BETWEEN WORLD HISTORY AND STATE FORMATION:
NEW PERSPECTIVES ON AFRICA'S CITIES

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The Journal of African History / Volume 52 / Issue 02 / July 2011, pp 223 - 248
DOI: 10.1017/S0021853711000259, Published online: 12 August 2011

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0021853711000259

How to cite this article:
doi:10.1017/S0021853711000259

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BETWEEN WORLD HISTORY AND
STATE FORMATION: NEW PERSPECTIVES
ON AFRICA’S CITIES *

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ABSTRACT: The dramatic urban change taking place on the African continent has led to a renewed and controversial interest in Africa’s cities within several academic and expert circles. Attempts to align a growing but fragmented body of research on Africa’s urban past with more general trends in urban studies have been few but have nevertheless opened up new analytical possibilities. This article argues that to move beyond the traps of localism and unhelpful categorizations that have dominated aspects of urban history and the urban studies literature of the continent, historians should explore African urban dynamics in relation to world history and the history of the state in order to contribute to larger debates between social scientists and urban theorists. By considering how global socio-historical processes articulate with the everyday lives of urban dwellers and how city-state relationships are structured by ambivalence, this article will illustrate how historians can participate in those debates in ways that demonstrate that history matters, but not in a linear way. These illustrations will also suggest why it is necessary for historians to contest interpretations of Africa’s cities that construe them as ontologically different from other cities of the world.

KEY WORDS: Apartheid, civil society, colonial, crime, culture/cultural, economic, postcolonial, power, precolonial, state, urban.

IN 1910, around four million Africans lived in cities. By 2007 there were 373 million, and demographic projections suggest that there will be around 770 million in 2030, more than the total number of city dwellers in the entire western hemisphere today.¹ Even if these estimated numbers of urban dwellers are far from accurate, they reveal the amplitude of the recent urbanization process in Africa which is said to be unique in world history and, according to the Executive Director of UN Habitat, the second biggest

* This article could not have been written without the advice of the following friends and colleagues: Vivian Bickford-Smith, Denis Constant Martin, Vincent Foucher, Henri Médard, Jenny Robinson, Samuel Thomas and Jean-Louis Triaud. It has also benefited from some insightful comments when it was presented at the following conferences: Anglo-American Conference of Historians, University of London, July 2009; African Center for cities, University of Cape Town, March 2009; Centre d’Etude d’Afrique Noire, Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Bordeaux, January 2010. I must also thank the several anonymous reviewers of the journal for their comments on earlier versions of this article. Author’s email: l.fourchard@sciencespobordeaux.fr.

challenge facing Africa after HIV. This recent urban trend has been analyzed in some cases as ontologically distinct from other urbanization processes in the world. Since the early 1990s, the World Bank has recognized that the urban-based economy in the South has significantly contributed to Gross Domestic Product though recent reports have described the continent’s urban growth as ‘pathological’ or ‘dysfunctional’, suggesting that, unlike the rest of the world, urbanization in Africa has not been accompanied by sustained economic growth or reduced poverty. Global city research theorists suggest that the world has been witnessing an epochal transformation in the spatial organization of capitalism since the 1970s which has enabled cities to regain their primacy as the geo-economic engines of the world system. They also contend that there is no global city in Africa, with Johannesburg arguably the only exception. More recently, a group of Western scholars and experts have popularized the idea that Africa’s cities are either dominated by a series of self-regulatory systems working outside state regulations, or are quasi-slum cities in which three-quarters of the population are slum dwellers. These expert analyses, although very different in their foci, all share a ‘failed state’ developmentalist perspective, an increasingly common stance in some circles of political science that views African states and cities as ungovernable, in crisis, and incapable of implementing public policies.

However, a less normative vision has recently suggested that cities should not be seen only in terms of what they lack but rather on the basis of what they are and how they arrived at their contemporary configurations. Analyzing Africa’s cities within the larger framework of the global South serves the dual purpose of avoiding their construction as exceptional and reinserting them in broader academic debates that are not confined to the continent’s history. According to this argument, it is imperative to include

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Africa’s cities in a larger context in order to look at them comparatively and move beyond a perception of urban Africa as being essentially different from the rest of the world. In this renewed and contentious academic interest in the continent’s cities, what is the place, and role, of history and historians?

The production of knowledge on Africa’s urban past is far from being the monopoly of a set of scholars who would label themselves urban historians. In dealing with Africa’s urban past, scholars are instead confronted by at least three distinct bodies of knowledge. First, there are an impressive number of monographs and edited collections which constitute an increasingly important field in quantitative terms but which have not yet led to the sustained development of synthetic overviews. This is overwhelmingly the work of urban historians who may be distinguished from those who might be considered as only ‘passing through their territory’ (that is, the city).

African urban history is a specific subfield of research that first developed in the USA and Europe in the late 1960s and then in Africa from the late 1970s onwards. This history examined the ways in which Africans shaped the patterns of urbanization and how urbanization influenced African social practices. Secondly, there are scholars who do not claim to be urban historians nor make the town their territory but whose interests in related topics constitute a central, and sometimes more valuable, body of research on cities than urban history itself. Finally, there is the production of other social scientists that includes an historical perspective within the framework of a more general interrogation of cities in Africa and the world. Considered in this broader perspective, the historiography of cities in Africa is considerably richer than the limited subfield of urban history.

For understandable reasons, attempts to merge the body of knowledge produced on Africa’s urban past with the more general trend of urban studies have been very few but have nevertheless opened up cross-fertilizing fields between history and the social sciences. Understanding Africa’s urban past and presenting this in a comprehensive analytical manner is actually faced with two major – and probably not so new – challenges. The first is to critically analyze the categories which are commonly used by scholars and policymakers and which are supposedly characteristic of the cities of the continent. In the past, cities were seen as Islamic or colonial; today they may be analyzed as postcolonial, cosmopolitan, informal, or yet to be globalized. A second challenge is to move beyond one of the major biases of urban history and the social sciences that often remain trapped in a localization that considers

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10 See for instance, Simone, *For the City*; Carole Rakodi (ed.), *The Urban Challenge in Africa: Growth and Management of its Large Cities* (Tokyo, 1997); James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley, 1999).
This article seeks to avoid the traps of localism and the temptation of categorization in an attempt to understand Africa’s historical urban dynamics. I suggest that research on Africa’s urban past may benefit significantly from a more thorough engagement with African history, urban studies, and social sciences in general. Historians may also contribute to this debate in ways that demonstrate that history matters but not in a teleological and linear way.

