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# On the Worlding of African Cities

AbdouMaliq Simone

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**Abstract:** How do African urban residents, who are conventionally assumed to operate within parochial, highly localized confines, operate at larger scales? How do they reach a “larger world”? The article looks at some of the overall effects on African cities and their residents of a global process of scalar recomposition and the reconfiguration of social cohesion that ensues. By examining renovations in a traditional Islamic institution, *zawiyyah*, an example is provided of ways in which urban Africans attempt to act effectively within larger domains.

**Résumé:** Comment les Africains des zones urbaines, qui d’habitude sont présumés fonctionner dans des limites paroissiales fortement localisées, fonctionnent-ils à plus grande échelle? Comment communiquent-ils avec le “reste du monde”? Cet article explore quelques-uns des effets généraux, sur les cités africaines et sur leurs résidents, d’un processus global de recomposition d’échelle et de la reconfiguration de la cohésion sociale qui en découle. Grâce à l’examen des rénovations effectuées dans une institution islamique traditionnelle, *zawiyyah*, nous offrons un exemple des moyens par lesquels les Africains habitant en environnement urbain tentent d’agir de manière efficace dans des domaines plus vastes.

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## Worlding from Below: New Domains of African Urbanization

### Placing African Urban Processes in a Global Dimension

At the heart of world cities theory is the elaboration of new spaces of transaction. These spaces open up conventional designations of scale and configure a new “place” for places in an economy oriented around densities of knowledge creation and the generalization of control. Notions of world cities point to new economic capacities and infrastructures which construct, assemble, and channel flows of information, goods, and influences (Agnew & Corbridge 1998; Balibar 1995; Castells 1996a; Johnson, Taylor, & Watts 1995; Leyshon & Thrift 1998). But perhaps more important, they constitute a way of identifying and speaking about an arena of operation that is not limited simply to new forms of monopolization (Taylor 2000). For such notions may also precipitate new behaviors and positions for individuals and groups residing in cities apparently most marginal from these new economic capacities.

It is clear that African cities, with the possible exception of Johannesburg, are nowhere close to being world cities. Rather, they are largely sites of intensifying and broadening impoverishment and rampant informality operating on highly insubstantial economic platforms through which it is difficult to discern any sense of long-term viability. African cities have also been subject to substantial restructuring over the past decade. In line with normative orientations of governance, these changes have emphasized decentralization of formal political authority and responsibility, if not necessarily capacity and real decision-making power.

The assumption has been that decentralization facilitates the incorporation of local populations within a systematic “stream” of urban development. As such, individuals and groups will then behave in line within a set of consensual and democratically deliberated objectives and procedures. Theoretically, this greater “coordination” of behavior helps constitute a platform for increased investment, resource mobilization, and thus, economic development and job creation. But in many respects, the concentration on decentralization and the related production of urban infrastructure circumvents the broader issue of how discrete African cities can move toward greater long-term economic viability. There is limited conception about what real economies are potentially attainable. There is a limited conception of how the developmental trajectories of discrete cities are probably dependent upon expanding the possibilities of transurban interactions among African cities. A critical issue becomes how to elaborate complementarities and niche functions within a larger nexus of regional economic growth.

Despite the power of their colonial antecedents, African cities have served as important frameworks for African societies to engage the larger political and economic world on their own terms. As Coquery-Vidrovitch

points out, African cities were places for the “integration of households into new networks of capitalist production; the invention of new webs of concepts and practices of land and land laws; new patterns of foodstuff consumption; new regulations governing social and political life” (1991:73).

### **Disrupting Spatial Coordinates: Penetrations and Inversions**

In many respects, however, the operations of global economies make it nearly impossible for many Africans to continue functioning “inside” their cities. A seemingly arbitrary circulation of the unknown has penetrated these cities. What makes people rich or poor, what accounts for loss and gain, and “working assessments” of the identities of who is doing what to whom are viewed as more uncertain. As the “insides” of African cities are more differentially linked to proliferating networks of accumulation and circulation operating at also increasingly differentiated scales, this uncertainty is “materialized.” In other words, it takes the forms of specific bodies and identities, in which parts of bodies, as well as part-objects, specific locations, and built environments, are seen to embody particular forces of well-being and success.

Thus cities are overpopulated, not simply with people, but also with the forces of magic, spiritual invocation, sorcery, willfulness, and death. What had been the purview of the so-called bush now runs rampant through the city, and there is little recourse to effective mediation or clear boundaries. As a result, urban dwellers now find themselves forced to operate with a more totalizing sense of exteriority. This stems from the proliferation of multiple figures of interlaced territories that make it difficult for many to determine exactly “where” they are and under whose jurisdiction. Localities are often reпарceled into narrow enclaves due to internecine conflicts. Some states are essentially private actors. In other instances, private indirect governments elaborate new technologies of domination and new bases of property and social stratification. In some areas, religious networks constitute the “real” public authority with sometimes no other scale but that of the world on which to operate (Mbembe 1999). As the material deconstruction of existing territorial frameworks leaves more Africans without coherent local and national arenas, a certain “worlding” has been enforced in terms of where they see themselves operating.

Much of this “worlding” is a state of being “cast out” into the world. The capacity to maintain recognizable and usable forms of collective solidarity and collaboration becomes difficult. Modifying Bourdieu’s (1990) reflections on habitus, these social activities can be viewed as crucial means through which localities, as social territories, are marked and are experienced as self-contained, almost “organic” environments. Therefore, a sense of being encompassed, drawn into and acting upon a circumscribed world of commonality, is nearly impossible as the previously relied upon practices of forging social solidarity dissipate. Urban residents appear increasingly

uncertain as to how to spatialize an assessment of their life chances—that is, where will they secure livelihood, where can they feel protected and looked after, where will they acquire the critical skills and capacities? When children across most African cities are asked about what they will do with their lives, the answer usually entails a life trajectory carried out far away from the place they consider “home.”

But the “worlding” taking place is not only something that occurs by default. It is not simply the by-product of the implosion of urban Africa. To a certain extent, this “worlding” is a process inherent in the very formation of African cities themselves. In other words, it involves the production of orientations to, and sensibilities about, the urban that seemed to posit that the salient features of urban life and its accomplishments were always also taking place somewhere else besides the particular city occupied. An uneasy mixture of external imposition and local redeployment of selective appropriations of that imposition shaped most African cities (Anderson & Rathbone 2000; Diouf 1998; Mabogunje 1990). As such, these cities exist in a universe of being rooted “everywhere and nowhere.” But at the same time, they have an extensive history of being subject to often highly idiosyncratic compromises, social and economic arrangements that make them very “localized” whatever the series of networks and external connections in which they “participate.”

