé's experiences of the very first months of the rebellion sum up two different ways Bouaké dwellers approached the events. On the one hand, some, like Mr. Kouamé – an electrician by profession and inhabitant of a "Bousmani" neighbourhood – lived in constant fear and left the city. On the other hand, others like M. Traoré – a contractor and inhabitant of a "Kanga" neighbourhood – applauded the rebellion and welcomed it. I met Mr. Kouamé and Mr. Traoré in 2014 during my first field stay in Bouaké. Despite the coincidental circumstances of the two meetings, both men became key persons to my research.

When I moved to my own accommodation in August 2014, I had some issues with the bulb in the living room. After an almost tragic failed attempt to solve the issue by myself, I actively looked for professional help and was directed to Mr. Kouamé. The following day, we agreed by phone to meet at my place in the afternoon. At his arrival, after inspecting the damaged switch, he first laughed at my attempt to use a sharpened knife instead of a screw, then went on to warn me for next time, because the house and its equipment were from the 1970s and required more care than modern houses. Once done with fixing the switch, he asked me more questions about my accent, where I came from, the reason of my presence in Bouaké, and we ended up conversing for about an hour. From that day on, I had several encounters with Mr. Kouamé. A man in his mid-forties, married with two children in 2014, he had stopped his education in high school for financial reasons, and became an electrician by learning-by-doing. Mr. Kouamé was considering going to Gabon or to Europe "to try his luck" and I represented a great opportunity for him to learn as much as possible about life "behind water".<sup>9</sup> I was at the beginning of my data collection, trying to build a network and so far only had contact with civil servants at the construction ministry, the prefecture, and the town hall. Building a relationship with a 'regular' Bouaké dweller was a great incentive for me to stay in contact with Mr. Kouamé, more particularly so when I learned during our conversations that he was born and had grown up in Bouaké, and had also stayed in the city for a while at the beginning of the rebellion, before leaving for Abidjan. About a month after our first meeting and three informal discussions, he agreed to be recorded for formal interviews, but had the right to ask me to stop recording some portions of our interviews whenever he wanted to communicate some information in 'off'. During the second formal interview, he shared how he experienced the crisis, and what struck him the most:

It was really not easy. Those who could do it just left. And if you live with your neighbour, when he leaves, he doesn't tell you eh! You wake up in the morning, he has left. There was suspicion; we did not know who was who. People, before leaving, in order not to draw attention, some left their belongings in their houses; you don't know what the political affiliation of your neighbour is! There was mutual suspicion. So, when some left Bouaké, they did not even say goodbye to their neighbours. He wakes up in the morning, his neighbour is gone. Maybe it's after two, three days, that's when you will realise that your neighbour has left Bouaké. That's how we lived. [...] The 16<sup>th</sup> of December

9 In Ivorian French, the expression "Derrière l'eau" means "overseas".

2002, I left and walked from Bouaké till N'Djébonoua, for about 21 kilometers. But that was nothing, some walked more than that.<sup>10</sup>

Mr. Kouamé's emphasis on how he and other fellows ran away from Bouaké is worth highlighting. The silence and complete lack of communication among neighbours who formerly used to share their joys and pains denote of the social malaise present back then and experienced by urban dwellers. Fear, uncertainty and suspicion were the predominant feelings. It is also important to mention the social value given to good neighbours' relationships. In Bouaké, as well as in many West African cities, it is not unusual to hear sentences like "in case of an emergency, when you are sick, or if there is a fire at your place, before your people (family and friends) can get to you, your neighbours will be the first to rescue you because they are closer to you. So, don't joke with good neighbour's relationships in town, it can save your life!"<sup>11</sup> This bond linking Mr. Kouamé to his neighbours explains why he was struck by the sudden lack of communication among neighbours in the early stage of the crisis. He was shocked by the shift in relationships induced by the prevalent feeling of suspicion, to the point that he repeated it over and over again during this interview.

Mr. Traoré, a head of family in his forties and inhabitant of a "Nouveaux riches" neighbourhood, experienced the early rebellion period differently than Mr. Kouamé. I had met Mr. Traoré in September 2014, during a field visit in the Northern outskirts of Bouaké with a colleague from the University of Bouaké<sup>12</sup>. I was taking pictures of a newly built building while listening to my colleague talking about urban expansion in that specific neighbourhood, when a man approached us, introduced himself as the neighbourhood's "youth representative",<sup>13</sup> and proceeded to calmly question us about our presence and why we were taking pictures. We introduced ourselves and explained that we were working on urban governance in Bouaké, hence our notebooks and cameras. Our interlocutor then gave us his name, Mr. Traoré, and told us more about himself: He had been a bus driver during the rebellion decade, mainly transporting people between Bouaké in Côte d'Ivoire and Bobo Dioulasso in Burkina Faso, before his current position as a contractor. Picking up on my accent and my family name, Mr. Traoré rightly guessed my place of origin, and joked about his surprise to meet one of his "slaves"<sup>14</sup>

10 Vraiment, ce n'était pas facile. Celui qui a ses moyens, il s'en va. Et tu vis avec ton voisin, quand il s'en va il ne te dit pas, hein! Le matin tu te lèves, il est parti. Il y avait la méfiance, on ne sait pas qui était qui. Les gens, avant de partir, pour ne pas dire, d'autres laissaient leurs choses dans leurs maisons, on ne sait pas, de quel bord maintenant, ton voisin il est! Chacun se méfiait de l'autre. Donc, c'est comme ça, quand d'autres quittent Bouaké, ils ne disent même pas au revoir à leur voisin. Matin il se lève, son voisin est parti. C'est peut-être deux jours, trois jours, c'est là tu vas te rendre compte que ton voisin a quitté Bouaké. C'était comme ça on vivait. [...] Le 16 Décembre 2002, j'ai quitté et j'ai marché de Bouaké jusqu'à N'Djébonoua, ça fait 21 kilomètres. Pour moi c'est petit, il y a d'autres qui ont marché plus que ça." (Interview, Mr. Kouamé, September, 11, 2014).

11 "Quand ça chauffe, par exemple en cas de maladie ou bien s'il y a un incendie, avant que tes gens viennent t'aider là, c'est ton voisin qui va te sauver parce que lui il est le plus proche de toi. En ville, faut pas s'amuser avec les relations voisins-voisins, c'est important!" (Informal discussion, Mr. Kouamé, 02.09. 2014).

12 Since 2012, the University of Bouaké has been renamed University Alassane Ouattara, after the current Ivorian president, Alassane Dramane Ouattara.

13 "Représentant des jeunes" is commonly used in French speaking West African countries, to refer to a stakeholder representing the youth of a certain group or community, the term "youth" loosely referring to a wide range of age groups. For more about "youth" and its use in development policies, see Worthman (2011).

14 For more about joking relationships, see Hagberg (2006).

in his neighbourhood. The joking relationship and Mr. Traoré's thorough knowledge of my country's geography created an instant bond between us. I then built up on this relationship throughout the whole data collection period and Mr. Traoré eventually became one of the key persons of my research. During an interview in December 2014, he explained how he had resented living in Bouaké as a "Northerner" before the rebellion, and how he experienced the early period of the rebellion:

Since the creation of Côte d'Ivoire, we the people of the North, have always been persecuted, we are not afraid anymore; we were already vaccinated against hardship and the government's racism [laughter]. Those who are armed, we know them, they are our brothers, so we were not afraid. It is as if you see your father coming with a rifle, you won't run away because you know him! It is the one who doesn't know him who will run! That's why we haven't run from Bouaké. [...] We wanted the war to be over, but in our favour.<sup>15</sup>

The father and son metaphor in Mr. Traoré's citation is a powerful one, as it depicts the mindsets of those who welcomed the rebellion in Bouaké and the dynamics they situated themselves in. For this category of the population, the crisis was long awaited and welcomed as a means to finally make their voices heard after years of abuse due to their "Northerner" or "foreigner" labels. Linking Mr. Traoré and Mr. Kouamé's memories of the early months following the beginning of the rebellion period, the family symbolism is at the core of both perceptions. To some, the neighbours' behaviour of fleeing without any warning was considered to be a shameful betrayal from people that were "part of the family". To others, the absence of warning was not an issue. The problem rather laid in the act of fleeing altogether, which was interpreted as the admission of "not belonging to the family".

However, most Bouaké dwellers did not expect the crisis to last a decade. The toll in human lives, the destruction of infrastructures, the negative effects of the armed conflict on the health and education systems, the length of the conflict itself, all these factors have contributed to a gradual change of mind within the population. After fear and joy, resignation settled in, and for those who stayed in Bouaké, there were limited options available to survive, live, or thrive. Mr. Coulibaly, a Bouaké dweller in his late fifties, lost his retail business due to lootings in 2003 and first went to Abidjan to try to make a living. When life in Abidjan became more and more dangerous for "Northerners", he went back to Bouaké in 2010, and managed to get a position at ONUCI,<sup>16</sup> which allowed him to take care of his family as best he could, without having to rely too much on the rebellion administration. As a "Northerner" who at first applauded the rebellion, he became more and more disappointed with the management of public affairs by the rebellion administration over the years:

Bouaké had become like *samasogo* [elephant meat]: everyone comes, what you can cut, you cut it and you leave! The city was in a seriously deteriorated stage during the crisis, because it belonged to everybody and nobody.<sup>17</sup>

15 "Depuis que la Côte d'Ivoire a été créée là, nous les gens du Nord, on a toujours été cabris morts, on n'a plus peur, nous on était déjà vaccinés dans la galère et le racisme du gouvernement [rires]. Ceux qui sont armés, on les connaît, c'est nos frères, donc on n'avait pas peur. C'est comme si tu vois ton père venir avec un fusil, tu ne vas pas fuir, puisque tu le connais! C'est celui qui ne le connaît pas qui va se chercher! Voilà pourquoi nous on n'a pas fui Bouaké, on n'a pas bougé. [...] On souhaitait que la guerre finisse, mais en notre faveur." (Interview, Mr. Traoré, 07.12.2014).