Analyses of urban Africa in relation to world history and the history of the state are suggested as two analytically productive ways for exploring the dynamics of Africa’s urban past while contributing to ongoing debates in urban theory, state-formation analysis, and world history. Unlike current studies of globalization, which do not tell us much about the historical depth of interconnections between Africa and the rest of the world, world history tries to understand the processes involved in the exchange of commodities and social and cultural practices between continents. Such an approach does not need to include the West nor, therefore, to involve a study of Western capitalism in order to pay increasing attention to the social, cultural, and environmental effects of the globalization process. To insert the continent’s cities in world history provides a method of analysis that does not depend upon the lens of European history nor does it oblige consideration of Africa’s cities as necessarily African cities. The major metropolises of the continent are actually not only African cities. Cairo belongs to the Middle East, the Mediterranean Sea, and the African continent; the port cities of the Indian Ocean may be referred to as ‘Afrasiatic’ from the early modern period; while Johannesburg can be said to be an elusive metropolis because of the multiplicity of registers in which it is either African, European, or even American. It is suggested here that the notion of African cities is inappropriate – albeit largely used in the academic literature – as it implies a common history among cities of the continent while underestimating the heterogeneous global influences that have shaped them. Privileging a broader reading of the continent’s cities is also a necessary academic challenge in a context in which Africa has been excluded from research on and theorizations of the global city.

However, this world perspective is not to be looked at in isolation from other scales of analysis. Charles Tilly once admonished urban historians to stop oscillating between ‘the time-space particularism of local history and...
grand timeless, spaceless processes, causes and effects’. Tilly’s cure for
this disease was to exhort urban historians to admit that their turf was
quintessential social history, and to turn back to interpreting ‘the ways that
global social process articulate with small-scale social life’. To follow up
Tilly’s suggestion is one possible way of inserting Africa’s cities into world
history and taking social history into consideration which, since the 1980s,
has been one of the most innovative fields in the historiography of cities
in Africa.

It is also important to consider the role towns and cities have played in the
history of state-formation and explore the effects and limits of state action on
the making and shaping of the continent’s cities. The point is not to return to
a nationalist reading of urbanization process or to write the history of
Africa’s cities caught within the teleological framework of the rise of the
nation-state. It is instead to participate in an important current debate
on state formation in Africa and to understand how local, national, and
transnational actors have forged and remade the state, an interpretation
that challenges ‘failed state’ analyses which ‘tend to reify African states as
ahistorical “things”’. Analyzing the multiple, ambivalent, and non-linear
city/state relationships on the continent is a way of moving beyond this
normative vision of the state while facilitating the interrogation of this rela-
tively unexplored issue in the analysis of state formation in Africa. Such a
perspective also opens up novel analytical approaches for understanding the
urbanization of the continent. African states and cities have a long history
but this current analysis limits its scope by drawing upon examples pre-
dominantly from the last two centuries.

Various labels have marked the last thirty years of urban studies and the
literature on urban history in Africa. From the criticized Islamic and colonial
city paradigms to more recent global city theory, Africa is alternatively per-
ceived at the core or at the periphery of a process of academic categorization
that concerns most of the cities of the south. In a way, these approaches have
been developed to either include the continent’s cities in, or exclude them
from, a world history perspective, though neither has been entirely able to

despite an increasing (but very uneven) integration of the continent’s economy into
the world economy, the 19th century does not necessarily represent a radical change in
Africa’s urban past. To integrate the development of ancient and early modern cities
remains beyond the scope of my current pursuit.
escape an oversimplifying vision of Africa’s urban change. Concentration on large-scale, anonymous structures and processes has neglected the life experiences of ordinary residents that are at the core of social history. After reviewing the different forms in which Africa’s cities have been categorized, I will look at ways of thinking about them both locally and globally, and will use the history of urban labour and the process of historicizing world imaginaries in Africa as two examples that illustrate the potential articulation of world history and social history.

FROM ISLAMIC CITY PARADIGM TO THE GLOBAL CITY THEORY

From the 1930s to the 1990s, the Islamic city paradigm enjoyed considerable popularity especially in North Africa. The Islamic city (that is, a set of political, economic, social, and cultural characteristics supposedly shared by towns and cities of the successive Arab and Ottoman Empires between the seventh and nineteenth centuries), was mainly defined negatively on the basis of a number of elements it lacked according to Max Weber’s prototypical city: the regularity and institutions of the Classical city; the political autonomy of the medieval town; urban planning; links with the countryside. The Weberian idea of the medieval town as a parasitic body, a foreign entity encrusted on the land, a ‘consumer city’ rather than a producing city, was refurbished by Hellenist Moses Finley and successive Orientalist scholars. In the last thirty years, several researchers have denounced the absurdity of using Islam as a conceptual framework to account for the urban phenomena of countries with such varied historical traditions. In sub-Saharan Africa, indigenous forms of urbanism predated Islamic expansion and had no links with Arab trade networks (Aksum, Zimbabwe, Benin City, Old Oyo, Ile Ife, Jenne Jeno). On the East African coast, Swahili towns were polyglot, multiethnic frontiers, and composed of various population groups (Arabic, Indian, African) while (Sahelian) cities ruled by Islamic elites (Timbuktu, Djenné, Gao, Katsina, Kano) were equally places of mutual influence between Northern and Western African societies. Despite these factors, the Islamic city paradigm only underwent a gradual demise and is still sometimes considered central in the historiography of cities of the Arab and African world. Resorting to the consumer and the


24 This paradigm is still at the core of recent productions such as Michael R. T. Dumper and Bruce E. Stanley (ed.), *Cities of The Middle East and North Africa: a Historical Encyclopaedia* (Santa Barbara, 2007), xix–xx; Susan Slyomovics (ed.), *The Walled Arab City in Literature, Architecture and History* (London, 2001).
parasitic city models to explain ancient towns in sub-Saharan Africa similarly remains in common use.25

