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A CONTINUOUS URBAN HISTORY

European colonial urban images and the development of African cities

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Abridged Version

Introduction

On the African continent, especially south of the Sahara, urban agglomerations have undergone various stages of development which have mostly been influenced by European presence. This presence has not only been an important factor to the actual development pattern of the urban centres but has also shaped their societal composition, spatial development, physical dimension as well as the way of thinking of the population, transforming the urban agglomerations from “traditional” towns to “modern” cities. Based on the development of the city of Douala, the economic capital and largest city of the Republic of Cameroon, this paper analyses how European presence has systematically influenced the development of the city and caused it to become what it is today.

Urban agglomerations during the pre-colonial era

Most towns in Black Africa grew out of villages, a process of great antiquity which was accelerated by the iron technology. Large human groupings required the iron products for co-operative deforestation or for the production of foodstuff of higher nutritional value, which triggered off an agricultural revolution in some areas and stimulated explosive demographic growth. Surplus food allowed farmers to devote more time to governance and to the creation of municipal institutions which made it possible to support communal life.

Some towns and cities like Kano in northern Nigeria or Great Zimbabwe in central Africa originated as spiritual centres. Others, such as Kumasi, the capital of the Asante confederacy in Ghana or Salaga in Niger originated as a marketplace. Still others emerged from their situation on the great routes, where gold and kola nuts were carried from the interior to the coast. Some like the Sokoto city, capital of the Sokoto Empire, emerged as a result of the domination of the Islamic empire on the traditional animist, thus making the city a spiritual and political capital.

On the other hand, by the tenth century, trans-Saharan trade, revived by Moslem merchants of North Africa, had sparked up the urbanisation process in most parts of the West African savannah. After 1500 AC, trans-Atlantic commerce also had a similar effect southwards, from the coast into the forested areas, thus contributing greatly to the rise and

growth of numerous great woodland urban areas before the European conquest. Nevertheless, the arrival of Europeans on the Black African continent gave birth to a new type of urban development, hitherto unknown to the traditional African urban pattern.

The Colonial Period

The nineteenth century in sub-Saharan Africa was a period of demographic dislocation, social upheaval, and reurbanisation. Old urban centres declined or were destroyed while new ones were born, often in a rather rapid and dramatic fashion. But the new urban centres were unlike the old. They were born of strife, and out of the desperate search for a new social, religious, and political order. Cities and towns were built and rebuilt “to create, reflect and reinforce the colonial order”.

Looking at the physical consequences of the colonising process on the spatial development in most traditional urban agglomerations, three broad spatial strategies for the structural order of colonial states, in their attempts at a “perfect” system of control” could be observed. The first of these involved altering African “orders without frameworks” in terms of settlement design to an order reducible to a segmented plan. Secondly, colonialism in urban British Africa aimed to create a fixed distinction between inside and outside in domestic architecture and urban design, thereby codifying neighbourhood, family, and gender relations in a manner distinct from African systems of domestic order. Thirdly, the segmented plan of settlement formed under colonial rule provided a place from which the individual could observe or survey the city, as a means of abstracting and objectifying the built environment. Each of these strategies became part of colonialism’s effort to separate “container” (the colonizing power) and “contained” (the African community).

The methods of administration of the French colonial territories on the other hand, constituted a compromise between the policy of complete assimilation inherited from the Monarchy and the Revolutionary Assemblies, and the respect for local cultures, that is to say, the necessity for taking into consideration the differences between French and native customs and ways of life. As far as French Cameroon is concerned, the policy of the administration had aimed at increasing the participation of the native population in the management of public affairs, as well as at promoting a respect for and the modernization of local customs. In addition, the French gave themselves as a main duty to get the people of Cameroon to forget that they had once been under the German protectorate and to lead them to become French-loving and French citizens. To attain this objective, the French adopted both a defensive and an offensive attitude. In their defensive approach, they implemented an intensive French language teaching program all over the Cameroon territory, thus imposing French legislature and they undertook a program to develop the economic resources of Cameroon. In their defensive policy, the French devoted themselves to destroying all German remnants and showing their hostility to German-loving Cameroonians.