16 ONUCI stands for Opération des Nations Unies en Côte d'Ivoire.

17 "Bouaké était devenue comme *samasogo* (viande d'éléphant): chacun vient, ce que tu peux couper, tu coupes et tu t'en vas! La ville était dans un stade de dégradation très avancé durant la crise, car la ville appartenait à tout le monde et à personne." (Interview, Mr. Coulibaly, 15.12.2014).



Kitchen tools painted with the colours of the Ivorian and Malian flag in the main market of Bouaké.  
*A. Sanogo, December 2016*

In this citation, Mr. Coulibaly hints at the fact that no one (neither the rebels, nor the ‘official’ administration officers that stayed in Bouaké) really identified enough with Bouaké to care about the city’s wellbeing. Contrary to Korhogo in Northern Côte d’Ivoire, that was administrated by a single charismatic – and controversial – rebel leader, Bouaké was administrated by a rebel leader and several commanders with each of them controlling a portion of the city. During the rebellion, many elements contributed to Bouaké’s gradual deterioration, the longer the conflict became over the years. These include the multiplicity of authorities who all had their own agencies and sometimes divergent visions about urban governance, coupled to the violent battles that took place in the city.

The resignation towards a lengthy conflict has also led different groups within the population to isolate themselves. After several failed national, regional and international mediations throughout the decade, the uncertain future had reinforced an environment of seclusion. In an open conflict setting, where it was difficult to know who the winner would be, sticking with “one’s people” was the safest option, by fear of retaliation. It is also in this context that new neighbourhoods were developed, mainly in the Northern part of the city. A minority of those who stayed in Bouaké got rich thanks to various activities (trading, transport, etc.). This group of Bouaké dwellers made use of land as an investment tool. Their will to secure a consistent flux of money through construction has led to the expansion of the city, with the creation of newly built neighbourhoods. Mr. Douno, a dweller who stayed in Bouaké during the whole length of the crisis took the example of the Kotiakofikro neighbourhood, that considerably expanded between 2002 and 2010, and was named “Morocco” by its inhabitants:

The Morocco quarter, on the road to Katiola, it used to be the bush! It's a neighbourhood created during the crisis, the allotment was done by the neighbourhood's inhabitants themselves. And the neighbourhood was officially recognised later on, because the houses were already built.<sup>18</sup>

The "Morocco quarter" represents a vivid example of neighbourhood developed during the rebellion period. Most of my interlocutors in Bouaké attributed this rapid urban expansion to "wartime booty", *butins de guerre*. Furthermore, the creation and expansion of new neighbourhoods during the crisis could partly explain why, in 2013, the Ivorian state officially added, or rather recognised the active role played by "landowners" in the property rights process. Up to 2013, the Ivorian law regarding property rights processes in urban areas did not acknowledge "landowners", the *propriétaires terriens*, as key actors despite the fact that most dwellers would rely on "landowners" rather than the state when trying to buy or rent a plot of land. The settlement pattern of "sticking together" continued after the post-election violence in 2011, partly because the memories of the crisis were still present in people's minds. The other main reason for the seclusion was the fear of another crisis, fuelled by rancour and frustration. Several voices increasingly denounced the "prevailing winner's justice"<sup>19</sup> and claimed that as long as a part of the population feel discriminated, the climate of suspicion between "Northerners" and "non-Northerners" would remain. These sentiments were, for instance, expressed by Pastor Kouakou, a Bouaké dweller involved in an ongoing land dispute. He asserted that his rights were being denied because his opponent was "close to the current political leaders":

It's like a wound containing pus, you don't drain the pus out of the wound, and you apply a plaster over it. How can the wound heal?<sup>20</sup>

Depending on their political affiliation and their place of origin or ethnic and cultural background, Bouaké dwellers thus experienced the Ivorian crisis differently. Whether they stayed in Bouaké or not during the rebellion period depended as much on their identification with the rebellion, as on their economic means. The conflict's length and the uncertainty associated with its eventual outcome, however, brought a feeling of disillusionment within the population.

## Settlement Patterns in Bouaké

In an effort to meet the needs of the majority of their urban dwellers, many African cities – some more successfully than others – have conceived and implemented urban planning schemes, to better organise the growing flux of populations (Pieterse 2014; Simone 2014). Few studies actually link the image that urban dwellers have of their cities to urban planning and urban governance; and yet, a closer look at the populations'

18 "Le quartier Maroc, sur la route de Katiola, c'était la brousse auparavant! C'est un quartier sorti de terre pendant la crise, le lotissement a été fait par les habitants du quartier eux-mêmes. Et le quartier a été reconnu officiellement par la suite, car les maisons étaient déjà bâties." (Interview, Mr. Douno, 17.12. 2014).

19 For articles related to the reconciliation issues, see Charbonneau (2013), Niamen N'Goran (2014), El Khawas and Ndumbe Anyu (2014).

20 "C'est comme une plaie qui a du pus, on ne perce pas le pus, et on met du sparadrap là-dessus, comment la plaie peut guérir?" (Interview, Pastor Kouakou, 08.12.2014).



understanding of what their cities should look like is important (Chenal 2013, 352). Taking the example of three neighbourhoods that fall into the categories of “Bousmani”, “Kanga” and “Nouveaux riches”, the following pages examine how urban dwellers practices are inherently part of the urban space’s formation.

Located in the Central-Eastern part of the city, the neighbourhood of Sokoura could be translated as new home or new neighbourhood in Jula language and is one of the three biggest “Kanga” neighbourhoods of Bouaké. According to the available historical urban formation literature (Atta 1978; Diabaté 2016), the very first neighbourhoods created in Bouaké were the “Kanga” ones. The first settlers, the Baoulé people, initially had an aversion towards the French colonisers and settled as far as possible from the French military camp, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The colonisers had to rely on people coming from further North of the country, to play an intermediary role between the Baoulé people and them. The “Kanga” neighbourhood names were then attributed by the most dominant group at the time. In the case of Sokoura, this meant the Mande group, that is generally included in the Ivorian label “Jula” (Atta 1978, 233).

Sokoura hosts the *marché de gros*, which was built in 1998 with the ambition to become the main market of wholesale agricultural products in the regional trade between Côte d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Mali (Tollens 1997). Most of Sokoura’s inhabitants are either from the Northern part of Côte d’Ivoire, or from neighbouring countries like Mali, Guinea, Niger and Burkina Faso. The central location of Sokoura made it a strategic settling choice for traders both from Northern Côte d’Ivoire and citizens from neighbouring countries, who could then settle and live close to the markets where they would sell and exchange their products with traders or farmers, coming from Central, Western, Eastern and Southern Côte d’Ivoire.

During the rebel-held decade, the traders’ identity of Sokoura’s inhabitants was gradually overshadowed by their identity as “Northerners”. More than their professional activities, the sharing of a common religion (Islam), a common language (Jula) and a common place of origin (the savannah), then became more relevant and accurate for Sokoura’s inhabitants. The term “Northerners” was used to group all those who were from Northern Côte d’Ivoire and countries neighbouring the Northern part of Côte d’Ivoire<sup>21</sup>. The distinction and labelling of “Northerners” as opposed to “non-

21 For an overview of the causes of the crisis and the identity issues underneath, see Banégas and Losch (2002), Akindès (2003), Fofana (2011), or Förster (2013).

Northerners" and more particularly to "Southerners" did not start during the rebellion period, but earlier. Analysing the Ivorian socio-political history, Dembélé (2003) argues that up to the 1990s, the designations "Northerners" and "Southerners" referred to specific representations in the Ivorian society in terms of economic and political power. "Northerner" then grouped communities from the Northern part of the country as well as from the neighbouring countries like Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso. The "Northerners" were mainly present in economic sectors such as trade, transport, and agriculture, whereas the "Southerners" (Ivorians originating from the big Akan and Krou cultural groups) were mainly present and visible in the highest levels of political power. The combination of the factors that led to the rebellion represented an important turning point for the shift in the representations associated with "Northerners" and "Southerners". The formers were from then on perceived as threats to the political establishment and within the population, the isolation of "Northerners" and "Southerners" could be observed in cities like Daloa, Vavoua and Bouaké, that witnessed violent confrontations during the war (Dembélé 2003, 40).

The identity issues underlying the socio-political crisis were reflected on the composition of Bouaké's neighbourhoods, which was then divided in two main groups, the "Northerners" and the "non-Northerners". The discourses of "them against us" were profusely used by both parties engaged in the armed conflict at the national level, leading to a crystallization of tensions among Bouaké dwellers that identified themselves to one group or another (Bah 2010; Cutolo 2010). The fear of getting attacked by a "rival" group was the main reason to follow a well-known but not explicitly stated watchword, as expressed here by an inhabitant of Sokoura:

On both sides, there was the fear of getting attacked at night, so everybody preferred to settle in a neighbourhood where they would feel safe. That's what increased the distinction between the Bousmani and the Jula.<sup>22</sup>

The use of the term "Jula" in this context could be similar to the term "Northerners", since it refers to the label associated to Bouaké citizens coming from the Northern part of the country or neighbouring countries. This labelling is interesting to observe, because those that are labelled "Jula" are not necessarily all Jula native speakers, nor are they necessarily all traders. To Sokoura inhabitants, security and settlement patterns represent two sides of the same coin. The feeling of belonging was then and still is, to many Bouaké dwellers, the most relevant reason to take into account when settling: They would rather build as many houses as possible in the same area and stay together, instead of leaving out what they sometimes perceive as "free space" left for roads, draining canals, and other required facilities.

Together with four other neighbourhoods, Ahougnanssou is one of the Baoulé farmer *campements*<sup>23</sup> turned into urban neighbourhoods, within the first post-independence zoning sessions that took place in Bouaké in the 1960s (Atta 1978). Located in the South-West of the city, Ahougnanssou is among the neighbourhoods that endured the most the hardships of the armed conflict. No official figures were issued about the exact number of houses and buildings destroyed. During several tours through Bouaké in the first weeks of my 2014 field stay, I observed that the Southern part of the city seemed "abandoned" compared to the Northern part. This fact was explained differently by my interlocutors. Ms. Kouakou, a businesswoman whose house was ransacked in Ahoug-

22 "De part et d'autre, il y avait la crainte d'être agressé durant la nuit, donc chacun préférait s'installer dans un quartier où il se sentait en sécurité. C'est ça qui a accentué cette distinction entre les Bousmani et les Jula." (Interview, Mr. Douno, 17.12.2014).

