

Violent conflict and the centrality of African peripheral urbanities

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This essay will take the spatial setting of secondary or peripheral cities as an analytical unit to discuss their political centrality in the context of protracted violent conflict and spatial transformation. Building on insights from the DRC and Ethiopia, the essay adds to the debates on spatial translations of war in a context of fast global urbanisation.



Rubaya (@Stéphanie Perazzone, October 2021)

Following a 2.5-hour drive from Goma (North-Kivu, DR Congo) on a winding dirt road that meanders through the villages and green valleys of Masisi, the town of Rubaya suddenly emerges, nestled against the slopes of dozens of hills and in the valleys, along the Mumba River. The contrast with the surrounding rural area is striking at first – the sheer number of houses and bustling streets instantly catch the eye – but Rubaya, with its many surrounding farms and on-going agricultural activities, also maintains a distinct rural feel. Overlooking the town, stand expanding cratered hilltops where the mining careers, populated with thousands of artisanal miners, vendors, police and army officers, and (ex-) militiamen, have mushroomed over the past two decades. While presumably ‘remote’ for its geographical location and infrastructural scarcity, Rubaya is just one of many instances of new urban spaces that hold the potential for fundamental disruptions and rethinking of what we understand a ‘city’ to be – in both scholarly and political terms.

Taking place and space as explicit analytical categories to investigate the transformative power of violent conflict, this essay brings together snapshots from the fields of two peripheral cities in Ethiopia and the DRC to reflect on the (violent) politics of the production of space.

The transformative power of violent conflict, a theme central to conflict studies (Duffield 2001; Cramer, 2006; Vlasenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004), is strongly reflected in the process of urbanisation and rural-urban transformation in the Global South where rapid urbanisation is one of the most radical contemporary spatial trends. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where this trend is the most explicit, protracted dynamics of violent conflict and (forced) displacements are often closely intertwined with the fast and unplanned urbanisation of formerly rural societies (Bakewell & Bonfiglio, 2013; Branch 2013; McMichael 2016; Büscher, 2018).

Both dynamics of war and urbanisation produce very visible socio-economic, political, and environmental challenges; they also tend to reproduce each other. In contexts of states lacking local legitimacy and urbanisation characterized by informality, rural-urban transformation is itself an often strongly contentious process translated into conflicts over land, governance, services, and livelihoods (Lourenco-Lindell, 2007). In the context of war, dynamics of forced displacement reinforces the intensity of urban growth and puts additional pressure on urban services and governance. Additionally it militarises the conflictual nature of urbanisation by integrating it into broader logics of violence and (ethnic) antagonism.

To investigate what is being produced in terms of politics from this intertwined transformative process, we propose peripheral towns as an original angle and a highly relevant field which has received little attention so far. The urbanizing effects of civil war can explicitly be read from three distinct spatial processes (Büscher, 2018): i) the contested expansion of peri-urban 'fringes' of the capital cities, ii) the growing political influence of secondary cities and the geographic margins of the nation state, and iii) the emergence of new agglomerations in predominantly rural areas originating from dynamics of war and forced displacement. In this essay, the cases of Dire Dawa and Rubaya respectively represent these latter two.

At the frontier of new urban configurations

The works of Hilgers (2009), Ruszczyk et al. (2020), Zhu (2008) and De Boeck et al. (2010) amongst others have argued for re-centering the role of 'secondary' cities in debates on rural-urban transformation. They put forward that these 'overlooked cities' (Ruszczyk et al. (2020) or still poorly understood fields "offer relevant laboratories for questioning the dominant paradigms" of urbanism (Bertrand & Dubresson, 1997: 10). Piermay (1997) speaks about a 'changing urban order' in this regard; where these 'marginal' urbanities, in the periphery of the center yet at the center of the periphery, are becoming the new leading urban poles. They do not only become new zones

of entrepreneurial development, but they also more generally contribute to a redefinition of the political, economic, and socio-cultural urban order (Büscher, 2011: 15). Secondary and tertiary cities can take the form of booming economic zones, but can also “fill the middle ground between village, town and small city on the one side and the endless megacity on the other” (Koechlin & Förster: 354). In their approach on the formation of political space in secondary cities, Koechlin & Förster (2018) and Büscher & Vlassenroot (2013) amongst others demonstrate how from their peripheral position, often located at the geographic margins of the nation state, local politics of these urban centres are intensely intertwined with broader regional political geographies.

