

# 1 Introduction

Simon Bekker and Göran Therborn

Capital cities have always played a central role in nation building and state building. These processes are both a symbolic movement and a quest to establish and maintain power. The nation state projects its power through the urban landscape and spatial layout of the capital city. This power is manifested in the capital's architecture, in its public monuments and the names of its streets and public spaces. These urban symbols of power, of state authority, however, are fluid and subject to change. Statues, monuments and public spaces, designed to impress the populace with the authority of power and the law, may be replaced as powerful individuals, political identities and ideologies give way to a new order and their associated legitimacy shifts. There is no fixed symbolism in the landscape and built environment of a capital city: it changes according to the era of control and authority – of power. In the studies of the African capitals in this book, the urban symbolism changes from European colonial rule to independence and new-found nationalism; from autocratic or militaristic ideologies to democracy; from communist-inspired state policy to capitalism. The capital city is a barometer of new ideological approaches, and the study of the city's urban 'geology' a key to understanding its political and historical development.

This book is a study of how power is manifested in the urban forms of several sub-Saharan capital cities. It also examines how the urban populace is at times powerless in the face of these manifestations and how counter-power is often generated in the urban spaces and communities of these capitals. The book uses the examples of a number of African capital cities to examine their different colonial backgrounds, processes of nation building, different kinds of regimes after independence, waves of popular protest, explosive population growth and in most cases stunted economic development. By focusing on the urban forms, symbolic as well as material, of multi-layered power, the book takes a new approach in the study of African cities and politics. The case studies of a selection of sub-Saharan capitals, which span the continent geographically, all have a broadly similar structure. The concluding chapter pulls together the threads of this urban geological study with a comparative analysis of these capital cities in Africa south of the Sahara, and provides contextual reference to other cities not included in the case studies.

In what ways is power evidenced in the capital cities of sub-Saharan Africa? As the seat of the national government, the capital hosts national institutions such as legislative and executive buildings, palaces of justice and others – material edifices which set these cities apart, literally, but also symbolically, from the other cities of the country. However, as the centres of formal political power and administrative authority, they also often become the main conduit to economic wealth and privilege in the country as a whole. These cities accordingly wield power, and are perceived

to wield power, over the citizenry. Hence, the capital often becomes the crucible for opposition political forces mobilising against the very power and authority vested in the capital and manifested in its symbolism. The capital also tends to attract many of the country's intellectuals and activists, and thereby simultaneously may become the centre of counter-power and site of high-stake struggles between government and opposition.

## **Postcolonial capital cities in sub-Saharan Africa**

Towards the end of the 19th century, a set of common architectural and iconographic features emerged in European national capitals. Four elements became prominent, each with its specific function:

- A set of buildings for central national state institutions, conveying the majesty of the nation state.
- The layout of main streets for upmarket commerce and parading.
- The establishment of national institutions of high culture, symbolising national identity through shared national heritage.
- The politicisation and monumentalisation of urban space (Therborn 2002).

These features strongly influenced the emergence of capital cities in sub-Saharan Africa, not least because most were established under European colonial rule. Such landscapes of power provide a useful way to analyse nation building and state building in the countries where these cities developed.

The colonial order created recognisable urban systems and hierarchical civic environments. Colonialism produced segregated cities, particularly the capitals, where the colonial elite lived in formal, serviced neighbourhoods surrounded by informal, unserviced 'townships'. Critically, it also created borders, countries and cities that became self-governed nation states and capital cities after gaining independence. Accordingly, it is to be expected that there are certain commonalities among these capital cities both during the colonial period and after independence. Further research needs to address the influence of colonial legacies on the development of capital cities after independence.

At the same time, there were also significant differences among the colonial states, leading to significant postcolonial variations in these capital cities, which the case studies in this book illustrate. Municipal government, as well as legal, administrative and planning systems differ today in sub-Saharan Africa partly as a result of British, French, Portuguese, Belgian, Spanish and German colonial state idiosyncrasies. In addition, in terms of city forms, these sub-Saharan capitals are visibly diverse, despite their shared colonial ancestry. There are cities defined spatially by their function as trading ports (Dakar, Lomé); market towns, such as Brazzaville; and regional transport hubs (Nairobi). A number moreover (e.g. Addis Ababa and Lomé) were significant pre-colonial urban places before European colonisation and retain traces of this pre-colonial history today.