The ‘colonial city’ is another widespread label used both within and beyond the African continent to refer to the city under colonial – and by extension – apartheid rule. It may refer to a particular moment during which colonialism was portrayed as a power demarcating, racialising, and ordering urban space.26 The overemphasis on colonial control, segregation schemes, and the ‘sanitation syndrome’ has indisputably played a role in the development of the colonial city paradigm. A large body of literature has helped to shape the understanding that all European powers used (hygiene/sanitation) policies to enforce a clearer division between Europeans and Africans. However, this was also a late nineteenth century world phenomenon related to heightened European racial consciousness and therefore more than just a strictly colonial practice.27 The debate on segregation and the control of space has been most vivid in South Africa where cities have often been seen by historians as the origin and centrepiece of apartheid legislation as well as a privileged site of anti-apartheid activism.28 This overemphasis on the perspective of the colonizers rather than the colonized has led to inconclusive typologies common to many syntheses of Africa’s urban past which ‘tend to divide between the essentially African and the essentially colonial city’.29 In some cases, analyses reduce the African practices of the city to a colonial perception of disorder while the reader is left to infer what Africans thought about these developments and the extent to which the laws were obeyed.30 To view colonial cities as ‘dual cities’ is misleading since colonial societies cannot be understood merely in terms of a ‘European versus Indigenous’ dichotomy.31 It omits the agency of African societies, their capacity to overcome such divisions, to ignore them or even to imagine them differently. The colonial ordering of urban space was incomplete as the colonial powers lacked the resources to enforce segregation ordinances while many Africans circumvented colonial regulations even in the stricter eastern and southern African colonial

29 John Parker, Making the Town: Ga State and Society in Early Colonial Accra (Oxford, 2000), xix.
In South Africa, this academic – and understandably political – obsession with the segregated nature of the city has, more than in any other part of the continent, been radically criticized since the end of apartheid for viewing state and urban control in teleological, monolithic, functionalist terms. Furthermore, this perspective consistently underestimates the world influence of modern architectural and planning movements in the country while forgetting to trace the relationships between the local and the national state, and does not pay enough attention to township dwellers’ practices and imaginations of cityness. This latter criticism highlights the necessity of giving up a dual city analysis though it arguably remains necessary for the continued exploration of the extent and limits of discrimination policies imposed upon African urban dwellers during colonial and apartheid times.

A similar ambiguity revolves around the postcolonial city label, commonly used to qualify cities which have been developing since the end of the colonial period. This approach implies the comprehension of an enduring common colonial legacy that unites Africa’s cities and other cities of the South in a postcolonial framework. In certain instances, this notion, still poorly discussed in academic arenas, nevertheless articulates something more essential than a particular historical moment, a condition either radically different from the colonial city or, conversely, one which cannot rid itself of this legacy – both readings that impoverish our understanding of the colonial and postcolonial urban past. The colonial situation, instead of being analysed as a total social project, as suggested by Georges Balandier, is limited to urban planning, technologies of control, and the civilizing mission. Sources of conflicts are said to emanate mainly from the spatial separation between colonizers and the colonized, while the contemporary city is perceived as a fluid and more variegated space shaped by conflicts of a more complicated nature (rich against poor, long-standing residents versus newcomers, youth against elders, citizens versus immigrants ...).

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34 As mentioned by Vivian Bickford-Smith, ‘Urban history in the new South Africa: continuity and innovation since the end of apartheid’, Urban History, 35 (2008), 288–315.


approach does not always avoid the trap of introducing forms of binary discourse that surprisingly tend to classify colonial and postcolonial cities into ontologically distinct categories. In this process the concatenation of historical periods and the various influences that have shaped African city life are forgotten. Moreover, seeing Africa’s cities only in terms of their colonial and postcolonial relationships may preclude a fuller understanding of the multifaceted ways in which they have engaged with the larger world.\textsuperscript{38}

While the various attempts to integrate Africa in large historical frames have sometimes led to an essentialist vision of its cities, one of the more recent and innovative urban theories has left the African continent aside. Global city research looks at the changing forms of capitalism and its effects on urbanization at the world level including the concentration of capital, transnational corporations, and financial services industry in some specific metropolises. On the one hand, it entails an explicit critique of mainstream conceptions of globalization which presume that territoriality, borders, and places are becoming irrelevant.\textsuperscript{39} On the other hand, it challenges state-centric approaches in the Western world by stressing the role major cities have played in reshaping the geography of capitalism and the rescaling of statehood.\textsuperscript{40} Inevitably perhaps, critics of global city research have emerged especially from within Africa as it presents Western cities as the paradigmatic ‘model’ in terms of which all other cities are to be interpreted, regardless of their particular locations or histories.\textsuperscript{41} Within such a framework, cities located ‘off the map’, in the South and especially in Africa, are almost invariably said to be lacking the characteristics that would qualify them as genuinely ‘global’ cities.

Given the shortcomings of the approach mentioned above, alternative notions of the global city have thus been developing more recently. However, using the notion of world city instead of global city to qualify metropolises outside the core of the capitalist system is probably of little help as this, again, has led to some doubtful classifications.\textsuperscript{42} The globalizing city notion might be more useful as it construes globalization as a process, not a state that reifies and classifies cities of the world.\textsuperscript{43} Looking from within the globalizing city of Accra, Richard Grant considered that there is a widening, deepening intensification and growing impact of global connections on the local economy and on local engagements with the world beyond.\textsuperscript{44} The adoption of globalizing strategies is not exclusive to socially mobile transnationals in building gated communities or new foreign companies investing significantly

\textsuperscript{42} Josef Gugler (ed.), \textit{World Cities Beyond the West: Globalization, Development and Inequality} (Cambridge, 2004).
\textsuperscript{44} Richard Grant, \textit{Globalizing City: The Urban and Economic Transformation of Accra, Ghana} (Syracuse, 2009), 7.
in Accra, but also concerns a process from below including returned migrants, evangelical movements, international NGOs, and slum dwellers looking for transnational alliances. The fact that Accra is more connected today to the world economy, to transnational NGOs and migrant networks is an important point that invalidates part of global city research which, de facto, excludes the continent from the global city map.

However, many scholars agree that Africa constitutes a site of extremely uneven globalizing processes. Such unevenness stems from the movement of capital across national borders, in the process linking particular and dispersed sites of global relevance thereby leaving huge regions simply bypassed.\textsuperscript{45} Furthermore, post-1970s contemporary urban dynamics need to be read simultaneously as disconnected from – or poorly connected to – the world economy. James Ferguson has dismantled the idea of any linear trend towards more permanent urbanization and greater connection of a city’s residents to the world, thereby questioning the meta-narrative of modernization that has frequently been associated with twentieth century urbanization in Africa.\textsuperscript{46} Such trajectories of disconnection may be more common than we think as processes of counter-urbanization have developed in several regions of the continent.\textsuperscript{47} There are also many small and middle-sized towns (with less than 500,000 inhabitants) where future urban growth will be (proportionately) larger than in the metropolises;\textsuperscript{48} the marginal nature of international flows of people and goods in such locations suggests that those flows will not provide an effective measure for analyzing the particular social, political, and economic dynamics characteristic of these burgeoning towns.\textsuperscript{49} The notion of a globalizing city might be useful to define post-1980s Accra, but the self-prophetic dimension of this construct is of little help in understanding the social and economic heterogeneity of the continent. In all likelihood, all these labels will be unable to fully reintegrate Africa’s cities into world trends without oversimplifying and homogenizing their multiple histories. One single notion does not appear to be sufficient for grasping the uneven integration of Africa’s cities into world history. In the next section, the urban labour market in Africa is used as an illustration for understanding the relations between this heterogeneity and larger economic trends.

