

African urbanisms and their hinterlands: contemporary cultural imaginaries of spatial connections

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the special issue on “African urbanisms and their hinterlands: contemporary cultural imaginaries of spatial connections”. It conceives of the relationship between the urban and the hinterland as non-dichotomous and makes an argument for the complex entanglements of African rural and urban cultural Imaginaries. Here, the interland is offered as a concept with diverse uses and appropriations across a range of African cultural forms.

KEYWORDS

African urbanism; hinterland; African popular culture; rural-urban connections; African cultural imaginaries

While attending a workshop in Kampala in 2022, we had the chance to watch a performance of Bwola dance – regarded as one of the most important Acholi cultural dances traditionally performed to honour chiefs (Okagbue and Kasule 2021, n.p.) – at Makerere University. This was accompanied by the art exhibition “Reconfiguring Acholi Cultural Dance: A Visual Arts Mediation of Bwola Dance in a Performative Space of Kampala City” by Ugandan artist Stephen Gwotkcho. In his paintings, Gwotkcho translates onto the canvas the continuities and transformations of Bwola dance practices as they travel between rural and urban areas, making visible the intimate entanglements between Kampala city and its rural hinterlands as the meanings of the dance form shift, overlap, circulate, and recirculate across different socio-political, cultural, and economic settings (see Hoeane in this issue). While studies of African dance up until the late 1980s often centred on “traditional” cultural dances in rural areas, Gwotkcho’s art illustrates the “multiple ways in which the circulation of dance styles in migration contexts foster new identities and new forms of sociality while simultaneously, at times, strengthening older ones” (Neveu Kringelbach and Plancke 2019, 3). As his paintings *Dancing to Bwola and the hybridity of the city*, *The Crane Performers instrumentalists*, and *Bwola dance and the Bakisimba nexus* show, Bwola dance in Kampala adopts elements (instruments, dance styles, costumes, sociocultural functions) from and, at times, fuses with multiple other cultural dance practices from the Baganda, Basoga, Runyakitara, and others. Gwotkcho carefully situates these lending processes and practices within a long history of cross-cultural fertilisation and migratory patterns in what is today Uganda and across East Africa, destabilising figurations of rural–urban movements as solely one-directional and

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dislodging easy claims to newness that are often made about contemporary urban cross-cultural assemblages in Africa. By highlighting translational artistic practices, not only through his tracing of Bwola dance across different geographies but also through his synergetic engagement with the medium of dance and visual art, Gwoktcho's work makes visible the "improvisational, fluid, and complex translations" (Ogude 2012, 150) inherent to African popular forms.

The Bwola dance performance and Gwoktcho's exhibition encapsulated the objectives of the five-year collaboration between the University of Pretoria, Makerere University, the University of Ghana, and the University of Cape Town, of which the workshop was part and from which this special issue arises. Titled "Entanglement, Mobility and Improvisation: Culture and Arts in Contemporary African Urbanism and its Hinterlands," the collaboration, led by Professor James Ogude (University of Pretoria), sought to revisit contemporary cultural and artistic imaginaries of African cities through a focus on the centrality of their manifold connections with their rural hinterlands. Tracing the multidimensional movements and flows between six African cities – Nairobi, Accra, Kampala, Pretoria/Tshwane, Johannesburg, and Lagos – and their respective hinterlands, this issue maps some similarities of contemporary city–hinterland interactions across the continent but also engages the historical specificities and complex afterlives of different colonial contexts that shape contemporary renegotiations of the rural–urban nexus. It brings together contributions by scholars from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, such as literary studies, urban sociology, media studies, medical anthropology, cultural studies, visual arts, and ethnomusicology. Articles explore city–hinterland connections depicted in artistic media such as Nigerian screen media, South African amapiano music, Ugandan poetry anthologies, visual art on Bwola dance, and informal practices of food vending in Accra Airport City. Several papers draw on the popular forms of the newspaper and the online blog to highlight the shifts and reimaginings of social and cultural practices as they travel between rural and urban spaces, examining the rural ritual of night running in Nairobi, the grasshopper delicacy in Kampala, and cultural knowledge and medical histories of malaria in Nairobi. Other contributors are interested in the use of polyphony and music as forms of agentic place-making by (transnational) migrants in Accra and Johannesburg and the ways in which these performative acts assert migrants' presence but also articulate their intricate ties with home communities. Read together, these contributions offer a range of productive approaches for rethinking the urban–hinterland connections in contemporary cultural imaginaries of the selected sites. Below, we briefly reflect on the possibilities opened up by engaging African urbanisms through a focus on the hinterland.

