

African Cities: Competing Claims on Urban Space
An AEGIS Thematic Conference
Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh 15-16 June 2006

The Centre of African Studies at the University of Edinburgh will host an AEGIS Thematic Conference on Thursday 15th Friday 16th June 2006 on the theme of “African Cities: Competing Claims on Urban Space”. The principal organizers for the event are Professor Paul Nugent (Paul.Nugent@ed.ac.uk) and Dr. Francesca Locatelli (F.Locatelli@ed.ac.uk). They would like to hear from any AEGIS members who think they might want to present a paper and/or want further information. The date for the submission of a half-page abstract is Monday 13 January 2006. Although the workshop is primarily intended for AEGIS members, other submissions will be considered. Please note that the finalized versions of papers will need to be received by Friday 19 May and that participation is conditional on receipt of a written papers by that date.

It is envisaged that participants will arrive on the morning of the 15th and that the conference proper will begin at 2.00 pm. It will then continue into the Friday and end around at around 4pm. The plenary meeting of AEGIS member Centres will follow on Saturday 17th June.

Rationale:

In Africa, the major cities have grown with unprecedented speed over the past few decades creating genuine metropolises. Cities like Nairobi, Johannesburg and Lagos reflect the makeup of the country at large, and indeed are often taken to stand as a symbol for the *nation united*. In a rhetorical sense, the city belongs to everyone – and more believably so in the ‘organic’ cities than in the planned ones like Abuja.

However, the reality of many African urban centres is more complicated than that would suggest:

(1) **many are built on top of, or around, older settlements** whose inhabitants claim to own the very land on which the city is built. In a case like Accra, which is rapidly expanding towards Tema, the notional urban autochthons - the Ga - have begun to insist on recognition of their rights as landowners. The case of the Douala in the Camerounian city of the same name is another case in point.

(2) many contain **migrant/immigrant communities** who have come from much further afield and who may be considered as strangers even when they have lived in the city for generations. Such has been the position of Ethiopians in Asmara

and of Eritreans in Addis Ababa. In South African cities, the visible presence of Nigerians, Angolans and Congolese over the past decade has been much commented upon because it is something new.

(3) some cities like Brazzaville have become **residentially segregated** according to notional regional or ethnic affiliation. In that sense, the city may be less of a melting pot and more of an ethnic cauldron.

Apart from establishing rights of residence, a host of other secondary claims arise out of the historical trajectories of settlement: for example, constructing a mosque or a church may become deeply contentious; ethnic associations of a more or less formal kind may demand the right to display their culture; and the siting of urban services (including leisure facilities) may involve municipal authorities having to make serious choices in the midst of acute scarcity. In some cases, like Brazzaville and Abidjan, divisions within the city have become so acute that they symbolize the travails of the country as a whole: in this case the *nation divided*.

‘Who controls the city’ is a question which is worthy of closer consideration, and it is for this reason that it has been selected as the focus of the next AEGIS thematic conference.