Colonialism and Spatial Design

The occupation of space during the colonial period varied from one colonial master to the other. For example, the British colonial model erected satellite towns for the Europeans just outside the walls or boundaries of the traditional or indigenous urban centres. The pre-colonial urban structures thus remained remarkably intact in both layout and architecture. The

satellite towns, on the other hand, were often microcosms of the typical English towns and were also known as Government Residential Areas (GRA). Other colonial masters, such as the Portuguese “lusotropicalism” and the Germans showed more of a military than a civil occupation of the urban area. In contrast, the French and the Belgians obliterated the traditional urban structures by superimposing new radial street patterns, forcing the indigenous populations to move to the periphery of the new urban area –the colonial city. These colonial strategies all came to have the same goal: the segregation of space.

The division of space in stopover zones in the interior consisted of an attribution of an exclusive “European quarter”, which was characterised by streets, planned in an orthogonal structure, giving the area square or rectangular blocks, thereby creating the basic form of the urban structure of these zones. Each block was owned by a person or a company (both European). The roads were so placed that they always led to the railway station, seaport, wharf or to the commercial centres. These infrastructures were mostly meant to facilitate and to serve the purpose of the administrative and commercial authorities, who were the only people, to participate in the colonial and empire life of the region. The “European area” was not only considered as a residential area but also primarily determined the structural development of the urban area. The Natives were not generally allowed to penetrate this zone without authorisation in most cases.

The spatial disposition of the “Native area” in the colonial town obeyed to the same principles of blocks and square structures as in the “European area” but with a difference. The roads or streets were merely a prolongation of those from the “European area” forming blocks which were then divided into four or more plots, each occupied by a group of families. In many cases these plots were separated by a fence made of mud or reeds, constructed by the natives themselves. They did not benefit from the same amenities as the “European area” and thus remained in a rudimentary state.

“Modern” Africa

Many authors evidence the fact that historical-geographical analysis of the colonial experience of urban development is vital to understanding Africa’s current urban dynamics. Many socio-economic problems afflicting eastern, southern and to some extent western African cities must be understood as they have emanated from colonial times. Although some “momentous changes” have occurred with independence, the post-independence period in African countries has been characterised by continuity rather than change in urban processes.

Size is the obvious “momentous” change, though. In 1960, East Africa was the world’s least urbanised region. By 2000 Kenya and Zanzibar were about one-third urban or more, while Zambia’s urban population is sometimes estimated at nearly 60 percent of the total. Even in Malawi the urban population rose from 4 percent of the total in 1960 to 16 percent by 2000. The same trend could be observed in West and Central Africa. In Ivory Coast, for example, the urban population rose from 13 percent in 1950 to 44 percent by the year 2000. In Mauritania, an extreme increase in urban population could be observed, rising from approximately 2 percent in 1950 to 58 percent in 2000. In Cameroon, 9 percent of the total population was urban in 1950. By the year 2000, this percentage has reached 50 percent. This growth has fundamentally contributed to the actual development of most African cities, especially that of Douala.

Douala

Douala, the seaport and economic capital of the Republic of Cameroon, is the provincial capital of the Littoral Province. Before the coming of the Germans in 1884, the city was divided into four different districts or kingdoms: Bell, Akwa (both under a “King”), Deido plateaux and Bonaberi-Hickory on which the main population concentration was found. Each was functioning as an independent ‘district’ with its own construction and road systems. The roads were regularly cleared and well maintained and the inhabitants of these districts were used to communicating among themselves. The official possession of this territory, which became a German *schutzgebiet* (protectorate), marks the beginning of a new urban order for the region which was then named *Kamerunstadt*. The Germans occupied the Bell plateau, transforming it to their administrative zone while forcing the natives who lived there to find a home in the interior against their will. The expelled population soon established another settlement in the interior, which they named ‘New Bell’. During this period, the German colonial administration elaborated the first master plan of Douala, which finally defined the urban pattern of the city. The plan had to provide enough space for the establishment of a ‘healthy’ tropical city for Europeans, a ‘free’ zone of approximately one kilometre separating the European residential and commercial areas from that of the Natives, and new residential areas for the native population.

The German occupation of Cameroon was abolished with the end of World War I and Cameroon was handed over to Britain and France. On their arrival in 1916, the French administration had little to change in terms of infrastructure and of administration in Douala, besides the language, for Germany left behind a well functioning system inside its territory. The well-organised and well-planned urban centre that they discovered surprised them. But with time, the French introduced their spatial segregation policy they were adopting throughout francophone Africa, thus reinforcing that left by the German colonial administration for the city of Douala. It was also during this time that Douala became a focal point for many natives from other parts of the country. The population of Douala developed very fast from this period on, moving from 15,900 inhabitants in 1910 to 124,700 by 1957. Since then, the population has almost always doubled every ten years, with a total population of 1,670,000 inhabitants by the year 2000. This has brought about untold social problems such as the constant emergence and proliferation of *spontaneous settlements*, at the fringes of the urban perimeter, among which Ndogbassi.