African urbanisms and rural hinterlands

Due to colonialism's naturalisation of epistemological and spatial binaries, African cultural imaginaries, as Harry Garuba reminds us, have long been steeped in the "dichotomization and spatialization of African subjectivity between the rural and the urban" (2008, 181). Cultural-nationalist readings frequently configured the rural as a locus of unspoiled "Africanness" supposedly untouched by colonialism, while the city was imagined as a space of "colonial alienation" and a corrupting environment of moral decay (180). With the "urban turn" in African (literary and cultural) studies in the late

1980s and 1990s, the focus shifted away from village settings as “indices of African life” towards urban environments that began to mark “the significant context of experience in the post-independence period” (Irele 2009, 11). Although Karin Barber situates the emergence of African popular cultural forms at the nexus of urban populations’ Janus-faced position between “two worlds,” with their “syncretic” art practices drawing on “both indigenous (hinterland) and imported (metropolitan) elements” (1987, 14), early research on African popular culture mainly locates its production and practices in urban spaces. As Ogude highlights, “far less attention is paid to the imbrication of the city and the rural, and how indeed both spaces are defined by a fluidity of relationships and the trafficking of economic goods and cultural currents between them” (2012, 150).

Similarly, much of the scholarship on African urbanism across other disciplines disproportionately highlights the city and continues to define it in isolation from its surroundings (see, e.g., Cobbinah 2023; Mbembe and Nuttall 2004; Pieterse 2010). When these “others” of the city come into view, they are often seen as little more than tributaries of resources for urban life. This is certainly inextricable from what Neil Brenner calls the “hegemonic dispositif” in urban studies: the assumption that urbanisation entails “the simultaneous growth and spatial diffusion of cities, conceived as generic, universally replicable types of human settlement” (2016, 120). The attendant dogma of the “hyper-trophic city” – that is, that the future of human settlement lies in ever-expanding cities (Brenner 2016, 127) – shapes both critical and material interventions on urban living. The plethora of studies on the emergent “megacities” or “cities of the future” in the Global South and Africa in particular since the turn of the millennium frequently feed on and reinforce this logic (see, e.g., Choplin and Hertzog 2020; Koolhaas and Harvard Project on the City 2001; Simone 2004). Tied to the growth of the continent’s young population (Appiah 2023), the recurrent refrain of expanding urban populations recedes the non-city more and more from view. Not only do such proclamations assert the primacy of the city, they render the hinterland as a thing of the past, a species fast dying out. However, these assertions take as self-evident the distinction between both spaces, especially since the parameters for judging the urban vary from context to context (Brenner 2016). They also often downplay the resilience of downgraded categories like the rural for shaping the affect and imaginaries of the city. This special issue is thus inspired by Stephanie Newell and Onookome Okome’s critique of this tendency towards spatial isolationism, particularly their question about the extent to which popular arts are produced not only in urban spaces but “throughout the continent, generated within and between urban, suburban, provincial, and rural societies, as well as along the transport routes connecting these communities together” (2014, 7). It is in this sense that this issue is driven by the impulse to think of the urban and rural hinterland as non-dichotomous.