This is why African cities often appear to act in an incessant state of preparedness. They keep residents in an almost permanent state of changing gears and focus, if not location. Of course, there are quarters where most of the residents have spent their entire lives growing up, raising families, and devoted to the same occupation or way of life. But even these stabilities are situated in a larger arena in which social economies must be prepared to exert themselves with large measures of fluidity. Indeed, if you take the life stories of many households across the region, people have been prepared to migrate at a moment’s notice, to change jobs, residences, and social networks with little apparent hesitation.

This sense of preparedness, the ability to be ready to switch gears, has significant implications on what residents think it is possible to do in place, in *the* place of the city (and also *in* place of the city). Households do display considerable determination and discipline to save over the course of many years to send children to school, to build a house, or to buy tickets so one or more members can migrate elsewhere. They are in a place; they demonstrate commitment to it. But at the same time, African cities operate as a platform for people to engage in processes and territories elsewhere.

The long period in which different versions of colonialism were in operation was, of course, critical to the shaping and present-day capacities of most African cities. But the importance of colonialism is not that it gave rise to cities in what was for the most part a rural continent. Rather, the crucial move was to shape urbanization so cities would act instrumentally on African bodies and social formations. They would act on them in ways that

made various endogenous forms of, and proclivities toward, urbanization possible only within the context of an enforced engagement with the European world (Cooper 1996; Diouf 1998; Guyer 1995). The ways in which this “urbanization for engagement” was accomplished and manifested varied in different settings and time periods according to the degree and kind of urbanization that proceeded colonialism. It varied as well with the different ways in which distinct African societies used the creation of new cities and/or the transformation of precolonial ones for their “own” objectives, however diffuse, coherent, varied, or contradictory they might have been (Clignet 1966; Rayfield 1974).

The present emphases on decentralization, local management, the exigencies of poverty alleviation, and regionally articulated local economic development are all in significant ways a reformulation of instruments used to evolve urban life according to the conditions that would ensure a very specific engagement with nonlocal worlds, and particularly, non-African worlds. This engagement necessitated not only the remaking of African identities and practices, but also the (hyper)visibility and crystallization of “traditional” selves and social formations so that they could be the objective and concretized targets of remaking. A key method of such visibility was the resistance registered to the remaking itself, that is, the various ways in which bodies and groups refused to cooperate or assimilate with one or more aspects of the colonial enterprise. So cities could operate as arenas for the consolidation of a wide range of local practices, initiatives, and identities, but under conditions in which this consolidation was to be inextricably linked to its dissolution and remaking (Apter 1992; Aronson 1978; Augé 1999; King 1990).

What we find in the diverse trajectories of urban development throughout the sub-Saharan region is a large sense in which urbanization was grafted onto inhospitable domains. But once grafted, urbanization had a significant effect in terms of reordering territorial relations beyond the scope of the immediate territory of which it was a part. The extent of this reordering was limited, however. In all regions, and particularly across Central Africa, large swathes of territory remained outside of functional colonial control. Even in West Africa, Senegal, Cote D’Ivoire, the Gold Coast, and Nigeria contributed almost all of the region’s recorded total economic output (Hopkins 1973). While cities primarily served to organize the evacuation of primary products, the ongoing development of this function opened up spaces for Africans to elaborate livelihoods outside of European supervised wage labor.

These opportunities derived largely from the configuration of other geographies, concretized through the movement of populations back and forth between urban and rural domains. Opportunities derived from the expanding transactions such movements were able to establish and into which they were able to draw increasing numbers of people—then going on to proficiently coordinate more complex networks of relationships among

them. Without large amounts of consistently reliable material resources upon which to draw in order to provide some deepening infrastructure for these alternative spaces of livelihood formation, relations and practices had to be renegotiated continuously. The project of making something out of the city other than what was expected by a fuller incorporation in capitalist production led to a “search” for different organizational forms and auspices under which to operate (Christopher & Tarver 1994; Salau 1979). Such practices increasingly depended on identifying loopholes and under-regulated spaces in changing colonial economies, compensations and alternatives that could potentially be appropriated by diverse actors with different agendas (Akyeampong 1997; Martin 1995; Ranger 1986; White 1990).

Fluidity thus remained both a fundamental strength and a weakness. These “alternative” economic and cultural practices were unable to remake the city in ways that could serve the objective of expanding agricultural activities for the bulk of rural residents. Nor could they expand the integration of the bulk of the city and its residents into capitalist circuits. Instead, they acted as a limiting constraint, allowing people to urbanize relationships derived from ruralized solidarity and to identify possibilities of urban sustainability in “undersupervised” rural domains. Thus urban Africa’s pursuit of “independent” agendas and aspirations took place largely in this “closed” circuit, both intersecting with and running parallel to the narrow ways in which the overall urban economy was linked to global capital.

Cities have been the places where Africans have most intensely engaged the conflicts precipitated by their own points of view, their political and economic practices, and their heterogeneous, often contradictory, representations of outside worlds. Cities were also places where Africans’ own strivings and deliberations about present and future ways of living were the most adamantly structured by the wavering demands of external powers. Regulating the city became a map for regulating the territory of colonial jurisdiction. During the colonial period, innovations derived from city living, although very much at work in the configuration of African urban spaces, also had to be put to work in rural areas outside the city, as well as in other cities both in Africa and abroad (Goerg 1998; Wright 1991). The effects brought about by this spreading of innovation were reincorporated into the city.

Developments in cities enabled the rural areas to produce and organize themselves in different ways. Increases in rural productivity allowed different kinds of consumption, and thus different kinds of social organization in the city. But people were also driven from the rural areas (Robertson 1997). Marginalized by the changes, they came to cities as places of refuge. This circuit frequently confounded clear divisions between the city and the country, or between one city and others. Yet the city’s surrounding areas could never be a totally sufficient or satisfactory “outside”—a friction-free place to target the accomplishments of the urban outside the “city walls.” Those remaining in rural areas were often suspicious of whatever

came from the city. They were often amenable to the distorted reassertion of customary authority and thus resisted this deployment of urban experience (Mamdani 1996).

Still, a certain urban connection to the rural goes beyond the exigencies of day-to-day economic survival or connections based on affection. The assertion of this connection is an acknowledgment of a cumulative African urban experience which requires the insertion of the rural in its midst, because the “outsides” of the colonial city were sometimes the only available spaces in which the particular experiential wisdom of African urban residents could be enacted (Fetter 1976; La Fontaine 1970). The rural areas sometimes could be places where the colonial gaze wasn’t as strong; where urban Africans didn’t always have to show a certain measure of compliance.

