

# Pirate Towns: Reworking Social and Symbolic Infrastructures in Johannesburg and Douala

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**Summary.** Through examinations of inner-city street economies in Johannesburg and mechanisms of emigration and political resistance in the Bapenda Omnisport and Mouchouchou quarters of Douala, the paper attempts to explore how notions of piracy might usefully elucidate the everyday practices of African urban residents attempting to operate more resourcefully in underresourced cities. Rather than being rooted in clearly defined familial, territorial and institutional relationships, residents increasingly seek out and manage a wide diversity of engagements within the city without long-term or clearly defined commitments. The key to realising movement within and among cities is to multiply the uses that can be made of resources of all kinds and this means the ability to put together different combinations of people with different skills, perspectives, linkages, identities and aspirations. Such complex and not easily identifiable forms of social organisation constitute a kind of perceptual system, a way of seeing that leads individuals and groups to put objects and experiences to many, otherwise unanticipated uses.

## Urban Transgression

If piracy is considered the act of taking things out of their normal or legitimate frameworks of circulation and use, then intensifying global urbanisation, which has partly fractured previously recognised territorial, administrative and social coherence, has deepened both the concerns and possibilities of piracy (Sassen, 2002; Nordstrom, 2003). At the same time, when various administrative machines lack the resources, legitimacy or interest in defining normative frameworks governing appropriate channels of circulation and uses for particular objects and possibilities, piracy also comes to the fore (Luke and Tuathail, 1997; Herbst, 2000; Jung, 2003).

The objective of this article is to explore the potential usefulness of deploying a notion of piracy, the better to come to grips with the

radical remaking of urban life in much of Africa. This is a remaking that produces substantial experiences of disorientation and where efforts are increasingly made to use actively such disorientation as a resource for increasing mobility and opportunity in elaborating circuits of movements between cities and within them.

Throughout urban Africa, power increasingly derives from a capacity to transgress spatial and conceptual boundaries, erasing clear distinctions between private and public, territorial borders, exclusion and inclusion, remunerated and compelled labour (Roitman, 1998; Bernault, 2000). Regimes increasingly recognise that they need no longer substantially invest in the definitional aspects of rule—i.e. to deliberate clearly defined jurisdictions, zones, policies and sectors. This

allows unregulated practices of accumulation to unravel once-relied-upon centres of social gravity and then intervening only to depict certain actors and spaces as threats demanding that the state take extraordinary and emergency actions (Bayart *et al.*, 1999; Baker, 2000). Vacuums of authority or excessive expressions of it are unable to consolidate strong overarching perspectives capable of putting bodies and objects in 'their' place (Appadurai, 1998; Kelsall, 2000).

At the same time, cities everywhere exert pulls on each other in a force field in which the maintenance of localised coherence becomes increasingly problematic. Africans do make cities that, in many respects, work. But the sheer demands placed on cities, which have lost many of their productive capacities in the face of expanding circuits of imports, trade liberalisation and other multifaceted articulations among urban areas across the globe, result in an exponential increase in the presence of Africans in non-African cities (Hamilton, 1997; Adekanye, 1998; van Hear, 1998; Faist, 2000). African and non-African cities are entangled in unprecedented ways. The material legacies produced by architectures of colonial power provide a specific infrastructure of capitalist penetration. This infrastructure permits a highly targeted and truncated articulation that maximises economic profit for select actors without the need for a more generalised development of African human resources (Mkandawire and Soludo, 1999; Sidaway, 2003). This dearth of domestic opportunity stimulates the tactical abilities of urban residents who delink themselves from home at an early age and use the city as a place full of resources for deception, and thus travel (Nyamnjoh and Page, 2002). It is also due to the penetration of capitalist infrastructure into the most seemingly impenetrable of physical and social environments (Hardin, 2002).

This entanglement also encourages a generalised practice of piracy played out over multiple locations and organisational forms (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 1999; Raeymaekers, 2002; Gore and Pretten,

2003). The pillaging of raw materials and the incorporation of so-called weak states into the complex configurations of illicit transnational trade, while significant, are the easily graspable, as well as easily distortable, aspects of an expansion of piracy throughout the region. What is perhaps more important is to understand the ways in which piracy operates as a means of negotiating everyday urban life.

