

Introduction to the Special Issue of NJAS: Mediated African Cities

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Social scientific research on cities in developing countries has frequently had very specific political aims, such as social justice or the emancipation of the subaltern people. The writings of numerous academics have identified racial or sociospatial differences in these cities. As Myers and Murray point out (2006: 12): “Colonial strategies of divide and rule left their spatial imprints on urban landscapes that were at once physical markers of urban difference and symbolic signifiers of the dominant and subordinate positionalities in the sociocultural order.” Myers and Murray, as well as Mamdani (2012), further argue that the colonial project sought to domesticate these differences, making the social and spatial hierarchies they had created, appear natural.

Thus, in order to make these indisputable racial or sociospatial differences visible, it is imperative to study them in urban settings. The danger is, however, that once these differences have been dragged into the light, they may be used to present the one and only true image of a particular city. No other images will ever be as credible – just like photographs of war and famine represent “Africa” for many people. Yet, these snapshots remain at the center of discussions on African cities, reproducing the coloniality of power (Quijano 2000) with its inherent boundaries and categories.

The age-old practices that still dominate the study of post-colonial cities emphasize this potential danger. Ananya Roy points out that while “the cities in the global north are often narrated through authoritative knowledge, or Theory, cities in the global south, are often narrated through ethnography, or idiosyncratic knowledge” (2014: 16). Therefore, she suggests that “such geographies and methodologies of authoritative knowledge must be interrogated and disrupted.” Given AbdouMalik Simone’s assertion that the challenge of the study of the cities of the South is “to think about lines of urban commonality, conveyance, and intensity among different facets of urban life that on the surface don’t seem to get together at all” (2014: 334), the reason for our interest in mediations becomes apparent.

Wherever humans organize their affairs, mediations occur. They are often hard to regulate or pin down. According to the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, “[c]onventionally, the verb ‘mediate’ has the meaning of interposing something as a medium between two things that are not connected. This implies a separation of the things and the necessity of mediation, as in the human soul and God, the subject and the object, the individual and society. To mediate is to connect or

reconcile separate things. Mediation is thus a third term between two things” (Nicholls 2007).

The study of mediation is a way of contributing to the study of how people get along in cities, rather than concentrating on the formation of the dichotomies, or boundaries, on the inside. McLuhan suggests that mediation translates into something common to all media: It converts experience into new forms (1994: 57). Cities become intelligible through acts of mediation, which in turn become a form of “social envisioning” (Peters 1997: 42) and a tool for understanding and foretelling the city. Furthermore, these cities are mediated in the ways people employ, imagine, and contextualize their actions and relations.

Our cases from cities in South Africa, Nigeria, and Côte d’Ivoire study urban mediations as both negotiated and contested through media. A medium can be any locally defined action or material object, space or practice, such as places of rituals, and uses of urban space, clothing, speech or information. By choosing a piece of clothing, or wearing a religious symbol, a person mediates urban change. In the case studies, people move across social boundaries to re-establish or transgress them. They also show how mediation sometimes welds separate social worlds together, blurring their margins, and changing them. In addition, all these articles explore the dimension of power in mediation to a greater or lesser degree.

The study of these mediations will help us to fathom a new approach to the study of the realms, overlaps, and interactions of social and spatial differences and boundaries in the cities of sub-Saharan Africa. This special issue of NJAS is the first product of the Nordic Africa Institute’s “Mediated African Cities” research project, which explores a little-known side of urbanity in sub-Saharan Africa. The articles in this publication demonstrate that the study of mediation can bring a fresh theoretical perspective to urban social and spatial processes, and thus contribute to a fuller understanding of the changing life in cities.

URBAN AFRICA AS A FIELD OF RESEARCH

Cities have long been important fields of enquiry in social research. They are much more than bricks and walls, roads and vehicles, and people. Each city has its own way of existing, its own particularities and quirks. What and how and why things happen in the city, and what it becomes, always depends on a vast number of (often coincidental) social, historical, geographical, and political factors. Max Weber was the first to produce a proper analysis of cities as a distinct form of social organization in the early 20th century. He even considered the cities outside the West (1921). After him, however, the academic literature largely ignored cities in Africa, as well as those in other developing countries.

The study of African cities remained marginal for a long time, and the study of cities in the developing world too often focused on the negative aspects of urban life (Gottdiener and Budd 2005: 138; Myers and Murray 2006: 2–3). The prevailing Afro-pessimistic perspectives depicted African cities as chaotic,

primitive, and backward. For a long time the image of an African city was that of a problem (Freund 2007: 142). According to the logic of coloniality, cities were the domain of the white man and served as places from which he would govern his subjects, the Africans, who were not seen as belonging to cities at all. For Mahmood Mamdani, cities were also potentially the places where the silenced colonial subjects could become citizens with a voice of their own. They thus posed a threat to the success of the colonial project (1996). The heritage of those silent and marginalized “subaltern voices” (Spivak 1988) haunts African cities to this day.