At the same time, engagement with colonizers was constant. In that constancy, negotiation and flexibility were necessary. Europeans and Africans had to “borrow” incessantly from each other if they were to be engaged with each other. This was the case even where living and working spaces were segregated. More than perhaps other cities, colonial cities depended upon a multitude of shifting, highly localized, and fluid tactics in order to keep the engagement going. Despite all the overblown claims made on this concept, a certain urban hybridity was not only possible but also necessary.

The process of urban identity making and exchange was just that—a continuous process of making and exchanging. Yes, people had their identities. Different moral regimes, governance systems, and economic practices were associated with different quarters. But still residents from all walks of life “tried out” different ways of being and doing things in the city. Regularities were sought and often institutionalized. Very little that was tried was completely discarded or given up. Operational memory was thus spatialized. In other words, African residents came to work out specific places and domains for being specific things, working out what were often contradictory needs and aspirations. There were places to “keep tradition alive” and there were places to be “modern,” places to be a “kinsman” and places to be a cosmopolitan urban “dweller” as well as more textured and subtle combinations of these primarily artificial polarities (Guyer & Belinga 1995; Pons 1969).

In some regions, the urban and rural are now inverted. The city is “turned over” to the task of reestablishing modes of thinking and acting historically associated with the rural areas. Rural areas, particularly at the frontiers of national borders, become sites of urbanization. It is here that links to the global economy are frequently the most elaborated. Dollars rule, and telecommunications and air transport operate more efficiently than in many established cities. These urbanized frontiers are sites of highly exploitative relationships and excessive expenditures. They are highly contested and often violent terrain. But they also manifest ways of domes-



ticating these economic arrangements that resonate with cultural memories of important values (Roitman 1998). These arrangements thus attain a sense of familiarity that enables them sometimes to usher in more effective mechanisms of social protection and distribution than have existed previously. The question then becomes how to relocalize these capacities back within the cities in “terms of shifting lines of partial (translocal as well as local–global) connections and patterns of de- and re-territorialisation” (De Boeck 1998:803).

Despite the profound difficulties the majority of African urban residents face in piecing together livelihood on a daily basis, significant efforts are made, to engage the city as a resource for reaching and operating at the level of “the world.” It is my contention that these efforts make up something more than attempts to shape a long-standing situation in which African labor exists as fundamentally delinked from any anchorage in the possibility of making local spaces productive. The “worlding” is more than simply a state of being “cast out” into the world as the “homeless” or the marginal. Granted, there is little autonomy African societies can currently exercise in terms of ensuring a sufficiency of resources and participation in international economic transactions. Yet African cities continue to be places of experimentation for engagement, the terms of which are not exclusively fixed or determined in advance.

### **Configuring New Urban Domains**

A new urbanized domain is also taking shape based on the entrenchment of specific circuits of migration, resource evacuation, and commodity exchange. Specific urban places, separated by marked physical and cultural distance, are being interpenetrated, in large part by the actions of African actors themselves. For example, cities as diverse as Mbuji-Mayi, Port Gentile, Addis Ababa, Bo, and Nouadibhou are being tied together through the participation of those who make them their base in an increasingly articulated system of countertrades involving mutual connections to Bombay, Dubai, Bangkok, Taipei, Kuala Lumpur, and Jeddah.

These circuits in turn “spin out” and link themselves to the more conventional migratory paths of West and Central Africans to Europe, and increasingly the US, and East Africans to North America and the UK (Constantin 1996). Despite the fact that these circuits are organized around different commodities, a common profile has taken hold. Valuable primary commodities, such as minerals in particular, are diverted from “official” national export structures into intricate networks in which large volumes of underpriced electronics, weapons, counterfeit currencies, bonds, narcotics, laundered money, and real estate circulate through various “hands” (Hibou 1999; Egg & Herera 1998; Observatoire Geopolitiques des Drogues 1999). The diversion can also include oil, agricultural products, and timber.

The elaboration of this domain is more than a matter of migrants seeking economic opportunity in the expanding service economies of the North and Southeast Asia or the purchase of cheap goods from urban markets in these regions. It is more than a dependence on remittances. Rather, an intricate framework for operating at a “world level” is being created through individual travel, the cultivation of permeable boundaries through which goods and money can pass with minimal regulation, the incorporation of formal financial and political institutions within informal mechanisms of disposing goods and accessing markets, practices of dissimulation, and a willingness to take substantial risks.

This “worlding” may be a constantly unstable and precarious practice, unable to substantially alter the positions and capacities of distinct African cities within a globalized urban network (Herbst 1996). Operations at this translocal level are limited to a small section of Africa’s urban population. Nevertheless, the attempts on the part of various associations, syndicates, and networks to articulate themselves and to act within this “worlded” domain are not insignificant in the everyday social life of many African quarters.

In many ways, this “worlding” ensues from the ways in which spaces of incapacity and marginality can be linked to reconsolidating political and economic power through a density of knowledge-based transactions represented by an elite cadre of urban centers. In one dimension of this articulation, Castells (1996b) refers to Africa’s “perverse connections” to the global economy. Globalization entails speed, unimpeded capital flows, the hyperreality of credit and fiscality, and the amplification of microdynamics and characteristics as key elements to profit making. Accordingly, globalization provides new opportunities for economic and political actors to operate outside increasingly outmoded laws and regulatory systems.

African cities are especially available to these opportunities precisely because they appear to be outside effective control, and thus anything can happen. Certainly the complicity and the intrigue are enormous. In some contexts it would almost seem that a new modernist urban vision has succeeded in taking hold. Luxury staterooms in presidential palaces and peri-urban hovels in sewage-laden lagoons often seem linked with few mediations in the elaboration of intricate schemes involving various Mafia, missionaries, militants, and merchant banks (Duffield 1998). At one and the same time, segregation among discernible classes and groups becomes more entrenched and provisional informal collaborations between the segregated classes continue to grow.

Local “corporate” bodies also come together, perhaps for one deal involving a sweeping array of characters and positions. Here entrepreneurship imitates the best in conspiratorial fictional intrigue. While the actual number of urban residents involved in these economies may be quite small, their importance grows in the popular urban imagination. These ventures are constantly talked about. Throughout neighborhoods, people speculate on how to participate in them or spawn new ones.

