

Introduction

Urban kinship: the micro-politics of proximity and relatedness in African cities

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African cities have long been perceived as emblematic of the vibrancy and contradictions that characterize public spheres in an African context – from breathtaking monuments of wealth and oppression to overwhelming destitution and despair; from vibrant market places and artistic expression to dilapidated infrastructures and rampant criminality. Through depictions of the hectic pace of different forms of movement – from the inner-city traffic that seems to be buzzing even in the midst of a complete standstill to public protests and food riots – African cities become lenses through which social and political life is assessed and synthesized; a canvas on which national politics and global inequalities are laid bare, for all to see. Indeed, the visual has long been the preferred prism for documenting and evoking the dynamism and decay of urban Africa. Many of these dualities hold some truths but have also contained the enduring simplifications of prejudice and exoticization. The ‘urban jungle’ is easily seen as the continent’s true Heart of Darkness; a pre-conceptualized dystopia (Robinson 2010); a micro-cosmos of the most frightening and fascinating facets of primitive humanity. This special issue challenges such simplifications by emphasizing everyday sociality, and by giving priority to the narratives and practices of urban residents themselves.

The selection of articles represents a broad geographical and conceptual range that nevertheless converges on the forging, transformation and reproduction of strong bonds of relatedness in urban contexts, characterized by dense residential areas or public spaces that provide the stage on which these relationships are brought under collective scrutiny. In these interactions, an emphasis on the ambivalence of social and spatial proximity is suggested here as an original conceptual contribution to the anthropological literature on urban Africa, which continues to grapple with the complexity of socio-spatial relations in the city. In the remainder of this introduction, we outline a conceptualization of urban relatedness, centred on notions of continuity, proximity, kinship and ambivalence.

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Beyond quantitative urbanism

As countless observers have noted, the African continent is expected to continue its urbanization in the coming decades at a pace that will see existing cities expand and new urban centres emerge. A recent synthesis estimates that, in 2030, Lagos, Cairo and Kinshasa will each house over 20 million inhabitants, while Luanda, Dar es Salaam and Johannesburg will grow to over 10 million inhabitants. By 2035, close to 30 million people could live in Lagos alone (Bello-Schünemann and Aucoin 2016). In combination with the projected population growth on the continent, concerns are raised about the challenges that these expansions will pose to social services, urban infrastructures and labour markets, from Cairo to Cape Town and from Dar es Salaam to Dakar (UN Habitat 2014). The general atmosphere surrounding such observations are, justifiably, seeped in concerns about the threats of an ‘African urban revolution’ (*ibid.*; Pieterse and Parnell 2014) to political stability, off-continent emigration, and the overall well-being of urban residents in African cities. These fears seem to confirm the pessimistic views of global trends towards ‘the modernisation of misery – the rise of a new regime of urban inequality and marginality’ (Wacquant 1999: 1640), if not a ‘planet of slums’ (Davis 2006).

At the same time, growing urbanization has also sparked more optimistic expectations with regard to the plight and responsiveness of urban residents in the global South, for example when urban marginalization is seen as the source of insurgent citizenship (Holston 2009). Whether ‘the revolution’ is seen in the sheer numbers of present and future residents of Africa’s expanding cities or in the political capacities for resident mobilization, these views seem to share a preoccupation with overarching political and economic (infra)structures and leave little space for *a peopled infrastructure* that includes the activities and preoccupations of urban residents in everyday life.

Concerns about the inadequacy of African urban infrastructures and the human costs of increased urbanization have been with us for a while. In fact, the sense of an explosively growing, uncontrollable urban landscape in Africa has been a dominant force in urban theory for decades, with – at times – alarmist undertones (Robinson 2010). From an anthropological perspective, regardless of the macro-level prospects for urban (over)growth and infrastructural collapse, research that accentuates the voices and practices of urban residents has a continued relevance. As we engage more closely with urban residents themselves, accounts pointing beyond urban despair and decay abound. The insistence on analytically populating our analyses of African cityscapes is not just rhetorical. It is through such qualitative insights that the realities of these places are most effectively brought to life; and through a committed focus on the outlooks and experiences of their inhabitants that the universalizing tendency to categorize cities in the global South on the basis of their perceived inferiority to their Northern counterparts is best avoided.