In line with Caldeira (2017), for this essay, we conceptualize the ‘periphery’ not only as a spatial location – the geographic margins – but rather as a particular mode of producing space, temporality, identities, and politics. Emerging boomtowns or peripheral fast-expanding established cities represent the frontline of urban transformation in sub-Saharan Africa, characterized by shifting governance systems, demographic composition, densification, and fierce competition over land and public authority (Abdoul, 2002; Boone, 2007; Jenkins, 2009).

The two cases coming together in this essay are situated at the heart of protracted civil wars. Their spatial politics are strongly entangled with the larger political geographies of violence, militarisation, and forced displacement. They emerge in these contexts as new urban configurations, dynamic centres of growth and accumulation, as well as strategic nodes in armed mobilisation and violent demographic engineering.

Dire Dawa

Dire Dawa, with an estimated number of around 400 000 inhabitants¹ is located at the eastern periphery of the nation-state and 515 km away from the capital of Ethiopia. The fast-growing town lies at the border of the Oromia and Somali national regional states both claiming exclusive indigeneity and ownership of the city. The regions share a 1410km long border with historical hotspots of violent conflicts. Its recent history of rapid expansion and rural-urban transformation is explicitly political and conflictual, translated along ethnic lines.

Ethnic competition over ownership of the city reached its climax in the 1990s, when Ethiopia embraced a multinational federal arrangement, turning the city into a battleground opposing Oromo and Somali ethnic groups. Yet, the regime, instead of acknowledging their claims, evaded the conflict tactically by devising an informal consociation model². Attempts

¹ <https://unhabitat.org/ethiopia-dire-dawa-urban-profile> (accessed on May 17, 2022)

² Consociationalism is an institutional design for multi-ethnic societies with deep social cleavages. It is an elite-driven cooperation between subcultures characterized by power-sharing in the executive (grand coalition), segmental autonomy, proportionality and minority veto (Stojanović, 2020).

continue by Oromo and Somali political parties to dominate the political sphere of Dire Dawa and gradually annex the city in the long term to their respective regions. Hence, conflict in the city and the relationship between the two regional states dynamically influence each other. The recent episode of conflict between Oromo and Somali, which caused the displacement of nearly 1 million Oromos' from the Somali region and the death of many³, is a clear indicator of this.

Ethnic competition for political power and land translates into urban demographic politics. For instance, Somali who were displaced from different parts of Oromia by these violent confrontations were resettled by the politicians in power in and around Dire Dawa city. Further, the regime allowed the rural neighborhoods adjacent to Dire Dawa (which are largely inhabited by the Oromo and the Somali) to compete for the seat of the municipality. This guaranteed the political dominance of the nations considered to be natives, the Oromo and the Somali, at the disadvantage of the third politically significant ethnic group, the Amhara. The latter were generally perceived to be numerically dominant, politically influential, and antithetic to ethnonational federalism. These active top-down urban politics of 'emplacement' are thus explicitly aimed at decreasing the influence of the Amhara who are still a majority in the urban civil service because of the past regimes' adoption of Amharic as a national language. As a result, the Amhara, feeling marginalized, today reject the current power-sharing arrangement that is called 40: 40: 20. According to this formula, the Oromo and the Somali each control 40% of the executive while 20% is reserved for other ethnicities.