\textbf{WORLD HISTORY AND THE MAKING OF AN URBAN LABOUR MARKET}

From the gradual abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in the 19th century to late colonial stabilization policies and post-1970s structural adjustment

\textsuperscript{46} Ferguson, \textit{Expectations of Modernity}.
\textsuperscript{48} UN Habitat, \textit{The State of African Cities}, 3.
policies (SAPs), the urban labour market in Africa seems to have been shaped by world economic trends and by decisions taken in international arenas in which African actors have apparently minimal bargaining power. A focus on historical changes does not, however, illustrate the resilience of African societies to these policies and the manner in which these policies were reshaped in tandem with both national and local circumstances. Recent research in social history and anthropology facilitates a reconsideration of the extremely uneven consequences of world economic history in Africa.

The link between the decline of the international slave trade and the subsequent increase in domestic slavery in the nineteenth century urban economy remained obscure twenty years ago. This is probably due to the fact that for a long time ‘many studies dealt with the general history of the states or communities in which ports were situated, rather than with the specific history of port towns themselves’. We now know from several monographs that, locally-speaking, the transition from exporting slaves to ‘legitimate commerce’ created an acute demand for new labour, increased domestic slavery in and around coastal towns, while the population of slave ports (for example, Accra, Ouidah, Lagos, Luanda, Cape Town, Zanzibar) increased dramatically in a few decades, and sometimes even within a few years. In the history of the continent this change should not be seen as exceptional, as the integration of slaves into major towns and their surrounding hinterlands was central in the making of major hinterland cities especially in West and Central Africa. It remains to be explored how the abolition of slavery in coastal societies transformed emerging urban labour relationships and how the repercussions of widespread slavery affected social relations in various regions of the continent throughout the colonial period and beyond. Former slaves in Zanzibar adopted new cultural urban forms and leisure (for example, dialogic poetry exchange, dance performance, competitive songs and football) to escape their servile

50 Only a minority of ex-slaves found wage labour in towns but statistical collection during the early colonial period was haphazard according to Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts (eds.), The End of Slavery in Africa (Madison, 1988), 33–7.
54 As in the case of Mali and the town of Man, see Gregory Mann, Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century (Durham and London, 2006).
55 Mann, Slavery, 8–14.
In French West Africa, many veterans, most of whom were slaves or ex-slaves, had no desire to return to villages where they would be subordinate to elders or former masters. Their integration into different urban environments remains to be understood but reveals in some cases an early process of individualization and social distinction (for instance, through the acquisition of land, bars, and new forms of attire).

While the transformation of slavery into new labour relationships remains to be fully explored at the town level, we know that late colonial stabilization policies were obsessed with urban workers. The main aims of these policies were to cut off the solidarities that had developed in the urban riots of the 1930s and 1940s between the ‘floating population’ and the more permanent urban workers, and to transform a potentially ‘anarchic’ floating population into a veritable working class which, it was hoped, would become increasingly differentiated in terms of salaries, promotions, and qualifications. Practically, however, the policies had differentiated and unwanted localized effects. In Tanganyika, maintaining the political legitimacy of chiefs and headmen proved more important to local administrators than did the implementation of a stabilization policy and raising the social welfare of working class urban Africans to international standards. In Nigeria, railway workers were able to use the perks of their jobs – salaries, housing, medical and other benefits – to support large households and become important patrons, rather than form the ideal small, nuclear families advocated by official policy. In several French and British colonies, instead of disciplining urban workers, stabilization policies generally led this section of the population to actively claim more social and political rights for their particular groups or categories.

To a certain extent, the post-1970s SAP sought to reverse the effects of these late colonial stabilization policies. It had the effect of shrinking the number of public servants and formal employment in many cities of the continent and reducing what International Monetary Fund (IMF) economists denounced as the urban bias of African governments (taxing heavily rural products and giving high wages to urban dwellers who were also the first to benefit from public investments in education, health, and infrastructure).

57 Mann, Native Sons, 15, 79.
59 Frederick Cooper, Decolonisation and African Society, the Labor Question in French and British Africa (Cambridge, 1996).
61 Lisa A. Lindsay, Working with Gender: Wage Labor and Social Change in Southwestern Nigeria (Portsmouth, 2003).
The popularization of a new notion of the informal sector by the International Labour Organization and several generations of academics, policymakers, and bankers to describe all activities that escape taxation or state registration suggests that the cities of Africa and the global South have entered a ‘new era’ marked by a general ‘informalization’ of the urban economy.63

This change was not as dramatic in all African countries and the division between the pre-1970s and post-1970s periods sometimes seems too clear-cut while case studies show more complicated situations as well as unexpected elements of continuity and change. Firstly, if we define informal activities as activities not registered, taxed, or regulated by the state, then they must be considered as a continuation of colonial history rather than a novel feature of the post-1970s era. There may also be a historical and gender bias in the informal sector scholarship. The idea that colonial cities were exclusively male preserves while women stayed in the country where they reproduced peasant livelihoods has been challenged successfully by recent research on women’s urban experiences that has helped to remap our understanding of the urban colonial landscape.64 Women involved in trading, dyeing, brewing, or prostitution were part of colonial and postcolonial informal urban economies and were probably more prone to join the non-regulated economy because of their loose connection to administration, their will to escape taxation, and fundamental commitment to following their own agendas.65 Moreover, once in town, their strategies differed widely from one place to another according to different possibilities of access to land, housing, and work, and according to local and national regulations that were, in many cases, more determinative than the 1980s SAP rupture.66

Secondly, instead of viewing the implementation of SAPs as responsible for a general informalization of the urban economy, several studies have


66 For two different examples see Barbara Cooper, Marriage in Maradi: Gender and Culture in a Hausa Society in Niger, 1900–1989 (Portsmouth, 1997); Rebekah Lee, African Women and Apartheid: Migration and Settlement in Urban South Africa (London, 2009).
indicated that large metropolises such as Nairobi, Johannesburg, Cape Town, Abidjan, Lagos, Maputo, and Dar es Salaam have started, in the last decade and sometimes earlier, to regulate their trade, reconquer their centres, and reassess their prerogatives in terms of spatial planning and taxes. These regeneration projects are also aimed at implementing a World Class City agenda, representative of an increasing concern among city managers and politicians to attract investments, raise land values, and clean up the streets from traders. These policies indicate the difficulty of dissociating informal from formal forms of labour in Africa’s cities as well as in the more general economy of the continent. They also invalidate the idea, suggested by Rem Koolhaas and his colleagues, that regulated colonial cities have gradually transformed into paradigmatic informal African equivalents. The exploration of social history and world economic trends remain imperative to avoid homogenizing African urban worlds.