23 *Campement* in Côte d'Ivoire refers to a hamlet or a temporary settlement that is smaller than a village.

nanssou, asserts that "Bousmani" neighbourhoods were among the targets during the pillaging in the first years of the rebellion:

Those who were first targeted were the uniformed service personnel: policemen, soldiers, all of them! Either they joined the rebellion, or they ran to join the Loyalists. Also, if you were pro-Gbagbo, or against ADO, you couldn't stay, since the rebellion was against Gbagbo! If you run and leave your house, it was ransacked. That's how it was. Houses that were not ransacked were houses that were inhabited.<sup>24</sup>

Ms. Kouakou's explanation raised several questions related to the desertion of the Southern part of the city: Were there more uniformed service personnel living in the Southern part of the city as opposed to the Northern part? Were most pro-Gbagbos also living in the Southern part of the city? If that was the case, for what reasons? Proximity to their villages? Unwillingness or impossibility to mix up with the Jula and live in the Northern part of the city? The informal discussions I had with various inhabitants of Ahougnansou did not provide enough exhaustive answers to allow for strong and reliable conclusions. Mr. Kofi, a Construction Ministry officer, asserted that it was "normal" and "logical" that the Northern part of the city had less abandoned houses than its Southern counterpart:

When Bouaké was cut into two, there was no possibility anymore for the city to expand towards the South, because the South shared a border with the Loyalists' territory. So, it's logical that there were more constructions in the North because there was more space there. The evidence of this is that people have built so much that in the future there won't be any distinction between Bouaké and Katiola!<sup>25</sup>

By arguing that neighbourhoods located in the Southern part of the city could not expand as opposed to neighbourhoods located in the Northern part of the city, Mr. Kofi chose to rationalise the urban expansion pattern during the rebellion period. However, he purposely avoided the lootings topic, and why some neighbourhoods were more affected than others. When asked about the "revenge" evoked as a reason by other interlocutors, Mr. Kofi subtly changed the topic:

My daughter, not everything can be said. Some people have lost a lot. Many things happened, we do our best to handle the situation with the means we have, but it's not always easy. What's your next question?<sup>26</sup>

24 "Ceux qui étaient d'abord visés, c'étaient les corps habillés: policiers, militaires, gendarmes, eux tous! Soit ils se ralliaient à la rébellion, ou bien ils fuyaient pour rejoindre les Loyalistes. Et puis aussi, si tu étais pro-Gbagbo, ou bien contre ADO, tu pouvais pas rester, puisque la rébellion était contre Gbagbo! Si tu fuis et tu laisses ta maison, elle va être visitée. C'était comme ça. Les maisons qui n'ont pas été visitées, c'est les maisons où les gens habitaient." (Interview, Ms. Kouakou, 07.12.2014).

25 "Quand Bouaké a été coupée en deux, il n'y avait plus de possibilité que la ville s'étende vers le Sud, puisque le Sud faisait frontière avec le territoire des Loyalistes. Donc c'est logique qu'il y ait eu plus de constructions au Nord de la ville, parce que là-bas il y avait de l'espace. La preuve c'est que les gens ont tellement construit que bientôt il n'y aura pas de distinction entre Bouaké et Katiola!" (Interview, Mr. Kofi, 17.12.2014).

26 "Ma fille, on peut pas tout dire. Il y a des gens qui ont perdu beaucoup. Beaucoup de choses se sont passées, on essaie tant bien que mal de gérer avec les moyens dont nous disposons, mais ce n'est pas toujours évident. Quelle est la question suivante?" (Interview, Mr. Kofi, 17.12.2014).

The covert messages grasped here and there (e.g. the reluctance for some to talk about "the past", or the difficulty for others to get back what they had lost) offer a better understanding of the settlement patterns. For most Bouaké dwellers, life during the rebel-held decade was synonymous with uncertainty, hope, loss, and fear. In Ahougnou, just like in Sokoura, the situation translated into an increased identitarian closure that is reflected not only in old neighbourhoods, but also in new ones.

Despite the hardships experienced by most Bouaké dwellers from 2002 to 2011, it is believed that some among them were able to take advantage of the circumstances, as expressed here by Mr. Doumbia, who managed to stay in and around Bouaké from 2002 to 2010, thanks to his position within the United Nations operations in Côte d'Ivoire, ONUCI:

Among those who stayed, out of ten families, eight had at least one member in the rebellion. Why? Firstly, to protect the family and safeguard the family's wealth, secondly because of political conviction, and thirdly to get rich. The poor became rich and the rich became poor.<sup>27</sup>

Many "hearsay" stories about sudden wealth were recounted by my interlocutors: being able to keep on eating bread even when, in 2004, the price of a loaf of bread rose from 100 CFA to 1000 CFA, getting married to a third wife, being able to send one's children to study abroad, and so on. The displays of wealth were measured and appreciated differently from one individual to another. However, all the rumours pointed fingers at the rebellion as the origin of these enrichments. Highlighting the generational conflict as one of the main reasons that fuelled the rebellion, Förster (2013) demonstrates how the former hierarchy established in Korhogo in Northern Côte d'Ivoire changed drastically during the rebellion. It is then not surprising that the same phenomenon was observed in Bouaké during the crisis decade, with part of the male youth population coming from poor families, getting richer and richer.

In a context where taxes were managed by the rebels' authorities, sub-regional<sup>28</sup> trade and transport were said to be the main sources of income for those who would be willing to "cooperate" with the rebels' administration. For instance, many of my interlocutors asserted that truck drivers paid a fee to the rebels each time they went through Bouaké. After the looting of the Banque Centrale des Etats de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (BCEAO)<sup>29</sup> in Bouaké in September 2003, banks were not considered to be a safe place to keep one's money. Acquiring plots of land then became one of the best options to protect the wartime booty gathered by the rebels and anyone involved in the fruitful trade and transport opportunities created during the rebellion period. The investment of this new flow of money in real estate resulted in the expansion of Bouaké in its Northern part, with the creation and, or growth of "Nouveaux riches" neighbourhoods such as Quartier Maroc<sup>30</sup> (Kotiakoffikro), Cocody (Fetekro Extension) and Tola (Tolakouadiokro).

27 "Parmi ceux qui sont restés, sur dix familles, huit familles avaient au moins un membre dans la rébellion. Pourquoi? 1. Pour sauvegarder les biens de la famille. 2. Par conviction politique. 3. Pour s'enrichir. Les pauvres sont devenus riches et les riches sont devenus pauvres." (Interview, Mr. Doumbia, 04.12.2014).

28 Mainly between Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Burkina Faso.

29 BCEAO is the West African central bank, with eight member states: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Bissau Guinea, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo.

30 The names written in italics refer to the names given by the neighbourhoods' inhabitants, whereas the names in brackets refer to the 'original' neighbourhoods' names, at least according the Housing Ministry and the cadastral plans.

New buildings are constantly built in Cocody.  
A. Sanogo, December 2014



The change and the transformation of the names display a conscious or unconscious will by the neighbourhoods' inhabitants to own their new homes, and thus (re) baptise the neighbourhoods with names they could better identify themselves with. As mentioned earlier, most of "Nouveaux riches" inhabitants I encountered were renters rather than owners of their houses or parcels. Owning their new home or new neighbourhood should then be understood as a process through which dwellers develop a strong belonging feeling towards their neighbourhood. A closer look to this renaming process going on in most "Nouveaux riches" neighbourhoods also gives an insight in the profile of their inhabitants. In some instances, it showcases their aspirations to reach a high standard of living, as expressed by an inhabitant of Cocody, in November 2014:

In the past, this place was called Misiwèrè, but we don't want this name anymore! So that's why we changed the name. Our Cocody will be better than the Cocody<sup>31</sup> in Abidjan. Things change quickly, if you spend two months without coming here, you will get lost because people build a lot. Currently rents are cheaper here because it's far from town and there's no electricity and no water. But we will install all this, you'll see. When you go to *toubaboudougou*<sup>32</sup> and come back, we will have electricity, water, and rents will go up!<sup>33</sup>

31 Cocody is one of the most upscale neighbourhoods in Abidjan, the Ivorian economic capital.

32 *Toubaboudougou* refers to Western countries in general, and literally translated from Jula, means "The White Man's Land".

Urban expansion in  
swamped areas in  
Bouaké.  
A. Sanogo September  
2014



Misiwèrè, literally translated from Jula, means “cattle pasture”. Before it got more and more populated, the neighbourhood used to be a farming area, and it still is to a certain extent. As most “Nouveaux riches” neighbourhoods, Cocody, located in the North-East of Bouaké, is continuously expanding, with new buildings emerging on a regular basis. The absence of facilities such as running water and electricity in the area is both an advantage and a disadvantage: On the one hand, rents are cheaper than in the city centre, which makes it an ideal choice for dwellers who cannot afford to live in other central neighbourhoods; on the other hand, its location makes it more attractive to land speculators and real estate investors, who seize the opportunity to make “good deals” without necessarily abiding with urban planning’s rules. It seems to be too early to predict whether Cocody will turn into a “Bousmani” or a “Kanga” section in the future. Nevertheless, there is a distinction in the neighbourhood between the Baoulé “land owners”<sup>34</sup> and the “Northerners” investors. Even though the actual inhabitants of Cocody, who for the most part are attracted to this “Nouveaux riches” neighbourhood by the low rents, Jula has always been the playgrounds’ language during my visits there over the last three years.

33 “Avant, ce coin-là s’appelait Misiwèrè, mais nous, on ne veut plus ce nom-là! Donc c’est pour ça on a changé le nom. Notre Cocody sera encore plus meilleur même que Cocody d’Abidjan-là! Les choses changent vite, si tu fais deux mois sans venir ici, tu vas te perdre, parce que les gens construisent beaucoup. Maintenant les loyers sont moins chers ici parce que c’est loin de la ville et puis y a pas courant, y a pas eau. Mais on va mettre tout ça, tu vas voir. Quand tu vas partir dans toubaboudougou et puis revenir là, y aura courant, y aura l’eau, et puis les loyers vont grimper!” (Interview, Mr. Traoré, 07.12.2014).