The political centrality of Dire Dawa however transcends the local and national level and needs to be further understood through its strategic location in broader transnational political geographies. The city's proximity to the eastern borderlands with their central economic and military regional importance further reinforces the cross-boundary nature of urban identities and the political centrality of this peripheral town. This can be illustrated further focusing on the Somali Issa clan, which is scattered over four countries of the Horn of Africa namely Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, and Somalia. Somali politics in Ethiopia can thus not be disconnected from its regional stakes. Local and regional conflicts tend to reinforce each other. In 2018, for example, the violence in Jigjiga town of the Somali region reached Dire Dawa in a flash, claimed the lives of six Djiboutians, and compelled Djibouti to airlift its citizens from the city. Ethiopians in Djibouti also fled their homes en masse fearing retaliation.⁴

When observing Dire Dawa's recent history of urban expansion, a significant increase in the number of Somalis in the urban spheres of economy, civil service, and politics can

³ <https://www.tesfanews.net/ethiopia-million-displaced-romia-somali-conflict-un/> (accessed on May 17, 2022)

⁴ <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2018/08/10/violent-attack-on-ethiopian-nationals-in-djibouti/> ((accessed on May 17, 2022)

be observed (McGuinness, 2018). Further, we see how the Issa clan invests transnationally in Dire Dawa city, by Somali elites from Djibouti investing in the urban real estate market for example.

Dire Dawa's urbanisation is as such highly political and contentious and is characterised by multi-layered tension. The conflicting parties, by politically instrumentalizing, mobilizing and weaponizing peri-urban areas, attempt to influence the demography and governance structure of the city using politically induced (re) settlements which in turn culminates in (sometimes violent) contestations.

Rubaya

Located in Masisi territory, about 60 km North of Goma, the provincial capital city of North-Kivu in DR Congo, Rubaya is a fast-growing "mining boomtown" (Büscher, 2018b) that has exhibited significant demographic and geographic expansion since the early 2000s. Although it is nearly impossible to provide reliable statistics in the region, it is now estimated by local and provincial authorities that the town counts approximately 70-80,000 inhabitants. As a dynamic commercial and mining hub, Rubaya has occupied a central place in (re)shaping the socio-economic and political landscapes of the Congolese state at the regional and (trans) national levels. Rubaya is exhibiting the kind of demographic growth, spatial dynamics, and socio-economic activities that make investigating the politics of city-making a crucial endeavour. Politics are pivotal to understanding *who* is involved in developing – or not – the town of Rubaya, and how this connects to broader dimensions of governance, commerce, and violence.

From the 1940s on, Rubaya's spatial, social and political make-up has been shaped significantly by decades of (forced) population displacements, ruthless colonial rule, Mobutu's violent political game, and protracted armed conflict across Masisi. Over the years then, and due to various episodes of famines, colonial governance, civil war, the 1994 genocide, and political violence, hundreds of thousands of Rwandan people settled in the Kivus, rendering "autochthonous" populations like the *Bahunde* (among others) a minority in Masisi. Besides undermining the customary authority of local chiefs, ethnic rivalries have also touched upon the thorny issue of who is eligible to receive or retain the Congolese nationality and who is not. The mineral booms of the 2000s and 2010s enhanced an already heavily militarized governance in the region, which intertwined with non-state armed groups' activities, generated a host of (informal) commercial dynamics, fuelled illegal mineral trade while driving the rapid growth of Rubaya (largely outside of formal state control).

With the notion of "central marginality" in mind, the political stakes that undergird the expansion of Rubaya spatially and demographically are thus primarily driven by land