Of course, concerted efforts continue to be made to govern cities through zoning, cadastre, property and administration, without completely erasing the unruly yet dynamic intersections among differences of all kinds to which the city offers both setting and cause. Despite all of the development regimes that attempt to bring order and efficacy to African cities, they continue to be, in many respects, virtual cities. For throughout urban Africa, order is essentially underfunded, and municipal governments have been disrespectful of appropriating an array of local practices and aspirations that could be the building-blocks for some viable form of efficacy (Ribot, 2002). African cities have learned, thus, to live close to those dimensions of urban life otherwise 'cut off' and separated from the attempt to make the city productive—i.e. the city's delirium and its capacity for thickening complicities and collaborations that go everywhere and nowhere simultaneously (Ferguson, 1999; Mbembe, 2001; De Boeck and Plissart, 2004; Trefon, 2002).

If production possibilities are limited in African cities, then existent materials of all kinds are to be appropriated—sometimes through theft and looting; sometimes through 'heretical' uses made of infrastructures, languages, objects and spaces; sometimes through social practices that ensure that available materials pass through many hands. The key is to multiply the uses that can be made of documents, technologies, houses, infrastructure, whatever, and this means the ability to put together different kinds of combinations of people with different skills, perspectives, linkages, identities and aspirations. For this multiplicity of

social organisation constitutes a kind of perceptual system, a way of seeing that then engages the urban environment in such a way that single items, objects and experiences are converted into many, otherwise unanticipated uses. If new uses are to be made of existent materials and resources, then individuals must in some sense delink themselves from the familiar social contexts in which they have been embedded. This is necessary in order for them to *see* differently—i.e. in order to participate in ways of being social that permit a different kind of cognition to take place (Cooper, 1990; Grosz, 1995; Knorr-Cetina, 1997; Thrift, 2000; Lash, 2002; Larkin, 2004). They thus convert themselves into a wide range of positionalities, becoming almost a kind of infrastructure in the assembling of new household formations, work crews and information conduits, and in ways where particular instances of use are no longer exemplary of general conditions.

One can observe a version of this in the ways in which the so-called inherited city—the largely run-down, seemingly useless commercial areas of many African cities—retains its surface identity. Here, restaurants, hotels, showrooms, small factories and department stores are availed to a wide range of disparate uses, often not clearly defined. For example, an old ballroom in Douala now surreptitiously houses racks of Italian men's clothes for a small boutique. The boutique, itself, is used only to give appointments to potential customers for meetings in the ballroom where, in turn, clothes are simply an introduction to the sale of fake purchase orders used to secure business visas for Europe. A large restaurant, with perhaps a few paying customers every week, is converted into an assembly hall for a group that still has not decided whether to be a church, a secret cult, a future political party or a gambling club, but it draws a fairly decent crowd twice a week with one of the area's most renowned bush meat chefs for a type of dining that is supposed to be illegal. This appropriation of the dilapidated is not gentrification, for these new uses rely on the very appearance of things falling apart.

### Finding a Different Point of View

As new uses of the urban environment compel new social assemblages that, in turn, reinforce new uses, the question becomes, what happens to the important sense of predictability and support that comes from stable social ties. What becomes of regulatory structures that seek to secure the consistency necessary for people to commit themselves to long-term efforts to improve their urban environment? What happens to the sense of people being able to come up with working predictions of what is likely to ensue if they act in particular ways and which then allow them a greater range of independent action?

These questions have to be framed within a broader sense of what it is possible to do within African cities today, particularly where, as the anthropologist Juan Obarrio (forthcoming) has provocatively indicated, there has been a structural adjustment of the economy of language itself. In other words, there is a restructuring of the very instrument through which it becomes possible to construct subject positions and discernible relationships between things and value, the real and the symbolic. At times, it appears as if the entirety of most African nations' material resources is owed to foreign interests and, in the process, becomes owned by them as well; spaces of transaction are effectively eroded. Whatever a nation possesses—its material, human and cultural resources—is consumed in a spectral conception of value—i.e. the values of virtual financial capital. A sense of local action and possibility, Obarrio argues, effectively disappears. The restoration of local possibility has not usually been in the form of an activist state attempting to use public instruments as a means of increasing capacities. Rather, it comes in the form of a state that curtails its sense of public responsibility while maintaining all of the prerogatives of rule in order to maximise the possibilities of accumulation as an increasingly privatised entity, making all kinds of deals with different national and international groups (Bayart and Warnier, 2004).

But what does this condition then mean for everyday urban life? What ensues is that not only do individual residents circulate amongst each other, but the very meanings of their various points of anchorage—household, networks and livelihoods—perform a kind of circulation as well. In a context where it is often unclear just who has the right and ability to do what, and where once-relied-upon forms of authority are increasingly unable to put their stamp on how daily life is to be enacted and understood, there is a pervasive anxiety on the part of urban residents as to with whom they can live and work, with whom they can talk and what kind of collective future they can anticipate.

