

## Unspectacular Secondary Cities in West Africa

### Project description

#### Concept

Most studies on urbanity in Africa focus on megacities, whereas secondary cities, the unspectacular middle ground between metropolises and small towns, have largely been neglected (Bell and Jayne 2009; Hilgers 2012; Marais, Nel, and Donaldson 2016). However, as the World City Report by the UN (2016) demonstrates, more and more people live in secondary cities. Secondary cities are rapidly growing in numbers and inhabitants and therefore their political, economic, and social importance is increasing. Furthermore, their independence from the capital cities is enhancing due to decentralization processes most African countries underwent since the 1990s and because of new communication technologies.

There are many differences among secondary cities regarding inhabitants, infrastructure, accessibility and their outreach; these distinctions manifest themselves on the political, geographical, social, and the economic level. Still, there are some typical features of secondary cities. Firstly, due to their hierarchical and (most of the time) also geographical distance to the heart of the state, the highest administrative level, they often breed forms of governance that result in specific modes of state-society interactions which differ from capital cities. Secondly, actors' ways of moving, circulating and navigating in secondary cities are more predictable and are not marked by the same degree of improvisation than in African megacities. Thirdly, everyday life in secondary cities is more immediate, that is, the elite is more tangible, social mobility is easier, and social stigmatization is more lasting than in large urban centres. This then affects people's encounters and their approaches to and expectations of urban life.

Inhabitants of secondary cities constantly compare their place of residence with the country's metropolis, but also with other larger and smaller regional cities. Urbanites of secondary cities incorporate and rearrange modes of living from both, the rural and the urban area. Thus, Hilgers (2012, 37, author's translation) aptly notes that "life in a secondary city is, partially, determined by the exterior, but the external contribution and the transformations that it produces are always reappropriated, reconfigured, reinvested according to the logics of their pre-existing and of a locally constructed urbanity". By doing so, urban dwellers create and recreate a unique image of their city. As Förster (forthcoming) writes, this making of the city "as a cultural and social entity" is noteworthy because "it brings individual and collective creativity together". This illustrates that secondary cities are not mere copies of megacities, but fully urban (Bell and Jayne 2009) in the way that multiple forms of encounter and distancing take place (Förster 2013). Their networks stretch far beyond their rural hinterlands, they cross borders and even continents. If we overlook urban forms that emerge in secondary cities, the image of urbanity is incomplete because "secondary urban centres are important laboratories for the definition of identity around religion, nation, ethnicity and locality" (De Boeck, Cassiman, and Van Wolputte 2009, ii).

Since the late 1930s, urban sociologists used three characteristics that defined the urban, namely population size, population density, and heterogeneity (Nielsen 2016, 4). In such studies, cities are typically approached by urban hierarchies. Then, cities between 50,000 and 3 million inhabitants are labelled as secondary cities.

This illustrates that there is little consent where to draw the line. Additionally, secondary cities are typically classified by their function within the subnational context, that is, their relation to the metropolises. I reject conceptualizations that focus solely on size and urban hierarchy. Moreover, I critique normative approaches that describe secondary cities as “disappearing into ruin and decay” (Murray and Myers 2007) or by labelling them as “shadow cities” (De Boeck, Cassiman, and Van Wolputte 2009). I rather propose a contextual approach to secondary cities which focuses at them as urban centres which play a non-negligible role as a nexus between the rural and the urban and within the network of cities in their respective countries and regions.

### Literature: State of Research

The body of literature on African cities has grown since the 2000 (Howard 2003; Robinson 2006; Murray and Myers 2007; Pieterse 2011). Several studies have emphasized on a variety of thematic in and about large urban centres in Africa: historical formation (Anderson and Rathbone 2000; Freund 2007), so-called informal economies (Bryceson and Potts 2006), urban governance (Pieterse 2008), and popular culture (Martin 2002) amongst others. Besides these general contributions, authors have written about specific African megacities, those glittering metropolises which compete with other international megacities (e.g. Simone 2004a; Malaquais 2007; De Boeck 2012, 2015; De Boeck and Baloji 2016). Altogether, two approaches within urban African research can be distinguished: One strand is interested in globalisation and the international connectedness of megacities like Johannesburg. The other strand is conceptualising metropolises by describing their malfunction and what they lack, like Simone (2004b, 4) who reduces metropolitan African life to “a state of emergency”. I however, plead for more research that is neither deficit-orientated by focussing on poverty and decay nor solely searching for signs of ‘modernity’ like glittering skyscrapers and art galleries in sexy African megacities. I argue that if we want to gain a more thorough understanding of urbanity in Africa, we must take into consideration ordinary life that unfolds in unspectacular secondary cities.

Academic research has largely neglected secondary (and small) African cities which are often characterized by what they lack compared to megacities; therefore, they are described as ‘not yet cities’. With a few but noticeable exceptions (Bell and Jayne 2006; De Boeck, Cassiman, and Van Wolputte 2009; Hilgers 2012), recent studies mostly focused on secondary cities in Southern Africa: While the report by John (2012) uses an economic approach, the book by Marais, Nel and Donaldson (2016) as well as Roberts’ report (2014) is about development. Among the relatively small number of studies focusing on cities “beyond the metropolises” (Bell and Jayne 2006), few draw on ethnographic data to portray and analyse the uneventful everyday of secondary cities’ inhabitants, by adopting an urban dwellers oriented perspective.

