Vital Instability: Ontological Insecurity in African Urban Spaces

Colloquium to be hosted by the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS), Wits University Johannesburg, South Africa, 15 to 17 October 2014

Call for Papers and Travel Fellowship Applications

This colloquium aims to trace, through layered social analysis enfolding ontological concerns, the articulations of manifold insecurities, and responses to these, in geographically diverse African urban spaces.

We view African urban spaces as sites in which multiple temporalities, moral and political orders, mediascapes and plural ontologies become enmeshed and reconfigured in spatially and demographically dense locales. Urban spaces include cities but also other sites exhibiting these characteristics, including: displacement camps, labour compounds, ports, boats, and border posts, among others. In addition we include African diasporic spaces outside of the continent in our geographic ambit.

African urban spaces are often characterized by multiple forms of insecurity which may include: violence; joblessness; indeterminate legal regimes; infrastructural fragility; deportations; continual forced removals by state and private actors; epidemic disease; the threats of malevolent spirits or witchcraft, among others. However these insecurities are not simply corrosive but may be vital and generative. Responses to insecurities have multiple articulations: evolving and diverse systems of healing, protection, and ritual; inflamed creative and artistic production; civic or legal provocations and new forms of alliance and sociality.

Here we aim to explore and theorize, through comparative papers, the manifold insecurities experienced by urban dwellers, and responses to these, as questions of *individual, social and spiritual being.* At stake in the struggle for security are not only material or biological concerns but also the generation, stabilization and vitality of plural ontologies – provisionally understood in the sense articulated by Philippe Descola "as an unfolding of the phenomenological consequences of different kinds of inferences about the things around us" -- inferences regarding the relations between mind-body, people and territory, humans and non-humans, and the material and spirit worlds.

Anthony Giddens, in a prominent exposition, has argued that ontological security requires the stabilization of the self and of 'reality' through a trusting network of social and existential relations. However, whereas Giddens views pre-modern traditions as providing stable ontological frameworks which are corroded by modernity, and the emergence of a secular risk society, we propose for discussion here, with reference to African urban spaces, that ontological insecurity arises not as a corrosion of tradition in the face of modernity and late capitalism, but rather from an *proliferation* of synchronous, disjunctive and evolving ontological frameworks that in exist in spatial proximity. Far from positing African ontologies as ahistorical, ontologies may evolve in relation to the historicity of colonial and post-colonial settings which may generate "combative ontologies" as Archie Mafeje has argued, in response to colonial or racial oppression.

Nonetheless, the very pluralism of ontological frameworks in urban spaces, and in relation to post-colonial regimes, may itself be a source of insecurity. Adam Ashforth has shown that spiritual insecurity in Soweto is not simply about the threat of malevolent spiritual actors or of witchcraft, but arises from the uncertainty of mediating diverse interpretative frames through which to make sense of disease, inequality and injustice.

Integral to establishing security is sound relations with the dead and spirit world. Metaphysical ideas of terrritorialization persist even with processes of migration and urbanization: Lorena Nunez and Brittany Wheeler show that in contemporary Johannesburg there is profound insecurity among migrants of dying 'out of place' in cities, away from ancestral territories.

Filip De Boeck has observed that in Kinshasa, "the spiritual insecurity in the city mirrors the material uncertainties that punctuate the urban terrain". The very material form of the city reveals an ontological instability – it is subject to continual collapse and erasure, and the boundaries between the living and dead are porous. In the context of war and mass displacement in Northern Uganda, Sverker Finnström, has argued that ontological insecurity arises from experiences of violence and displacement but also disordered spiritual and moral worlds. Establishing ontological security requires *good surroundings.*

Building on this line of research this colloquium aims to provide a comparative empirical and theoretical reflection on understanding ontological insecurity, and responses to it, in urban African spaces. We invite participants from diverse fields in the social sciences including, but not exclusively, anthropology, political science, sociology, urban geography, social psychology among others.

A collection of papers will be selected for the development of a special issue to be edited by Dr Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon and Mr Peter Kankonde Bukasa of the ACMS and Dr Lorena Nunez, Department of Sociology, as part of the ACMS hosted Religion and Migration Initiative. Prof. Dr Hansjörg Dilger from the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Freie Universität Berlin, will be a critical respondent.

Several full or partial travel and accommodation fellowships will be provided. Priority for travel fellowships will be given to African researchers (entailing those from Africa, living in Africa, working at an African institution, or part of an African diaspora community abroad) and conducting research in a non-South African context, but other applications are also welcomed.

Please submit abstracts of no longer than 500 words by 30 May 2014 (responses will be given within two weeks), along with a CV to Matthew.Wilhelm-Solomon@wits.ac.za, and copied to kankondepeter@gmail.com. Draft written papers will be required to be submitted by end September for circulation to respondents.

Applications for funding should also be included in a motivation letter accompanying the application of no longer than 500 words, specifying estimated travel requirements, along with potential alternate sources of funding. Acceptance to the colloquium is not a guarantee of publication.