34 In French: *propriétaires terriens*.

## Conclusion

As stated by Coquéry-Vidrovitch, “The shift from colonialism to post-colonialism has not changed much in terms of urban planning, in the sense that the change of power little affected residential habits; at most, racial zoning was substituted by social zoning” (Coquéry-Vidrovitch 2012, 268). In the case of Bouaké, the social zoning launched by the State in the 1960s, and mostly based on the urban dwellers’ economic status, has been altered along the way by their practices, aspirations, and the opportunities (or lack thereof) they encountered or created. The three kinds of neighbourhood presented in this paper raise the city’s (re)shaping issue, by showing how city dwellers’ agencies greatly affect urban governance in Bouaké.

The ongoing “identity withdrawal” – *repli identitaire* – reflected in the choices of settlements among urban dwellers is striking enough not to be ignored. In this paper, I have shown how some of the reasons that fuelled the Ivorian war in the early 2000s are still present to a certain extent up to day in Bouaké: The resentment accumulated by the “Northerners” may have reduced after 2011, but the social malaise is still very much present. This is reflected in the neighbourhoods’ formation, which are shaped, imagined and transformed by the urban dwellers’ everyday practices as well as their aspirations. The naming of the “Bousmani”, “Kanga” and “Nouveaux riches” neighbourhoods represents a continuing process through which Bouaké dwellers identify themselves and each other in comparison to their own cultural and economic backgrounds. Whether they are perceived as allies or potential threats for a variety of reasons, neighbours and their characteristics are decisive in Bouaké dwellers’ settlement choice.

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# Living Together, Living Apart in the City: Reflections on the Land-Urbanity Nexus in Eldoret, Kenya

Miriam Badoux

## Introduction

In Kenya, land is commonly described as an “emotive issue.” Associated with politics and corruption, and often blamed as the root cause of recurring political and ethnic violence in the country, land is endowed not only with economic, but also with social and political value. Issues of access to and ownership of land drove the struggle for independence and have been at the heart of the public debate in postcolonial Kenya. On a more ordinary level, land plays a crucial role in people’s lives, not only in rural areas but also in urban centres. In Eldoret, a secondary city<sup>1</sup> located in the Rift Valley’s former “White Highlands,” land is, for many of its inhabitants, not only a major asset, but also a goal in life and an object of struggles. Seen as a sort of social security for some, as an attribute of status for other, land is “better than gold,” as many of my informants put it. Beyond its mere physical or technical dimensions, land has become, through the many risks and opportunities attached to it, an ambivalent and widely debated topic that is as fascinating as frightening.

While land issues have been widely documented in rural areas, they are still under-researched in urban settings. Yet, and especially in fast-growing sub-Saharan secondary cities, land is an analytically fruitful research topic. In this paper, I argue that land can be seen as a heuristic lens to explore urban governance, and to understand how people relate to each other and to the state. More broadly, I attempt to draw links between land and urbanity at large, and to reflect on the following questions: What can land tell us about urban life? Can the dynamics of urban land disputes help us understand what brings people together or tear them apart?

This paper is based on a twelve-month fieldwork conducted in the city of Eldoret. During this time, I collected data on disputed land and contested ownership claims, thus documenting the diversity of land matters. The identified cases cut across the public-private divide, the formal-informal divide, and the rural-urban divide, and show that these binary oppositions are better grasped as continuums rather than dichotomies. When looking at cases of land conflicts, my main assumption is that land disputes are not only about land, but that they reveal social and political stakes, that

1 Although secondary cities in sub-Saharan Africa are sites of rapid urbanisation, they have remained widely under-researched, staying too often in the shadow of mega-cities. Yet, secondary cities are an opportunity to study “ordinary cities” (Robinson 2006), and though they might seem less spectacular than metropolises at first sight, they are not less interesting as a field site. Indeed, secondary cities are nodal points between the rural and the urban, and are usually more accessible to ethnographic fieldwork than their bigger counterparts (Ammann and Sanogo 2017, 6).

they have deeper ramifications, and that there is, as argued by Lund (2013, 7), a strong link between property and citizenship. I see disputes as moments in which claims are articulated and – sometimes c o l l e c t i v e – action is taken. As a consequence, I argue that they allow us to observe and study how new governance arrangements emerge and crystallise. Adopting a non-normative approach toward governance, understood as “articulatory processes of collective agency addressing social problems” (Koechlin 2014, 7), this paper suggests that actors of land disputes do not only claim property, but more broadly belonging to a community, a neighbourhood, the city or even the nation. Rather than focusing on empirical case studies, my aim in this paper is to shift my attention from the fieldwork in the city to research on the city (Hannerz 1980), and thus build on my data to better conceptualise the role played by land with regard to interactions taking place among urban dwellers in cities.

The first section of this paper aims to set the stage and give some background information on Eldoret. By putting the city’s unique history and social configuration in perspective, I show how and why land has become so important in this region. In a second step, I give an insight into the diversity of urban land disputes, focusing on the various actors, stakes and claims. Finally, the last section explores the ways in which land structures urban life and how it engages the meaning of urban citizenship, feelings of belonging and the very making of the city.

## Setting the Stage: Eldoret, from the “White Highlands” to a “Cosmopolitan” City

Eldoret is a fast-growing secondary city with a population estimated at about 300 000. Located in the former “White Highlands” and mainly developed by “immigrant” groups,<sup>2</sup> Eldoret is characterised by its specific historical background and “cosmopolitan” social configuration. By developing these aspects, this section helps understand how and why land has become such a valuable asset – socially, politically and economically – to the city’s inhabitants.

Issues related to land, access and belonging have played a central role along the historical milestones of Eldoret’s urban development, and looking at how the city urbanised may shed light on the role land plays today in the region. Founded at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by White farmers, the town developed along the railway connecting Mombasa to Uganda. During colonial times, the city was zoned with separated areas for Kenyans, White South Africans, Indians and British. After independence, the “White Highlands” were “reafrikanised” and Kenyans from various ethnic groups – yet mostly Kikuyu – settled in and around Eldoret. What has been dubbed “historical land injustices” is thus not only a colonial phenomenon; it also refers to the unequal distribution of land in post-colonial times, notably through so-called settlement schemes (Kanyinga 2009).

Currently being Kenya’s fifth city and the capital of Uasin Gishu County, Eldoret has witnessed strong socio-economic growth since the country’s independence. Located at the crossroads of several strategic axes, it has developed as a nodal point in terms of commercial, industrial and agricultural activities, and hosts key educational institutions (Lado 2009, 449). This dynamism has been favoured by political factors, as Kenya’s second president, Daniel arap Moi, put many efforts into developing his home

2 Not only was the town founded by foreign settlers, but it was also developed after independence by Kenyans originating from other parts of the country – mainly Kikuyu.

region. The fact that Eldoret is also the home town of the current deputy president, William Ruto, further contributes to give a particular political significance to this area.

Considered as a political hotspot, the town has been the epicentre of recurring violence outbreaks after the elections of 1992, 1997 and 2007, causing the death of several hundreds of people and displacing thousands. These clashes have been associated with long-standing land grievances and ethnic tensions – mainly between Kalenjin, the “autochthonous” ethnic group, and Kikuyu, the “settler” community (Anderson and Lochery 2008; Kanyinga 2009). Despite the various efforts deployed to foster peace and reconciliation since the last episodes of violence, their impact can still be felt today in the daily life of the city and its inhabitants – this being often summarised by the slogan “no land no peace.”

Political gathering  
on the main road in  
the city centre of  
Eldoret.

*M. Badoux, December  
2015*



Beside Eldoret’s specific historical background, its social configuration also plays an important role in its urbanisation process in general and in urban life in particular. I argue that this social configuration is not a given, but that it should be approached as a discursive formation articulated by the actors themselves. When talking about identities and their characteristics, I thus build on the data I gathered from my informants. A key aspect of Eldoret’s social configuration is that both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ groups live in and around the city. The Kalenjin – who are considered as the ethnic group originating from the region – used to be a pastoralist community valuing large tracks of land. As one of my informants puts it, “among Kalenjin we like to see vast land; we don’t like congestion of people. Vastness of land brings status.”<sup>3</sup> While Kalenjin usually

3 Interview, chief, 18.11.2014

have a deep attachment to land, most of them preferred, until recently, to stay away from urban centres: “Kalenjin are not supposed to stay in town, otherwise you’re considered as a crook.”<sup>4</sup> Or as another informant told me: “Most of us Kalenjin we never knew the importance of living in town, going to school, being aggressive in business.”<sup>5</sup> In turn, Kenyans from other ethnic groups – mainly Kikuyu – invested in urban land, acquired plots and developed them. This involvement of “immigrant” groups in the urbanisation of Eldoret is at the core of land grievances that still persist today, and which are sustained by the discourses of urban dwellers. While “settler” groups talk of “willing buyer, willing seller” agreements, ‘indigenous’ groups use the terms of “grabbing” and “dispossession” to describe their history. According to many of my informants, Kalenjin sold their land at an undervalued (“throwaway”) price, while Kikuyu and other “settler” groups took advantage of the widespread illiteracy of Kalenjin to easily acquire their plot. These discourses are still politicised today by local leaders to feed land grievances.