In such conditions, there is tendency to retreat into specific particularisms—i.e. of ethnopolitical groupings, reinvented traditions or heavily defended local territories (Geschiere and Nyamjoh, 2000). But as African cities continue to grow and continue to be shared by residents from different walks of life, the challenge is how they keep each other in some kind of consideration; how to keep open the possibilities of some kind of common future. In part, this occurs through a circulation of meanings, styles, vantage-points, experiences, ways of talking—tried on and discarded, and perhaps tried again. These elements thus come to belong to no one, even though particular groups may make strong claims on them at any given time.

This is a critical orientation to trying to keep things open, to keep open the possibilities of constituting a multiplicity of trajectories of accumulation, collaboration, livelihood, communication continuously threatened with disattention, co-optation and state-engineered disappearance. This is a politics not aimed at seizing power, at expelling the current cast of characters inhabiting the regime, or even at consolidating incremental gains in terms of access to land or other resources.

Again, in pursuit of this attempt to keep things open, there is a generalised displacement of mediating interventions. In other words, residents avoid crystallising stable frameworks and identity positions able to render definitive interpretations about what

specific actions must mean or what are to be normative, good uses of all that which makes up an urban environment.

At the same time, the majority of African cities remain spaces where the social characteristics usually associated with rural existence persist with increasing distortions and compensations for these distortions. They are also spaces where a substantial amount of ‘normative’ urbanisation has also taken place. Functions and identities are individualised, even though the majority of the urban population has not been brought along. The reproduction of ‘customary’ ways of living largely becomes compensation for the difficulties the ‘customary’ faces in the city in the first place. The customary also compensates for the lack of an economic platform to extend and sustain more conventional forms of urban identity. ‘Modern’ ways of being in the city are certainly pursued. There is the pursuit of responsible civil behaviour and investment in individual capacities. The pursuit of such ‘modernity’, however, too often leads back to heightened dependence on extended family references and obligations that are often viewed (correctly or incorrectly) as impeding modernisation (Andersson, 2001; Englund, 2002). So, there appear to be no *ready-made* alternatives to reinvented or readapted ‘customary’ forms or ‘normative’ individualised identities as ways of pursuing urban livelihood and opportunity.

As the structures of mediation diminish—those institutions that hold individuals, families and households in some continuous consideration of each other—residents that I have worked with across different African cities report becoming increasingly anxious about the efficacy of their actions. In other words, they worry about who can be reached, who can be affected. Additionally, they tend to complain about blocks everywhere; about everything being too tightly controlled. In order to operate outside these constrictions, many urban residents try to leave home, or secure some basis for operating in different quarters of the cities in which they live.

For the rest of the paper, I will focus on two very different African cities, Johannesburg

and Douala, as a way of illustrating various facets of contemporary pirate economies. The observations from Johannesburg stem from eight years of ethnographic work in the inner city, primarily with immigrants from other African countries. Those from Douala stem from a three-year engagement with a cultural centre, Doual'art, working in several neighbourhoods of the city with various youth and development committees on projects of upgrading and social development.

The objective is not to subsume the illustrations to strengthening a particular notion of piracy, but rather to use this notion flexibly, even heuristically, as a way of talking about and then intersecting diverse urban practices concerning the pursuit of livelihood and opportunity. This is done recognising that 'piracy' is a loaded term, resuscitated in recent years to describe new possibilities of unregulated use generated by information technologies, as well as the 'return' of real live pirates on the high seas most famously known for their theft of oil tankers. But the use of such strong language here is itself a tactic to draw attention to both long-term and emerging dilemmas faced by African urban residents trying to make do—making do in cities where the chronic sense of crisis necessitates more extraordinary actions in order for households and individuals to stay afloat. It is thus impossible for residents to stay put. And this impossibility is reflected not only in reiterating the historical capacities of many African populations to move and to move long distances, but in wide-ranging and diffuse tactics attempting to affect a mobility of perception and action within the confines of the city itself.

### **Johannesburg**

In the inner city of Johannesburg, 90 per cent of its current 400 000 residents were not in residence 10 years ago.<sup>1</sup> All African nationalities are represented in this highly volatile mix of origin, class background, aspiration and approaches to urban life. The inner city was a place of substantial infrastructural development—large apartment blocks, with some

buildings containing hundreds of units; hotels with swimming pools and sophisticated communications facilities; entertainment complexes; large underground parking garages. This infrastructure has largely either been overextended beyond its intended capacity or converted into uses never intended. These systems of unconventional usage are both informed by and are structuring of modalities of habitation, entrepreneurship and social collaboration that do not coincide with the prevailing normative conceptions of households, social networks and so forth.

