



Beneath the city's grid: vernacular and (post-)colonial planning interactions in Dakar, Senegal



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ABSTRACT

Research on the urban grid plan in colonial contexts tends to analyse the grid as an occidental top-down phenomenon that was inscribed on a spatial tabula rasa of indigenous environments overseas. Moreover, after the implementation of the grid plan, urban planning historiography treats the colonial city a Western creation almost exclusively, and is quiet about the variegated vernacular responses to this urban form. This article contributes to the shifting of this historiographic balance. Rich in visual evidence, primary sources and observations in situ, it brings to the fore a dynamic tapestry of challenging interactions between endogamous and exogamous planning cultures in an African city – interactions that are all but unidirectional in character. Against the background of the French colonial grid plan design of Dakar, the vernacular Lebou traditions of settlement configuration are discussed. The article demonstrates that the indigenous and colonial planning cultures became intimately entangled and hybridised, changing their character across time, moving from attempts of erasure to competition and creative cohabitation. It reveals that ancient spatial practices have remarkably still survived in Dakar's very city centre – a gridded area that since its creation has been considered in both academic and popular discourses as the most Western site in West Africa.

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This article examines the dynamism of spatial interactions between indigenous and Western planning cultures in an African city from the pre- and early colonial period up to the present. The

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¹ A partial list of book-length studies on urban Africa includes L. Bigon, *French Colonial Dakar: The Morphogenesis of an African Regional Capital*, Manchester, 2016; F. de Boeck and M.F. Plissart, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City*, Leuven, 2014; Z. Çelik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers Under French Rule*, Berkeley, 1997; C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *The History of African Cities South of the Sahara: From the Origins to Colonisation*, Princeton, 2005; B. Freund, *The African City: A History*, New York, 2007; G.A. Myers, *Verandahs of Power: Colonialism and Space in Urban Africa*, New York, 2003; S. Salm and T. Falola (Eds.), *African Urban Spaces in Historical Perspective*, Rochester, 2005; G. Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, Chicago, 1991. Beyond Africa, see J. Jacobs, *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City*, London, 1996; A. Kusno, *The Appearances of Memory: Mnemonic Practices of Architecture and Urban Form in Indonesia*, Durham, 2010; A. Simone, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar*, New York, 2010; C. Topalov (Ed.), *Les divisions de la ville*. Collection: *les mots de la ville*, Paris, 2002; B. Yeoh, *Contesting Space: Power and the Built Environment in Colonial Singapore*, Oxford, 1996.

French colonial grid plan of Dakar, Senegal, is discussed against the vernacular Lebou traditions of settlement design, showing the changing character of their intimate entanglement across the period. Conceptually, this is an integral part of the urban history literature on the colonial and post-colonial periods in Africa which has revealed the multiplicity of hybrid forms of city space.¹ This article is also in line with some important studies of French colonial politics in Senegal, showing that the colonial authorities were constantly obliged to engage with vernacular political forms and social practices. Hybridity was thus a consequence of the multiple 'paths of accommodation' that were embraced by the French colonial regime due to certain inherent weaknesses in the colonial project in sub-Saharan Africa.² However, the unique contribution of

² A. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930*, Stanford, 1997; M. Diouf, *Assimilation coloniale et identités religieuses de la civilité des originaires des Quatre Communes (Sénégal)*, *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 4 (2000) 565–587; W. Johnson, *The Emergence of Black Politics in Senegal: The Struggle for Power in the Four Communes, 1900–1920*, Stanford, 1971; D. Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880–1920*, Ohio, 2000.

this article is to the urban planning literature on the specific yet global configuration of the grid plan.

Globally, the history of the urban grid embraces both multiple regions and time periods.³ It is also connected with a variety of forms of political, economic and social organisation, ranging from egalitarian to more centralised and authoritarian regimes.⁴ Since the ancient city of Mohenjo Daro in present-day Pakistan and Egypt's Middle Kingdom pyramid town of Kahun, both dated to the third millennium BCE, grid plans have been implemented by the Assyrians, Greeks and Romans, in Renaissance Italy, in Germany, China, the French bastide towns and in late medieval England.⁵ Yet, in almost all the historical studies regarding the modern colonial period, grid-plan designs have been associated exclusively with the exercise of European power overseas and with the occidental rationalist tradition. Colonial cities – normally laid out on the grid plan but also on other designs – have therefore been perceived in the urban planning literature as a direct continuation of European modes of planning beyond Europe. This is true concerning the Portuguese, Spanish and French colonisation of the New World, the later westward movement of settlement across North America, and other colonised places in Asia and Africa.⁶

As a result, it seems that the urban planning literature has absolved itself of having to deal with non-Western planning cultures in these regions, or with their possible long-term interactions with colonial Western ones. The introduction of the grid plan in colonised countries has been described in this literature as an act exercised on a spatial *tabula rasa*. Thus baptised, colonised regions globally were 'whitened' and could enter the mainstream of urban history. This Eurocentric view has persisted in some classic planning history textbooks regarding the many decades that followed the implementation of the grid plan in colonial urban sites. Nothing is said in these textbooks about Native American, Indian and African planning concepts and their possible interactions with the colonial grid following the laying out of New York, New Delhi or Abidjan. This epistemological gap applies broadly to urban history in colonial and post-colonial North America, South-East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.⁷