Admittedly, the hinterland is more frequently encountered as a key term in research on transport and maritime economy. Derived from the German “Hinterland,” the term was sporadically used from the fifteenth century onwards to describe an economically usable area in the vicinity of a town, port, or industrial centre. It gained particular prominence as a legal concept in European colonial politics of the late nineteenth century when the term was adopted as a loan word into English, French, and other languages (DWDS 2025). The term’s history is thus closely associated with a colonial racial capitalist extractivist outlook, where it denotes an “area ‘lying behind’ a civilisational centre or outpost, a meaning freighted with a sense of backwardness” (Brahm and

Rosenhaft 2016, 4). Matthew Unangst highlights how the hinterland doctrine, deployed as a justification for German colonial conquest during the Scramble for Africa, was remodelled in the late twentieth century by postcolonial nationalists to establish their presence as geopolitical actors and challenge the legacies of colonially imposed borders (2022, 514). In the African context, the term has tended to be used in relation to port cities in particular (Candido 2013; Gamassa and Chen 2017; Kithiia 2021). The predominance of water-based transportation for much of the last three centuries translated to the disproportionate development of coastal areas in relation to surrounding towns. The former easily transformed into cosmopolitan hubs with local populations and diverse itinerant peoples – features that would become quintessential to the definition of cities. The power differential implied in the hinterland as the zones removed from but subservient to the port remains when the term is deployed in relation to the city/non-city dynamic. We use the term here to signal and critique such unequal relations and to accommodate different spatial configurations that would otherwise be delineated according to measures like population size and resources. This allows a centring of the city-hinterland relationship itself as the object of reflection rather than a plotting of the various ways one can distinguish between the different spaces.

Our approach echoes but also differs from recent work on the hinterland that seeks to dethrone the city in theories of the urban. In “The Hinterland Urbanised?,” Brenner locates the centrality of the city in assumptions that perpetuate such dualisms as city/countryside, interior/exterior/, urban/rural, and the like in mainstream urban theory. Instead of explanations that rely on a negative relation to the city, such as the hinterland’s dissimilar characteristics, he offers two definitions that attempt to evade hierarchies. Hinterlands, he proffers, are sites for the production of primary commodities from “the various ‘free gifts’ of nature embedded in the land (materials, energy, labour, food, water)” (2016, 125), and “operational landscapes” are places “consolidated through the active production of colossal urban-industrial spatial configurations that have been reflexively designed to accelerate and intensify the accumulation of capital on the world market” (2016, 126). Although undermining reified parameters of urbanity in the delimitation of the hinterland, Brenner’s intervention nonetheless maintains the sense of a distinction, albeit one now tied to relative distance to industrial capitalism and not direct contrast with one another. In contrast, Heron and Heffron (2022) more recently call for the abolition of the hinterland altogether, citing the blind spots of Green New Deal imaginaries in the Global North, which propose to transform urban living to sustainable ecological havens while peripheralising distant and near hinterlands. A world without hinterlands, they propose, is one that brings food production closer and into urban settlements at the same time that it empowers the peripheries to be independent. With public transport that connects cities and countries and continents, the boundaries between city and country, centre and periphery, fade. The hoped-for blurring of such distinctions is one we take for granted in this special issue. The pervading argument is not only that the dichotomies are superficial but that the everyday interactions mediated through the cultural products expose them to command divergent political and emotional investments in the individuals living in such terrains.

The hinterland indeed continues to have its uses, even conceptually as a tool for thinking about planetary concerns in the manner that Heron and Heffron pursue and for bringing into view previously invisible or disparaged urban forms. In the field of