For example, it is well known that Nigerians, mostly from Igbo South-east, are major economic players in the inner city—with interests in narcotics, money-laundering, computer fraud, mobile phones, real estate and beauty products and hair care. Every mid-afternoon, on a block in the centre of Hillbrow, several thousand Nigerians mill publicly in the street. While a common assumption is that they are plying their drug trade, this is only incidentally the case. Most Nigerians involved in the array of provisional and frequently illicit trades have taken over the majority of the area's hotels as residential centres and thus usually purchase their meals from women who sell cooked food in the streets. Yet this purchase of the main mid-afternoon meal serves many different purposes.

First, it is a way for the Nigerians to demonstrate their capacity to mobilise a public presence. This space, Quartz Street between Kotze and Pretoria Streets, becomes one of the few places in all of Johannesburg where public life attains such density—thus iterating the Nigerians as a distinct sociality within the city, with distinct capacities for mobilisation and coherence. This display becomes a display of impunity, pointing to the insufficiency of South Africans not only to deal effectively with them, but also pointing out South Africa's own deficit of public action. Secondly, this publicity becomes a means of mutual witnessing. In other words, it is a means of Nigerians from many different walks of life, with different skills, patrons, trades, allegiances and aspirations, to

circulate, to exchange information. They also watch the various meetings of patrons—who arrive in luxury cars—with their respective ‘lieutenants’ that take place on the balconies of several bars that overhang the street.

For the most part, the businesses in which Nigerians are involved—while sometimes driven by wealthy Igbo politicians and businessmen back in Nigeria—are not structured as tightly knit Mafia or syndicates. Although several former trade union leaders play significant ‘supervisory’ roles in the various commercial activities, these activities are, for the most part, loosely structured. They provide a rubric for very diverse actors to see what they can make of a circumscribed series of opportunities, with mostly limited resources. Although structures of command, resource distribution and tributary payments are worked out, Nigerian-driven commerce depends more on the recombination of different actors and activities, with a particular emphasis on the shifting of different personnel and finance through different regions and sectors. In this way, there is a great deal of ambiguity as to what is legal and what is not, as well as keeping money and goods mobile, and thus underregulated. Working alliances that are always in the process of being remade also enable new uses to ensue from existent materials, holdings and interests. Nigerian entrepreneurs demonstrate an astute capacity to shift gear and to change direction when placed under threat or scrutiny.

While the Nigerian case may be the most obvious example of an economy of piracy, other examples of this economy are found across the inner city—from the use of underground parking garages as sites for new mega-churches; the use of hotel kitchens as daycare centres; and even indoor swimming pools as butcheries. Because the regulatory authorities responsible for property and housing sectors have experienced multiple policy and operational shifts over the past decade, a wide array of tenancy and sub-tenancy arrangements have managed to take hold. Many inner-city households are composed of highly provisional arrangements

among unrelated individuals, with often complicated informal financial arrangements among them. In addition, residential buildings increasingly house informal businesses, one of which is the provision of short-term accommodation itself. The sheer diversity of the quality of housing stock, its ownership and regulatory structures, and its availability to distinct populations, gives rise to complex residential arrangements and economic collaborations. Despite the volatility of the inner city, the multiple possibilities inherent in this urban environment—where different kinds of actors with different capacities and backgrounds find some niche livelihood activities in a space of accelerated and incessant transition—manages to induce some stability in the interactions of an intensely heterogeneous population. For example, a substantial informal economy through which to hedge consumption expenses is availed to the middle class. At the same time, the poor are availed the maintenance of some, albeit limited, functioning zones of security and formal provisioning systems from which they can secure some parasitical arrangement.

While the authority vacuum has given rise to various combinations of social actors and the concomitant generation of creative entrepreneurship, it fosters an overall lack of commitment to a series of progressive and discernible steps through which the inner city can be developed. One result is that many individuals and households are actively trying to secure footholds in residential neighbourhoods beyond the inner city. As these individuals and households more often than not tend to have greater access to economic resources, these movements out act to impoverish further the inner city. At the same time, these economic differences are not substantially greater and thus the inner city, in some sense, extends itself across larger territories.

One is repeatedly struck by the diversity of non-formal economies attempting to remain operational within the narrow confines of sub-neighborhoods, all ‘rubbing up’ against each other in ways that can sometimes be complementary, but more often are conflicting. Such conflict tends to reinforce the

highly segregated zones in which residents conduct their lives according to common ethnicity and nationality. Even here, the social attributions of common nationality, ethnicity or place of origin are often not sufficient to ensure workable collaborations.