A recent shift happened after the last episode of post-election violence in 2007/8, when Kalenjin are said to have realised the economic significance of urban areas. After the clashes, many Kalenjin bought properties of other groups who sold their houses and businesses, or had to flee the region. Some of them became involved in the business of urban land, opening land “agencies” or even cooperatives with the aim to supply Kalenjin with urban land. As a result, one can argue that Eldoret is more mixed since 2008, as more Kalenjin have been living and doing business in town since then. However, Eldoret’s “cosmopolitanism” – the mingling of Kenyans originating from various ethnic groups – is put in question by the inhabitants of the city themselves. Not only have several neighbourhoods in Eldoret become more ethnically homogenous, business networks and urban interactions have increasingly been organized along ethnic lines. This tendency is illustrated by Simon, a Kikuyu in his sixties I met in January 2016, who explained me that he bought a piece of land from a Kalenjin in Munyaka, a settlement predominantly inhabited by Kikuyu, because he “feels safer” in this neighbourhood, “surrounded by his own people.” In addition, Simon has stopped being active in the neighbourhood association of the area he used to stay in, and is now more involved in Eldoret’s Kikuyu elders’ association. This example confirms that a consequence of the post-election violence is to have reconfigured trust within society and that citizens increasingly rely on ethnic networks in the city. As a result, the various communities that form Eldoret seem to live, though within one city, in more bounded spaces than before.

This salience of ethnic identities has been reinforced by the devolution reforms introduced since 2013 (D’Arcy and Cornell 2016). While devolution has been surrounded by a climate of hope and change, being often referred to as “the best thing that has ever happened to Kenya,” it has also exacerbated ethnic tensions by favouring ‘insider’ groups. The newly established Kenyan counties being based on ethnic boundaries, devolution can be seen as a redistributive mechanism at the local level that can be summed up as follows: “it is now our turn to eat in our county.”<sup>6</sup> This unequal access to the resources of the local state has clearly strengthened the insiders/outside distinction at the county level. In Eldoret, this tendency has led some “immigrant” groups to question

4 Interview, elder, 19.02.2015.

5 Interview, youth leader, 19.01.2015.

6 In Eldoret in particular, devolution has led to the resurgence of clans or “subtribes.” Uasin Gishu county being the home of the Nandi sub-group of the Kalenjin, access to local resources became under devolution not only strongly dependent on being a Kalenjin, but being a Nandi. For more information on the constitution of the Kalenjin identity and how the political context has influenced its formation (before devolution), see Lynch (2011).

the cosmopolitan nature of the area; as one informant told me: “as much as we say it is a cosmopolitan county, it is not!”<sup>7</sup>

Thus, discourses of ethnic identities – not seen as an essence but as fluid (self-) ascriptions to assert difference and articulate claims – play a central role in the urbanisation process, and in particular in access to and ownership of land. This social configuration, added to the particular historical background of the region, help grasp the significance of land in Eldoret. I argue that understanding the social and political value of land is a first and necessary step to analyse land disputes and the claims articulated by the actors involved in these conflicts, which is now the topic of the next section.

## Struggling for Land in Eldoret – An Insight Into Land Disputes and Their Dynamics

I build on recently collected ethnographic data to present three broad types of ongoing land disputes in Eldoret, distinguishing disputed plots, disputed neighbourhoods, and disputed public space. Not only are these three types of disputes characterised by different features, they also engage various levels of belonging, from individual property to

Files of pending cases at the land court, Eldoret.  
*M. Badoux, March 2016*



public interest. By emphasising the agency and trajectories of the various actors involved in these disputes, I show how competing claims over land are articulated and what they are based on, how alliances are formed or dismantled, and what stakes lie behind these conflicts.

7 Informal discussion, 15.12.2014.

A large number of land disputes in Eldoret take place at the plot level and involve individuals who have been dispossessed of their land and struggle to get it back. The dispossession can take place within the framework of various scenarios. Within a family, it can be caused by a dispute about the succession process, affecting in most cases widows or other female relatives. In other cases, the state allocated land belonging to someone to another person, often through fraudulent means. Another typical case in which people lose their plots of land is when land brokers use conning strategies, for example by selling a plot to several people at the same time. While these cases – possibly with the exception of the fraudulent land brokers – also happen in rural areas, the ways in which these disputes are solved are specific to the urban context. Many of these cases are dealt with by the court rather than elders. Having the financial means to cover the costs of the court process is thus often a prerequisite for these struggles. In addition, the technical knowledge of the law and the ability to use networks are also key assets in this process. In short, these conflicts usually cause a lot of frustration, tearing people apart, and exacerbating tensions that are often explained in ethnic terms.

The second type of conflicts take place at a larger scale and usually involve land-buying companies<sup>8</sup> or cooperatives. These disputes can affect a whole neighbourhood,<sup>9</sup> and offer the opportunity to understand how people come together to collectively deal with them. In Langas, a spectacular case of a land dispute at the neighbourhood level in Eldoret, about 4 000 plot owners who have access to the land but no title deeds are opposed to two families claiming to be the first buyers of the land, who have a title deed for the whole area but no access to the land. The neighbourhood developed from a farm of the “White Highlands” to Eldoret’s largest informal settlement, urbanising rapidly since the 1970s. The two families holding the title deed are suing the government for having planned and brought infrastructure to “their” land through a World Bank-funded slum upgrading programme without their consent, and are asking the state to compensate them with billions of Kenyan shillings. The 4 000 plot owners have entered the case as interested parties, claiming that the land is legitimately theirs and that it is now time for them to be issued title deeds as an ultimate proof of ownership of the land. Beside the plot owners, a group of people calling themselves the “shareholders” also entered the case as interested parties, claiming that they acquired the land with the first buyers after independence, yet without having their names included on the title deed.

The various groups involved in the current court case include plot owners, first buyers, shareholders and the government (through different institutions, e.g. the county government, the lands ministry, the physical planning department, the National Land Commission, etc.). In the process of the land dispute, these parties forge alliances to make their claims seen and heard. The plot owners, for example, backed by the shareholders, created an association to further their interests. Through collective action, they were able to widen their networks and give more salience to their claims, not only stating that the land is theirs, but that they also need to be issued title deeds. It is worth noting that ethnic discourses play a limited role in this case, as some groups of different communities have come together to act as one block in the court case. An illustration of this are the plot owners, mostly Kikuyu, forging an alliance with the shareholders, a group of Kalenjin, against the two families of first buyers, who are also Kalenjin.

The third type of land disputes involves public land. “Land grabbing” in Kenya commonly refers to the illegal or irregular appropriation of public land by elites (Klopp 2000; Southall 2005; Manji 2012). As such, the use of the term “land grabbing” in Kenya differs from its use in the West or at the international level, where it usually describes

8 On land-buying companies in Eldoret, see Gitau (2001).

9 Correctly put, these disputes are at the “former farm level,” as the land was usually bought as one piece when it was still a farm after independence, and shared among a group or subsequently subdivided.

large-scale land acquisitions by foreign companies. Predominantly urban, this phenomenon is often considered as the main land-related problem in cities. In Eldoret, for example, private title deeds have been issued for the town hall, the high court, several markets, or the bus stage. Not only has it led to wealth accumulation by elites, but also to the scarcity of public space in urban areas. Located in a longer history of dispossession and struggles, “land grabbing” reached its peak in the 1980s and 1990s, under Moi’s presidency. Since then, there has been a number of attempts to repossess “grabbed” land, with various degrees of success and political motivation.<sup>10</sup> After the 2010 constitution, these efforts have been reinforced by increased citizen mobilisation against grabbing – as in the spectacular case of Langata Road Primary School in Nairobi, in which

A recently fenced and alleged “grabbed” playground in the centre of Eldoret.

*M. Badoux, November 2015*



pupils demonstrated in the street against the grabbing of their school – and by the work of the newly established National Land Commission.

In Eldoret, citizen mobilisation has not been as strong as in Nairobi or other mid-sized cities, notably because of the climate of fear linked to the political sensitivity of land in the region. However, some kind of more ‘hidden’ mobilisation took place around the alleged grabbing of a playground in the city centre, in which local leaders, unionists, or civil society activists took part. Though surrounded by rumours, these kind of events have the power to rally citizens from different backgrounds around an ideal of public interest that has to be protected. The work of the National Land Com-

<sup>10</sup> See for example the Ndung’u report, compiled by a Commission of inquiry into illegal and irregular land allocations in Kenya (Ndung’u 2004).

mission, whose mandate is to improve the management of public land throughout the country, supports this perspective. The rhetoric used by the commission is strongly based on the repertoires of national identity and public interest, as this quote from a member of the commission during a public hearing in Eldoret shows: “My fellow Kenyans, let’s admit that mistakes were done in the past, let’s be brave and face these mistakes. In correcting past mistakes, some people will suffer losses, but these losses will come with greater compensation for the public, just as our parents did when fighting for independence.”<sup>11</sup> Mobilisation against land grabbing is thus a typical example in which people assert their national and/or urban citizenship, rather than focus on ethnic identities. Though grabbing is often linked to patrimonial networks organised along ethnic lines, the efforts to repossess ‘grabbed’ land, when supported by citizens, can be seen as an act of resistance against this very patrimonial system (Klopp 2000, 23).

While I attempted in this section to organise land disputes in Eldoret into three types, it is important to say that in reality, the complexity and the “messiness” of the various cases does not necessarily fit into these categories. Some cases could be ascribed to several of these types, and their nature is very often blurry. However, I argue that this sketch of a typology of land disputes allows us, on the one hand, to get an insight into this phenomenon, and helps us, on the other hand, to make a first step toward a better conceptualisation of land and its significance for urbanity.

## Land and Urbanity: Living Together, Living Apart in the City

Building on the empirical data presented so far, this section seeks to move towards a better conceptualisation of the role of land in urban areas. I argue that land can be seen as a heuristic lens to understand what brings people together or tears them apart. Thus, it allows us to explore the ways in which people relate to each other on the one hand, and to the state on the other.

The data presented in this paper has made clear that land is intimately linked with identities, feelings of belonging, and social interactions. Rather than considering identities as something that is given, definitive and whose contours are firmly defined, I suggest that they are negotiated and reconfigured by these very processes of social interactions, of which land disputes are one telling example. However, while the repertoire of ethnicity is often mobilised in discourses of land grievances, it does not always appear to be a salient feature of land disputes (see for example Klopp 2002, 286). In some configurations, people claim their belonging to a neighbourhood rather than to a particular community. In the case of ‘land grabbing’, citizens mobilise to defend the public interest and assert national unity against the corrupt practices of the elites. As a consequence, multi-layered identities are created and recreated through land: sometimes ethnic, sometimes urban, sometimes national, but always in the making.