At the same time, this emphasis neglects the significant role that various associations are playing in terms of attempting to extend the reach of urban quarters. Religious brotherhoods and fraternities, ethnically based trading regimes, syndicates, and even community-based and multi-association operations are functioning with increasing scope (Diouf 2000; MacGaffey & Bazenguissa 2000). Urban quarters not only serve as platforms for popular initiatives—waste management, microenterprise development, shelter provision, and so on—but readapt local modalities of cohesion and sociality to more regional and global frameworks.<sup>1</sup> Some localities, such as Nima (Accra), Obalende (Lagos), Texas-Adjame (Abidjan), and Grand Yoff (Dakar) reflect a strong relationship between the elaboration of local associations and the generation of new economic activities and resources. Here associations become important in configuring new divisions of labor. They help coordinate the cross-border small and medium-scale trade of individual entrepreneurs and work ways of pooling and reinvesting the proceeds of this trade to access larger quantities of tradeable goods, diversify collective holdings, and reach new markets.

In the North, the post-Fordist complexion of urban economic life leaves large areas of underregulated and underutilized spaces intact. There are warehouses, suburbs, and markets whose status may reflect their lack of functionality to the immediate local economic setting (Augé 1999). But in many instances they are being seized upon by African actors as sites for workshops and storerooms for artisan production to niche markets or as nodes in the transshipment of illegal commodities (Kesteloot 1995; Sassen 1999).

### Who and What Belongs Where

The capacity to sustain, extend, and participate in this “worlded” domain, however, is increasingly dependent on the expansion of highly localized and territorially rooted extraction activities. Many states are “giving up” on economic modernization and focus almost exclusively on the extraction of resources. Many African countries are narrowing attention to those aspects of primary production which, regardless of volatile price fluctuations, seem to assure long term demand. This usually means a concentration on gold, diamonds, and oil. Large-scale gold reserves have recently been identified in Tanzania, Niger, Guinea, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Mali, and (on and off) Senegal. While Uganda, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe have little gold and diamonds of their own, they are heavily engaged in the mineral business via their participation in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Sudan, Chad, Mozambique, Equatorial Guinea, and Cameroon are making efforts to expand oil production widely.<sup>2</sup>

Such a reintensification of seemingly “colonial-oriented” economies raises issues about belonging—who are the original inhabitants of specific regions and to whom does the site of oil, gold, timber, diamond, and emer-

ald extraction belong? Diverse groups who have lived together for decades, if not longer, are treating each other as strangers. There are pressures on people to acquire land and assets, not in the areas where they may have lived all of their lives, but in their area of family origin. Disputes are breaking out across the continent as to who is a citizen and who has the right to vote where (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 1998; Geschiere 1999).

But can these conflicts be reduced simply to fights over the disposition of particular places for their own sake? Are they only about what can be drawn into and developed within a specific place on the basis of controlling key natural resources? Rather, fights about belonging and the rights incumbent on belonging for access to resources may be more about what the control of these resources means to enhancing the possibilities for actors to operate on the level of the larger world (Fisiy 1999; Reno 1998; Richards 1996). The attempt may not be to bring territory under the singular control of a particular force, but to create as many possibilities of linking that territory to a plurality of allegiances and opportunities. This plurality would then enable local actors to feel that their operations in localized spaces are also conduits to or extensions of a much larger world (Lock 1999).

The fight is not so much over the terms of territorial encompassment or closure, but rather over maintaining a sense of “open-endedness.” Narrow, seemingly parochial factions and groupings predominate in these conflicts. But the specific configuration of “sides” is not so much directed toward defending specific turf. Rather, social units are honed to better manage shifting allegiances and participation in multiple exterior networks. Disruption and local conflict are a way of coming to the “stage”—of making a particular group visible and known (Lemarchand 1997).

If one spends significant amounts of time in African cities, it is hard not to notice the incessant sense of preparedness and readiness to switch gears. Households do display considerable determination and discipline to save over the course of many years to send children to university, to build a house, or to buy tickets so one or more members can migrate elsewhere. They are in a place; they demonstrate commitment to it. But at the same time, African cities operate as a platform for people to engage in processes and territories elsewhere.

The location of this “elsewhere” has commonly been other cities, both within and outside the continent. Increasingly, it also includes various interiors—rural areas, borders, and frontiers. The interiors are also symbolic and spiritual. They concern geographies that are off the “map”—demonstrated in popular descriptions of subterranean cities, spirit worlds, lucrative but remote frontiers. Cities not only straddle internal and external divides, national and regional boundaries, but also a wide range of terrain and geographies, both real and imaginary.

This is an enormous task given the ease with which multinational capital can directly penetrate the diamond regions, the timber forests, and oil

shelves. It is an enormous task given the increasing chasm between life in most of the rural and peri-urban areas and in the rest of the world. Africa contains rural and urban areas that slip further away from the control of normative institutions and discourses, even though, at least theoretically, access to any point in any given territory is now more precise and possible. Accordingly, there is a constant stream of people moving in and out of, as well as among, the various quarters within the city. There are people who can no longer operate or position themselves in places where disorder is increasing. There are others who seek the relative invisibility of disordered places in order to pursue new opportunities. There are many moving back and forth among them.

African cities were largely constructed as points of contact—as places to organize the evacuation of resources and to construct mechanisms through which broader territories could be administered. While they continue to play this role in the postcolonial period, critical points of convergence and articulation with the global economy do, however, take place outside these functions. This means that the manner in which individuals act or behave at the interfaces or junctions with global economies—i.e., how they access and manipulate opportunities to acquire widely divergent volumes of extracted resources—occurs largely outside the conventions and moral economies of either village or urban-based contexts. But it also means that those individuals, working as renegade miners, diamond purchasers, smugglers, financiers, go-betweens, and agents of multinational corporations, are “resocialized” by the multiple, often ephemeral, institutions that attempt to give some shape to these engagements and economic activities.

What I want to do in the rest of this paper is to talk about one example of how processes of informalization “free up” a wide range of actors to participate in an emerging, albeit limited, configuration of “world level” transactions that emerge from the initiatives of Africans themselves. These initiatives are, of course, enjoined to and shaped by the circuits of economic transaction elaborated by more powerful economic institutions and monopolies. This “freeing up” can significantly loosen the moral coordinates through which urban quarters might maintain a semblance of coherence and social cohesion. The dissolution of cohesion in turn can precipitate and extend urban-based conflicts about who belongs where to rural areas which often now constitute the most direct links to the global economy through extraction activities. Thus the greater reach and rescaling of local initiative possible through participation in gradually emerging translocal urban domains must be balanced by efforts to reinvent at least provisional modalities of social cohesion if the fight over resources isn’t to keep actors within highly parochial and localized spaces of operation.