This is particularly the case amongst immigrants from other African countries since the composition of political refugees from the same country varies according to shifting political regimes. The operations of various national security and intelligence agencies from across the region introduce a fairly recent and significant dimension to the overall economy and security of the inner city. Thus, while agencies are ostensibly concerned with the activities of their respective nationals within Africa's most significant urban centre, they have, themselves, invested heavily in a wide range of nefarious activities, using the capacities incumbent in their agencies to consolidate new forms of illegal and unconventional transnational trade.

The inner city is thus the intersection of intensely narrow spaces of operation with highly porous and extensive vectors of external connectivity. Such an intersection poses many challenges to conventional paradigms of urban governance based on subsidiarity, particularly if municipal institutions lack the policy instruments to engage with it, let alone the analytical instruments to develop some functional understanding of the economic and social dynamics involved.

Municipal responses tend to consist simply of periodic and militarised clean-up campaigns, where the army is sent in to display a show of force, detain illegal immigrants and generally appropriate the possessions of residents with many different kinds of status. In other instances, buildings with substantial municipal arrears have been possessed by municipal authorities and sometimes resold to new owners on debt reduction for development schemes or more often razed. For a few potentially profitable properties, major realtor companies have assumed management responsibilities in return for the institutions of fast-track arrangements in the courts that allow rapid evictions of non-paying tenants

and tenants engaged in illegal activities sited within the property itself.

The extensiveness of the appropriation of infrastructure, services and regulatory functions within a transnational criminalised economy is such that it is difficult to imagine just exactly what steps the city's municipal institutions could take to impose some viable form of regulation. This is an urban space that has placed highly diverse peoples in close proximity to each other under conditions where familiar modalities of solidarity and social support either find themselves dysfunctional or have limited basis to really work. The fluid and provisional recombination of household structures, livelihood practices, security arrangements and social support rearrange everyday social cognition enabling people to see and engage with their environment—and the people, objects and resources within it—in different ways, thus becoming subject to different uses.

In response, the attraction increases for dismantling problematic aspects of the built environment in which such an economy grows. There is serious sentiment—for example, within Johannesburg's city council simply to demolish large areas of the inner city to deter further 'slummification', as the process is popularly called. In the interim, the use of the inner city as a way to extend such 'economies of piracy' or informalise larger swathes of the city also grows. This process occludes the efforts on the part of the majority of inner-city residents to make modest, yet viable, livelihoods within the framework of conventional propriety and efficacy. While many livelihoods are rooted in unconventional trade and collaborations among diverse national actors, they are most often criminalised by default and not by intent.

### **Douala**

Douala has become largely a city for evacuation. Residents tend to represent the city as a place from which one is obligated to flee. This is the case even though unserviced land divided into hundreds of plots some 30 km

from the city centre can sell out in a matter of days and despite the fact that the city's growth rate hovers at around 4 per cent. More daily activities on the part of households centre on maximising the possibilities of emigration for as many members as possible. This orientation sometimes poses delicate political problems within families as to who gets to leave, in what sequence and with what obligations, as well as coping with various implications of absence. This massive mobilisation on the part of urban households to secure possibilities for leaving is not simply a sign of economic stagnation.

Even if Douala's lack of history as an administrative centre minimises the possibilities of formal employment usually available only in such administrative contexts, it is one of Africa's most dynamic commercial cities and displays an economic dynamism that exceeds that of most African cities of its size. While economic hardship prevails despite this dynamism, the most salient factor centres on how individuals can access opportunities, information and capital. The primary motivation for emigration is the absence of a sense of predictability that getting trained and doing specific things will result in some kind of livelihood. There is the absence of conviction that it is possible to take certain steps that are likely to produce results foreseen in advance. This lack of confidence has been almost systematically cultivated by an urban culture shaped by a sclerotic political regime that not only runs in a patrimonial fashion but rewards and punishes almost arbitrarily. As a result, no one is quite sure exactly what it takes to get ahead or to stay out of trouble. Clearly old-fashioned networking, school connections and political loyalty are important. But there are such marked ebbs and flows characterising incomes and opportunities—one day one's neighbour suddenly has a lot of money; two months later, they have nothing—that few individuals can put together a viable perspective as to how they can secure a consistent livelihood over the long run.

In an urbanised environment, households must rely upon many different renditions

of so-called customary ties—through which households are able to extend kin-like relations and thus support and obligation. At the same time, they must increasingly find ways to operate outside these frequently claustrophobic sets of relations. The efforts to forge networks across ethnic and territorial domains are fraught with uncertainties given the relative dearth of institutional contexts through which they could be socialised—given that Douala lacks any semblance of a strong organisational culture. Outside school, church and work, there are few contexts through which people can collaborate in situations not focused on entrepreneurial activities.

