

RECENSIES — REVIEWS — COMPTES RENDUS

The Strangers of New BelLynn Schler¹Unisa Press,
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Since the 1990s there has been a renewed interest, methodologically as well as thematically, in the urban history of African cities, and the reviewed book *The Strangers of New Bel. Immigration, Public Space and Community in Colonial Douala, Cameroon, 1914-1960* by Lynn Schler can be considered as part of this *réveil*.² Following in Anthony D. King's footsteps³, the author aims at bridging the gap between two different historical perspectives on urban space: 'history-in-the-city' and 'history-of-the-city'. Schler seeks to elaborate on a new theoretical paradigm for understanding the role the city, interpreted as a social 'construct' as well as a physical artifact, played in African lives, rather than make it serve as a backdrop for these lives.

On the one hand, she criticizes the approach of many historians dealing with social, cultural or political processes in the city, who tend to overlook the physical space or 'built form' in which these processes take place.⁴ This phenomenon has been strikingly described by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch with reference to the conference/book 'African urban spaces in historical perspective': 'Ironically, in spite of the conference title, what was lack-

1 Lynn Schler is a lecturer in African History in the Department of Politics and Government at Ben-Gurion University, Israel. Her work has focused on the cultural and social history of colonialism in West Africa. Her current research and publications focused on transnationalism and nationalism among Nigerian seamen, with research being conducted in both Nigeria and Liverpool.

2 This *réveil* has been elaborated in the journal 'Stadsgeschiedenis' by Johan Lagae and Luce Beeckmans. Lagae, Johan and Beeckmans, Luce (2008). De (her)ontdekking van de Afrikaanse stad. Enkele aantekeningen bij actuele thematieken in het historisch onderzoek naar de koloniale stad in sub-saharisch Afrika. *Stadsgeschiedenis*, Volume 3 (2): 209-225.

3 'How people build affects how people think [at least as much as] how people think governs how people build', King, Anthony (1976). *Colonial Urban Development. Culture, Social Power and Environment*. London/New York: Routledge.

4 Historical analyses on Douala of this type: Austen, R. and Derrick (1999), *J. Middlemen of the Cameroon Rivers: The Douala and their Hinterland, c. 1600-1960*. Cambridge University Press; Derrick, J. (1999). *Douala Under the French Mandate, 1916 to 1936*. London: University of London (PhD thesis). Gouellain, R. (1975). *Douala: ville et histoire*. Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, Musée de l'homme. LeVine, V. (1968). *The Cameroons: From Mandate to Independence*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

ing most were discussions of urban space (without an 's'), while spaces (with an 's') are properly treated in the present book. Undoubtedly, historical spaces and cultural spaces (i.e., spaces as announced by the title of the conference) were here. How to say this? "Spatial Space" was barely there.⁵ On the other hand, architectural historians focusing on colonial architecture and urban planning often neglect the social and cultural lives of those residing there and, moreover, regularly limit themselves to the neighborhoods of the colonial city inhabited by Europeans.⁶

Willing to pay attention to historic invisible places and ordinary, in this case African, people, the author of this book focuses on what was often perceived by the colonial administration and planning apparatus as a 'non-place' or 'outside colonial space': the immigrants' or strangers' quarter of New Bell in Douala, the colonial capital of Cameroon. This quarter was frequently described by the European as well as by the African population of Douala, as the 'bush' or the 'African village', disenfranchised as it was from the narratives of modernity and progress, structuring the history of the city centre. But although New Bell was considered by the community of 'strangers', immigrating from remote regions within Cameroon and abroad, as an uncontrolled, uncolonised and even unurbanised space, perhaps reminding them of a distant, familiar, local world left behind, it was ultimately a new, colonial construction.

After WWI, New Bell was established by the French administration according to plans designed by the former German administration, which intended to relocate Africans in newly built quarters in the outskirts of the city separated from the European quarter by a one-kilometer zone, known as the Free Zone, and in this way reserve the city centre for Europeans only. Lacking detailed information behind the German administration's motivation to create a separate strangers' quarter for non-Douala immigrants, this racial/ethnic segregation can be explained, according to Schler, as a typical characteristic of modern planning.⁷ Though not mentioned by Schler, it is likely that these segregational features of colonial planning in Douala were not explained in racial terms by the colonial administration, but rather explicated under the pretext of hygiene and sanitation or legitimated by modernistic zoning principles as was the case in many other French and British colonies. Anyhow, for the French administration, the Free Zone became the border where the civilizing mission ended and in 1925 New Bell was excluded from the official municipality – and as such was no longer the responsibility of city planners. Besides, it took until 1950 before the first map and census of New Bell were elaborated. As a result of this segregation, Schler argues that the colonial power relations were reflected

5 Coquery-Vidrovitch, Catherine (2005). Introduction: African Urban Spaces: History and Culture. In Salm, Steven; Falola, Toyin (eds.), *African urban space in historical perspective*, New York: University of Rochester Press, p. xxi.

