

Dr. Felicitas Becker

Assistant Professor of African History, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver

'Floating populations' and ideological innovation in African cities

The enlivening effect of the current phase of globalization on the major cities of the industrial world has long been noted: in the study that popularized the term 'global cities', Saskia Sassen focused on New York, London and Tokyo (Sassen, 1991). No city in Africa combines size, density and interconnectedness with global commerce in the same way as these cities or the emerging cities of Asia such as Shanghai. Nevertheless Africa has seen a dramatic process of urbanization throughout the twentieth century. Combined with sustained population growth, it has led to the emergence of Cairo and Lagos as 'mega-cities' with over ten million inhabitants. Clusters of cities such as those in South Africa's Gauteng region and along the Guinea coast present another form of intense urban growth.

To fully appreciate the significance of Africa's current urbanization process, though, we have to define the 'mega-city' with reference to its hinterland, and consider its function as a social laboratory rather than its absolute size. Set against the fragmentation and deprivation of Africa's rural regions with their staggering ethnic, linguistic and environmental diversity, a city of three million people effectively functions as a melting pot and a dazzling metropolis. Observers of urbanization in Africa have long known that the intricacy of rural social relations is magnified and transformed in the towns, with their 'home boy' and funeral associations, professional networks, and economic and social niches (Gugler and Flanagan, 1980). The extreme poverty of African conurbations, moreover, adds to the challenges surrounding their governance: they are mega-cities compared to their national governments' budgets.

Besides obscuring these 'relative' mega-cities, an exclusive focus on the obvious examples in established and emerging industrial nations also risks obscuring parallel and connected changes in the hinterland, and the implications of these changes for the cities themselves. The drama and complexity of mega-cities may seduce observers into analyzing them in isolation. Yet in Africa (and arguably elsewhere too), the current wave of globalization intensifies a well-established paradox: the most isolated, least urbane locations are in crucial respects the most vulnerable to global markets and policy trends (Ferguson, 1999 and 2006). The resulting rural changes in their turn affect the cities.

This vulnerability is due partly to the preponderance of primary, especially agricultural, commodity production in Africa's economies. Arguably, it is also due to the mercenary, even predatory way in which extractive industries in Africa tend to be structured (Ferguson, 2006). To take an extreme example: the eastern Congo was rural and isolated in 1890 and continues to be so, but it was then and is now also directly and brutally connected to the world economy: by warlord-controlled slave exports then, by warlord-controlled coltan and diamond exports now.

It is my contention that the serious study of emerging mega-cities cannot afford to ignore the connections between the cities and these rural frontiers of the global economy. Partly, this is so because they reach the cities in the form of migrants. Even more importantly, the people stuck on the margin, painfully conscious of their vulnerability, seek to address their predicament, among other things, by participation in ideological exchanges that connect them to the urban centres. The ideological realignments thus produced have potentially major repercussions in the cities.

The close connection between urban and rural change is not specifically African, as the wave of rural dispossession and displacement accompanying China's current urban growth attests (Zhang, 2001). Still, it is worth setting out the conditions under which urban-rural ideological 'feedback loops' are developing in Africa, before considering an example.

The period since the 1980s has been described in Africa as that of 'de-agrarianization': a combination of market and policy influences has made peasant commodity production less and

less viable, with no alternative becoming available (Bryceson, 2003). African cities lacked the economic strength to integrate the resulting migrants, but with on-going commercial deregulation they offered the opportunity, of sorts, to survive on (often petty) trading. Too poor to establish households in town, and dependent on rural-urban price differentials for their business, a sizeable subgroup of these new entrepreneurs alternate permanently between city and countryside, often denigrated as yokels in town and as (urban) crooks in the countryside (Becker, 2006).

Simultaneously with the emergence of these rural urbanites, Africa became the target of proselytism by a whole range of new religious movements, from Texan neo-Pentecostals to Pakistani *tabligh* Islamic revivalists. On the Christian side, this development was fuelled by a new kind of Christian activism in the United States (Gifford, 2003). Among Muslims, a new commitment to proselytism in the newly rich Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, combined with international reformist/Islamist movements. Innovative media use, including 'televangelism', internet presence and satellite TV, are characteristic of the new proselytism in Africa and indicate its debts to both Western and Middle Eastern precedents. However, slightly more pedestrian media, above all video and audio tapes, are more important on the ground. They enable broad-based ideological shifts and debates (Becker, forthcoming 2008).

My own work among Tanzanian Muslims has given me the opportunity to observe the challenges, as well as potential solutions, that arise when the floating 'rural urbanites' produced by de-agrarianization absorb these ideological inputs. African cities act as hubs for the transmission of ideological impulses between seemingly quiescent rural locations on one hand, and undoubtedly global cities on the other. These impulses help new and precarious urbanites carve out niches in the city; in a sense, form new identities. Concomitantly, though, the cities risk becoming battlegrounds as well as recruiting grounds for metropolitan battles elsewhere.

Tanzania's commercial capital Dar es Salaam, estimated to have 3-4 million inhabitants, has become known colloquially as *bongo*, 'brain', of the country. Structures that evoke the term 'slum' characterize large parts of the city, but do not, in this place, signal social anomie: they are no worse, often somewhat better, than rural mud huts. Nearly all of the country's ca. 120 ethnic groups are present, including South Asians, as well as a growing number of European expatriates. They coexist largely peacefully, with the urban poor practicing a kind of barefoot cosmopolitanism. Both Muslims and Christians, who each make up close to half of Tanzania's population, are well represented in the town and have coexisted largely peacefully (Brennan, Burton and Lawi, 2007).