As mentioned earlier, land is a highly sensitive topic, and is passionately debated in the media and among citizens. In urban areas like Eldoret, rumours and scandals around land partake in constituting social reality, and thereby making cities. These discourses are not only about land, but help people make sense of their environment at large, including politics, corruption and social inequalities. Land thus can be seen as a

11 Commissioner, public hearings of the National Land Commission in Eldoret, 24.02.2015.

vehicle for imaginaries of the state, and, especially in cities, imaginaries of how people live together.

Finally, land can be grasped in a diversity of social interactions ranging from encounter to distanciation. As put by Förster (2013, 244), “urbanity unfolds in the dialectics of both encounter and distanciation.” Land deeply structures urban life, and claims formulated by urban dwellers constitute political articulations with a real potential for transformation and change. These articulations can bring people together, but they can also tear them apart, and sometimes even end up in violence. Land thus help us widen our understanding of urbanity at large, without overlooking the agency of urban dwellers and how the latter contributes to the very making of cities.

## Conclusion

In an attempt to move toward an actor-oriented conceptualisation of the urban (Koechlin 2015, 19), this paper has shown that land allows us to better understand how claims and identities are formed and articulated in urban settings. As Abdoumalik Simone (2010, 7) has argued, the city is a place for “making claims,” a “site of contestation.” In spite of the many disputes and the conflict potential of land, urban dwellers may also, in the process of claiming land and urban space, come together and turn the city into a place of encounter. The approach to urban land proposed in this paper is a holistic one, not only based on policies, their formulation and implementation, but also on the wide range of discourses and practices that are created and recreated by urban dwellers. While the role of ethnicity and the social configuration of the city do play an important role in land issues, I suggest that urban life offers new possibilities to citizens, that emergent urban spaces can be created through collective action and mobilisation, and that these possibilities are at the heart of the making and remaking of cities.

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# Anthropology and Urban Comparisons

Till Förster

## Why Do Anthropologists Compare Cities?

Urban anthropology has a long and winding history. When it emerged in the 1960s, roughly half a century ago, it was either perceived as a belated reaction to a changing world or as an offspring of other disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields. On the one hand, many people that anthropologists had studied in rural areas and small towns had moved or were about to migrate to the newly emerging post-colonial cities and urban agglomerations. Anthropologists followed them but often continued to work as if they were still conducting research in neatly integrated and apparently self-contained towns of the rural worlds that they were familiar with. They studied compounds and neighbourhoods, street life and meeting places as they had done before, participating in everyday interactions, looking at how town dwellers made a living, how they identified with the places where they lived, and not least how they integrated into urban political economies (Lewis 1966; Redfield 1960; Redfield and Singer 1954). On the other hand, the Chicago school of urban sociology heavily influenced urban anthropology. Its understanding of the city as an urban core surrounded by rings and niches where different social or ethnic groups lived (Wirth 1938) matched well with the focus on small spatial units that urban anthropologists usually studied. Until Ulf Hannerz' landmark publication of 1980, there seemed to be little need to look at the city as such – as a social, cultural and political entity with a distinct character that the urbanites identified with.

Since the 1980s, this gap was addressed by many an anthropological study of cities in the Global South and, to a lesser extent, also in other parts of the world.<sup>1</sup> These studies of cities had an implicit dimension that the older studies in cities lacked: They were comparing cities and urban life. Many of the comparisons were hidden and barely reflected, but they increasingly informed urban anthropology. With all due caution, it is safe to argue that this turn towards comparisons initiated a second phase of urban anthropology. As in other subfields, anthropology engaged in different types of comparison, of which some were addressed directly while others remained embedded in other, larger debates.

One comparative, generalising gesture of the first kind was that of rural versus urban. As all grand dichotomies, however, the distinction became more and more blurred the closer anthropologists examined it. Urban lifestyles were rapidly spreading into the rural hinterland of cities, and the exchange between urbanites and their rural relatives and friends was often so intense and regular that it made no sense to characterise one or the other in essentialist terms. Of course, this did not mean that there were no differences – but it became increasingly difficult to order them along one dividing line. Furthermore, the settlement structures were increasingly blurred. Sub- and peri-urban spaces merged with what the urban sociologists of the Chicago school had called the core of the city.

1 E.g. Holston (1989) for cities in the Global South and Pardo (1996) for cities in Europe.

Transformations that seemed to be specific to the Global North seemed to become universal features of what would be called a rising urban age – and that challenged the second grand dichotomy that most anthropologists had implicitly reproduced in their work: There seemed to be little evidence to distinguish cities of the Global North and South. The rising urban age appeared to transcend all local forms. That cities in Asia, Latin America and, for that matter, Africa looked so different and so disorganised was no longer interpreted as a particularity of southern urbanisation or as an outcome of the lack of funds, a weak state and planning deficiencies but rather as a glimpse on the future of all cities. Star architect Rem Koolhaas (2002) flew over Lagos and saw instead of “a smoky expanse of concrete and shanty-towns ... a wild zone of the urban imagination” (Gandy 2005, 37–38) and eventually a fascinating urban creativity that easily competed with other cities worldwide. While urbanists were once looking to cities of the West, they were now ready for “learning from Lagos” (Gandy 2005) – a quotation of the equally seminal but older “learning from Las Vegas” (Venturi et al. 1972 [1977]). Such positive images of the formerly exotic African city inversed some strands of globalisation theory but also confirmed other presumptions that were no less venturesome: There would only be one urban age, and it would lead to the same, rogue urbanism throughout the world (Pieterse 2011; Pieterse and Simone 2013).

This turn and the debates linked to it were, of course, of immediate relevance to urban anthropology. It is probably no coincidence that Jennifer Robinson’s highly seminal book on ordinary cities, first published in 2006 (also Robinson 2016), fell on fertile ground in anthropology. Her claim that all cities should be analysed according to the same principles confirmed the post-colonial stance of many anthropologists: There is no reason for an African exceptionalism. Urban geography, urban sociology and urban studies more generally seemed to serve as models for a renewed urban anthropology that would no longer focus on particularities and the uniqueness of the cities that it studied. At least to some extent, anthropologists were urged to give up cherished claims to specificity and to the distinctive character of ‘their’ cities.

Anthropologists had difficulties to digest the new strands of theorising the city. They still saw more particularities and irreconcilable differences where urbanists were talking about ordinary cities as the premise of all comparisons. A certain tension between anthropological comparisons and that of geographers and sociologists remains, and despite all claims to general comparisons, anthropologists still struggle with the opposition of the urban human condition on the one side and the uniqueness of cities on the other. Yet, the comparative gesture might be more ubiquitous in anthropology than it first appears. It is embedded in statements and conclusions on differences and similarities of cities studied across Africa or the Global South. This short paper thus tries to untangle those comparative gestures. It argues that there is more than one way of making sense of urban comparisons. Outlining the rationales of these comparisons, it opts for a theory that conceives urbanity as urban social practice, making it the cornerstone of a truly anthropological theory of the urban that can underpin wider comparisons.

## Why Abstract Reason Does Not Help

In one of the more recent books on “cross-cultural” comparisons, the editors state that anthropology has too often tried to forget about its own past and that it should “reinvigorate” past comparative methods (Gingrich and Fox 2002). Comparing societies or cultures has indeed been part of anthropology’s early history: Evolutionism as an intellectual project was entirely based on a comparison of societies – and indeed mankind as a whole – along a line of technological development. The ideological underpinning of

such comparisons is obvious and has rightly been criticised, also by Gingrich and Fox. However, they want to retain “a heterogeneous spectrum of middle-range strategies, mainstream and subaltern, that sustained the discipline along numerous lifelines” (Strat-herm 2002, xiii). This claim seems to be more modest, but basically, these less ambitious comparisons are grounded in the same procedures as the bold comparisons of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before talking about current debates and urban comparisons, it is useful to recall how these procedures work and what they can achieve.

Comparisons are part of an anthropologist’s daily work. Anthropologists inevitably compare their own society to others, and most of the time, they also compare other societies to each other. Compared to their ubiquity in anthropological work, comparisons are often done implicitly and are rarely thoroughly thought through.<sup>2</sup> In classical modern anthropology, the main comparative instruments are a set of concepts and analytical tools that are used to characterise a particular type of social order, economic organisation, or simply culture. Segmentary societies, for instance, are societies that differ from other societies because their social order is based on unilineal descent groups that share the same rights and values – and not on classes or some other sort of unequal social strata. The decisive step is the construction of a criterion that serves as the conceptual basis for further comparisons. It is important to note that such criteria are not natural attributes of a society or a set of societies. They are secondary features that anthropologists create for a specific purpose – namely to render their findings intelligible to other scholars and possibly a wider, usually northern audience. Anthropologists need to characterise the societies they study, and they often do that for smaller communities as well. The debate of new social movements and their forms and types could serve as an example. And cities are no exception, as I will analyse further below.

Formal comparisons in the social sciences are facing basic difficulties. Some are related to the constraints of professionalised social science and its language, others are of an epistemological nature. The first have been analysed thoroughly during the crisis of representation in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Marcus and Fischer 1986). More interesting in this context are the latter, the epistemological difficulties of comparisons. Attempts to introduce positive, seemingly reliable criteria for the comparison of larger social entities do not work as intended. The reason is mainly that the *comparata* – that is, the objects of comparison – are no natural objects of social everyday life but rather pre-constructed objects of anthropological or sociological thought. They do not exist as such – they are, on the one side, summative creations of everyday social imagination (Castoriadis 1987; Robinson and Rundell 1994) or, on the other side, of the anthropological (Crapanzano 2004) or sociological imagination (Mills 2000; Denzin 1990). The two may overlap to some extent and perhaps make use of the same criteria – but it would be naïve to presume that scholarly *comparata* will always mirror the former, the imaginary objects of everyday life. The reasons are simple: they belong to two separate discursive formations in which different actors with different intentions articulate their views. More often than not, the anthropologist is the only actor that is actively participating in both discourses.