Ndogbassi

Ndogbassi, a former swampy area next to the international airport of Douala, which until the mid 1970s was just a cultivation area for local consumption for the people of Douala, is today a home place for more than a quarter of a million of people of the city of Douala. It began with the extension of the international airport located south of the city centre. The first people to settle in this swampy area arrived in the mid 1970s. At that time the area was a dense mangrove forest where water, in some places, could attain one metre above ground level. By the end of the seventies, the first inhabitants were already comfortably settled in the area, especially those whose dwellings were found on the little dry land that was available in the area. Its transformation into a residential area was solely due to the extension of the

international airport of the city and the construction of the Yaounde – Douala highway which found it's way through the swamps to the airport and finally to the city of Douala.

Due to internal laws and regulations developed and implemented by the dwellers themselves as development strategies for their settlement, a great part of the settlement has kept an aspect of a planned settlement. The road network, though in rudimentary nature, has maintained it's initial size of approximately 12 meters for the main roads, 7-8 meters for the secondary roads and 3-4 meters for tertiary roads. The breaking of rules such as the occupation of the road, as observed in many other settlements of this kind, is immediately interrupted by the population itself, thanks to their social organization within the settlement. The plots sizes have been planned by the first dwellers together with the landlords, with surfaces varying from 200 m² to 800 m². These were sold to dwellers according to their purchasing power. Each plot has at least one of its sides by a road.

In order to coordinate the activities within the area and to control the development of the settlement, the dwellers have divided the area into quarters, which are further divided into blocks, the former being under an authority of a "Chief of quarter". Chiefs of blocks, who are elected every five years, assist the quarter head. The blocks in their turn are divided into "parcels". These parcels are groups of houses, 4 to 10 in number, forming a unit. The parcels are also under the control of a "chief of parcel". According to information gathered during survey, this structural organization in the settlement was deemed necessary because of serious difficulties found in living within the swampy area. These difficulties rendered mutual help absolutely necessary. The social organization in the settlement facilitated the establishment of amenities necessary for the functioning of any social group such as electricity, tap water, medical centres, nursery and primary schools, markets, all as a result of private initiatives. Although part of the area is still under the threat of being cleared due to it's proximity to the international airport and the accusation of illegal occupation of land, the local administrators have started considering this area as a part of the city which necessitates assistance and encouragement.

Although Ndogbassi emerged in the mid 1970s, it reflects some characteristics of inherited colonial rudiments: a settlement emerging at the periphery of the urban agglomeration in whose development various administrations haven't been interested, thus forcing the dwellers to take over any development initiative in favor of their settlement. Unfortunately, due to lack of some engineering know-how, problems such as irrigation, sewage, clean water supply, etc are very common. Another problem in the settlement is the "legality" of land use. The early planning and development strategies developed by the dwellers in response to the passive reaction of the authorities have prevented Ndogbassi from becoming a typical slum, as the case may be for many other settlements of its kind.

Conclusion

From the attempt of going through the historical development of urban centres in Africa up to present situation, it is observed that the emergence of spontaneous settlements or slums in most Black African countries south of the Sahara was from misconceived colonial urban policies, which advocated a marked dichotomy between the urban space strictly reserved for where the colonial masters were to establish their residential, their commercial as well as other urban structures and services and another urban space which was strictly to be

reserved for the natives to settle as they wished without any directives from their colonial masters.

Furthermore, this spatial dichotomy laid down by the various colonial administrations continues to determine the urban images of most African cities today. This is no longer basically due to spatial and racial segregation but mostly due to social segregation, which leads in many cases to the birth and proliferation of spontaneous settlements at the peripheries of urban centres, which all need alternative approaches. Subsequently, a sustainable solution to the slums phenomenon in African urban centres south of the Sahara will therefore not only require the implementation of new elements, but primarily mean the reorganization and optimization of existing structures based on historical values of spatial organization, urban development, and social composition observed so far. A failure in a proper and effective attempt to grasp the phenomenon of slums, to assure complete integration of urban poor and their living environment (slums) in the urban conception of “modern cities”, will strengthen the image of African cities becoming a chain of gigantic metropolises full of poor people.

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