Over the last three decades, though, religious differences have multiplied and become deeply divisive. They pit 'mainline church' Christians against born-again ones, mainstream Sufi Muslims against Muslim reformists and Islamists, and Muslims against Christians. While ideological shifts have taken place in all these camps, the rise of the Islamists is the single most striking change, and it is intimately connected to both transnationalism and urban-rural interaction. The birthplace of Tanzania's Islamist movement is not Dar es Salaam but Tanga, a more homogeneously Muslim town whose religious establishment was wracked by factional conflict between patrician families in the 1970s. In response, younger scholars took up offers from Saudi student recruiters for scholarships in Saudi Arabia. Returning, they used their saved-up scholarship funds and new religious knowledge to set up a separate organization (Becker, 2008).

This initiative galvanized similar discontent in other towns, and in the early 1990s Dar es Salaam became the site of high-profile organizational centres and public confrontations for the new movement (Lacunza Balda, 1997). Its agenda gave local relevance to well-known Islamist concerns over the purification of ritual and the establishment of Muslim governance institutions, deploring, for instance, the under-representation of Muslims in higher education. Using manipulation, persuasion and intimidation, they established control over a number of mosques in the capital. Mainstream Muslims, Christians and the state, however, reacted nervously, and the government began to strengthen moderate Muslim organizations so as to enable them to 'roll back' the Islamists' influence.

At this point, the strength of Islamist support among the floating population of 'rural urbanites' became a crucial factor enabling their survival and continuing growth. The petty businessmen have carried the audiotapes and ideas of the Islamists into the countryside and introduced religious factionalism to the villages. At present, Islamists and mainstream Muslims have found a *modus vivendi* in some formerly contested sites in Dar es Salaam, while the bitterness of confrontations in the countryside is increasing (Becker, 2006). Meanwhile in the political arena of the capital, recrimination between Christian and Muslim leaders has become commonplace and potential battle lines are being drawn up around issues such as access to education and representation in government (Mbogoni, 2005).

Although there are significant differences between metropolitan and provincial Islamists, the rural and peri-urban supporters of the movement could easily become the 'muscle' for major confrontations in the urban centres, especially Dar es Salaam. While the urban Islamist leadership ranges from moderate to firebrand and comprises politically sophisticated individuals, the rural urbanites are politically naïve, impatient and frustrated. Their precariousness in both worlds, their aspirations to an urban existence and fear of sinking back into rural penury lay them open to manipulation.

This short account of one East African city's role as hub in an ideological exchange between the rural hinterland and the Middle East suggests several points. Firstly, it should make clear why Africanists tend to disagree when Africa is treated as a 'black hole' of globalization (Austen, 2007). The continent may be marginal to certain core institutions of the current wave of globalization, including financial markets and the internet. But it is at the forefront of both mineral exploration and the resurgence of monotheist religion (Ferguson, 2006; Ellis and ter Haar, 2004). Both these trends are related to classical accounts of modernity, but in diametrically opposite ways (industrialization, including extractive industries, is often seen as a harbinger of modernity while religion was long expected to fade before it); and both require close observation.

Secondly, Dar es Salaam's 'rural urbanites' are indicative of a broader phenomenon: an intermingling of town and countryside widespread not only in Africa's growing cities, and reflective of a lack of opportunity in both locations. In China, the 'floating population' of people fleeing rural stagnation and marginalized by administrative exclusion in town is estimated at 120 million (Zhang, 2001). Increasingly, forms of social dislocation and violence commonly associated with cities occur in rural areas, such as Nigeria's oil production areas or Congo. Conversely, the survival of semi-rural survival strategies in metropolitan areas presents new challenges for emerging cities, especially environmental ones. This issue deserves comparative study between Africa and other world regions.

Thirdly, we see that increasing connectivity provides the means for the construction of far-flung networks not only by commercial and gubernatorial elites, but also by much more marginal players, such as Tanga's Muslim students. These different layers of networks may coexist largely without interaction at most times, but they can affect each other in dramatic ways. Unfortunately, of late the role of Muslim migrants in urban terror attacks in Europe (Moroccans in Madrid in 2004, people from the Horn of Africa in London in 2005) has been a particularly clear example (Elliott, 2007). A clearer understanding of the networks through which persons and ideas circulate is required to understand and possibly counter a rise in hostilities between them.

Lastly, the experience of Dar es Salaam towns also suggests that conflict is not inevitable or, at any rate, does not have to turn violent. After several years of recurrent confrontation, different orientations among the town's Muslims have developed *modi vivendi* in a number of formerly fought-over mosques and schools. In the process, some of the radicals have become more moderate; in a sense, more urbane. Their informal organizational structures notwithstanding, Muslim institutions themselves – with some support by local governments – hosted the debates and provided the moderators to achieve this outcome. It is important to recognize and support this potential for fostering *détente* between competing religio-ideological groups, and it is a task in which the governing institutions of the city can play a constructive role,

for instance by providing neutral sites. These needs and possibilities, again, deserve comparative examination across places and cultures.

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