Colouring the City: Environment and urban form in Touba and Khartoum

The urban studies literature is rich with metaphorical colour: Peter Borsay speaks of the green and blue spaces of nature as opposed to grey man-made spaces; planners speak of brown field sites; to Jane Jacobs the ‘gray areas’ of cities were those over-planned acres of uniformity that were most afflicted by the ‘Great Blight of Dullness’ stifling American cities.\(^i\) A different colour image has shaped the literature on colonial and postcolonial cities: that of a well-ordered White Town standing aloof from an oppressed Black Town on which it ultimately depends. A recent theme for colonial urban history has been the erosion of this false binary, which is now recognised as itself forming part of an imperial narrative of domination that presents Westerners as all powerful conquerors and everyone else as put-upon victims.\(^ii\) Meanwhile, an increasing engagement with environmental history has led to a growing interest in the nature of cities as habitats. An emerging sub-discipline of urban environmental history straddles several existing discourses in technological, urban and environmental histories, often interrogating the green or blue spaces of largely western cities.\(^iii\) This greening of urban history in many ways represents an exciting opportunity for innovation. There is a danger, however, that it becomes a conversation predominantly about European, North American and (perhaps) Australian cities. This may be the case even when cities from beyond these regions are brought in as case studies: if the language of urbanism continues to be inflected with Eurocentric poetics, then cities from Africa or Asia may simply be subsumed into categories developed elsewhere.

This paper calls for a critical engagement with the language of urbanism as a crucial step in revealing the possibilities of a truly global urban history. It is one thing to say that ‘green spaces’ look different in different climates; after all it is not true anywhere that nature is uniformly green, anymore than it would be to claim that rivers are always blue. But these colour metaphors carry with them images of a normative West, or (following Dipesh Chakrabarty) an imaginary Europe, that risks overwriting the specific cultural forces at play in the development of non-Western cities.\(^iv\) There is an a-symmetry at play...
in the historiographical conversation, whereby terminology emerging from the study of Western cities becomes the standard language of the discipline, whereas there is less return flow of ideas from the study of non-Western cities to the ‘mainstream’. This again follows Chakrabarty’s arguments in the sphere of intellectual history, and one might say that I am taking Paris, London and New York to stand as parallels to Hegel, Smith and Marx. That is to say that they are awarded a universality that is not granted to Bombay, Cape Town or Rio. In short this paper is a call for historians of the West to attend to cities beyond their own region of specialisation, just as historians of Africa (for example) attend to at least some cities of the West. By implication, it is also being argued that there is too much focus on an elite set of world cities, and that we should not see smaller urban centres as simply failed versions of a normative metropolis.

The two case studies examined here are, therefore, not drawn from the ranks of the new global cities that rival the established Western centres, although there is certainly rich scope for research into the place of nature in the development of, say, Dubai. They are chosen, rather, because they offer contrasting accounts of what it might mean to be a city, and require different language to describe the origins of their forms. Touba in Senegal, over 100 miles east of the capital Dakar, is a city founded by a Sufi religious leader; Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, sits at the confluence of the Blue and White Niles and was founded by colonising forces from Egypt and later from Britain. Both have been shaped by colonial and religious histories, and by the landscape, but in contrasting ways. The rest of this paper will outline each city in turn, before returning to the question of how to forge a less Eurocentric language for global urban history.

Touba was founded in 1887 by Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba Mbacke, and named for the Islamic Tree of Paradise. Allah is said to have guided him to a tree in the wilderness, that he might form a community there that would follow the ‘Straight Path’ of Islam. He was later exiled from the site by French colonial authorities fearful of allowing him independent power. The development of the mosque and later the city was carried out by the Mouride order, of which Ahmadou Bamba is also the founder. During the colonial era the settlement remained small, but since independence it has grown from fewer than 5,000 inhabitants (1964) to around 500,000 (2005). It is now the second largest urban centre in the country after Dakar. This rapid growth, however, has not taken the city away from the founder’s vision: many of the areas of the city were named by Ahmadou Bamba long before they were built upon. This reverses conventional
understandings of the role of naming in urban development: rather than an act of ordering following explosive growth, in Touba the naming long predates the city’s expansion, suggesting that all is proceeding according to a plan ordained by Allah. These toponyms were bestowed on sites by Ahmadou Bamba during times when he retreated to the wilderness from the town of Mbacke. He founded small settlements when on retreat (khalwah), and these names persist, writing the founder’s spiritual journey into the fabric of the city. Examples include Darou Salam, named for al-Salam ‘The Peace’ (one of the names of Allah); Darou Marnane, from al-Mannan ‘The Benefactor’ (one of the attributes of Allah); and Darou Minam, from minan, or Divine Graces.