archaeology, J. Cameron Monroe (2018, 388) recounts how the push for the study of urbanism attentive to regional peculiarities hinged on a functional model that demanded emphasis on the distinction between cities and their hinterlands, rather than on urban characteristics like population, government, literacy, and architecture (McIntosh and McIntosh 1984). Through this method, it became possible to outline prehistoric traditional urban life in Africa, a counter-discursive response to colonialist scholarship that tended to credit evidence of urban civilisations in Africa to the influence of exogenous forces. For Pamila Gupta et al., the hinterland offers a perspective, a lens to reckon with the effects of colonialism, capitalism, and climate change. It is both spatial and temporal, capturing those sites and times where human and more-than-human entanglements are observable even in the midst of constraining forces (2024, 6). This understanding supports a view of globalisation anchored on *ruralisation*, where the hinterland is “a central process in its own right” (Gupta et al. 2024, 11) and not an appendage to the city. Ruralisation, they assert, is a regenerative force, and not merely the precursor of the urban or evidence of its decline. We concur with the insights this perspective allows the authors to generate but note the tendency of such expansive definitions as they offer on the hinterland to become unwieldy and resistant to clear analysis. In the realm of African cultural production and everyday interactions that concern this issue, the hinterland and its associated notions are frequently mobilised in specific ways to capture relations between individuals, institutions, and state actors. In Femi Eromosele’s analysis of Nigerian screen media, for example, attributions of rurality delineate between a foreign kind of strange(r)ness potentially imbued with social capital and a less regarded local variant. The difference of the hinterland in Dorothy Takyiakwaa’s article is a sign of home and identity for migrants navigating the multicultural metropolis of Accra. In a similar vein, other articles in this special issue foreground the complex connectivities between the rural and the urban, exploring the multi-modal ways in which African cities relate to and are transformed by their respective hinterlands in the context of multi-directional mobilities of people and ideas, cultural and artistic exchange and the back-and-forth flow of goods and technologies.

Special issue outline

Eromosele’s article emphasises the importance of the imaginary in how the urban is constituted. He reiterates the argument that the city is a sum of the diverse imaginings of those who live in it and those outside its supposed borders – particularly in its hinterlands. But the imaginings on the outside do not always stay so; sometimes, they collide in the city space, innervating effects that are as material as they are discursive. This is nowhere more evident than in the figure of the “Johnny Just Come,” the quintessential newcomer to the city, whose appearance in screen media is frequently the occasion for laughter. Created in Nigerian popular culture chiefly through its reiteration in Nollywood comedies and melodramas, the JJC has come to signal absolute ignorance or misconceptions about the true nature of life in the city. Eromosele argues that this epistemic dimension to the character highlights issues of power and privilege couched in humour. The JJC is often the victim of the city’s underside, the object of its most unsavoury offerings. Ostensibly a character made for comic relief, they point to serious

issues of urban crime. Focus on the music video – a form known not only for its media munificence but also for its brevity and economy of signs – facilitates Eromosele’s analysis of the subtle ways that the figure partakes in a discourse that equates urbanity with epistemic superiority and the performance of economic wealth. The Lagos in Eromosele’s article is a city that differentiates its inhabitants from others not just by the geography of their residence but by their knowledge of the codes at play at any moment and in any terrain within it.

Understanding night running as a ritual fosters meaning around the nocturnal in temporal and spatial terms in Western Kenya. Maureen Amimo juxtaposes the historiographical and oral account of night running as a rural phenomenon with its adoption and reinterpretations for urban nightlife, as evinced through print media. This process offers the reader a peek into the transformational power of popular culture in purging the practice of night running, as a rural phenomenon, of its negative shroud while simultaneously providing the urban with relevant vocabulary to explore the multiple meanings of the night and nightlife for its actors. Ultimately, a crucial symbiosis between urban and rural is fashioned through the temporal and spatial exploration of the phenomenon of night running, thus inviting the potential to reassess the nocturnal rural enclave while reading the nocturnal urban space in nuanced ways.

Sophie Oyat, Susan Kiguli, and Bengé Okot turn their attention towards poetry. Unlike most contributors to the issue, they are less concerned with what traverses the urban/non-urban divide than with how notions of the self are constituted in the city. The authors argue that their selection of poems contemplates ideas about the self in Kampala through the symbols of name, food, buildings, and people. These symbols reveal the diverse relationships individuals can have with the city, as well as the urban struggle to maintain relationships built on communal ties. The concrete and walls in the city not only mandate divisions between people, but they close individuals in on themselves as well, rendering them “concrete people” – out of touch with themselves. This is certainly a view of the city that persists in both scholarly and popular imaginary – that the city alienates. But Oyat et al.’s contribution here lies in the assertion that the self produced in the city is never one-dimensional. The authors draw on a multi-sided notion of the self proposed by Augustine Nwoye – e.g., the generative self, the communal self, and the transcendental/spiritual self – to suggest that the city appeals to and results in different manifestations of the self, depending on the encounter depicted. Despite its concrete walls, the city of Kampala in the selected poems is hardly static; its meaning and the identities it harbours are always in motion.