shortages, mineral trade and related commercial activities. A context of lingering ethnic tension, deeply conflictual land management and militarisation renders competition for sources, services, citizenship, and representation conflictual and violent. Importantly, following the 2006 constitution, decentralization policies have been enacted into law based on the widespread belief that it would ensure political stability, better democratic accountability, and socio-economic development⁵. Unsurprisingly though, implementing decentralization proved particularly difficult and exacerbated ethnic tensions, corruption, and political competition between customary, provincial and national state actors (Englebert & Kasongo, 2016). A 2013 Decree by the Prime Minister had originally granted Rubaya the status of *Commune Rurale*: the first concrete administrative and political step towards acquiring the status of city – a decentralized, and therefore, more autonomous entity than its previous ‘village’ status. Subsequently, state representatives and administrative staff were sent by the provincial authorities to Rubaya to kick-start the process, and have set to establish their authority (however fragile) by levying taxes – especially on urban land, as well as commercial and mining activities – interfering therefore with the customary authorities’ fiscal revenues. Indeed, the *Bahunde* customary chiefs see the Commune status as yet another vital threat to their legitimacy and additional tension and competition ensued between state and customary authorities in and outside of Rubaya. Intense lobbying from customary chiefs at both provincial and national levels led to the removal of Rubaya from the list of “commune Rurales” in 2018, but without the abrogation of the 2013 decree⁶. Provincial state authorities sent to Rubaya are still in place, and while the town’s administrative status remains unclear, its control and governance continue to be located at the heart of fierce political debate and competition in the provincial and national political headquarters in Goma and Kinshasa.

This is because political competition over who controls the town is driven in part, by the fact that mining exploitation and decentralization politics in Rubaya are deeply interconnected to ‘Big Men’ politics, whereby former armed rebel leaders who own land and mining companies in Rubaya, Goma, and across Masisi and North Kivu more generally speaking, have acquired high-level political positions in the national and provincial government. Rubaya’s urban politics are deeply affected by the vested interests of two important politician-entrepreneurs and formerly armed group members. One is Hutu, and the other

⁵ Cf. the ‘Loi organique n° 08/016 du 07 octobre 2008 portant composition, organisation et fonctionnement des Entités Territoriales Décentralisées et leurs rapports avec l’Etat et les Provinces’ available at <http://www.leganet.cd/Legislation/Droit%20Public/Administration.ter/L.08.16.17.10.2008.htm> (accessed on May 17, 2022) and see the following policy brief by the DRC government, providing an overview of decentralization’s rationale and legal framework in the country: https://aimf.asso.fr/IMG/pdf/decentralisationenbre_-_rdc_pdf_2013612_123145.pdf

⁶ Arrêté interministeriel N° 25/CAB/VPM/MININTERSEC/HMS/081/2018, May 30th, 2018.

Tutsi. They respectively head the Cooperative of artisanal miners working in the mines in Rubaya – COOPERAMA – and, the SMB, the main mineral exploration and extraction company selling out the minerals internationally, making up for half of Congo's Coltan production. In addition, the SMB leader is also a national deputy in Kinshasa and the COOPERAMA leader is the President of the Provincial Assembly in Goma. As both men – and their allies – have close linkages with military actors of all kinds and nurture antagonistic political and economic goals, they exert considerable political weight on how the city is run, its levels of (in) security, who gets access to establish their businesses and who gets to work (in the mines or elsewhere). Through various investments, housing, services, and urban infrastructure, they tend to shape the material make-up of the town as well. Far from being a mere peripheral town in Masisi, Rubaya is instead a central but antagonizing space for political strategizing, electoral stakes, issues of citizenship, and socio-economic development, the ramifications of which not only stretch far beyond the town's geographical or administrative limits, but also entertain a pivotal role in shaping local, regional and (trans)national power structures.

Conclusion: central margins in urban translation of war

From their location in the margins of the nation state, urbanizing largely outside the formal planning and governance frameworks, secondary towns like Rubaya and Dire Dawa seem to thrive in the shadows of the dominant logics of larger capital cities. However, when trying to entangle the spatial politics of local, national and regional struggles for political power and control, these towns emerge as central arenas and influential conflict-scapes. These central margins, which Das and Poole (1991) refer to as producing 'unstable and unpredictable politics', generate a kind of urbanity that is of highly contentious nature. This peripheral urbanity, through its politicized growth, its militarized spatial governance, and its big men logics of development, represents instead of a shadow rather a true luminescence shedding light to the spatial translations of violent conflict. Through their dialectical relation with broader dynamics of violent conflict in Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the politics of urbanisation in Dire Dawa reveal the scaled manifestation of the (violent) production of space in a setting of protracted war.

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