The primary, but not sole, historical focus of this book is the period since the

achievement of political independence from European colonialism, that is, a period of some 50 years or less (2010 marked the 50th year of independence for numerous countries in Africa). Hence, much of the urban landscape and built environment that is discussed is of recent construction, or at least of recently changed symbolic importance. This relatively brief time frame also means that the traces left behind in these towns by the European colonial powers have remained significant.

Each capital city studied in this volume has an introduction that provides a short historical context both of the development of the city itself and of the nation state. This way the legacy of each city's European colonial order is woven into its postcolonial history. Each case study concentrates on the urban geology of the capital – on the use of monuments to commemorate independence (and other later important national events), on street and city nomenclature where names are changed to extinguish the symbolic importance of the past and herald a new ideological period, and on other relevant architectural features of the city. The case studies discuss where and when the cities became arenas of contestation of national power by identifying the locations where public marches, rallies and other forms of mobilisation and protest have taken place. Each city has its own individual national trajectory after independence, the South African case being the most recent, and each chapter examines crucial city-making epochs, as opposed to providing a linear chronological narrative. The power vested in these African capitals is analysed through the political dramas that have taken place over the past 50 years in Africa and through their city histories.

These African capitals also share a critical demographic feature. In contrast to Europe, where the era of rapid urbanisation is past, sub-Saharan Africa is currently experiencing a process of urbanisation that is extraordinarily rapid. In 1980, only some 27% of Africans lived in cities. This rose to 38% in 2000 and is expected to reach 50% by 2020 (Hall & Pfeiffer 2000: 3). Rapid urbanisation creates ties between the city and the countryside, simultaneously disturbs and transforms communities living in urban neighbourhoods and in rural villages close to the city, and has led to substantial numbers of mainly internal, rather than international, migrants who choose the capital cities (mainly) in which to settle because these places are perceived to offer citizens an improved economic livelihood and better educational and health services (UNDP 2009). Most capital city governments have been overwhelmed by the volumes of in-migrants.

The general consequences of urbanisation are well known: urban sprawl becomes ubiquitous and haphazard, and service delivery, such as the provision of water, sewerage, waste removal and, critically, urban transport, is taken over by informal groups or members of resident households themselves. Exacerbating the problems of urbanisation in sub-Saharan Africa were the global economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s and the Cold War, which was partly played out in this region, as the two superpowers became involved in sphere-of-influence competition in several African states. The combined effect was that the formal economies of these exploding cities shrank and work became increasingly casualised and informalised. Perhaps the

most visible consequence was that housing construction also became informal, and homes were built with locally available materials by informal contractors or residents themselves, sited so as to improve access to work opportunities. As a UN report puts it:

In sub-Saharan Africa, urbanization has become virtually synonymous with slum growth; 72 percent of the region's urban population lives under slum conditions, compared with 56 percent in South Asia. The slum population of sub-Saharan Africa almost doubled in 15 years, reaching nearly 200 million in 2005. (UNFPA 2007: 16)

The authors of this book identify whether the often weak, cash-strapped capital city governments (and in certain cases, the national governments) have been able to bring a measure of order to the urbanisation process in their cities.

The case studies also examine the profiles of the capital cities and their residents within the broader context of the state as a whole. They include brief discussions of the decentralisation or devolution of power from national to city governments under different political regimes, the changing demographic profiles of the city residents and the economic, social and political relationship between the capital and the rest of the nation. In addition, each chapter outlines the nature of the massive demographic growth of the city and assesses the relative socio-economic and political advantages that accrue to residents who have chosen to live in the capital city.

In the case of certain countries, independence also brought about the need to reappraise the suitability of the site of the capital inherited from the former colonial powers and associated with the ex-colonial regime's authority and symbolism. Brazil and Pakistan previously abandoned their capitals in favour of new ones, Brasilia and Islamabad. A small number of African countries followed this example. Nigeria's colonial capital, Lagos, was replaced by Abuja; these two capitals are the subject of chapters in this volume. Malawi and Tanzania are two other African states that changed their capitals post-independence. Elsewhere, the former capitals were maintained (Christopher 1985). In South Africa after democracy, the new government chose to retain Pretoria, a city founded by Afrikaners and the executive seat of the National Party government, as one of the country's three official capitals.