The scholars of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute were an exception. Instead of participating in the silencing, they were the first to carry out ethnographic urban research in sub-Saharan Africa. Their work focused on the cities of the Zambian Copperbelt in the 1950s and demonstrated that Africans were not just members of “tribes” who should live exclusively in the countryside, as the colonial regime would have it, but modern urban dwellers in their own right (Ferguson 2002). These researchers studied African cities as places of normalcy where people live their daily lives. These lives were in no way exotic, strange, or primitive, but the same as in any other place where material deprivation and political oppression underlie the human condition.

The “subaltern voices” (Spivak 1988) echoing from the African cities do not only relate colonial wrongdoings, or the undisputed epistemic violence to which their inhabitants were often subjected. The people in cities get on with their daily lives, look after their families, meet their friends, argue, buy food, and eke out a living from their urban environments as best they can. This is where people live their whole lives, and these places cannot simply be reduced to their traumatic colonial histories. Along similar line of reasoning, Jennifer Robinson points out that African cities need to be understood as “ordinary” (2006).

In recent decades, there has been a sharp rise in research on African cities in the social sciences. This is partly the result of the study of globalization, which opened up new spaces to challenge previous dichotomies, in turn creating openings for a number of new and interesting disciplinary approaches. One of the most recent of these approaches is the initiative to study urban life and modernity in the cities of the “global South” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012; Oldfield and Parnell 2014). Nevertheless, a developmentalist bias still influences geographers and those in development studies dealing with urban questions. As Marianne Millstein (2013: 376) points out, “while urban studies has limited things to say about African urban experiences, development studies has constructed particular imaginaries of urban dysfunctionality and marginalization.” These reproductions of urban boundaries can be seen as “territorializing traps” of regional and developmental categories for thinking the urban” (Robinson 2014: 58).

In the study of the urban social worlds, scholars have focused almost exclusively on exclusion, social categories, and urban boundaries, which set people apart, rather than on what actually unites and includes them. Cases in point are the classical anthropological works on African cities that have concentrated

on newly established social boundaries (Meyer 1961; Mitchell 1956; Wilson and Mafeje 1963) in order to point out that Africans are also modern urban dwellers and not only “traditional” people who belong to their rural “tribes.” While these authors’ point was a valuable one, the interconnectedness of urban dwellers was lost in the process.

Whether in the field of geography, anthropology, or any other discipline exploring African cities, the strictly category-building approach assumes battles (Mitchell 2000: 11) and divisions. These are certainly not hard to find in African cities. But while societies do have structural differences, it matters how we choose to explore these differences. Are we exclusively interested in urban boundaries, or do the mediations between them, as well as the connectivities between sociospatial categories, also count? Should we look for a fuller picture? Or, as Mbembe and Nuttall suggest, should we aim for research that revisits “the frontiers of commonality and the potential of sameness-as-worldliness” (2004: 351)?

Once again, the subaltern voices go unheard if a whole range of practices of the everyday life of the urban majority – Simone (2014) calls them the “missing people” of the South – is ignored. It is a valuable enterprise to aim for an understanding of the social boundaries and the distinctions in African cities, but such an understanding should never completely define the outlook on their social worlds. The picture needs to be balanced and looked at from more than one side. Neither separation, nor unity, is in any way a natural process that occurs in isolation, or in a social void. Social boundaries are porous, transparent, and mediated. They seldom remain unchanged for long: They are ephemeral, relational, and frail. Their movement and mediation are aided or hindered by a medium, and the successes of this mediation can be hindered or supported.

MEDIATION

In academic discussions, “mediation” takes on a number of slightly differing, or overlapping, meanings, depending on the way in which it is used. A popular legal term, it refers to arbitration between parties in dispute. It is also used in media studies, in connection with Marxist theory, and to signify cultural, or religious, mediation. We consider it a useful term, because it helps us tease out issues, and view and interpret our field data in novel ways, as well as compare discourses on cities of the South with each other, while avoiding Eurocentric assumptions and generalizations. Eventually, it will also aid the critical augmentation of urban theory on the cities of the South.

In a very basic sociological sense, mediation can be understood as a process occurring between two social entities, where new thoughts, practices, and ideas from one sphere of ideas seep into another, changing the target and often changing itself. Classical structuralist/poststructuralist anthropological scholars have – in the footsteps of Claude Levi-Strauss – attempted to study mediating categories as

cognitive entities derived from the natural world (Douglas 1966). Anthropologist William Mazzarella points out that “the question of mediation is a general one, one that touches the very fundamentals of social process,” because mediation is “a dynamic principle at the root of all social life” (2004: 360).

Importantly, in order for the mediation to occur, a medium is needed. It has been pointed out that virtually any object, or phenomenon, could be a medium (Eisenlohr 2011: 1). However, in the classic study of mediation, this medium is often the mass media: Benedict Anderson emphasizes the role of the printing press in his classic study on “imagined communities,” which can also be read as a seminal interpretation of how Indonesian nation-building was mediated by means of the mass media.