**HISTORICIZING WORLD IMAGINARIES**

To move beyond the excessively narrow economic approach of globalization, more innovative research has looked at the everyday social practices of inhabitants shaped by ‘globalised imaginaries’ to highlight the worldliness of contemporary African life forms. As mentioned by AbdouMaliq Simone, African urban residents have developed a ‘worlding’ from below as they are able to operate at larger scales in a broader world through the mobilization of religious practices, modes of dress, food, and musical taste. These perspectives share a vision of Africa’s cities in which world cultural repertoires are both locally produced and imagined, and propose a comprehensive reading of the city which avoids both localism and the global city paradigm. The risk, however, inherent in globalization studies is to omit mention of the historical dimension of these processes as well as the limits of world connections. An additional risk is to read the city as a unified actor – considering a metropolis as cosmopolitan, for instance – assuming that its residents univocally share a (singular) world repertoire.

Historicizing various competing world imaginaries among city dwellers elucidates the messy process by which people get connected to worldwide

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71 Simone, ‘On the worlding’, 28

72 As mentioned by Cooper, Colonialism in Question, 91.
influences and helps to identify groups (who might be defined along social, gendered, or generational lines) who claim to share a form of cosmopolitan life. More importantly for our purposes, it also sheds light on the very processes by which becoming cosmopolitan was equivalent with becoming urban: both marked a distinction from the countryside. Heterogeneity and historical contingency shaped how each group or individual, in each town or city, came to imagine themselves as belonging to several worlds at the same time. For instance, at the core of the social history of Bulawayo (Zimbabwe) in the 1930s and early 1940s, stands a figure named Sipambaniso. He was alternately a police officer, welfare officer, railway adviser, union leader, executive of the Bantu National Congress, and was involved in modern music, dance, football, and boxing. He was considered to perfectly represent the interests of the long-term residents of the Bulawayo at the time. His capacity to embody these diverse cultural and political repertoires aptly captures what it meant to be urban in mid-20th century Rhodesia. In other urban locales, other world repertoires were appropriated and merged with local idioms. In Kinshasa and Brazzaville, appropriation entailed the swift adoption by young Congolese migrants of sports, movies, and new musical genres at the crossroads of American, African, and European influences. Gangsters known as tsotsis in Johannesburg participated in the emergence of a ‘youth subculture’ made up of a mix of American and local influences dominated by specific language, dress code, violent practices, and exacerbated masculinities. They claimed a strictly urban origin, and looked down upon and confronted other groups considered as backward such as the Marashea gangs whose activities were organized between Sotho rural settlements, gold mining areas, and urban enclaves.

Becoming cosmopolitan and becoming urban were thus contested historical processes everywhere, though especially in regions with longer established urban traditions (for example, the Swahili coast, hinterland West Africa, North Africa). In these places, Islam played a central role in the process of dissociating oneself from a rural, ‘backward’ environment and being associated with real or imaginary prestigious external links. It is significant that Swahili and Hausa city-state elites and those in northern Sudanese cities, especially after the fifteenth century, claimed Arab or Persian origins. Timbuktu and Walata between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries were multiethnic centres of commerce but as time passed, fewer

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and fewer scholarly families claimed a West African ethnic identity and ‘by 1800 there were almost no scholarly families left in Walata and Timbuktu that claimed anything other than a Arab identity’. Similarly on the Swahili coast from the sixteenth century onwards, to be civilized, one had to be a coastal townsperson: the term mwungwana signalled urban culture and the elite’s sense of belonging was demonstrated by social markers such as stone houses, prestigious external origins, Islamic practices, and specific modes of public behaviour. This status of urban belonging became increasingly attractive in the late nineteenth century. Participating in cosmopolitan town life, public rituals, and dance societies was a source of prestige and became central to being recognized as a member of the urban coastal society. Nevertheless, demands for inclusion by people from the interior were highly contested by urban patricians who sought to heighten their exclusiveness by identifying themselves with overseas regions associated with Middle-Eastern ancestry, Islamic authority, and international commerce. The word wanyamwezi was used by urban coastal people as a derogatory term connoting ‘uncivilized’ or ‘rural’, though the boundaries separating Swahili townspeople from the supposed barbarians of the hinterland were shifting, permeable, and extremely ambiguous. These examples illustrate what it has meant to be urban and to be cosmopolitan in Africa at different moments in history. They also suggest how these strategies, when pursued by elites, could be intimately tied to processes of state building.

**RECASTING CITY/STATE RELATIONSHIPS**

Exploring the co-constitution of cities and states in the continent’s history is a less than straightforward exercise. The long tradition of research in history, geography, and historical sociology has focused on the central albeit ambivalent role played by towns and cities in building and rescaling the state in Western Europe. This is not the case in Africa where the history of city/state relationships in a *longue durée* analysis is often either ignored or more recently dealt with through a normative framework of analysis. Thirty years ago, John Peel recommended that ‘a satisfactory African urban history must


be about politics … which directs attention to the larger unit of the state in which West African urban analysis must be set’. These recommendations have not always been followed by historians and political scientists. From the perspective of economic history, trans-Saharan and transatlantic trade and Western capitalism are effectively seen as the determining forces of the urbanization process. Such a perspective tends to downplay the role of political leaders at the local, national, or regional levels in shaping multiple urban forms on the continent. From the perspective of political science, the town-state nexus from the precolonial period to the present sometimes appears but has yet to be fully explored. In general, towns and cities have not been highlighted as significant factors in the history of the state in Africa. They are at best briefly mentioned, and sometimes totally excluded from, the most influential books on the historical formation of states in sub-Saharan Africa. The central argument of Jeffrey Herbst’s analysis appears to be an exception but does not totally escape a normative approach to the state in Africa. He suggests that the state in Africa does not extend beyond a core area, defined as either the capital or the critical urban areas and those rural areas with important economic assets. The geographically limited authority of such states reveals their fundamental and historical weaknesses. Herbst uses the same ideal type definition of the state (a monopoly on legitimate violence, an autonomous bureaucratic apparatus, the embodiment of popular sovereignty, a spatially and territorially coherent entity) that scholars have used to interpret state politics around the world. Measured by this ideal type definition, ‘African states are often identified as failed not by what they are, but by what they are not, namely, successful in comparison to Western states’. This analytical framework is thus at the core of the ‘failed state’ perspective frequently criticized by anthropologists and political scientists but which is nevertheless influential in the ways cities in Africa are often understood. In other words, a long historical urban past in Africa might be seen as either marginal to state-building processes or as the manifestation of the inherent weaknesses of the African state in general.