I will provide an example of how this process of juggling cohesion and opportunity takes place. For the ways social cohesion and opportunity are balanced are critical aspects of how Africans from different walks of life

might participate in a kind of “worlding” from below (Kayetekin Ruccio 1998).

## “Zawiyyah City” and Reaching the Larger World

### The Encouragement of Movement

In the following, I present a brief sketch of a specific practice through which social cohesion and opportunity are balanced in an overall attempt on the part of specific African urban residents, with specific affiliations, to operate within a larger, more “worlded,” space of economic transactions. The sketch is about African groups in Jeddah and is derived from information based on over two decades of work with various African-based Islamic welfare organizations in which I have been attempting to help urban quarters with sizable Muslim populations think through specific local development strategies. The sketch is a composite of both my own observations and information gathered from discussions with various actors involved in the processes described.

Within many Sufi traditions, the *zawiyyah* plays an important role as both a service to members of a specific “brotherhood” and as an embodiment and facilitator of the translocal character of this affiliation. The *zawiyyah* is part lodge where accommodation for traveling “brothers” is provided, part site where *zikhr* (worship) can be performed according to the practices of a particular brotherhood, and part referral agency, where information about various opportunities and resources can be accessed.

When a man joins a particular Sufi order (*tariqa*), he is obligated to take a *wird*, an oath of loyalty. The loyalty is directed not only to the order as an abstract framework of religious practice, but also to the leadership, the *shaykh*, and the hereditary right and passing on of this leadership. The order is thus anchored in an unyielding focal point of mediation between the earthly and the divine. The hierarchies involved are complex and textured, not simply an arrangement with the *shaykh* at the pinnacle and the rest of his followers in a position of devotion and access. But a strong sense of the equality of all before the *shaykh* does exist, and it enforces a practice by which the *talibe* (the followers) must be responsible for the welfare of each other. The *zawiyya* is the key institution through which this responsibility is expressed. For in travel, individuals are operating outside of the confines of their local anchorage and support systems. Temporarily freed from these domains, the *zawiyya* becomes the most salient place through which the sense of connection among members of the *tariqa* can be expressed and also mobilized for various forms of collective action.

In many cities throughout West Africa, the *zawiyya* was an important site through which migrants could be incorporated into the city. They

might be connected to preexisting economic activities as apprentices or laborers. They might be provided with some small sums of capital with which to launch small enterprises and in this way expand the network and diversity of economic activities engaged in by the order. At other times, they were provided with goods to sell back to their home regions as a means of strengthening both trade and religious links. Given the specific political circumstances, the zawiyyah could also be used as a site for the dissemination of political analysis and organization (Hiskett 1984).

These established places of hospitality and support implicitly encouraged travel. Increasingly, zawiyyah became centers through which travel was tracked. The monitoring was not so much geared toward keeping tabs on the activities of followers as it was intended to cultivate a means by which their movements could be used as a resource. After all, talibe staying at a particular lodge would talk about what they were doing and what they had seen. To the extent that their successes and opportunities would bring glory to the shaykh, and thus to themselves in the “next life,” there was a strong impetus to engage fellow members of the tariqa in various projects and opportunities. The zawiyyah then became a circumscribed domain of publicity, a place where devotees could get a sense of the wide range of locations and activities in which the tariqa was involved. They could be stimulated to take on new activities and conceive and assess individual possibilities in the larger context of what the order was doing (Launay & Soares 1999).

Thus in Treichville, where I visited a Tidiane zawiyyah in 1993, a large world map was placed on a wall in one of the common rooms. On the map, hundreds of cities were circled with magic markers and “tagged” with numbers. On a table below the map were heavily worn and numbered cardboard files corresponding to the numbers on the map. In these files were various lists of names of followers living in these cities with brief profiles of each one. Some of the profiles had been written by talibe who had passed through this particular zawiyyah over the years. Others were stories and notes compiled by guests about other followers whom they had met or learned about in the course of their travels. Still others were, in essence, photocopies of profiles that were compiled in zawiyyah in other locations. “Profile” is a very rough designation for these documents; they were not prepared, compiled, or used in any systematic way, especially because many talibe are functionally illiterate.

What is significant about these notations is not so much their systematicity or use. Rather, they point to a practice of articulating discrete individual stories and activities into a larger network of interconnected pursuits and opportunities. What exists within the scope of these written records may only serve as a reminder to talibe of the possibilities of reciprocity and collaborative action. In some circumstances, these graphically apparent indications of networked activity may actually mask the nature of the “real” exchanges and collaborations taking place. They may incite talibe to seek

out interactions with fellow devotees in other places under the auspices of religious comradeship and a purported knowledge about what they might be doing, but where such interactions might lead and who they might involve are matters to be negotiated. At one level, the *turuq* seek to establish means through which collaborations and mutual support can be exercised among talibe who are strangers to each other—that is, to assert the viability of such cooperation. At the same time, they seek to fine-tune such collaborations in ways such that certain economic activities, especially those that are illegal in specific contexts, can be pursued by talibe who find a means to trust each other and use their different skills and histories.

### **Zawiyah and the Advent of Islamic “Modernism”**

Until the post–World War II period of African urban history, the *zawiyah* remained an institution for all talibe despite their economic capacities and social status. But in the acceleration of urban modernization in the postwar period, and then in the postindependence period, the *zawiyah* in many cities became primarily an institution for small traders and the poorer members of the *tariqa*. Wealthier followers developed new associations and networks. They joined or formed political parties, welfare organizations, business clubs, and built special mosques and schools, as well as Islamic institutes and centers. These institutions increasingly served as a base for consolidating the local and national power of specific *tariqa*, but also for attracting funds from and learning about opportunities in the larger Islamic world, particularly the Gulf States.

The traditional *zawiyah*, then, has been increasingly incorporated into the orbit of these new organizations and objectives. How this incorporation takes place, and the subsequent role of the *zawiyah* in a new network of institutions and entrepreneurial activities, of course varies in specific urban and national contexts. There are also differences in the extent to which various *turuq* cooperate or compete with each other, according to their relative strength in particular regions. In northern Nigeria, Tidiiane, Qaddriyyah, Bruhaniyyah, and Sanusiyya, *turuq* have strong pockets of adherents in a context of enormous diversity of Islamic expression, institutions, and entrepreneurship. As such, cooperation often remains minimal. In Abidjan, where Muslims have made a concerted effort in recent years to become a more prominent sociopolitical force, different *turuq* have joined hands in many activities.