Shifting our attention to Southern Africa, Innocent Tinashe Mutero’s article “Harare muJoni” (Harare in Johannesburg) examines the musicking practices of a Zimbabwean diasporic community in Johannesburg in a climate of widespread anti-Black xenophobia directed mainly at migrants from other African countries. Rejecting restrictive orthodoxies in music studies, the author’s exploration of musicking – the practice of music making and the various forms of social life surrounding music – allows for wide-ranging engagements with Zimbabwean’s crafting of urban diasporic identities through music. While research on Zimbabwean diasporic music has mainly focused on Global North contexts, the article expands our understanding of diasporic musicking by bringing into view continuities and transformations in the longstanding histories of musical mobilities across Southern Africa. Zimbabweans’ musicking in the shopping precinct

kwaChikwanha in Boksburg, Johannesburg, Mutero argues, shifts the focus away from narratives of migrants' victimhood, abjection, and invisibility, towards their use of music as a means of placemaking that rejects state-imposed conceptions of citizenship and makes visible articulations of everyday citizenship, foregrounding Zimbabweans' active participation in, shaping, and reimagining of postapartheid urban life.

Where Mutero's paper focuses on intracontinental transnational migration, Agnetta Adiedo Nyabundi returns to intranational rural–urban mobilities in the context of healthcare-seeking practices among residents in Eastlands, Nairobi. Combining an eclectic mode of data collection, which included in-depth interviews with Eastlands residents and analyses of online blogs, Nyabundi's research found that perceived malaria in the malaria low-risk zone of the city is predominantly linked to individuals' mobilities between Nairobi and malaria-endemic regions where their rural homes are located. Centring residents' narrative practices about their “perceived malaria experience” to understand how they interpret, respond to and seek treatment, Nyabundi shows how Nairobi residents construct meanings of health and wellbeing through dynamic interactions between urban spaces and rural hinterlands. Drawing on Kristine Krause, David Parkin, and Gabi Alex's notion of medical diversity, the article demonstrates that individuals' narratives are grounded in a plurality of medical knowledges gained orally across multiple spacetimes, allowing them to pursue appropriate, rather than alternative, treatment. The significance of the paper lies in its emphasis on the need for expanded understandings of health emerging from research in African medical humanities and its call for medical diversity in health systems to recognise that “healthcare-seeking forms constantly interchange and mutually influence one another across geographical and cultural spaces, embracing the concept of openness.”

Ivan Nathanael Lukanda, Susan Nalugwa Kiguli, and Sarah Nakijoba examine the process of harvesting and consuming grasshoppers and how it reflects various aspects of life in Uganda. *Enseenene*, as grasshoppers are called by many Bantu language speakers in Uganda, have demonstrated, through this paper, that their irresistibility as a delicacy in rural and urban Uganda is as pervasive as their ability to draw attention to numerous societal issues. Through the application of semiology, content analysis of photographs and their associated captions, the paper explores social realities including values and beliefs, social formations, culinary ideals, commodification, gendered norms, child labour laws, and road traffic violations arising from the chain of activity from capture to consumption of grasshoppers. The paper thus calls attention to the fact that, while grasshoppers are available as a special treat to Ugandans, the processes that lead them to people's plates raise issues in society that are either ennobling, detrimental, or wrapped in ambivalence. The delicacy, the paper argues, highlights the complex linkages between Kampala and its rural hinterlands, strengthening “socio-economic connections while challenging the stiff binaries of urban sophistication and rural backwardness.”