87 Pêclard and Hagmann, Negotiating statehood, 541.
88 Ibid.
Some authors have suggested less essentialist ways of exploring statebuilding in Africa. The historicity of the state, the embeddedness of its bureaucratic organizations in society, the interactions between state officials and non state actors, the material dimension of statehood, and the importance of accumulating basic legitimacies are all key dimensions that apply to African states as well as to many states in the world. Scaling down the focus of analysis from the level of the territorial state to local arenas or to socio-economic areas (such as mining or border areas) has been suggested as another possible way of evaluating the manner in which the state is built from the margins or from local situations. Two other analytical possibilities are advanced here. First, understandings of the ‘state’ and the ‘town’ have, for too long, engaged with these as separate political entities even though several historical studies have recently emphasized the necessity of analyzing them within a common analytical framework. Second, cities have been privileged places in which multiple authorities compete over state functions and, as such, should contribute more to our understanding of the history of the state in Africa than is the case at present.

**Making the Town, Making the State**

There is a clear correlation between state formation and processes of urbanization in various regions of the world and Africa is no exception. This is in spite of the examples of stateless though urbanized societies, for instance Jenne-Jeno, and states without towns but with mobile court capitals, such as Burundi, Rwanda, and Buganda until the nineteenth century. As in Europe, most African states needed the revenues generated by trade activities concentrated in towns and ports in order to strengthen their power over a territory and to finance war. This was the case for the long, urbanized past of both North Africa and areas of sub-Saharan Africa, where governments were even more dependent on taxing trade given the low population densities dispersed across vast hinterlands. In several parts of the continent, town and state formation were simultaneous and cumulative processes. Control or protection of long distance trade, warfare, and a slave-based economy were central elements for town prosperity that, in turn, reinforced state power. The nineteenth century Sokoto Caliphate provides a significant example. The long history of Hausa city-states, the capture of slaves by the cavalry

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destined for work in the textile industry or for settlement in colonizing villages around various towns, the expansion of Hausa merchants throughout West Africa and their connection to regional and international trade networks, all contributed to the economic, demographic, and urban expansion of the Caliphate. The most powerful and populous state in sub-Saharan Africa at the time was also the most urbanized.

Warfare was an integral part of state formation and was a crucial stimulus not just for social and political change but also town growth. There are many examples of towns and states formed by displaced groups or developed by the arrival of ‘refugees’. For instance, the collapse of the Songhay ‘Empire’ in the late sixteenth century led to the re-emergence of Walata (in the western Sahara) as a notable centre of Islamic literary production thanks to the migration of cleric lineages from Timbuktu. The arrival of warriors and merchants from the inland Niger Valley led to the creation of the town and state of Kong (in today’s Ivory Coast). The migration of merchants and religious lineages from Gao and Timbuktu to Katsina and Kano contributed much to the rising importance of Hausa city-states after the seventeenth century. In many parts of the continent, warfare led to the multiplication of city walls which, in turn, led to a greater concentration of people seeking protection. This emergent settlement pattern allied to the practice of warfare also facilitated taxation and the control of trade while at the same time imparting prestige to rulers. Significantly, in the 19th century, the two most urbanized regions in Africa south of the Sahara, Hausaland and Yorubaland, were also the densest groupings of African walled cities. Despite the evident significance of the role played by warfare in the development of urban centres, a systematic, continent-wide analysis of this dynamic has not been undertaken.

Nineteenth century warfare was also decisive in shaping town institutions, integrating ‘strangers’ into local societies and making the state. In Accra, military organization and warfare determined the form of Ga institutions and the dynamics of political competition. In nineteenth century Kumase, warfare and military organizations such as asafo became a force to be reckoned with and contributed much to emerging distinctions between the ‘urban’ and the ‘rural’. In the town of Ibadan, founded in the late 1820s, chieftaincy titles were allocated according to practical criteria of military merit and maintenance of a following by warrior-founders of compounds (ile). The city did not emerge out of a coordinated project managed by an overarching authority as had been portrayed in earlier academic research. Instead, the conflicting oral histories collected by Ruth Watson clearly demonstrate that the ‘residential group was constantly changing as new refugees arrived, built up their military retinues, and then departed to set up their own ile, taking their own group of followers and their families with them’.


94 Cleaveland, ‘Timbuktu’.

95 Griffeth, ‘The Hausa city’.


98 Akyeampong, *Drink*, 23, 52.


100 Ibid. 28.
symptomatic of both the affirmation of the nineteenth century military state and indigenous forms of African urbanism: in less than half a century, it became simultaneously the most powerful state in the region and one of the largest cities on the continent.

As state formation and town growth are aspects of the same historical process, it is near impossible to disentangle the terms for ‘state’ and ‘town’ in several African languages. The foundational concept of Yoruba political sociology is the term *ilu*, commonly translated as ‘town’ or community. An *ilu* is both a town and a polity and Yoruba people do not make a conceptual distinction between the two. In Dahomey, urbanity was not only defined by size and the concentration of people, but by political autonomy and the role of the town as an administrative seat: *to* referred to a town or settlement of any size while *togan* (the chief of the *to*) was a provincial governor within the kingdom. In the Ga language (southern Ghana), the term *man* most commonly denotes ‘town’ and has wider social and political connotations such as people, nation, or state. There are also a large number of names that distinguish townspeople enjoying full civic rights (*mambii*) from people of the bush. ‘The very things that made Accra a state – organized political, military, legal and religious institutions – are also the things that made Accra distinctly “urban”.’ These examples suggest that networks of towns directly shaped precolonial states and militate against the idea that the latter developed independent of the former.