Despite the proliferation of new institutions, schools, mosques, enterprises, and political and cultural associations based on varying emphases on class, ethnic, and national distinctions, the relationships among Sufi-oriented institutions retain a large measure of the spirit of the *zawiyah*. In other words, the ethos of how the *zawiyah* has operated throughout hundreds of years is infused into the operational practices of Sufi *turuq* as a whole. These are *turuq* still dominated by the leadership position of the



shaykh and the responsibilities of the talibe to take care of each other.

The rest of the Islamic world has maintained a largely ambivalent attitude toward the predominance of Sufism in West African religious practice. The orthodox Sunni *Wahabi* traditions which prevail in the Gulf are largely critical of this practice, viewing it as an essential deviation from the *Sunnah*, the way of the Prophet Muhammed and the normative frameworks of *Makhtab*, the guidelines informing religious activities. But in practice, a wide range of mutual engagements has ensued. With its large Muslim population and relatively fluid political and economic environments, West Africa is an important place of operation for the major Islamic powers. In the past two decades, particularly, reform movements emphasizing a more politicized role of Islam in national and international affairs have been active through various formations of the *Jebha Islamiyyah*, the Muslim Brotherhood. Various *shia* groupings based in Lebanon and Iran have used elements of the large Lebanese community in West African cities as nodal points in their political and economic operations. Through its well-endowed welfare association, *Dawa Islamiyyah*, the Libyans have also been extremely active in building mosques and schools throughout the region. They have funded a variety of political groups and have trained local leaders.

Urban West African communities have been the targets of sizable amounts of external funding, in part through an ongoing contestation among the major Islamic powers for predominance. While I was living in a Muslim household in Nima, a primarily Muslim quarter of central Accra, three of the sons were receiving money from different countries—Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Libya—to work as organizers in the community. Conflicts among local groupings with different external affiliations often became quite tense and competitive. Serious neighborhood disruptions, however, could still be tempered over long dinner conversations among the brothers at home. Loyalties shifted according to need. The kinds of ideological and political distinctions that external “allies” sought to enforce were never deeply rooted in any community in which I lived. Additionally, substantial amounts of external assistance were capable of diversion. In another example from Accra, the Muslim Judicial Council bought and sold large stores of rice in 1990 with funds intended to develop new Islamic secondary schools in the country. I know this because I was called on to assist the council in framing a strategic development plan for these schools.

Agencies such as the African Muslim Agency, largely funded by Kuwait, were established to disseminate religious materials and support religious education in each African country. While much of the effort of this agency is indeed focused on such pedagogical activities, it has developed substantial business interests in many countries. Even some of the scholarships it offers for advanced religious and secular studies are “sold” on the open market. Many Christian students pretend to be Muslims in order to be eligible for these. On the other hand, these “converts” are frequently sought

out by the various Muslim agencies themselves. For example, the African Islamic Institute in Khartoum is a large, well-endowed center of secondary and postsecondary education. It is well known that any student who does well here is likely to have opportunities for advanced professional training in the Gulf States. Many of the students from Nigeria and Ghana, particularly, are “converts” who are subsidized by Gulf State entrepreneurs in exchange for their participation in a wide variety of illicit business ventures. The belief is that these “converts” are freed from particular family and community obligations and are more amenable to taking risks. But as converted Muslims, they are also in many ways not viewed as “real” Muslims, a view that prevails despite Islamic injunction which says that Muslims, whether they are born to Muslim families or not, can only be Muslims through taking the *shahada*, the profession of belief.

The African Islamic Institute is only one of a number of interrelated Islamic institutions and private corporations in the Gulf States. This network operates with significant scale and reach and includes institutions such as the Islamic Development Bank, the Saudi and Libyan versions of Dawa Islamiyyah, the Fahd Foundation, a venture capital operation, as well as a network of banks, construction firms, clearing houses, and import–export firms. The underregulated banking, customs, and market structures of most West African countries play an important role in the recirculation of money and commodities used by the Muslim Brothers, in particular, to launch repeated forays into financial markets with more capacity in Asia, Europe, North America, and Latin America.

The important point is not the existence of these Gulf-based economic operations, but the ways in which various *turuq* have sought to engage them in order to advance their own interests. Through a well-elaborated system of seminars, meetings, religious convocations, and, of course, the annual pilgrimage to Makkah for *haj*, West African Muslims have long been availed opportunities to travel to and throughout the Islamic world, particularly the Gulf States. As in the past, preparations for the *haj* can take many years. The pilgrimage involves a sizable investment of personal resources. Local savings mechanisms are usually relied upon in order to generate the resources needed to fulfill this obligation. The Saudi government allots a specific number of “places” and requires specific plans for accommodation and travel on the part of national “delegations.” This means that national organizing committees are formed. Payments are made to these committees for handling all the logistics of the pilgrimage, as well as negotiating who goes and under what circumstances.

Struggles over who controls these committees can be intense, for control means that large amounts of money are available to committees, usually for some time before the actual pilgrimage is made. There are frequently controversies over how these funds are used and invested prior to their deployment to cover the costs for national delegations. In Benin, for example, there have been repeated controversies over the extent to which

haj funds have been used to cover a variety of precarious pyramid schemes. In other circumstances, the Tidiane *turuq*, by organizing separate deals with the Saudi government, has been able to use haj funds to support various takeover activities of European properties and companies by Saudi-based firms. These investments are made in return for a specific portion of the profits and access to employment opportunities and markets for the commercial interests of major Tidiane businessmen.

In recent years, some *turuq* have become heavily involved in the transshipment of narcotics, counterfeit currencies, credit cards, and other financial instruments. They have also organized bartered exchange on a large scale—where gold supplies, for example, are bartered for weapons, machinery, and vehicles. These economic concentrations require dispersed networks capable of plying distinct national regulatory environments—with differences in banking rules, customs procedures, and laws governing corporate formations and trade. The wide-ranging networks of *zawiyyah*, mosques, and Islamic centers scattered around the world can be appropriated as potential nodes in this specialization in “unconventional” trade and economic activity.