The shortcomings of bird’s-eye perspectives on urban Africa have been addressed over the past decade by calls for a less structural, and more empathetic, understanding of the outlooks and preoccupations of urban residents. Such research has evoked the ‘elusiveness’ (Nutall and Mbembe 2008) or ‘invisibility’ (De Boeck and Plissart 2004) of a dynamic and ever-changing urban social landscape where conventional categories of quantitative assessment or urban

governance fail to capture the innovative and adaptive nature of city life. The seminal work of AbdouMaliq Simone, for example, has suggested that we think of ‘people as infrastructure’, highlighting the non-physical dimensions of urban realms, ‘capable of facilitating the intersection of socialities so that expanded spaces of economic and cultural operation become available to residents of limited means’ (Simone 2004a: 407). This is a process particularly palpable in inner cities in formal disconnect with their surroundings, where ‘residents pursue ways of collaborating with people often very different from themselves, operating in different parts of the city, and with whom they work out highly particularized relationships and ways of dealing with each other’ (Simone 2004b: 5ff).

Throughout urban Africa, Simone proposes that ‘residents experience new forms of solidarity through their participation in makeshift, ephemeral ways of being social’ (2004a: 426). What this inspirational scholarship tends to share with the more conventional and quantitative approaches to understanding African cities, however, is, firstly, a tendency to emphasize newness and flux at the expense of the underlying continuities that inform everyday sociality. The contributions to this special issue illustrate that even in the midst of personal or structural transformations, the social dynamics of everyday interaction and exchange draw on (and challenge) well-established cultural registers. This perspective on urban sociality, of course, evokes a recurrent conundrum in urban anthropology, summarized succinctly by J. Clyde Mitchell half a century ago:

It may well be that the social situations in which a town-dweller interacts are more varied than those in the life of a tribesman but, so far as sociological analysis is concerned, it seems that the behaviour of a townsman in a given social situation is not likely to be more ‘complex’ than that of a tribesman in a rural situation ... It is possible that the apparent complexity of social phenomena in African urban areas is due simply to the fact that we do not as yet have the perspective with which to view these phenomena and bring them into focus. (Mitchell 1966: 40–1)

Terminology aside, Mitchell stated an enduring conceptual point: namely, that differences in scale and concentration between urban and rural contexts, in and of themselves, say little about the nature of social interactions in these contexts. The assumption that life in the city would be fundamentally different from life outside it might come down to a question of methodology – of analytical delimitation, rather than empirical complexity. In turn, the unease with which urban anthropology has approached the question of delimitation may be understood as a reflection of an epistemological legacy within Africanist scholarship in general to produce oversimplified typologies of social and political life in African contexts, a legacy that has posed equally unsettling questions with regard to analyses of rural and translocal contexts. As Ferguson has commented: ‘Perhaps the real issue is not why we feel so uncertain in speaking about “the culture” of cities, but why we have felt so confident in authoritatively summing up the culture of villagers’ (Ferguson 1999: 271, note 15). In other words, we proceed from the assumption that intimate social relations and their effects are as fleeting, and as solid, in African cities as anywhere else. The urban context may bring some people and world views together for the first time but the themes of compression, flux, complexity and fluidity are not only not new, they may also obscure the significant continuities that underlie the fast pace and

quick wit so often ascribed generically to urban residents. Idioms of kinship are one sphere in which the durability, solidity and predictability of social life are grafted, however rhetorically, onto the constantly mutating cityscape.

Secondly, the recent scholarship on African cities as amorphous and revolutionary social spheres paradoxically tends to leave urban residents as voiceless as they are in the quantitative analyses of urbanization rates and infrastructural collapse. As William Monteith points out in his contribution to this issue, ‘its suppression of subjective accounts represents a diversion from the conventional ethnographic goal of prioritizing the categories and concepts of the (urban) respondent’. As a result of our engagements with their narratives and experiences, we therefore explore in this special issue how urban residents claim social and cultural continuity in the context of everyday life in African cities.

The micro-politics of urban proximities

Analysing the ways in which urban residents articulate or construct social and existential continuity in the midst of new or changing surroundings was in many ways the hallmark of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute and the Manchester School anthropologists, at a historical juncture when rapid urbanization and concern about its implications rose to the fore in (colonial) policy and academic engagements with African cities. As noted by a contingent of urban scholars since that golden era, the analytical insights and methodological innovations of Max Gluckman’s influential collective have not only left a lasting mark on the field, but remain relevant for conceptualizing urban sociality (see, for example, Bank 2011; Ferguson 1999; Moore and Vaughan 1994) and even social theory on a more abstract level (cf. Evens and Handelman 2006). Building on these re-articulations, this special issue thus re-engages the legacy of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, leaving questions of whether and in which ways urban contexts produce qualitatively different forms of social interaction to empirical analysis rather than structural categorization. Such an exploration naturally reconnects with the work of Simone and others in emphasizing peopled infrastructures over material ones, and in seeing the city as primarily a social, rather than material, sphere of human interaction.