While relations based on reciprocity and trust remain crucial anchors in a volatile social field, they are consistently being repositioned in terms of the need to maximise opportunities through what often appears to be a constant revision in the intersections of individual, household, neighbourhood and social network activities. Livelihood across many urban quarters of the global South depend on highly mobile interrelationships among actors, activities and spaces that must be incessantly renegotiated in terms of who can do what with whom and under what circumstances (Bayat, 2000; Benjamin and Bhuvanewari, 2001). Relations based on trust are then often called upon to do more work than they can functionally absorb, thus overwhelming the economy of 'small acts' which Nigel Thrift (2005) sees as the more useful locus in which to understand urban relations based on generosity and kindness.

At the same time, more provisional networking efforts are actually less vulnerable to manipulation by the state, which has largely appropriated the process of governmental decentralisation as a way to localise its reach into urban neighbourhoods. Even if many quarters in Douala are ethnically mixed, the immediate living situations for most households enjoin them to neighbours of generally common ethnic origin.

Additionally, associations that do exist in quarters tend to be organised along ethnic and highly hierarchical lines. Individuals seek to



disrupt these hierarchies as well as to maintain their ostensible purpose of being able to offer clearly defined positions and responsibilities for their members. Still, they are prone to be targets of the local party machinery—both in order to attenuate their potential political force as formal associations and as an arena that enables them to disrupt co-ordinated local actions. With the latter, this is done, again, through arbitrary rewards and punishments.

For the majority of residents either unable or unwilling to negotiate their way through these political games in a context with clearly limited real job or financial opportunities and where state power consistently transgresses any discernible rules of the game, alternative means of accumulation must be secured. In my wide-ranging discussions with youth across the city's most dense quarters of Nkongmondo, Bapenda and Makepe, the prolific desire to 'make oneself into a new person' through emigration rarely manifests itself in an expectation to go away for good. The sense that there is no future in Douala as it stands does not necessarily mean that individuals do not want to use emigration as a way of making such a future. The overwhelming sentiment is to find ways in which to come and go, to secure a niche both at home and abroad; to find ways of commitment to both and neither at the same time. The concern here is always the extent to which sufficient resources can be mobilised, not only to leave but, once away, whether enough can be garnered really to increase one's autonomy of action back home.

Leaving, itself, though is the major challenge. Many households save for years and many prospective emigrants start early in childhood performing a variety of paid and unpaid jobs in order to cultivate help later on. As larger numbers of individuals seek to emigrate and as access to visas and work opportunities elsewhere tightens, competition is intense and bureaucratic hurdles increase. Except in extraordinary circumstances, applications for visas must be initiated months in advance and criteria for granting visas have become more complicated, both in terms of the kind of documentation necessary and

demonstrations of sufficient funds and prospects for return. The costs of going backdoor have tripled on average during the past several years. As a result, more and more formal businesses and institutions are serving as contexts for the provision of passports, fake employment histories, pay stubs, mission orders, bank statements, diplomas, invoices and purchase orders, all facets of the documentation necessary in order to move.

Additionally, a wide range of shipping and transport companies are facilitating illegal entry into other African countries and Europe, primarily, but also into Asia, the Middle East and North America. More Doualais initiate arduous journeys across the Sahara to northern Africa in order to make precarious illicit crossings into Europe, as well as attempt entry via central Asia. In recent years, more are looking to China and Taiwan, not necessarily as sites of residence, but as sources of cheap goods that can be moved across varying circuits of exchange. This is complemented by frequent journeys to cities such as Dubai, Mumbai, Karachi and Istanbul, where a wide range of goods are bought, sometimes sold back home, but often brought to regions such as southern Africa which do not have substantial histories of external travel. Here, a substantial economy of piracy is at work making heretical use of the signs relied upon to indicate a stable life in place.

But these rather obvious appropriations of the workplaces, airline companies, computers, documents, waybills and so forth are not the only forms of piracy prevalent within the city. After all, despite the overwhelming desire of residents to leave, the majority is simply not able and is thus forced to make some kind of a life in place. While interceptions, interruptions, diversions and misappropriations certainly take place in all kinds of settings within the city and are usually applied to an assortment of criminal activities, they also have a more general sense. They also refer to practices whereby residents attempt to position themselves in places where they do not belong or have no clear status as a means of partaking of some goods or opportunities,

and without being removed or excluded. Again, the focus is how to stretch the meanings and uses of what exists, as well as to speak and act in ways that do not immediately provoke a clearly defined and limiting set of responses.