As mentioned above, Touba is named for the Tree of Paradise, and this image is central to its religious significance and its urban development. The tradition of this tree comes not from the Qur’an but the hadith; tuba can also be used as a blessing and appears once in the Qur’an in the sense of the bliss awaiting those who do right (13:29). Eric Ross relates the imagery of the tree to Neoplatonic elements in Sufi philosophy, in which:

>God is ultimate Reality…and the source of all reality. Multifarious phenomena in the material world…are also real but only to the extent that they reflect some portion of God’s Reality. [Emphasis original]vi

In this system, as developed by Sufi theosophists, the Tree of Paradise is one manifestation of a World Tree that emanates in all planes from hell, through the material world, paradise and to the universe itself. The material city of Touba represents one element of this cosmic tree. In Sufi terms it is a qutb, a site or moment at which the layers of reality intersect. Thus, the symbol of the tree draws the city into a realm of profound religious poetics in which material reality is of only limited relevance. It might be possible to analyse Touba from other points of view, to uncover the politics and economics behind its growth. In presenting here the city’s religious nature I am not seeking to claim that this is the only available means to understand it, but to highlight that it exists as part of a knowledge system far outside those that urban historians generally move in. An analysis of the use of space in the city, looking for ‘green space’, would tend to erase this religious element that remains fundamental in a city still run by religious authorities.

Whereas Touba was founded against, or at least autonomous from, French colonial power, Khartoum is bound up with colonialism from its foundation by Egypt in the
nineteenth century. From the 1820s onwards Egypt expanded south into the vast plains of what would become Sudan, a nation roughly the size of Western Europe, ranging from the fringes of the Sahara in the north to tropical marshland in the south. As well as an assertion of independent power, the Egyptian motive was greater control of the waters of the Nile. Terje Tvedt has argued that the policies of all powers in the region should be seen as driven by hydrological concerns. vii The fall of Khartoum in 1885, generally told as a narrative of either stubbornness or heroism on the part of the British General Gordon, combined with incompetence or indifference from politicians at home, Tvedt reads as being strategically crucial because of the loss of the Nile water meter that provided advance information on the supply coming to Egypt during the annual flood. The Mahdists (followers of the religious leader known as the Mahdi, who himself died shortly after the defeat of the Egyptians) who ruled an independent Sudan from 1885-1896 did not interfere greatly with the administrative system Egypt had created, but they did build a new capital on the western banks of the White Nile, known as Omdurman. In the 1890s, Egyptian forces with British leadership re-conquered the Sudan, and a system of joint rule termed the Condominium was implemented, whereby British officials held most of the real power in Sudan but ostensibly ruled on behalf of Egypt. It was also Egypt that footed the bill for occupation, although the plan was for Sudan to become self-financing relatively quickly.

In re-establishing ‘civilised’ rule in Sudan, the British were keen to create an urban symbol of their authority, and so re-founded Khartoum as the capital. The streets were laid in a grid pattern, with diagonal roads running through to aid military access to key points; the resulting hatching is sometimes said to echo the design of the union flag, though I have seen no evidence for this being a conscious aim. A picturesque description from the Daily Mail in 1910 gives some impression of the city at that point, both in the experience it offered to the traveller and in its place in British imperial ideology:

Some day Khartoum will be the garden city of Africa. It has been laid out with that view. Just now the immensely wide streets are bordered only by small trees which make the hot, dusty expanses of roadway seem dustier and hotter by mocking the wayfarer, as if a thirsty man should have a thimbleful of water offered to him. But growth is rapid here. Before many years are past these saplings will spread their leafage wide, and everywhere one will walk beneath a cool canopy of whispering leaves. viii
Here the trees are being described literally but also put to metaphorical use, to show the wise planning of British officials in laying out a city that, while still at the moment rather flawed, might blossom into something glorious. Later in the same piece the author describes the planners themselves:

“Some day,” they said to themselves, these far-sighted Englishmen and Scotsmen and Irishmen, not forgetting Welshmen, “some day this vast country will, instead of being mostly desert, be covered with wheat fields and cotton fields. Work and water will turn the barren sand into one of the great producing countries of the world. In that day Khartoum will no longer be the head place of a province which is still looked upon as the Cinderella of the British empire and treated accordingly.

“It will be the capital of a rich and powerful dominion. Whether it will be fitted to play this important part in the world drama and set an example to other capitals depends upon us,”

Such was the triumphalist tone of the Daily Mail, even while describing the city’s flaws. How things change. In fact, although the British generally spoke of Khartoum as if it stood alone as a city, it was part of a developing urban region that included Omdurman to the west and the new settlement of Khartoum North.

The latter sprang up as an industrial area during the early years of British rule, on the northern banks of the Blue Nile. The river was the dominant force shaping this urban region: it was because of the Nile waters that the British and Egyptians were interested in Sudan at all, and the monitoring station at Khartoum was strategically vital. Further, the very land on which they built had a close relationship with the river, which during its annual flooding would saturate the usually sandy earth. This proved challenging for the erection of large buildings: Robert Weir Schultz, the architect of Khartoum Cathedral, claimed that an advantage of the regular delays to the project caused by funding difficulties was that the foundations were only slowly brought to bear the full weight of the (rather modest) church. The willingness of British authorities to treat Khartoum as symbolically vital, while denigrating Omdurman and generally neglecting Khartoum North, led to the stifling of the effective development of all three. Here the triumph of the symbolic city undermined the effectiveness of the urban form.

This paper has reviewed the urban development of Touba and Khartoum, in order to illustrate the range of different metaphorical forces at play in the development of North
African cities. In Touba, a religious poetics can be read through the urban form, while the development of Khartoum was largely driven by geopolitics. Can the metaphorical colour language used of Western cities be applied to these cases? Certainly the river is fundamental to Khartoum’s existence, and so some analysis of blue space might be relevant; but water is most important to the city not as a static object but in its movement, either in moving towards its destination downstream or in spreading beyond its bounds into Khartoum itself. The tree as a spatial metaphor is crucial in understanding Touba, but here it stands for more than an abstracted nature: it signifies a connection to metaphysical planes of existence beyond the material city that can be seen. A historian approaching these cities with the categories learnt from Europe or America would miss much that makes them specific. This calls for a more precise, perhaps more localised, language. This can only come out of historians reading widely across the discipline, and breaking down some of the barriers between regional specialisms. This has to be combined, however, with a strong effort to resist the universalising tendencies of terminology developed for certain privileged cultures. I close with an extract from Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, in which Marco Polo describes cities to Kublai Khan:

“From now on, I’ll describe the cities to you,” the Khan had said, “in your journeys you will see if they exist.”

But the cities visited by Marco Polo were always different from those thought of by the emperor.

“And yet I have constructed in my mind a model city, from which all possible cities can be deduced,” Kublai said. “It contains everything corresponding to the norm. Since the cities that exist diverge in varying degree from the norm, I need only foresee the exceptions to the norm and calculate the most probable combinations.”

“I have also thought of a model city from which I deduce all the others,” Marco answered. “It is a city made only of exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions. If such a city is the most improbable, by reducing the number of abnormal elements, we increase the probability that the city exists. So I have only to subtract exceptions from my model, and in whatever direction I proceed, I will arrive at one of the cities which, always as an exception, exist. But I cannot force
my operation beyond a certain limit: I would achieve cities too probable to be real.”

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6 Ibid. pp. 11-18.