As a domain of social interaction, however, urban infrastructures do seem to influence sociality in particular ways, as housing, work, education and transportation produce specific forms of interaction, or ‘urban mutualities’ (Chari and Gillespie 2014), as the contributions to this special issue illustrate in their diversity. Empirically, the notion that spatial proximity would affect social relatedness is neither new nor surprising; in urban contexts, dense residential areas and busy market places provide as much potential for forging new bonds in a ‘relational city’ (Myers 2011) as they confirm Simmel’s classical notion of urban anonymity (Simmel 1950), but equally they create spaces for ambivalent ‘relations of non-relations’ (Simone 2004a: 409).

In everyday life, practices of alliance, respectability and display intersect with strategies of avoidance, accusation and deceit (Bjarnesen 2015). These micro-politics of proximity are not written onto a cultural *tabula rasa* but reproduce, refashion and reject established norms of interaction and relatedness just

as social life does in any other setting. Central to these fundamentals of social life are notions of personhood founded on ‘the sense of connectedness that individuals come to have to others, especially relatives’ (Riesman 1992: 10). This does not preclude that city life implies ‘a proximity that produces a highly ambiguous sense of place’ (Simone 2004b: 2), but simply requires that such ambivalence is understood as intrinsic to sociality in general, not specific to the urban context.

Patrick Desplat’s contribution to this issue illustrates how urban proximity affects the spaces available for urban residents in Mahajanga, Madagascar, to negotiate the boundaries between public and private in an effort to preserve their respectability and avoid the envy or suspicion of their neighbours. The physical infrastructure of the neighbourhood thereby imposes an intimate sociality between neighbours that may ideally be a sphere within which to enact local ideals of solidarity and conviviality, but this same intimacy also holds the destructive potential so clearly depicted in Africanist studies of the modernity of witchcraft (cf. Geschiere 1997). In a similar spirit, Christian Laheij suggests that deliberate strategies of reaching out to neighbours in Nampula City in northern Mozambique serve to negotiate the micro-politics of proximity by ‘creating interdependence where there is none, giving residents a measure of control over their social surroundings’ (Laheij, this issue). In these strategic interactions among neighbours, social and spatial proximities intersect to the extent that everyday life in the neighbourhood becomes a struggle to negotiate the transparency imposed by dense housing arrangements and cultural idioms of solidarity. Much as these negotiations bring what might otherwise be private matters into public view, urban residents deliberately infuse public life with idioms of relatedness, further blurring the lines between Habermas’s classical conceptualization of the public and private spheres (De Boeck 2012). These experiences of private domains growing into public ones, and vice versa, are obvious to most residents in, and visitors to, African cities; this micro-politics of proximity is vividly illustrated in the work of Brenda Chalfin on public toilets in urban Ghana (2014), but also in observations by De Boeck (2015) and Simone (2010).

Urban kinship

In order to understand how social and spatial proximity affects the dynamics of everyday sociality, we suggest the notion of *urban kinship* to capture how idioms of relatedness in the city build on more enduring socio-cultural legacies, often explicitly articulated in the language of family. As Janet Carsten (2004) demonstrated in her influential deconstruction of the classical kinship studies in anthropology, kinship ties are often thought to be naturally given, both in the sense of being biologically rooted in descent and in the sense of being inevitable social ties. Kinship, in this understanding, ‘is like your buttocks, you can’t cut it off’, as the Nyole proverb cited by Reynolds Whyte and Whyte (2004: 77) puts it. But on the other hand, kinship ties are negotiable and require active work, in terms of their implications for the reproduction of relatedness as well as in their nominal orders. Kinship ties can indeed be broken, as many teenagers insist on reminding their despairing parents.