6 Although Andreas Eckert is not an architectural historian, he provides a lot of information on the urban planning of Douala in his book 'Grundbesitz'. The approach Schler aims at elaborating in her book is very similar to the one of Eckert, but Eckert focuses mainly on the Douala people and quarters and provides not much information on the immigrants of New Bell. Eckert, Andreas (1999). *Grundbesitz, Landkonflikte und Kolonialer Wandel: Douala 1880 bis 1960*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner.

7 In addition to this, Schler argues that this ethnic segregation was also a feature of pre-modern or pre-colonial planning, as different ethnic groups lived separated in pre-colonial cities, including Douala.

in the physical space of Douala, leading to places of marginalization and exclusion, neglected by urban planners and developing in a rather informal way. Therefore and continuing this reflection, we would like to notice that 'the informal city' can be considered as an intrinsic part of the colonial African city instead of a recent phenomenon.⁸ However, although many Africans, in particular the Douala elite, opposed their expropriation out of the city centre, the strangers of New Bell did not perceive the reinforced segregation as a crisis, but rather as an opportunity to create their own space beyond ethnic differences among the diverse population of strangers.

After a profound introduction on the objectives and methods of the book (Chapter One) and a brief history and demographic overview of colonial New Bell (Chapter Two), Schler zooms in on the community of New Bell itself. By means of some significant social-economic parameters as money, crime and alcohol Schler studies communal associations in New Bell and the way these are reflected in the 'built form' of some small-scaled localities such as the neighborhood, the street and the bar. At this point (Chapters Three to Six) she shows that most of the actions of the immigrants of new Bell can be observed as ordinary maneuvers, part of the everyday dynamics of African cities, which are more shaped by coincidence than entering into direct dialogue or confrontation with the colonial state. For instance, while local alcohol production was illegal in Douala, mainly to protect the sale of imported beer and wine from France, the consumption of locally produced palm and maize wine by some New Bell women was, partly because of the relaxed attitude of the French administration towards New Bell residents, a widespread phenomenon which gave rise to an alternative world of leisure and entertainment as opposed to the European-styled dance halls and bars in the center of Douala. With respect to this subject Schler argues that *'the stark contrast between drinking establishments in New Bell and the Douala quarters serves as a metaphor for much of the difference in the experiences of each quarter under colonial rule'*.⁹ Consequently, the sharing of a drink was foremost a significant manifestation of community life and popular culture, generally dissociated from ethnicity or religion, and was only rarely inspired by anti-colonialism or nationalist resistance. Moreover, even after WWII, the immigrants' support to the pan-ethnic nationalist mobilization may possibly be interpreted as an expression of a more general feeling of dissatisfaction, often paradoxically caused by the deteriorating economic conditions and enhanced ethnic competition as a result of the massive influx of immigrants after the war – and not so much as a form of political protest.

The author of this book principally aims at elaborating an alternative, more critical historical interpretation of community building in the colonial city, with the notion of community as population group as well as physical neighborhood. By focusing on the

8 The 'informal city' has recently been rediscovered by authors as Alfredo Brillembourg and Rem Koolhaas. Brillembourg, Alfredo; Feireiss, Kristin and Klumpner, Hubert (2005). *Informal City*. Caracas Case. Munich/Berlin/London/New York: German Federal Cultural Foundation/Prestel/Caracas Urban Think Tank; Van der Haak, B. (dir.) (2005). *Lagos wide & close*. An interactive journey into an exploding city. Submarine.