## **The city case studies**

The book contains chapters on Conakry, Dakar and Lomé in francophone West Africa; Abuja and Lagos (the current and former capitals of Nigeria); and Brazzaville in francophone central Africa. The chapter on Nairobi provides a case study in the East African region. Maputo and Luanda are addressed in a single chapter as lusophone southern African cities. The South African case (with its multiple capital cities) completes the series of studies. This last case is treated as an African example with its own specificities, the primary one being that the 'South African experience lies in the strength of its civil society, both white and black' (Mamdani 1996: 28).

The chapter on Conakry is written by Odile Goerg, a French historian who has extensive knowledge of Guinea both under French colonial rule and after independence. The chapter closes with a short postscript on recent political conflict in Conakry after the death of President Conté in 2008. The chapter on Dakar is written by Amadou Diop, an urban planner and geographer, who looks primarily at the planning and development of the city during the post-independence period. The chapter on Lomé is written by Philippe Gervais-Lambony, a French geographer who has lived for a substantial amount of time in the city. The chapter includes a section on Lomé as a node in the West African economic network of port cities.

Two chapters trace the development of Nigeria's newly established capital, Abuja, and its former capital, Lagos. In his profile of Abuja, Wale Adebani, a Nigerian political scientist with substantial journalistic experience, debates why the rationale given for the establishment of a new capital city – to promote national economic development and national unity – has failed. Adebani argues that it is the personal interests that Nigeria's political elites had and continue to have in this new capital-city project that are in fact the pertinent motivating factors for the change of capital. The history of the establishment of the port of Lagos in the late 18th century and its subsequent development to the present day is written by Laurent Fourchard, a French historian who has lived in Nigeria for a number of years. In colonial and early postcolonial years, the integration into the world economy of Nigerian trading and other market interests was a major factor in the development of Lagos. This led to continuing tensions between local political and economic interests in the city and national and federal elites bent on transforming the city into a modern and international capital. As Nigeria's oil wealth emerged in the 1970s, resources became available for a new capital to be established in Abuja.

The chapters on Nairobi and Brazzaville are written by two Kenyan geographers, Samuel Owuor and Teresa Mbatia, and Gabriel Tati, a Congolese demographer. In the historical profiles of these two capitals after independence, particular attention is paid to city-level policies and their implementation, and how these compare with similar plans and practice in the other cities in these two countries. Such policies and practices are also located within the changing ideologies of post-independence national governments. Such changes in ideology and government also figure centrally in the chapter on Maputo and Luanda, the capital cities of Mozambique and Angola, two countries that suffered internal wars for long periods after independence from Portugal. Written by Paul Jenkins, a British architect and planner with a great deal of experience in sub-Saharan Africa, this chapter also examines the similarities and differences between the historical trajectories of these two southern African capital cities.

The final case study, which concerns itself with Pretoria, Cape Town and Bloemfontein in the Republic of South Africa, is written by Alan Mabin, a South African geographer. Why the country has had and continues to have a multiplicity of capitals is one theme addressed by Mabin; the current debate regarding the executive capital of Pretoria and its proposed change of name to Tshwane is another. The trajectories

of the South African capitals may be viewed as transformations from apartheid to post-apartheid, as opposed to colonial to postcolonial, cities – a distinction pointing both to similarities as well as differences between the South African and other sub-Saharan cases.

The cities that have been selected to form this study are in different regions of Africa south of the Sahara. Since this selection was not intended to be representative, let alone exhaustive, the concluding chapter incorporates the experience of several other African capitals to illuminate the themes examined in the nine case studies and provide a comparative context.

## References

- Christopher AJ (1985) Continuity and change of African capitals. *Geographical Review* 75(1): 44–57
- Hall P & Pfeiffer U (2000) *Urban Future 21: A global agenda for twenty-first century cities*. London: E & F N Spon
- Mamdani M (1996) *Citizen and subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*. David Philip
- Therborn G (2002) Monumental Europe. The national years: On the iconography of European capital cities. In *Housing, Theory and Society* 19(1): 26–47
- UNDP (2009) Human development report 2009. *Overcoming barriers: Human mobility and development*. New York: United Nations Development Programme
- UNFPA (2007) State of the world population 2007. *Unleashing the potential of urban growth*. New York: United Nations Population Fund