Cities are a case in point, but the same applies to nations, ethnic groups and, eventually, to societies at large. They are imagined communities – and they have to be so as nobody can experience a nation, an ethnic group and a city directly as such. All imagined communities are experienced through a multitude of social practices that confirm their existence and foster a particular, partial perspective. Many of these practices overlap to some degree, some are complementary to each other, and still others may be inconsistent and related to specific situations and events. However, as all discursive formations, they rotate around a core that serves as a nodal point for the articulations

2 Notable exceptions are Goodenough 1980; Gingrich and Fox 2002; Schweizer 2003.

of the actors who see themselves as members of that community. Benedict Anderson's famous example is the heading in the daily newspaper that speaks of "the nation" as a community that the reader naturally belongs to (Anderson 2006, 25–36). The members of such communities develop summative accounts of their own, scattered daily experiences while social scientists' accounts are rather based on focused descriptive analyses. It is likely that both accounts reflect the actors' intentional relationships to cities as imagined communities. But scholars have other intentions than ordinary actors, and, as already mentioned, their articulations belong to a different discursive sphere. It goes without saying that an understanding of imagined communities as intentional objects must recognise their situational and relational character. Since cities are imagined communities as well as intentional objects, they can only be grasped in the absence of a referent (cf. Resina 2003, 14). In other words, there is no stable comparata on which a comparison in the strict sense of the term could build.

There is a second point. Abstract conceptions of comparison are rarely of help in the social sciences because it is impossible to keep either the parameters or the third stable in an urban context. It would be hazardous to posit that parameters constituting comparata of a particular kind are easily identifiable in urban social life – its sheer complexity is an obstacle that either leads to a reduction of multifaceted urbanities or makes it impossible to conceive them in a way that would still permit such a comparison.

The distinction of comparata and their *tertium* or "third" is most often conceived as similarity and contrast, or resemblance and difference. In such a setting, it must remain unclear what the tertium refers to. Comparing in such a basic way of juxtaposing comparata may work as abstract thinking, but it builds on presumptions that ignore the fluid character of the social: it requires a selection of parameters that inform the comparison as elements of the comparata, implicitly assuming some sort of correlation. Although there is often no indication for functional connections, such correlations are often thought of as indicators for a conditional relationship, that is, the tertium is related to the contrast or similarity of the comparata or, in other words, as dependent variable. Such a comparative approach at best gives rise to linear research procedures or, to quote Jeffrey Alexander (2003, 17–21), a "weak research programme" that cannot capture other relationships than the ones preconceived by the researcher. A strong programme would aim at explaining urban phenomena in their own right and how they make and shape the city and its specificity.

## Materialist Perspectives

It seems to be much easier to restrict comparisons to 'the obvious'; the 'unquestionable' realities of the urban. Size is most often identified as a criterion. Counting or estimating the populace seems to be the first and most reliable step to rank cities along an ascending or descending line. Such implicit comparisons are often part of everyday language as well. English, for instance, distinguishes between hamlet, village, town, city, and, if more levels are needed, the metropolis or, more recently, the mega city.

However, everyday language is notoriously imprecise. The terms are not reflected concepts but rather notions that overlap considerably. Oftentimes, town and city may be used for the same settlement, and other terms can also overlap. The semantic fields can vary enormously from one language to the other. German, for instance, would not differentiate between town and city – that would require an additional adjective or prefix as in *Kleinstadt*, *Stadt* and *Grossstadt* ("little city, city, large city"). Other languages may lack nuanced vocabularies for bigger settlements. Senari, the language of the Senufo who mostly lived as farmers in hamlets and villages in the West African savannah

Abidjan is a primary city and often called “the pearl of the lagoon”. The Plateau is the showcase of the post-colonial nation state – also at night.

*T. Förster, November 2015*



until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, has no word for city. The few towns that slowly emerged under colonial domination and rapidly transformed into the first cities in Senegoland were simply called “big villages”.

Normative scaling may also play a role, in particular when resources depend on the size of a settlement. For instance, since 1887, German administrators draw a line between ‘cities’ (Stadt) and ‘large cities’ (Grossstadt) and define the latter as any city with more than 100 000 inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> The categorisation has direct consequences: The allocation of federal funds for additional urban infrastructures is based on the classification. A city of that size was outstanding in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany – but it is no more today, which illustrates, on the one hand, the arbitrariness of such classifications. On the other, it shows that size as one of the few, seemingly indisputable criteria can turn an ‘obvious’ ranking into an urban hierarchy that has a direct impact on governance and urban policies.

But even size is not as undisputable as it seems. Whether urban councils are allowed to count students who only spend half of the year in town as inhabitants has been debated in more than one country. And whether the populace of peri-urban spaces should be counted as urban or not has also been a subject of political disputes – to mention but two examples.

Before addressing relative rankings, a word has to be said about other material criteria. Urban planners often list what they have achieved to underline the importance of ‘their’ cities (and their own planning activities): kilometres of urban highways and streets, of sewage canalisation, of bridges, suburb railway lines, and the else. Such statistics are implicit comparisons in two ways: first, they compare before and after, e.g. when related

3 <https://www.die-erde.com/stadt/siedlung-landstadt-kleinstadt-mittelstadt-grossstadt-millionenstadt> [accessed 15.06.2017].

to the legislative period of an administration, and second, they allow for a comparison with other cities when related to various material criteria, e.g. the size of green areas per capita. However, such statistics do not tell us much about the ‘real’ character of a city – for instance, urban social life that the inhabitants can and often do identify with.

The terms used in natural languages most often include dimensions of human settlements other than size, density and the like. Some cities are called ‘big villages’ because they seem to lack what most people would associate with urban life, for instance a vibrant culture that is focused on the city as a social space and not oriented towards a distant somewhere else: urban life is intimately connected with so-called “soft factors” as, among many other things, art, museums, theatre, but also night life and the staging of the self in public spaces. All that is obvious and in no way surprising. It shows that ‘obvious’ criteria are never as self-evident as they seem to be. They are as much embedded in urban social and political life than other forms of ranking comparisons.

## Urban Hierarchies

Another, seemingly self-evident scale is that of urban hierarchies. As most countries have only one capital, it is most often conceived as primary while all other cities are relegated to lower ranks. This model works well for many countries, France and Paris being the most obvious example. In Africa, Senegal and Dakar, Kenya and Nairobi, Ghana and Accra would fit that model; in Latin America Argentina and Buenos Aires, and in Asia Thailand and Bangkok, to mention only a few. Such urban hierarchies build on more than one pillar. Size is one of them, more precisely the relationship between the capital and the second largest city. The metropolitan area of Nairobi has some 6.5 million inhabitants while Mombasa, Kenya’s second city, has 1.2 million.<sup>4</sup> Dakar, Senegal’s capital, is home to about 3 million people while Touba, the country’s second largest city, has only some 750 000 inhabitants. In other words, Nairobi is more than five times bigger than Mombasa, and Dakar about four times compared to Touba. Their dominance in the respective countries is evident and observable in almost all fields.

However, there are also countries where such rankings do not lead to a clear hierarchy. Cameroon can serve as an example. In terms of economic activities, Douala, the port city, is dominant. It has about 2.45 million inhabitants (2012 est.). Yaoundé, the seat of the government in the interior, has almost the same size in terms of population (2.44 mill., 2012 est.), but is economically by far less important than Douala. Such brief comparisons show that the ranking of cities leads to questionable results. Comparisons need to be based on more than one criterion, and size is often not the most important one. The administrative hierarchy is, in particular in centralised states, another, equally important element. Capital cities host many, sometimes all ministries, offer jobs in the administration and often also house many institutions of higher education. Yaoundé therefore attracts and accommodates a different kind of population than Douala, which is more attractive for people who seek jobs in trade and industry or as workers in the harbour. Ranking one city as ‘primary’ and the other as ‘secondary’ thus means to weigh the importance of the respective sectors of the economy.

Of course, there are many more dimensions that such comparisons need to take into account. Attempts to define primary, secondary and tertiary cities show the noto-

4 All figures are based on estimations or censuses of the past ten years, i.e. [www.citypopulation.de](http://www.citypopulation.de), and [www.worldpopulationreview.com](http://www.worldpopulationreview.com) [both accessed 16.06.2017].

rious difficulties to integrate these dimensions into a clear and coherent definition that can draw a line between primary and secondary cities:

A secondary city is largely determined by population, size, function, and economic status. Commonly, secondary cities are geographically defined urban jurisdictions or centres performing vital governance, logistical, and production functions at a sub-national or sub-metropolitan region level within a system of cities in a country. [...] The population of secondary cities range between 10–50 % of a country's largest city, although some can be smaller than this. They will likely constitute a sub-national or sub-metropolitan second-tier level of government, acting as centres for public administration and delivery of education, knowledge, health, community, and security services; an industrial centre or development growth pole; a new national capital; or a large city making up a cluster of smaller cities in a large metropolitan region. (Roberts and Hohmann 2014, 3)

The criteria are convincing elements that may feed into a general understanding of primary and secondary cities – but they are not a definition in the strict sense of the term. They rather outline a typology that aims at ranking cities. Accordingly, the authors of such 'definitions' usually state that the three levels of primary, secondary and tertiary cities may overlap (Roberts and Hohmann 2014, 4). It would be more appropriate to understand such rankings as one possible typology among many. And as any typology, it can easily be questioned by another.

But before getting to this point, a word has to be said about other ranking comparisons, namely those that are based on the consciousness of the populace. In a series of highly seminal publications, Saskia Sassen has argued that the world's largest cities do no longer compete with other cities in the respective countries but rather with other 'Global Cities' (Sassen 1991, 2002, 2005). She thus presumes that cities – at least Global Cities – have a sort of self-awareness and that they can act as if they were a collective, if not corporate actor who articulates its own position with regard to that of others, in this case other Global Cities. This construction of cities as actors is the first step of her argument, but the decisive move is to replace national or regional boundaries by the global ecumene in which these cities function as a network of networks (Hannerz 1992). Her argument is more about globalisation and its effects rather than on cities and their characteristics.