9 Schler, Lynn (2008). *The Strangers of New Bell*. Immigration, Public Space and Community in Colonial Douala, Cameroon, 1914-1960. South Africa: Unisa Press, p109.

community of immigrants, the strangers' quarter of New Bell, and thus on other routes of knowledge and communication than those shaped by the *métropole*–colony axis alone, Schler challenges the nation–state as a primary category of analysis and by this positions herself within a fundamental debate in African historiography.¹⁰ Furthermore, by taking the urban neighborhood as the focus-point, she rejects, next to the national, also the supranational as the framework to assess communal alliances. While the strangers of New Bell may often be assumed to be powerless in respect to city-building and in comparison to the French administration and the Douala elite, they actually possessed multiple means for contesting, resisting and appropriating their environment. But notwithstanding the deserving efforts of the Subaltern Study Group in their rejection of elitist histories, Schler warns not to read every experience of ordinary people as an act of resistance and fall into the trap 'to replace the cliché of 'the great men' into another, that of crafty rebels, who mastered their everyday life with supreme ease and were always ready to play a trick on the powerful'.¹¹ Instead of visualizing the city as an arena of conflict and struggle or romanticizing it, Schler shows how 'living in the margins of colonial rule' could open up unexpected possibilities and opportunities for cooperation and alliances among the strangers of New Bell and thereby lead to a certain African autonomy. Hence, we like to notice that the inventive strategies of Africans, often a vibrant mix of traditional and hyper-modern tactics, described by anthropologist as AbdouMaliq Simone and Filip de Boeck in contemporary African cities, can be considered as part of an enduring and historically – based process of Africans to overcome social, economic and physical marginalization and long-term neglect.¹²

Although the conclusion (Chapter Seven) with respect to content only slightly differs from the introduction (Chapter One), Schler's book can be considered as pioneering in the field of African urban history regarding method as well as content. 'The Strangers of New Bell' offers the reader a textured and nuanced view of colonial Douala, and more specifically of the strangers' quarter of New Bell, as the author analyzes the city through innovative lenses and interdisciplinary frames without losing intellectual rigor. Schler accurately shows the important role and agency of immigrants in the history of African cities and, more general, the colonial encounter without falling into the commonplace representation of African cities as sites of chaos and struggle.¹³ It would definitely be interesting to see more comparative research on African cities along the lines Schler has drawn in this book. This type of research would undeniably confirm that there are much more continuities than ruptures between colonial and post-colonial African cities as of-

10 With regard to this, Schler refers to the influencing book of Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler. (1997). *Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda*. In Cooper, F. and Stoler, A. L. (eds.). *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Structures in a Bourgeois World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p.28.

11 Schler quotes here Andreas Eckert and Adam Jones. Eckert, A. and Jones, A. (2002). Introduction: Historical Writing About Everyday Life. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, Volume 15 (1): 8.

12 Simone, AbdouMaliq (2004). *For the city yet to come. Changing African life in four cities*. Durham: Duke University Press; De Boeck, Filip and Plissart, Marie-Françoise (2004). *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City*. Ghent: Ludion.

13 Although the approach of Schler is similar to the one of Eckert, Eckert focuses mainly on the Douala people and quarters and provides not much information on the immigrants of New Bell. See note 6.

ten presumed. Although the author of this book only to a small degree pays attention to the post-colonial era and even if she stresses the fact that cities as well as societies are flexible entities, she emphasizes the extent to which cities, physically as well as socially, bear the footprint of their past, underlining the importance of historical research on urban space.¹⁴ However, despite the creditable urge of Schler to work towards a more 'spatialized' urban history of African cities, her approach is certainly not the one of an architectural historian as many questions from this viewpoint remain unanswered: Was the Free Zone as vacant as was designed by the French administration or was it gradually being appropriated during colonization as was the case in many other colonial cities in sub-Saharan Africa? Why was the German concentric layout for New Bell never implemented when the French took over the plan? In which ways was the quarter of New Bell modified and molded after the main arteries had been laid out by the French? Which forces and ideas have been impeding the FIDES development plans for New Bell in the late colonial years? Thus, even while Schler uses a wide variety of sources, like archival documents and oral histories, we believe that the actual 'mapping of places as they are made and remade' would have provided additional information on the process of place-making in Douala. Moreover, as Nasr and Volait argue in their book 'Urbanism. Imported or exported? Native aspirations and foreign plans', the study of the blockage of some proposals, the alteration of some plans, the divergence in visions and the conflict in interest of the multiple actors involved in the planning and shaping of the built environment, could have revealed additional information on power relations in the city. As a consequence, the attempt of Schler to include a 'history of places' in this analysis of colonial New Bell has been accomplished with varying success, probably causing the feeling that, while this book provides an excellent image of the society of strangers of New Bell, we got only a small glimpse of its physical configuration.

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14 With regard to this, Schler refers to the work of Achille Mbembe, Mbembe, A. (1992) The banality of Power in the Aesthetics of Vulgarities in the Postcolony. *Public Culture*, Volume 4 (2): 1-30.