One feature shared by all contributions to this special issue is precisely that they demonstrate how the forms and meanings of kinship and kinship-like ties are produced and reproduced in everyday life in African cities. Here, as with cultures of relatedness in most contexts, biology and lineal descent are less important than the significance inscribed into particular relationships by the urban residents involved. This relational work is obviously not specific to the urban context (see, for example, Guichard *et al.* 2014). As Geschiere and Gugler have pointed out:

The language of kinship and solidarity is often evoked to reaffirm the self-evidence of the moral obligations that connect members of a community, whether they are in the city or in the rural home area. (Geschiere and Gugler 1998: 310–11)

Idioms of kinship are evoked in a myriad of different contexts and relationships, with significantly different implications. In some instances, these idioms may be seen as attempts to build or evoke ties that are not initially there, as in Monteith's study of Nakasero market in Kampala, where Alex the rubbish collector's working day to a large extent consists in establishing and maintaining ties of transactional kinship. Work also brings Alexis Malefakis's informants together as they collaborate in the informal shoe-vending sector of Dar es Salaam. As in Ann Cassiman's study of the ambivalent partnerships underlying the cyber-fraud business in the neighbourhood of Nima, Accra, both these studies demonstrate how professional ties become vested in kinship-like relationships that entail solidarity and mutual assistance but also spark suspicions of ill will and accusations of witchcraft, as 'the shadow side of kinship' (Geschiere 1997).

Although kinship terms are invoked here with particular strategies of profit and conviviality in mind, these relations cannot be reduced to their calculated outcomes but take on lives of their own. In this way, even recent social ties may accrue meanings similar to those evoked as being specific to bonds of descent within corporate groups in classical kinship studies, in which an '[a]xiom of prescriptive altruism' was 'definitive of and intrinsic to the facts of kinship as opposed, for example, to the facts of political or economic organization, religious beliefs or ritual practices' (Fortes 1978: 22). In everyday life, the distinctions between these different spheres are broken down, altered or even turned on their head. Kinship is mimicked and replaced by friendship alliances (Guichard *et al.* 2014), and mixed up with informal business networks (Meagher 2010) and big man politics (Utas 2012). Malefakis (this issue) shows how shoe vendors with shared rural origins are torn between considerations of increasing individual profit and kinship-like obligations that are bad for business but difficult to dismiss: 'He owes money to a lot of people here, but we don't chase him away because he's our relative,' Hamis explains in the courtyard that serves as the shoe vendors' workshop and hangout.

It is no coincidence that many of the contributions to this special issue focus on a younger generation of urban residents, since the generational challenges faced by young people in contemporary African cities are central to any study of urban sociality in such contexts. The centrality of young people to social and political (trans)formations across the African continent has given rise to a rich scholarship on African youth and generations over the past two decades. These studies have demonstrated how young people are able to challenge and manipulate hierarchical relationships to their own advantage (see, for example, Honwana and De Boeck

2005; Christiansen *et al.* 2006), and also how expanding cohorts of new generations challenge and overwhelm traditional idioms and mechanisms for structuring the transfer of power and resources across generations (for example, Cole and Durham 2007; Alber *et al.* 2008). In such contexts, in the absence of predictable paths for social progression, young people may invest more in social ties to their peers than in ties to their extended family, reinforcing the kinship-like character of their friendships and peer group alliances.

Ann Cassiman's study of youthful online romance and offline friendships in Accra explores such egalitarian relatedness among peers, who invest their friendships with a kinship-like sense of moral obligation and support. In a context where young men and women look to their peers for most of their social connections, she argues that 'kinship has been complemented, and even partially replaced, by alternative forms and new layers of relatedness, composed using vocabularies and practices of friendship'. Even in more hierarchical relationships, idioms of kinship serve to consolidate or redefine many different forms of relatedness, for example by making claims to shared moral obligations with regard to child rearing or other household responsibilities, as Andrew Spiegel demonstrates in his ethnography from a post-apartheid Capetonian shanty town. Spiegel's tracing of the construction of kinship across rural and urban contexts shows how these ties are defined to fit the needs and expectations of translocal households. In these reconfigurations of household obligations and responsibilities, he argues, kinship 'is a keen cultural resource, sustained by people's efforts to define their relationships, giving them meaning by reference to genealogies and clan-based linkages ... It is also constantly in the process of being transformed, precisely through being called upon and used' (Spiegel, this issue).