Using Victor Turner's 1969 concept of liminality, Irene Appeaning Addo's paper explores the everyday realities of ordinary people as they negotiate a space of belonging in Accra's Airport City. It reiterates the erasure of low-income-earning city dwellers in the mapping out of cityscapes. The paper employs a qualitative research approach, incorporating interviews and field observations, to illustrate the crisis of exclusion in the case of the Accra Airport City enclave. The activities of blue-collar and/or minimally skilled workers, as well as temporary installations by vendors

catering to the dietary needs of the low-income-earning class or offering a cheaper alternative for the middle-income-earning class, provide a pool of data for the reflections in the paper. Transience and ambiguity, as characteristics of liminality, codify the precarity and marginal position of the aforementioned actors. And the religious invocation “*Yesu Adom*” (which is God’s grace in the Twi language) captioned by the author in the paper’s title represents the research subjects’ awareness of the temporality and uncertainty driving their use of informal spaces in the Airport City enclave as hubs for accessing general hospitality, in the case of the low-income-earning workers, or providing it, in the case of the food vendors. By analysing the field data through the concept of liminality and “*Yesu Adom*,” Appeaning Addo makes a bold revelation of the intricacies of survival for those cash-strapped in a city designed for only those who have the wherewithal.

Dorothy Takyiakwaa’s article considers the place of language in the constitution of urban subjects in Accra. Her research in the Agbogbloshie market and migrant associations reveals the personal and economic motivations for the adoption of linguistic repertoires. Repurposing the concept of polyphony and hybridity, drawn from Mikhail Bakhtin and Homi Bhabha, respectively, Takyiakwaa argues that migrant traders from rural and peri-urban areas in Accra create “new urban codes and systems” that enable them to bypass restrictive conditions as they interact with diverse actors in the course of their business. The power dynamic embedded in social interactions ensures that language can be instrumentalised in the attainment of personal and collective goals. What is most striking in Takyiakwaa’s research is the contrasting logic operative in the two spaces she examines: the market requires that migrant traders switch between languages and codes to win over customers. That is, they must display familiarity or belonging with their interlocutors’ ethnicity and language to make themselves more attractive as the best purchase point. The migrant association, on the other hand, seeks to recreate conditions of the migrants’ home villages, transmit language and traditional values to children of migrants (who otherwise would have little dealings with such), and assert ethnic identity in a multicultural space. The strategic shifting between moments of inclusion and exclusion by the traders not only demonstrates their dexterity in reading the codes of the city but also intimates their capacity to transform the city space, albeit provisionally, into pockets of the hinterland.

Turning to the house music sub-genre amapiano, Albert Oloruntoba examines the music videos *Big Flexa* (2021) by Costa Titch and the Bacardi hit *Bhebha* (2023) by a collective of artists (Myztro, Mellow & Sleazy, QuayR Musiq, Matuteboy, ShaunMusiQ and Ftears and Xduppy) to suggest that amapiano, much like kwaito during South Africa’s so-called transition period, has become a prominent cultural form of self-expression for young Black South Africans born after 2000. For the generation of the “ama2000s,” amapiano constitutes a space where the affordances, disappointments, desired pleasures of freedom and continuing unfreedoms of the contemporary postapartheid moment are lived out and reimagined. Straddling various urban geographies – from townships to suburban and inner-city areas – the videos Oloruntoba analyses highlight amapiano’s status as a genre with high degrees of mobility. While the article, in contrast to other contributions, does not engage with the ways in which the genre and amapiano lifestyle are infected by urban, peri-urban, and rural mobilities, it centres its analysis on the digital sphere as a key site of amapiano making and remaking. As young amapiano

fans engage in social media dance challenges and promote the circulation of amapiano, they not only contribute to dismantling conceived spatial boundaries but, Oloruntoba suggests, also enjoy newfound “freedom[s] of political participation” made possible by what he terms the “cyber-hinterland.”

The special issue concludes with Mabafokeng Hoeane’s review of Stephen Gwotcho’s exhibition “Reconfiguring Acholi Cultural Dance: A Visual Arts Mediation of Bwola Dance in a Performative Space of Kampala City.”

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