Every year during the haj, there is a meeting of what is popularly known as the “twelve tribes.” These twelve “tribes” roughly correspond to (1) the major West and East African *turuq*; (2) syndicates based on personal loyalty to a major religious/business leader; (3) leading commercial families associated as patron or funder of a specific network of Islamic welfare and education institutions; and (4) various other actors tied to particularly large youth councils, haj committees, and even political parties. In saying that these “tribes” roughly correspond, I have several dimensions in mind. First, the use of the notion of “tribes” points to the arbitrary composition of these interest groupings. For example, Tidiane interests are not consolidated within the boundaries of a single grouping. The Tidiane *tariqa* is in actuality made up of many diverse figures, tendencies, and institutions. While acknowledging nominal loyalty to an overarching history and *shaykh*, the *tariqa* is much too large and dispersed to fall under a single administrative rubric. There are also many different economic interests and activities within discrete Tidiane networks. In part, this heterogeneity has to do with the very different situations and histories of various Tidiane orders in West Africa. But it also relates to deep divisions about the political, economic, and cultural orientations of Tidiane orders, not only across countries, but within them as well.

The notion of rough correspondence also reflects ebbs and flows of who talks to whom and who is willing to deal with whom, as well as the changing fortunes of particular businessman and syndicates. For example, the Malian businessman and marabout Bameni Cissoko, who had amassed a fortune through highly suspect means, has lost most of it through a variety of legal troubles and visible efforts to become a major political actor within the West African region. The Patel family in Abidjan, once an impor-

tant patron of politically oriented Islamic reform, has relocated much of its commercial activities out of the continent. Shaykh Mohammed Al-Amoudi is head of a Swedish consortium of thirty engineering and construction companies (Midroc Scandanavia), head of the ABV Rock Group, chief investor in the primary African ITC company World Space, the owner of Capitol Bank and the National Commerce Bank, and the owner of a sizeable amount of Ethiopia's economic assets. Al-Amoudi once was a prominent figure in these African networks but no longer plays an active role since moving back to Ethiopia several years ago to become the country's, and perhaps the continent's, major business investor.

In fact, it is never certain whether the designation "twelve tribes" represents twelve discrete groupings at all. On the one hand, as I indicated before, *turuq* are religious brotherhoods that vary in terms of their cohesiveness and spread. Some remain almost exclusively mystical orders devoted entirely to religious revelation. Others are widely dispersed. They may maintain an overarching sense of a coherent religious identity, but how that identity is expressed and organized in specific national, political, and economic contexts can differ widely. On the other hand, the substantial investment made by normative Sunni Islam in Africa through various national and international agencies has had a significant effect in solidifying spaces of Islamic practice and organization outside of the *turuq*. This support has cultivated sizable networks of professionals, students, and entrepreneurs operating throughout the Islamic world. Different *turuq* now often seek affiliation and support from these networks as a means of gaining new opportunities, under the guise of proffering reform movements within the *turuq* themselves.

Various businessmen and entrepreneurs who operate as local agents of various banks and corporations based in North Africa, the Gulf States, and Malaysia, also intersect. Additional prominent players include large import enterprises, particularly those in Dubai and Bahrain, which have become important places for the acquisition of commodities and the "cleansing" of money through commodity purchase. Often these businessmen and agents have little direct interest in the religious orientations of the *turuq* themselves but participate in them because they provide an advantageous framework for their economic activities. The leadership of the *turuq*, in turn, use their business expertise as a means of expanding their own economic capacity. But these configurations are by no means stable. On the other hand, there has been concern during the past twenty years about ensuring a stable access to the Gulf States.

### **Preserving Africa Jeddah**

The "twelve tribes" began as a way to deal with increasing concerns on the part of Saudi authorities that Jeddah was being overwhelmed by illicit African business activities. Saudis felt that the increasing African presence

in several city quarters, such as Mahallet al-Yemen and Mahallet al-Shan, was changing the character of the city. To a large extent, the Saudis were looking for scapegoats to blame for the negative results of urban growth in the country's primary urban center. On the other hand, a variety of smuggling and illicit economic activities—from the scams surrounding the importation of so-called red mercury (with which Saudi *rials* were supposedly counterfeited), increased narcotics trafficking, and the use of the port of Jeddah to divert and repackage a wide range of commodities—were of purportedly increasing concern to the royal family. While Saudi commercial interests had long taken advantage of many of these activities, they had grown to a scale that was becoming increasingly visible. Given the exceedingly tight way in which Saudi society is organized, an unusual opportunity was provided to African interests in Jeddah to exert greater control in policing themselves.

What is particularly significant about this process is that the tradition of the *zawiyyah* was reappropriated as a primary reference point for actualizing such control. Competition among groups using Jeddah as some kind of commercial base, place of trade and exchange, or node in the transshipment of commodities could have been amplified. Instead, different interests, again roughly corresponding to the lines of demarcation mentioned earlier, began discussing mechanisms for keeping Saudi urban space available to their operations. In the course of these discussions—at first held through a variety of intermediaries—the interlocking relationships between *turuq*, nationally based commercial interests, transnational commercial operations of the different *turuq*, and common affiliations with discrete banking structures, religious propagation, and welfare institutions became increasingly clear. Like the function of the *zawiyyah* as a place for hospitality, mutual support, and accountability, the “twelve tribes” developed increasingly into a loose-knit council. This council was ready to accommodate “travelers” from different regions, Sufi orders, and institutional affiliations in order to keep track of the activities of diverse Africans in Jeddah. It attempted to use an accounting of these activities as a means of maximizing the resourcefulness and opportunities available to different yet loosely configured interests and actors making up the “twelve tribes.”

During the single opportunity I had in 1995 to witness these discussions, the primary focus was the situation in Jeddah. But discussion of Jeddah also led to a lengthy and often convoluted overview of the various political, economic, cultural, and religious dynamics at work in shaping the commercial interests and activities of these key religious and commercial leaders. There was little discussion of the details of specific businesses and commercial ventures, except as they related to specific problems that had to be solved in the behaviors of particular operations in Jeddah itself. There was no effort to prohibit specific activities, except if they posed an immediate and concrete risk to any member of the major interest groups or to their operations within a specific city or region. Instead, there was a

complete accounting of what it was possible to do within a specific ministry, company, city, or country. The focus was on assessing what was possible and what was not possible. So if, for example, money laundering through Islamic commercial banks in Egypt was deemed not possible, it was assumed by all that from that point on, no one would attempt to do so. Through this discussion of possibilities, specific activities were both inferred and disciplined.

Additionally, the different interest groups discussed areas of need: for cheaper transportation, government connections, labor, financing for deals, real estate investment, and even the need for various new infrastructures in their respective countries. Whether different interest groups could successfully keep open a space of operation in Jeddah was predicated on a practice of open-ended information exchange and identifying opportunities for collaboration among different African actors and interests. When such an exchange worked, it was used as evidence that a much broader level of collaboration might be possible.