The ambivalence of relatedness

This special issue takes its conceptual lead from these empirical evocations of urban kinship, where sincerity and calculation, practice and performance, combine to articulate complex and negotiable forms of relatedness in diverse urban contexts. In this sense, both Desplat's analysis of the cultural idiom of *fihavanana*, or solidarity, in Mahajanga and Laheij's study of witchcraft accusations in Nampula City reveal the seamless ways in which relatedness is created, negotiated and redefined in the context of urban proximity. That these practices and discourses of relatedness come to be perceived as self-evident takes nothing away from the ambivalence they raise. On the contrary, the ambivalence described in most of the contributions testifies to the embeddedness of urban kinship in the everyday lives of the people involved. Suspicion, malice and envy are, indeed, the shadow side of kinship, and the proliferation of witchcraft accusations and social anxiety in the cases to follow illustrate precisely the ways in which new and reconfigured relationships take on a kinship-like character that brings out the best and the worst in our most intimate relationships. As Monteith suggests, building on the work of Erik Bähre (2007: 33), "ambivalence is crucial to an appropriate analysis of solidarity" – and, by extension, kinship – in urban African settings' (Monteith, this issue).

The ambivalence of kinship ties has been documented and analysed by generations of anthropologists but it is still worth emphasizing, given the persistence of a

more classical and one-sided view of kinship. Such a view is present in Marshall Sahlins' recent work *What Kinship Is – And Is Not* (2013), which has generated renewed debates about the nature of relatedness. On the basis of a rich lexicon of classical and contemporary ethnography on kinship, he insists that: 'The specific quality of kinship ... is "mutuality of being"; kinfolk are persons who participate intrinsically in each other's existence; they are members of one another' (*ibid.*: ix). But arriving at a categorical and universal definition of what kinship is almost inevitably reduces it to its idealized claim, and to what Meyer Fortes (1969) called 'kinship amity', which 'excludes any form of accounting between participants: *yours* and *mine* no longer exist; there is only ours' (Pitt-Rivers 2016: 444, italics in original).¹

A narrow focus on kinship idioms, then, is not the intention of this special issue. To paraphrase Janet Carsten's (2013) review of Sahlins, the contributors explore what kinship idioms *do*, rather than focusing more squarely on what they *are*, or what sets them apart categorically from other forms of sociality. Many of our contributors emphasize the darker sides of intimate relationships, underscoring how kinship 'entails promises and breaches of promise, acts and violations of intimacy, and acts of forgiveness and revenge' (Lambek 2011: 4, quoted in Carsten 2013: 248). But more than simply exposing these shadows, the theme of urban kinship addresses the active efforts of urban residents to forge bonds that reflect Meyer Fortes' characterization of 'neighbourliness':

Superficially, the concept of neighbourhood signifies social relations arising out of local contiguity. In fact, it has a narrower connotation. It pinpoints a field of social relations in which local association is suffused with the ideology and values of kinship and is thus drawn into the familial domain. (Fortes 1969: 245)

These strategies of connection and avoidance, and these negotiations of alliance and respectability, characterize the micro-politics of proximity, and kinship idioms serve as an effective repertoire 'to find ways to make a complex situation, where the rules are unclear, accord with and remain analogous to the basic principles generated by formal kinship' (Miller 2007: 539). This does not imply that urban kinship is merely, or primarily, a strategic or disingenuous ploy to accumulate friends in the midst of potential enemies, but rather that kinship-like ties are forged 'in the gradual accumulation of everyday experiences through living together' (Carsten 2013: 248) and through such negotiations.

As several contributions emphasize, the stakes of relatedness may be increased by a series of factors in the urban context: from migrant households dependent on the moral and financial support of their neighbours (Spiegel, Laheij), to transactional relationships intertwining friendship and business (Cassiman, Malefakis, Monteith), and neighbourhood-based solidarity threatening to relapse into moral condemnation and social exclusion (Desplat, Laheij). Urban sociality in

¹ Among the growing commentary on Marshall Sahlins' *What Kinship Is – And Is Not* (2013), Marylin Strathern has suggested that there may be a *linguistic* shortcoming at the heart of this one-sided view of kinship. She argues that writing about kinship in English enforces an imagery in which 'kinship ... is somehow connection first and differentiation second' (Strathern 2014: 58), and that these limitations to a large extent apply to the more widespread use in anthropology of the term 'relations'.

these cases, in other words, is as culturally grounded and as socially complex as sociality anywhere else, but the density of residential areas and public spaces and the precarity of the lives of most of their inhabitants bring out the ambivalence of the micro-politics of proximity with particular clarity and force. Through these intimate engagements with urban residents in cities across the continent, we hope that this special issue will contribute to the growing literature on complex socialities in urban Africa and beyond, emphasizing the discourses, strategies and practices of urban residents themselves in their quests for existential continuity in the context of continuous transformation and flux.

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