In several parts of Africa, a wide range of negotiations, compromises, and conflicts came to define complex relationships between European officials and local elites. Precolonial urban-based institutions were often important in making the early colonial state as many colonial territories came into existence through them. The old and new networks of towns became the architecture of emerging bureaucratic colonial states (with expanded though limited administration and public services). As in rural areas, colonial administration was unable to afford the cost of services for the urban population and was forced to tolerate institutions that were beyond its control and could be used to subvert or evade its dominance. This was the case in cities created by the colonial powers – for instance, the *chefs de quartier* in FWA or *autorités coutumières* in Congo, as well as old settlements like the Kasbah of Algiers, the walled city of Tripoli, the Senegalese Four Communes, the townships of Accra, Ibadan, and Kano, the ‘old town’ of Zanzibar and Mombasa, and the royal neighbourhoods of Ouagadougou and Kampala. In the latter cases, the influence of chiefs and townsmen of precolonial origin

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102 Ibid. 31.
103 Law, *Ouidah*, 81.
105 Ibid. 238.
106 As suggested by Herbst, *States and Power*, 15.
continued long into the twentieth century. In a context characterized by the quick turnover of colonial staff, policy changes, and slow and uneven bureaucratization processes, many of these authorities dating from pre-colonial times maintained or acquired significant authority (see below).

Urban questions, especially those concerning labour, planning, poverty, and delinquency, became important issues within official circles both in Europe and Africa during and after the Second World War. These concerns favoured the creation of new departments in the late colonial bureaucracy. The early colonial experience in towns might also have been decisive in setting up embryonic services and regulations though this has been less systematically explored. It seems from existing case studies that piecemeal responses to moral panics (over disease, unemployed youth, ‘unattached women’ or prostitutes) were subsequently transformed into public policies at the territorial level. It is also possible – though this remains to be confirmed – that embryonic town services (municipal police, town planning, hygiene and welfare services) shaped the emerging central services of the colonies. This might represent a similar experience to that of Europe, where the emergence of the welfare state was often extrapolated from municipal experiments and the personnel involved in their operation.

While *ad hoc* town initiatives might have shaped the central bureaucratic state, it is also clear that colonial officials, like African political leaders, dramatically transformed urban networks. In the long term, public investments gave rise to different patterns of networks. In former French Western and Central African countries, the concentration of public investments in capital cities after the Second World War favoured ‘primacy’ that involved 30 per cent or more of a country’s urban population living in its largest city. This arrangement meant that labour markets and infrastructure were concentrated in capitals which were then surrounded by networks of towns with relatively poor urban services, a model popularized by a famous formula, ‘the state stops at PK 12’, that is, 12 kilometers from the capital. In most African countries, postcolonial leaders continued to invest disproportionally in capital cities neglecting both secondary towns and rural areas. ‘Primacy’ as a

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113 Simon Bekker and Goran Therbon (eds.), *Capital Cities of Africa* (Dakar, Pretoria, 2011).
colonial heritage of centralization still dominates Africa more than any other continent but has begun to decline over the last three decades.\textsuperscript{114}

**CONTESTING THE STATE AND COMPETING AUTHORITIES OVER STATE FUNCTIONS**

Post-1970s structural adjustment policies (SAPs) together with the reduction of state services and decentralization of government administration have facilitated the return of local power centres, increased the number of non-state actors involved in delivering services, and multiplied the patron-client ties and personal networks upon which people must rely to survive.\textsuperscript{115} In itself, this process does not necessarily imply the weakening or privatization of the state.\textsuperscript{116} Scaling down the focus of analysis to local arenas has recently helped to renew our understanding of the state in Africa. As argued by Christian Lund, the multiplication of parallel structures and alternative sites of authority (for instance, chiefs, political factions, hometown associations, neighbourhood groups, and vigilante organizations) has managed to ‘bring the state back’ into local arenas.\textsuperscript{117} A growing though still limited literature on ‘cities at war’, in post-conflict situations, or towns beyond the control of government bureaucracies helps elucidate how the state can be built from the margins through unofficial agents imposing taxes on populations, building embryonic administrations, capturing the resources of humanitarian aid (for example, Goma, Lumumbashi, Juba),\textsuperscript{118} or developing financial centres for money laundering, receiving migrant remittances, and recycling the goods of the regional economy (for example, Nador [Morocco], Benguerdane [Tunisia], Touba/Mbacké [Senegal]).\textsuperscript{119}

An historical approach that examines the contingent relationships constituted through conflicts and negotiations between state officials and multiple competing authorities in local and urban areas reveals processes of state construction and deconstruction in Africa. To oppose the rural and the urban here is probably of little help. Juxtaposing urban Africa as a privileged site of emergent civil society and of challenges to colonial and authoritarian regimes with tribal and despotic power in rural areas\textsuperscript{120} overstates the role


\textsuperscript{116} Be´atrice Hibou, *Privatising the State* (London, 2004).

\textsuperscript{117} Lund, ‘Twilight Institutions’, 688.


\textsuperscript{120} As suggested by Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, 1996), 289–93.
of urban political forms and undervalues the strategic place of rural constituencies and the importance of urban-rural links in the making of African politics. Political struggles during the colonial period have more often than not bridged the gap between the rural and the urban, though this may be changing. Nevertheless, urban areas should remain a significant focus for exploring day-to-day interactions between state and non-state actors.

Of radical importance are the effects of urban unrest and large-scale mobilization on the shape of the state. Heightened political tensions in cities have led to public actions and reinforced the role of bureaucracy as a means of reasserting the authority of the state over turbulent populations. Examples of such actions include the establishment of the late colonial state in British and French Africa after the urban riots of the 1930s and early 1940s, the creation of security services in Togo after the revolt of Lomé in 1933, the notable reinforcement of the South African repressive apparatus after the 1960 Sharpeville massacre and the mid-1980s township revolt, and the recentralization of the Federal state stimulated by the 1966 anti-Igbo riots in northern and middle belt Nigerian cities that precipitated the civil war. Moreover, ‘urban bias’ seems to coming back as a key concern for some African leaders after the so-called 2008 food riots.

These large scale mobilizations are probably not the dominant form of political and social confrontation in most of Africa’s cities. Less visible, though no less important, are a set of fragmented confrontations and negotiations between the urban poor and the state. In a number of Middle Eastern and North African cities, mass protests, labour unionism and social movements failed – at least until late 2010 – to improve the living conditions of any significant number of people. Instead, poor people fostered what Asef Bayat calls quiet encroachment, characterized by largely atomized and prolonged mobilization with episodic actions by individuals and families to acquire the basic necessities of their lives, and to get access to collective resources (land, shelter, piped water, electricity) and to public space (street pavements, intersections, street parking places).