Unfortunately, her work lacks empirical evidence. Of course, there are cities that would easily match Sassen's model. In Africa, Johannesburg may serve as an example. It sells itself as "a world class African city, [...] defined by increased prosperity and quality of life through sustained economic growth for all of its citizens."<sup>5</sup> Putting its role as a financial and economic centre first, Johannesburg's metropolitan municipality tries to attract more foreign investments and also tourists and other visitors. Whether the citizens who live the city day in and day out actually share such images is, however, an open question that calls for empirical enquiry. And it is also remains open whether they would compare their city with other Global Cities as the ones that Sassen drew on in her work: New York, London, Tokyo. Or rather with the second layer of Global Cities in the BRICS countries: Delhi, Mumbai, Beijing, São Paulo, Moscow.

The findings of a group of anthropologists at the chair of anthropology of the University of Basel – though still preliminary – point toward a different kind of urban hierarchy: Citizens in mid-sized or secondary cities are usually very much aware of the national urban ladders, but less so of global hierarchies. At least to some extent, this

5 E.g. <https://lsecities.net/media/objects/articles/johannesburg-a-world-class-african-city/en-gb/> [accessed 15.06.2017].

awareness is induced by social practices and in particular by their interactions with the administration of the state and its subsidiary bodies, for instance national public health institutions. One example suffices to illustrate the point: *Cela se fait uniquement au niveau d'Abidjan*, a student told me when we were talking about the extension of my residence permit. In this context, 'niveau' stands for the administrative hierarchy, which translates into a grading of provincial towns and the dominant urban centre that Abidjan is. Global urban hierarchies are occasionally debated among the elites that also share some knowledge of such competing cities. Again, it seems that urban hierarchies as a discursive theme have to be sustained by some sort of social practice.

In general, the awareness of urban hierarchies goes far beyond administrative levels and competences. And it is situational. The articulation of difference depends on what the actors look at: The inhabitants of Korhogo, Côte d'Ivoire's fourth largest city, usually draw on their city's role in regional trade, agricultural production and its rich cultural heritage when they situate it in the country's urban hierarchy. They often claim that it "has to be" Côte d'Ivoire's third largest city – Daloa, which now has a few more inhabitants than Korhogo, would be a "one-horse town without a horse".<sup>6</sup> Korhogo was, they claim, already a town when Daloa did not even exist yet. Besides being proud of one's own history, there are also other feelings. In Korhogo, many citizens think of the times under rebel domination as a free space where they could experiment with alternative governance arrangements, and some also say that there is more leeway to deal with social problems without provoking state interventions in such cities. The provision of security and, to a lesser extent, the persecution of crime would be a case in point (Förster 2015).

However, many citizens of Korhogo have an ambivalent relationship to the country's urban hierarchy – and they might not be an exception: peasants in rural areas speak in a similar way. When talking about *les abidjanais*, "the Abidjanese", they sometimes complain that these urbanites only look at their own life and their own city, having very little knowledge of the Ivorian realities elsewhere. In particular, Abidjanese' knowledge of *le pays profond*, "the rural hinterland" is almost non-existent, villagers claim. Two feelings may merge in such statements: On the one hand, there is the (in)famous blasé attitude that may become habitual for urbanites, and on the other hand, there is the experience that the urban elite in Côte d'Ivoire, rightly identified with *la classe dominante*, "the dominant class" (Fauré and Médard 1982), willingly ignores the harsh economic and social realities in the country.

Whether the citizens of Abidjan really live up to the image that the inhabitants of the country's smaller cities seem to share is again an open question that requires more empirical research. Everyday experience suggests that they, the Abidjanese, make use of two major reference points in their urban life: They often look to Paris, which is, for many, still the metropolis where one needs to be and from where urban lifestyles radiate into Africa – even to a primary city like Abidjan. But the second is indeed their own way of life – or Abidjan as a social, political and cultural space. In any case, they rarely situate their city in the global ecumene that Sassen had in mind. Whether that is due to the relatively less important position of Abidjan in the global urban hierarchy has to remain open. However, the dichotomous dividing line that Sassen draws between ordinary big cities and Global Cities does not seem to hold.

Secondary cities are the subject of the contributions to this issue, and it is useful to recall some of the basic assumptions that the inhabitants make when they compare their city to the economic capital of the country: First, they assume that there is more free space to develop local governance arrangements – not only under rebel domination.

6 *Une ville pour les ânes sans ânes*, literally "a city for donkeys without donkeys." Daloa is situated in the coffee belt of Côte d'Ivoire and quickly grew out of an agricultural settlement. It lies in a humid zone where donkeys, an important pack animal in the northern savannahs, do not survive.

Second, they clearly see their own city as subordinate to the capital. Even if they try to make use of the advantages that such a position in the national urban hierarchy offers, they still feel neglected by the nation state. That sounds paradoxical, but it is not. The latter, the feeling of being marginalized, is rather the reverse side of the first, the freedom of not being monitored too closely.

## Urbanity

The emic perspective on cities is, from an anthropological point of view, the most promising starting point for urban comparisons. As urbanites everywhere, urban Africans compare their cities with others, and they will also rank them if there is reason to do so. One has to keep in mind that scholarly typologies are never the only ones, and urban practices are certainly more informed by local comparisons and typologies than by those of outsiders.

Setha Low's (1996, 1999) typology of cities may serve as an example for the latter. She outlines eleven ideal types in Weber's sense: the ethnic city, the divided city, the gendered city, the contested city, the deindustrialised city, the informational city, the modernist city, the postmodern city, the fortress city, the sacred city, and, last but not least, the traditional city. Low's types<sup>7</sup> are deduced from the literature and thus from empirical research, but they have another, double purpose: on the one hand, they summarise the main characteristics of the respective cities and cast them into a mental image. On the other, they are meant to facilitate wider, general comparisons. As a toolkit, such typologies may work to some degree, but it is important to keep in mind that they are first and foremost a scholarly, anthropological construction. There is nothing wrong with such constructions, but they do not necessarily reflect how the inhabitants think about their cities nor do they correspond to all of the characteristics of any one city. It depends on the researcher which phenomena he or she emphasises.

Comparisons based on such typologies have some advantages. They highlight specificities, but they also conceal that such comparisons are pre-configured in the construction of the typology. It is helpful to take a step back and think about the most basic understanding of what a city is and what is appropriately called urban life.

What is a city? Most people would answer this question by pointing again at the size of the population, its materiality and its physical appearance, attributing all three to a bounded space. Space – and indeed most often bounded space – is certainly a key element for many. But what kind of space is meant? Most urbanites would probably insist that size and physical appearance is not enough to speak of a city. For many, a city is much more a social space – a space of interactions that urbanites can freely engage in. This more Lefebvrian (Lefebvre 1991) understanding raises an important question: Social practice can adopt many forms, but what, if anything, makes it distinctly urban? Interactions would also characterise village life, and lonely herders do also interact when they meet somebody in the wilderness now and then. A truly human understanding of the urban thus has to make clear what characterises urban practices and how they then integrate into the social space that a city is.

Summarising an argument that I developed elsewhere (Förster 2013), two dimensions have to be addressed. First, the researcher has to examine the social interactions of urbanites and to contrast them to those in other settings. There is, of course, a common, human ground – else, it would be impossible for outsiders to participate in urban social

7 Parker (2015) develops a similar, more open but also less comprehensive typology.

Urban visual culture is as competitive as politics and the articulation of social identities.  
T. Förster, Februar 2015



life, and anthropologists would be unable to conduct research in cities other than the ones they are already familiar with. But encounters in urban social space also have a distinctive style (in general Watson 2006, 2ff.) – very much like the urban morphology of buildings, streets and squares. What I called ‘style’ is in fact a habitual way of engaging in encounters and hence a dimension of social practice that urbanites have and need to acquire over time. The cheekiness of New Yorkers and Berliners is (in)famous, and so is the directness and even brutality of everyday encounters in Lagos, Nigeria.

Second, one has to look at the habitual ways of encountering others – and also distancing oneself from others – as a general interplay of actors, that is, as a basic feature of urban life that to some degree informs other spheres of social life. In small communities, where most people know each other, the habitual interplay often regulates social ties and keeps emotional bonds at a middle distance; translating segmentary social organisation into personal experience (Needham 1962). In an urban context, the actors have more freedom of choice and can engage in much more intimate relationships here while distancing themselves from other social contexts there.

I do not argue that all urbanites make use of that freedom. There are countless examples that people living in sub- or peri-urban neighbourhoods mean a rural life – very much as if they were living in a small hamlet. My point is rather that they would not need to do so. There would be alternatives, but it is often easier to stick to a sociality that one is already used to rather than to experiment with (yet) unknown ways of living. As agency is always composed of three dimensions; judgement and imagination together with habits (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), it depends very much on how actors will weigh a particular situation. They may give up certain habitual ways of situating themselves in an urban context if a particular situation urges or even obliges them to do so.

I have called these dialectics between encounter and distancing ‘urbanity’ (Förster 2013). Taking my argument a step further and applying it to comparative urban

Masquerades like this were used to articulate loyalty to one branch of the politically leading family of the city of Korhogo.

T. Förster, February 2015



research, it is reasonable that a comparison can also focus on different urbanities that characterise urban life in different cities. As urban practice that underpins city life, urbanity pervades more than just the sphere of everyday face-to-face encounters – it also informs urban politics to some degree and hence the formation of governance arrangements. To what degree it does so is, of course, an open question that calls for empirical research. But there are more than only hints that urban politics also adopt a specific ‘style’ in different cities. Korhogo could again serve as an example: The struggle between two branches of the Coulibaly family that has dominated urban politics since the end of the 19th century has penetrated all spheres of social and cultural life in the city. In the late 1980s, for instance, one branch of the family created a masquerade called *kà pã cãñ*, literally “we’ll see” [who will win]. It instigated violent conflicts that culminated in fist fights and finally in knifings between followers of the two factions.

Urban comparisons can do much more. Comparing the formation of governance arrangements or, as in the two case studies in this issue, urban land governance, reveals much about the character of cities and their urbanity. A city is made in everyday encounters – but no less in urban politics and how urbanites try to resolve social problems. Accordingly, the two case studies both had to focus on the interaction of urbanites and those who have a say in the city. They are both based on intensive anthropological fieldwork because there is no other way of studying urbanity in all its depth.

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