### Research focus

For a better understanding of urbanity in secondary cities, more empirical research is needed that analyses social processes which unfold in these cities. The aim of this research project is to describe and analyse social processes of encounter and distanciations. As recently requested in urban studies (Amin and Thrift 2002; Robinson 2006, 2011), I will also use a comparative approach to gain general insights into the history of connectedness and disconnectedness in Sikasso, Mali, and Kankan, Guinea. I will empirically research

the formation of urban spaces and how urbanity unfolds in these two secondary cities. My main research questions are: Where and how do the different social actors articulate their imaginary of how an urban society should look like? How do people of different backgrounds and various ways of life encounter each other and how do they distance themselves from other groups. By which means are commonalities and differentiation enacted? More precisely, along what kind of social lines (e.g. gender, class, ethnicity, belonging, age, religion, education, nationality and so on) are these discourses and practices of belonging articulated? In order to draw a conclusion, the aim of this research project is to study urbanity in secondary cities in their own rights, that is, through various sets of interactions and distanciations which take place among urban dwellers. I tackle these questions based on the understanding that human agency consists of three temporal dimensions, namely past habits and iterations, the imagining of possible future trajectories, and the evaluation of the present (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

### Places of research

I aim at researching comparatively, two secondary cities in the Mande region, namely Sikasso in Mali and Kankan in Guinea. Kankan, where around 220'000 people reside, is the administrative centre of the Upper Guinea Region, located some 650 kilometres northeast of the capital Conakry and 180 kilometres from the Malian boarder. The city is an important trading and Muslim religious centre. The Manding constitute the majority of Kankan's population whereas the Fulani community is the largest minority. Besides, a small number of people who identify themselves with other ethnicities or origin from neighbouring countries, also live in the city. After eleven months of fieldwork during my PhD, I am very familiar with Kankan. Still, more empirically grounded research on how urbanity unfolds in Kankan is needed.

Sikasso is Mali's second largest city in terms of population with approximately 150'000 inhabitants. Located, 370 kilometres from the capital Bamako, the city acts as a crossroad for people, goods, and ideas due to its geographical location near the borders to Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. Therefore, Sikasso is a melting pot where different ethnic groups live. Furthermore, the region is Mali's agricultural centre. Due to the actual instable political situation in Mali, this second field site might change; however, the research will be done in a secondary city within the Mande region.

### Methods

Secondary cities are often more accessible to ethnographic research as they are typically less confusing and puzzling than metropolises. Further, the dynamic processes of urbanity and political formations are more visible and can easier be grasped in secondary cities than in large urban centres. Inhabitants of secondary cities are typically under less pressure for daily survival than in megacities because the rhythm in secondary cities differs (Koechlin and Förster forthcoming). Or in De Boeck, Cassiman, and Wolputte's words, "these towns often 'work' better than the metropole, where life is fraught and shaped by much stronger social and economic tensions and contradictions" (De Boeck, Cassiman, and Wolputte 2009, ii).

In this postdoc project, I will access everyday processes of encounters and distanciations by applying the triangular Emic Evaluation Approach (EEA), which is based on three pillars: a) mapping of social actors, b) discourse analysis, and c) social-practice analysis. This circular approach is grasping new and constantly changing social spaces and perceiving the social discourses and practices therein. The three components of

the EEA are interrelated and constitutive of each other; each approach is only fruitful with the knowledge gained through the other two (Förster et al. 2011). For the mapping as well as the analysing of discourse and social practices, I will apply a variety of methods. As each of them has its strengths and limits, the application of a methodological diversity helps crosschecking and triangulating the data and, hence, validate it (deWalt and deWalt 2011, 102). Generally, my research process is influenced by “principles and practices” of the Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2006, 9). Thus, there is no clear cut between data generation, its interpretation, and writing it up; it is rather a circular process where every stage influences the next one (Gupta 2014, 398-399). My overall aim is to generate “rich data” which will allow me to see emerging narratives and, finally, to produce thick descriptions and analysis (Charmaz 2006, 14).

Once in the field, I will map the social actors, their physical and social environment, and how these actors relate to each other. I search for social spaces where encounters and distanciations take place and where issues of belonging are bargained over. Firstly, I will use a broad sampling that represents the cities’ heterogeneity (Silverman 2006, 306). Secondly, I will select key research participants with whom I will then exchange regularly. Concretely, I will use interviews, informal conversations, and naturally occurring talks for the analysis of people’s discursive formations. I plan to record interviews and to make field notes of informal conversations, naturally occurring talk and my observations. Additionally, I will participate in the daily lives of the research participants and observe their social agency. Social discourses and practices are closely interlinked, they inform each other. However, the actual practices diverge from how people describe them (Spittler 2001, 16). This distinction hints at contradictions and gaps (Förster 2011, 43). In a secondary city, where local norms are not as diverse as in metropolises, these contradictions are especially informative. As I already did during my previous fieldwork, I will collaborate with research assistants who speak the local languages and are familiar with the local social settings.

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