The contemporary urban landscape of the poor in several large metropolises seems dominated, on the one hand, by the apparent lack of public policies and, on the other, by the everyday bargaining of citizens with state officials and local political leaders.


122 The question is to establish whether political and social contestations will be increasingly urban-based in the near future as it was already the case in 1980s South Africa. See Jeremy Seekings, The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South-Africa, 1983–1991 (Cape Town, Oxford, Athens, 2000).


In Lagos, Nairobi, Casablanca and Cairo, the poorest neighbourhoods are, however, not necessarily abandoned by the central or the local state, as the ‘failed state’ literature contends, but instead remain strongly tied to it through networks of intermediaries, caïds, and political or union leaders, relationships that result in multiple forms of political belongings. Such a situation might not look unfamiliar to historians of Africa, as large areas of cities under colonial rule were also poorly serviced and often dominated by forms of patronage and corruption, and under the nitpicking control of the state officials. A comprehensive and continental assessment of what has fundamentally changed in urban based patronage and in the poor’s access to services, land, and housing from the late nineteenth century to the present is not to be found in the existing literature.

Ultimately, the government’s inability to ensure security for its citizens is usually considered the most important indicator of contemporary state failure in Africa. Historically, however, coercive practices including collecting taxes, recruiting labour, implementing sanitary regulations, and policing towns and cities have often been delegated to ‘Native authorities’, foreign companies and local communities. The colonial establishment of trained and professional police forces was slow and uneven, and never met the needs of the population. Local leaders and elders frequently demanded the provision of security by indigenous authorities, self-defence groups, and vigilante and community organizations in areas perceived as threatened by youth gangs (in some Nigerian and South African townships this has been the case since at least the 1930s). Such provisioning became a cheap way for the state to unload the expense of policing onto local communities. Nevertheless, the results of this delegation – or in certain cases, this capture – of security functions were unpredictable. In the mid-1980s, no one would have guessed that street committees, neighbourhood watches or

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128 Peclard and Hagmann, ‘Negotiating statehood’, 552.


vigilante organizations would, twenty years later, become part of the South African police service through community police schemes and reserve police forces.\textsuperscript{131} It was also far from obvious that former night guards in southern Nigerian cities, denounced as vigilante groups by the federal state in the mid-1980s, would become officially recognized and paid agents of states in the early 2000s.\textsuperscript{132}

To cast the multiplication of actors performing or subverting state functions as the ‘privatization of the state’ or as ‘the end of the postcolonial state’\textsuperscript{133} is to analyze such practices in terms of a one-way affair and ignore the capacity of local authorities to operate in the twilight between state and society, public and private.\textsuperscript{134} Looking at sites of authority that are linked to state officials and perform state functions might allow us to see new forms of authority being generated in apparently failing states.\textsuperscript{135} Achille Mbembe suggests that private actors who perform functions such as imposing taxes and create moral or political order through violence and other constraints should also be understood as doing so for their own personal material gain.\textsuperscript{136} Both arguments are probably valid, depending on circumstances. By placing actors who claim state authority in a larger historical frame, we might move beyond this dilemma and grasp how African public authorities ‘wax’ and ‘wane’ as state institutions are never definitively formed.\textsuperscript{137}

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

Considering Africa’s cities as dysfunctional, chaotic, failed, informal, or not globalized works to retain the Western city as the paradigmatic model against which all others are to be assessed. Attempts to categorize Africa’s cities as Islamic, colonial, postcolonial, and cosmopolitan similarly shed little light on the urban change that has taken place on the continent. These categories tend to underestimate, or leave unattended, more localized and regional historical contexts, and ignore the fact that urbanization in Africa has been, as elsewhere, a layered economic, social, and political process. The heterogeneity of urban situations and the extremely uneven influence of other continents in Africa ultimately suggest that it is more appropriate to speak about ‘cities of Africa’ rather than ‘African cities’. Simultaneously, social history examinations have revealed how the specificities of localized situations have greatly shaped the everyday practices of ordinary residents. Given the sheer diversity of these situations, a comprehensive portrait of urban Africa thus remains a difficult challenge to achieve.

\textsuperscript{131} See for a general overview of this recent phenomenon, Claire Bénit-Gbaffou, Seyi Fabiyi and Elizabeth Peyroux (eds.), \textit{Sécurisation des quartiers et gouvernance locale} (Paris 2010).
\textsuperscript{134} Lund, ‘Twilight institutions’.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid. 701.
\textsuperscript{136} What is referred to as ‘Le gouvernement privé indirect’ by Achille Mbembe, \textit{De la postcolonie}, 95–138.
\textsuperscript{137} Lund, ‘Twilight institutions’, 697.
In this article, exploration of cities as places situated within country, state, and world networks has been suggested as a way to move beyond localism and unhelpful categorization, and to avoid fetishizing scales of analysis. Linking world economic trends more carefully to urban labour history may enable reconsideration of post-war modernization policies as well as the domination of the informal sector paradigm since the 1970s. Labour history has always been an important subfield within African urban history and new topics of analysis such as land, leisure, visual, literary and the performing arts and public policies relating to education, health, housing, water, security remain to be explored. Much recent historical and social scientific scholarship has also insisted on the necessity of thinking about the city and the state, and the city and the world, simultaneously. Being urban, modern, civilized, or cosmopolitan appear, in a number of cases, to be overlapping processes. Making towns and making states were also simultaneous historical processes in many African societies prior to colonial rule, while negotiations and contestations between a range of local and imperial actors shaped the early colonial state in the 19th century. Reasserting the importance of cities in history will likely help us to understand better processes of state formation in Africa today. Exploring, in more empirical detail, the making of the city and the state and their uneven connections to the wider world will make the banality of Africa’s urban past part of the history of the urban world.

Today, scholarship on Africa’s urban past shares with its European counterpart some common handicaps: a dearth of studies of small and medium size towns, which renders difficult a clear understanding of urban networks and their connections to the world economy; the decline of economic studies focusing especially on cities; and more generally, often absent connections between stories of individual cities and broader trends.¹³⁸ Not surprisingly, these gaps and omissions have proven a significant obstacle to the few attempts to write a comprehensive and comparative history of urban Africa. Our analyses of Africa’s urban past must move beyond the narrow subfield of urban history, which remains ill-defined, too narrowly empirical, and disconnected from larger debates. Instead, we should return to one of the subfield’s initial motivations: the desire to forge interdisciplinary connections between history and the social sciences.¹³⁹