However, Mazzarella (*ibid.*) pointed out that it is important that we also look outside conventional mass media to other forms of mediation, as we should not “choose only overdetermined nodes of mediation as sites from which to explore these issues.” The less determined (or much less frequently studied) forms and modalities of urban mediation should be explored. The authors of this issue have set out to fill this gap, and they use the term “mediation” to discuss the processes of social change in a few African cities where the acts of mediation establish bridges and connections between social worlds. In their articles, mediated social ties become visible, power relations are revealed, and tensions unearthed.

A helpful approach to the study of mediation is to first define the focus of the particular mediation, and to then follow the medium and find the concrete content (the mediated subject) within the medium. For example, in an earlier study in South Africa, I followed how the gaudily dressed *sangomas* (traditional healers) mediate between this world of people and that of the beyond, which the ancestors populate, and between the categories of male and female, as they can often channel an ancestor of the opposite sex. However, white South Africans trained as African traditional healers also mediate between ‘white’ and ‘black’ areas in the cities, which have remained largely segregated since the end of apartheid. The medium is the healer’s racialized body, which also carries different meanings (Teppo 2011).

In this special issue, the authors deploy the concept of mediation to fathom the changing social relationships and social boundaries in African cities. In their case studies, the process of mediation is a political one. The authors therefore also take the political tensions and power relations that have contributed to the formation of these boundaries into account. Consequently, an understanding is established of the mediation taking place in the urban environment, which complements the previous discussions on boundaries and differences in cities. Examining mediation offers tools of understanding and pathways of engagement with issues of class, race, and mobility for urban theorists, anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, and others interested in African urban studies.

ON THE ARTICLES

In this journal issue, all the authors belong to the somewhat loosely defined field of “African Urban Studies” and have social anthropology, ethnology, political science, and political geography as a disciplinary background.

The first two articles are anthropologically inclined, but seek new expressions and explore new epistemic avenues. In anthropology, as part of religious traditions, mass media is regarded as connected with the new turn known as “the return of the religious” (Hirschkind 2011: 90), or as the “media turn” in religious studies (Engelke 2010: 371). In fact, “religion is understood as mediation – a set of practices and ideas that cannot be understood without the middle grounds that substantiate them” (ibid.). The focus has been on mass mediation and the ability of the new media to convey thoughts and ideas (Englund 2007; Eisenlohr 2011: 2). However, there can, and should be, a shift from media anthropology to the anthropology of mediation (Boyer 2012: 389).

The first article – a joint effort by Ulrika Trovalla, Eric Trovalla, and Victor Adetula – concentrates on how specific and different ways of movement define the processes of mediation in the “landscape of fear and ownership” (p. 67) that is the city of Jos in Nigeria. The tensions between the Christian and the Muslim residents, as well as the ethnic conflicts, harden the invisible lines etched between the urban spaces, and their juxtapositions have grown starker. Movement mediates images of friends and foes in Jos, where the spatial order verges on the chaotic. In the study, the media of these movements are public rituals, such as street parades, or the clothes that citizens, who have to commute from one part of the city to another, wear. But movement is not just a steady flow forward: The points at which the movement stops, or where they freeze on boundaries that cannot be circumvented, or breached, are also important. Looking at the city from this perspective makes its logic clearer, although it often seems chaotic to an outsider.

Jesper Bjarnesen shows how the “diaspo” youth culture of the immigrant youths from Côte d’Ivoire encounters the original “burkinabè” youth culture in Bobo-Dioulasso in Burkina Faso. Facing social stigmatization, the newcomers choose to mediate their youth culture as a desirable social brand, slowly inscribing it “into the urban social fabric” (p. 91). Style is a popular medium for these youngsters: The right dress, right hair, and right way of speaking form performances, which in turn become mediations of ethnicity in the urban spaces.

While mediations can be studied as the use of clothing, religious symbolism, or spatial actions, they can also be explored as words and power plays: Political discourses that are communicated further – or not.

The idea of power is present in all the articles, but the contributors understand it very differently. The authors’ different disciplinary backgrounds also flavor the papers: Victor Adetula, Ulrika and Eric Trovalla, as well as Jesper Bjarnesen, approach the topic from an everyday life perspective – how power is produced in

the movements in and around the city – but always from the grassroots perspective up.

In contrast, in Marianne Millstein’s article, the exercise of power is perceived from the top down (from the authorities to the citizens) and from activities and community groups – from the bottom up – as an entangled, but essentially mediated, process. Millstein requires more than a relational understanding of mediation. She emphasizes the importance of understanding what happens in and through the mediational process, and how mediation works. The power involved in mediation can only be seen as practiced. In terms of a state’s relationship with its citizens, the state can exercise power with information that can be manipulative, or seductive, but which is hard to grasp unless observed in practice.

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