Consider the tactical knowledge elaborated by citizenry in Bapenda, Douala's densest quarter and, reportedly, the epicentre of the political opposition. Residents have been compelled to engage in a game of constant pretence in the face of the arbitrary application of state power. As popularly understood, the repressive character of the state does not operate by telling residents of the city what to do and forcing them directly to do it. Rather, the local machinery of the ruling party singles out specific persons for reprimand or marginalisation for not having acted in a specific manner. This may include not attending a local meeting, not having made a specific monetary contribution to a certain fund, refusing an appointment to a local position, such as block party captain or local market chief, or not informing officials of the potentially criminal or subversive actions on the part of neighbours.

Despite the complete disillusionment with politics and a profound disdain for the state and ruling party, what ensues is a daily-orchestrated performance, not only of quiescence, but of active support for the party machinery, which largely displays itself through a host of ceremonial functions. This party machinery does little that has any substantive economic or social impact on people's lives through what it actually provides or does. Even so, this setting-up of a stage for witnessing and scrutinising and the public performances it elicits, is the critical factor in determining who has access to specific opportunities of formal employment, servicing, advancement and approvals for self-made enterprises, buildings and so forth.

On the surface, then, there is little room for local initiatives and organising outside this game. As the rules and consequences are not clear, it is difficult for residents to anticipate what is likely to happen to them if they take particular steps in terms of pursuing specific objectives. On the one hand, constitutionally

enshrined democratic principles in Cameroon accord a wide range of freedoms for people to act, organise and form associations of all kinds. Yet, the ruling power has been the only organised force capable of operating proficiently within a framework of deconcentrated governmental power. However, without sufficient resources to make its mark, it is forced to make its presence known as a disruptive force, a source of blockage, confusion and interruption. For example, in very obvious ways, uninvited party officials are seen carrying bags of money in the middle of the night to households seemingly picked out at random. Residents must continuously face distrust amongst themselves in everyday lives already burdened with the demands of trying to make ends meet.

On the other hand, the profusion of these performances of compliance is exaggerated, taking on an almost baroque quality, so that the demonstrated compliance of local communication systems allows certain reciprocities and complicities among local residents to take place. For example, on certain days of party celebrations, residents are 'encouraged' to wear black. Regardless of the fact that 'black is black', there is a common game in Bapenda Omnisport, one of the fiercest anti-government quarters in all of Cameroon, where residents compete with each other over whose outfit is the blackest. This game sets in motion extensive discussions among residents about which company makes the blackest dyes, about the relative eyesight of local party officials and the sexual proclivities that may affect their eyesight, and about the latest shipment of dark glasses coming from China that might be presented to party officials. Unofficial delegations are sent to other quarters to assess the nature of 'local darkness' existing there.

Under the cover of this 'darkness', and in pursuit of the perfect conformity to party dictates, extensive discussions take place about the tastes and weaknesses of a wide range of local characters, how they can be manipulated, seduced and diverted, and how residents can, however, momentarily, work together towards these ends. All of these

exchanges, in which wide-ranging information about many topics is shared and debated, are conducted in the idiom of a dedication to the perfect performance of compliance. This is a game of leakages, slips, indirectness, where no one has to commit themselves to anything irregular but where a horizon of other possibilities is momentarily visible and where the belief in the fundamental absurdity of state power is renewed, particularly as a dynamic of mutual captivity.

Consider the case of a group of youths who in many ways have neither left nor remained in the city, but who have put together a space of operation where it is unclear where they 'really' are. Machouchou is set back from the intersection of two major roads, one leading into the city, the other to Yaounde. During the rains, the area floods easily and is traversed with great difficulty. It is a quarter with a reputation for thieves, killers and malaria. What success these neighbourhood 'emissaries' have had in the past has not been necessarily attributed to deft skill or astute planning. Instead, 20 young men will show up somewhere completely improbable—a formal luncheon for ambassadors' wives, payday at the bank—during times when places are either crowded or full of security and simply bully their way to some relatively modest cash, usually taking significant casualties on the way. Sometimes the ruthlessness will result in a big score. But the brutal intrusiveness and the 'take no prisoners' attitude are what have earned the quarter its characterisation as a sullen dump of thuggery and its young male criminals the name, 'head-bangers'. Few attempts at quarter 'improvement' are initiated, although both the police and the military have repeatedly tried to clean out the growing criminal element.

Given the number of schemes, syndicates and confidence games that often have occasion to make use of such 'blind determination', one might think there would be safer and more lucrative opportunities for the young men here. But there is a seeming insistence to stand apart, as very few are willing to work as brute force for more

sophisticated networks or ringleaders. Detention and death are also not persuasive deterrents to the endless supply of youth from the area purportedly identified as full of assailants and perpetrators.