But the primary objective—to ensure collaboration and to sustain the mixture of African strangers, travelers, and residents in Jeddah—never went beyond Jeddah. In other words, there was no obligation to try to transfer this *zawiyah*-like practice of regulating African behavior in Jeddah to a larger scale. When the different interest groups operated with some consensus that collaboration was working well in Jeddah, however, this consensus provided a large measure of confidence for them to “try out” collaboration of other kinds.

Rumor has it that the twelve tribes have been crystallized into a major council of African “Mafia” dividing up territories and sectors for increasingly expanding illegal trades. While such may well be the case, I have no way of verifying the truth of the rumors. But neither am I interested in the ways unconventional trade may be taking place. Rather, what I want to amplify from this sketch is the way in which Islam provides a vehicle for a mutual accommodation, however reluctant, awkward, and contested it might be, on the part of actors from substantially different cultural and political contexts. This mutual accommodation—of different actors and institutions paying attention to, adapting themselves, and often manipulating and using each other—provides a platform through which the specific commercial and political interests emanating from distinct African cities can be resourced and extended. This extension of scope and capacity beyond the confines of the particular African city faces competition and challenges when operating in another city, in this case Jeddah. Because of its combined religious and commercial significance, Jeddah comes to constitute an important site of African operations. A process unfolds in which there is an attempt to stabilize the interaction of the diverse characters and purveyors of those interests. The process entails Africans reaching deep into their traditions to take essential elements of a once important Sufi institution, the *zawiyah*, to inform how such regulation might take place.

Throughout all of these deliberations, Islam remains a consistent reference point. What Islam may mean, however, to various African actors and institutions is, of course, not consistent in itself. Nevertheless, Islam remains an important platform on which many Africans of various capacities and walks of life attempt to access and operate at the level of a larger world.

In the example of Jeddah, we see how an historical modality of assemblage, deeply rooted in many West and East African societies, is given a new lease on life through its application outside of the continent. Here a tool that has long passed in urban Africa is treated as embodying some important principles for extending urban Africa outside the continent. While a vast world of unofficial economies is one of the few real opportunities for substantial wealth creation in the continent, these activities increasingly rely on cut-throat competition and have generated increased levels of insecurity and conflict. Here, many of the traditional tools and social institutions of reconciliation and cooperation simply don't work. But in efforts to secure an external base whereby actual or potential competitors at home can collaborate and reduce their vulnerabilities abroad, aspects of these same social institutions can potentially work to great effect. Such effectiveness instills greater measures of confidence that can then be reapplied to difficult dilemmas faced at home.

## **Conclusion**

This article has attempted to sketch some dimensions through which African urban residents are attempting to elaborate a transurban, "worlded" domain of operations. It has looked at several ways in which they try to balance the need to maintain some functional sense of local "rootedness" while at the same time gaining access to opportunities that are more transnational, even global, in scope. Given just how increasingly precarious life in urban Africa has become, residents who share a quarter must often find ways of not locking themselves into fixed commitments with each other. They must pursue their own livelihoods and aspirations, but at the same time, they must engage each other in ways that maintain some semblance of local stability, interaction, and cohesiveness. A series of practices and institutions must be elaborated in order to balance these divergent, yet interconnected, needs. As such, they constitute pathways to operations on larger scales.

There is no uniform marginalization of African cities from global processes which accounts for the production of all the processes of informalization under way or the ways in which belonging and collaborative action are being reshaped. As in cities everywhere, different dimensions, institutions, and spaces within African cities are increasingly connected to aspects of cities around the world. This connection at a globalized urban

scale is consolidated through a broad range of informational flows, financial transactions, and interinstitutional affiliations that are negotiated within transnational private arenas. This consolidation, emerging from highly informalized processes, is increasingly subject to new notions of legality, private standards, and norms which operate with substantial authority (Sassen 1999).

At the same time, Africans are not passive bystanders to these processes. Specific and long-standing traditions of social regulation and collective effort are being reworked as elements in elaboration of spaces of economic transaction, knowledge production, and cultural influence that are translocal and transnational. They are translocal and transnational in terms that, although subsumed to the constellations of power which define the prevailing dynamics of what is “global,” reflect substantial African control.

The notion of well-bounded communities of affection and cooperation, where local citizens all participate collectively in processes of governance capable of ensuring democracy and better livelihoods, may still resonate with the aspirations of the “grassroots.” The conventional idea remains that African cities are largely made up of such well-bounded communities and that strengthening them is the key to development.

But these communities also point to ways of living and producing that become tenuous and ineffective within a globalized urban world. Therefore, the enclosure and sustenance of coherent local spaces increasingly depends on the capacity to secure effective individual and corporate engagements with the wide range of networks and flows that make up translocal domains. Local communities—either of affection or administration—cannot serve as places of self-containment or resistance without finding avenues to cross and interact with various scales and other spaces. But this is not just a matter of following new international norms, or of copying what other communities are doing. In adherence to a normative series of “best practices,” localities “announce” their irrelevance. It is important for communities to signal that they can be trustworthy partners or that they are safe bets for investment. But to a large degree, communities can usually only come to this larger stage by using terms and practices that emerge from their own aspirations and logic (Ranciere 1998).

There are actors and domains within almost all African cities which increasingly operate with substantial capacity, capitalization, and international scope. They do so in the contexts of a “real power” constituted by imbricating multiple spaces of legality and illegality, formality and informality constantly pieced together and pulled apart. They also do so in the contexts of emerging “legal” or “normative” transnational arenas of economic transaction and control. The ability of African institutions to participate in these arenas seems, in part, to be a by-product of the very operations of informalization at larger scales.

How this corresponds to the now frequently brutal deconstruction of polity and community, such as is taking place in the Democratic Republic



of Congo, Angola, and the Sudan, remains largely unknown. But the emergence of new financial instruments and trade regimes perhaps points the way to even more possibilities where a substantial history of “worlding” from below can help shape new modalities of economic capacity. This capacity is sometimes set aside, sometimes complicit with, and sometimes set against the trajectories of African exclusion. These operations at larger scales, in turn, point the way to sectors and activities that might constitute the basis for new “formal” economies.

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**Notes**

1. This is the conclusion of a broad range of initial field study reports under the auspices of the MacArthur Foundation/Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa Programme on Africa's Real Economies.
2. See particularly *Africa Research Bulletin: Economic, Financial and Technical Series*, vol. 35, 1998.