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The African City

This unique book tries in a short format to give the reader a comprehensive picture of cities in Africa from early origins to the present. It is comprehensive both in terms of time coverage, from before the Pharaohs to the present moment, and in that it tries to consider cities from the entire continent, not just sub-Saharan Africa. Apart from factual information and rich description material culled from many sources, it looks at many issues, from why urban life emerged in the first place to how present-day African cities cope in difficult times. Instead of seeing towns and cities as somehow extraneous to the real Africa, it views them as an inherent part of developing Africa – indigenous, colonial, and post-colonial – and emphasizes the extent to which the future of African society and African culture will likely be played out mostly in cities. Different positions and debates amongst scholars on African cities receive considerable attention. The book is written to appeal to students of history but equally to geographers, planners, sociologists, and development specialists interested in urban problems.

Bill Freund is Professor of Economic History and Development Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He is the author of many books, including *The African Worker* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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Preface

Urbanisation is one of the most important social processes observed and written about over time. From a variety of beginnings, cities have evolved into sites where more and more complex activities take place. At a certain point historically, the city may look parasitic on the productive countryside, where the balance between human beings and nature is so much better sustained. However, further along the line the city itself becomes the logical home for multitudes of social and economic activities that are fundamental to the material life of mankind. And with that, the balance between city and countryside changes.

Cities attract friends and enemies. The city on the hill is a symbol of wisdom and balance, of the good life, and of democratic politics. The metropolis – Smoketown, Shackland – is the site of alienation and oppression where modernity becomes a prison for men and women. On the whole, this book will try to avoid these kinds of moral judgments, not that they may not lack validity within particular discourses and for particular individuals or types of individuals. Given the author's special interests, much attention will be paid to economic and social processes and where the city fits into them. The city evolves distinctive cultural forms, some of them largely appropriate only to urban life, and I shall try to do some justice to these cultural forms. It also becomes in need of a distinctive politics that fits the dense interstices of urban living. These will take a more important form as our narrative proceeds and urban politics acquires this distinctiveness.

This work is a synthesis not only of monographic work but of syntheses. There have been not only numerous excellent studies of

urban life and urban history situated in Africa, but even some excellent general works on some aspects of urban society. The ambition here is to create a larger picture of African cities developed historically from the proverbial beginning. This is, I believe, a path that has not been trodden. Why do it? One reason for this is that while particular towns and cities that fit particular historical purposes and political or economic ends may come and go, the urban tradition is one of accretion and agglomeration, not one of entirely distinct stages. Cities inevitably carry baggage from their individual and collective pasts that have to be understood. Another reason is to confront the rural bias that affects much African studies, particularly in the English language scholarly tradition. Mahmood Mamdani has provided for us a framework for colonial politics in Africa that divides rule between the potentially democratic world of the citizen and the autocratic world of the subject – and native authority (*Citizen and Subject*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). On the whole, the city was the more likely residence of the citizen and the concept of individual citizenship, so standard in the colonial metropolises, potentially threatened the form of colonial rule in Africa. Rural studies, peasant studies, have easily represented themselves as the true Africa. By contrast, this book insists not only that the urban has a historic place in Africa of some importance – even if it is not necessarily the home of citizen democracy – but that this importance has grown and grown and that the future of Africa is likely to be increasingly urban. African studies have to situate themselves in part on an urban foundation. In the last two chapters, I draw a distinction between modernist interpretations of the city and postmodern approaches. I will have to admit to my prejudices being very largely modernist myself, but I can see the strength of some post-modern insights and try to bring those to bear on the discussion in those chapters.

Africa is also a good place to study cities because African cities are so varied. We can find one-industry towns as well as diverse urban economies, fragile and nascent urban development traceable from the historical record and the work of archaeologists as well as some of the Third World metropolises that rightly exercise the minds of development experts. Nice as it might be to be an expert on everywhere, this scholar has his special interests and areas in which he has a strong background. In recent years, I have written quite a lot on the political economy of Durban, the South African city in which I live. This has extended itself as well into participation in a comparative project

involving the French city of Marseilles and the Ivorian city of Abidjan. It enabled me to reacquaint myself with the magnetic appeal of the West African city. My memories include impressions of living in Zaria and Dar es Salaam as well as more fleeting time passed in many other cities from Cairo to Tananarive, from Asmara to Dakar.

In this book, I have tried to do justice to very different parts of the African continent in putting forward a continental portrait. With some misgiving about his own limitations, this has meant the author has discarded the usual idea of sub-Saharan Africa and integrated Africa north of the Sahara, notably Egypt, into this portrait. My hope is that this may help in the task of deracialising the way readers look at this enormous continent and stressing the human variety that can be found in historic and contemporary Africa. Having worked with French colleagues and plunged into the relevant literature in French, a literature which has long been much more sympathetic to the urban in Africa in general, I have tried frequently to use examples from Francophone countries and material written in French in order to make them more available to readers without French.

I need to thank especially Martin Klein for his faith in my ability to carry through this ambitious project as well as a number of anonymous readers whose criticism contained useful suggestions that allowed me to take this study forward. One of these who revealed her identity was Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch. Although there are some differences in how we analyse African cities, there are many parallels in our thinking, manifest in her superb review article on African urban history for the 1991 *African Studies Review*. Indeed, had she completed her proposed two-volume study of African cities, this book would have had far less justification. I would like to thank also two distinguished urban scholars in South Africa, Alan Mabin and Sue Parnell, for wading through my first draft. I must thank also the reader for the final version of the manuscript whose concerns have pushed me towards a slightly more didactic text which will hopefully assist student readers particularly.

The initial phase of gathering ideas and working towards a proposal was made possible by my time as a Guest Researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1999. Of the many helpful people there, I would like to single out the director of the then urban studies programme, my late and much missed Norwegian friend Mariken Vaa. The last phase has involved coming to the School of Oriental & African Studies of the University of London as a British Academy Visiting Professor, where I was the guest of Henry Bernstein and the Department

of Development Studies. For this I must thank Henry, SOAS, and the Academy. I also have tried out parts of this book as seminar papers in a number of settings, notably the African Studies Centre at the University of Bayreuth (Germany); the annual meeting of the African Studies Association of Australasia and Oceania (at Perth, Australia); at WISER, the Witwatersrand Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa; and at a conference held by the Netherlands Institute on War Documentation in Amsterdam. In the last case, the paper I gave will be published in a modified form in the Netherlands. I am very thankful in each case for the practical assistance provided. Thanks also to Tom Leighton for Egyptian references and to the Frankl-Bertrams for making research work in London seem like research done at home.

I would like especially to thank Helen Hills at Cambridge University Library for her help in obtaining the images that appear as Figures 1, 2, and 3; the assistance of Marie-Paule Blasini for her help in obtaining the image that appears as Figure 4; and Georges Gottleib, for his help in obtaining the image that appears as Figure 8. Thanks are also due to Dr. and Mrs. Sifrin and the University of the Witwatersrand in connection with Figures 8 and 9, the Gerard Sekoto reproductions; and to the Johannesburg Art Gallery for imaging these paintings.

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