Not even two minutes from the Western entrance to the quarter stand the remains of what was once Douala's largest cinema, now closed for the past several years. Next door stands a four-storey building that once housed one of the city's better Catholic high schools, now moved to another more suburban location. The demise of both has a lot to do with the relationship between them. The pupils would miss classes to attend matinee showings next door of an endless fare of cheap *kung fu* movies. The young people would barely pay attention to the films; it was more a place to smoke marijuana and have sex. Some efforts were made to get the authority at least to close the place during school hours. But this was to no avail, especially as the very popular soft porn showings at the weekends drew crowds of local functionaries.

While over the years the cinema had been stripped clean—of seats, carpet, even major sections of the roof—the locked projection room strangely remained intact. Given its proximity to Machouchou, the cinema was a convenient hangout for neighbourhood youth, a beguiling place of refuge since, despite its present locked down fortress appearance, its status as a gathering-spot of criminals was well known to the police. But as far as I could make out, there were no raids, no arrests. Unlike the high school kids, these youth actually came to watch cinema, perhaps as a respite from just how much their lives had become clumsy imitations of third-rate movies. The thing was that there were no movies *per se* to watch. Rather, they had managed to attach the projector to a small generator simply to get it running and would then sit, often for hours, watching the rays of light as they reached the surface of the screen. Afterwards, they would get beers and have long discussions about what they had seen, arguing over plot lines and characters. It was clear that there was an important

way of life being depicted, the landscape and composition of which they would discuss in great detail following these ‘showings.’

Like most *Doualais*, they were fascinated with this spectre of distant lands and also, like most, they were determined to save money any way in which they could, in order to buy tickets and secure visas. But unlike these others, they never could identify the name of the destination or work out how far away it really was or, conversely, the name and distance would change all the time, as would the relevant authorities and the ways of getting there. So it would never be clear just how much money they needed to get, how much the costs would be. As it was always difficult to try and hide money or to keep on spending it, either to be left alone or to buy one’s way out of trouble, the problems seemed endless.

In the summer of 2001, Forum for Inhabitants, attempted to make a preliminary effort to organise some form of community association in Machouchou. It consulted the village chief and with his assistance put together an initial assembly of over 50 residents to talk about what they could do about the insalubrious conditions that prevailed. Unlike most such meetings across the city, and across most cities in the region today, the complaints about present conditions were muted. Although there was flooding and a lack of basic services, the community had long been able to get by with being what they were; their aspirations were not great, nor did they think that, whatever they might do, anything significant would be likely to ensue. When asked if the large numbers of criminals who reputedly operated from the community and subjected the community to harassment and a bad name put a damper on their motivation, a grey-bearded man of about 70 forcefully responded, “No, not at all, they are invisible to us”.

### Concluding Note

It is fair to assume that most residents in Douala and Johannesburg know that they cannot go it alone, but exactly with whom to

go with is another matter, for we have seen the pulling apart of conventional social ties. There are no maps; no grand visions for a viable future as, in turn, there is nothing intact from an ‘archive’ to be returned to life or to be reinvented. Rather, the boundary between the actual and the possible is effaced, as that which never happened but could be remembered as it is about to happen now. The milling about on streets waiting to eat, the flickering projection in the cinema, the search for the perfect blackness—all point to a repositioning to call upon possibilities that perhaps have been there all along. It is a repositioning releasing a multiplicity of active forces to be in play, rather than assigned to reiterate existing values and differentials.

Thus, the outcome of this emergence cannot be assured in advance. As Rancière (2001) indicates, the political becomes a proliferation of useless and unnecessary words and the invention of a scene in which they might be audible, in which objects might be visible and individuals recognised. For those without the specific properties that allow them to exercise power—money, knowledge, credentials or connections—they exist, as Rancière says, entirely within the act of making contentious the givens of a situation. Thus, they are positioned to pay attention to a potential “not always already seen under the sign of actuality, but in its own right” (Rancière, 2001, p. 121).

New trajectories of urban mobility and mobilisation are taking place in the interstices of complex urban politics. Distinct groups and capacities are provisionally assembled into surprising, yet often dynamic, intersections outside any formal opportunity the city presents for the interaction of diverse identities and situations. But, across urban Africa, there is a persistent tension as to what it is possible to do within the city and the appropriate forms of social connections through which such possibilities can be pursued.

The intensifying misery of African urban populations is real and alarming. Yet the theoretical reflections that underpin these observations of inner-city Johannesburg and Douala point to ways in which the unravelling

of connections on the part of African urban majorities to normative trajectories of urbanisation and public life can constitute new fields of economic action.

## Notes

1. Estimate made by the former Inner City Office of the Johannesburg Municipal Council as part of the overhauling of the cadastral system.

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