Ironically, not only were the vernacular traditions of settlement design erased from the historiography of urban grid plans in colonial contexts, but even where gridded configurations are an integral part of indigenous heritage this has gone unacknowledged. For instance, in the case of the grid-plan town with the central plaza in Spanish America, archaeological research shows considerable

correspondence with the pre-colonial vernacular gridded-plaza design, and that the Spanish colonial endeavour amounted to a reconfiguration of this indigenous design.⁸ Yet, as noted by Setha Low, 'the hegemonic discourse that privileges the European sources of architectural influence over pre-Colombian sources has gone unrecognized, resulting in an architectural history that has remained unchanged for the past 40 years'.⁹ A similar situation was clearly noted by the urban geographer Eric Ross, a leading authority on settlement configurations of the Mouride Way and of other Islamic-Sufi Ways in Senegal.¹⁰ While lecturing on the holy city of Touba, with its converging avenues and straight crossing streets, one of his colleagues remarked that the 'Haussmannian' influence of French urban planning was clearly evident there.¹¹ Yet Touba's gridded configuration reflects autochthonous urban ideas that do not have a colonial origin and can be traced back to the laying out of the royal capitals of the Wolof-speaking hinterland in the twelfth century.¹²

This article focuses on Dakar. The city on Cap Vert first served as the capital of the federation of French West Africa (AOF) between 1902 and 1960, and then as the capital of post-independence Senegal. Since the French took command in the second half of the nineteenth century, Dakar has been considered in both academic and popular discourse to be the most Westernised city in West Africa. What follows challenges these views of the city and its gridded configuration. It draws particular attention to the city centre: the commercial and administrative nerve centre during and since the former colonial project. We begin our exploration of Dakar's urban design by studying its pre-colonial settlements. We then trace the continuous and multifaceted relationship between these endogenous (Lebou) settlement traditions and the exogenous (French) ones they had to accommodate. These continuous interactions, which move dynamically as new challenges were met, are examined over a relatively long period of time – from the nineteenth to the twenty first centuries – using qualitative research methods including archives, visual evidence, in-situ observations, historic and satellite mapping, field interviews and oral history.

This study of indigenous vernacular planning cultures interacting with Western ones in a colonised place aims to contribute to the broadening of urban planning historiography. In particular, this

³ D. Stanislawski, The origin and spread of the grid-pattern town, *Geographical Review* 36 (1946) 105–120; R. Rose-Redwood, Genealogies of the grid: revisiting Stanislawski's search for the origin of the grid-pattern town, *Geographical Review* 98 (2008) 42–58.

⁴ J. Grant, The dark side of the grid: power and urban design, *Planning Perspectives* 16 (2001) 219–241.

⁵ S. Kostof, *The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History*, London, 2001 (orig. 1991), chapter 2.

⁶ For instance, respectively, G. Foster, *Culture and Conquest: The American Spanish Heritage*, New York, 1960; V. Fraser, *The Architecture of Conquest: Building in the Viceroyalty of Peru*, Cambridge, 1990; P. Pinon, *Raisons et formes de villes: approche comparée des fondations coloniales française au début du XVIII^e siècle*, in: C. Coquery-Vidrovitch and O. Goerg (Eds.), *La ville européenne outre-mers*, Paris, 1996, 27–56; J. Repts, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning*, Princeton, 1997 (orig. 1965); P. Marcuse, The grid as city plan: New York City and laissez-faire planning in the nineteenth century, *Planning Perspectives* 2 (1987) 287–310; A.D. King, *Colonial Urban Development: Culture, Social Power and Environment*, London, 1976; A. Njoh, *Planning Power: Town Planning and Social Control in British and French Colonial Africa*, London, 2007.

⁷ For some of these 'classical' textbooks see Repts, *Urban America*; King, *Colonial Urban Development*; K. Kolson, *Big Plans: The Allure and Folly of Urban Design*, Baltimore, 2001; P. Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford, 1996 (orig. 1988); P. Pinon, M. Lambert-Bresson and A. Têrade (Eds.), *Architectures urbaines, formes et temps*, Paris, 2014; A. Njoh, *French Urbanism in Foreign Lands*, Cham, 2016.

⁸ G. Gasparini, The pre-Hispanic grid system: the urban shape of conquest and territorial organisation, in: R. Bennet (Ed.), *Settlements in the Americas: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, Newark, 1993, 78–109.

⁹ S.M. Low, Indigenous architecture and the Spanish American plaza in Mesoamerica and the Caribbean, *American Anthropologist* 97 (1995) 749.

¹⁰ 'Way' (literally from *ṭarīqa* in Arabic, sometimes translated as 'order' or 'brotherhood'/*confrérie*) means a path, which, in the Sufi tradition, is connected to an idealistic search after ultimate truth. The Senegalese Mouridiyyah is a Sufi 'Way' established by Cheikh Amadou Bamba (1853–1927), with its name derived from the word *murīd* in Arabic (literally 'one who desires'), a term designating a disciple of a spiritual guide. Other dominant Sufi Ways in Senegal are the North-Africa originated Tijāniyah, and the Layenne that is derived from the legacy of Seydina Limamou Laye (1845–1909), who is believed by the predominantly Lebou members to be a messianic leader. Today, the Layenne has become an influential institution especially in Cap Vert. Several key spatial principles that appear in Touba, including the gridiron plan, are echoed in the settlements of Yoff-Layène and Cambérène. See C. Laborde, *La Confrérie Layenne et les Lebou du Sénégal*, Bordeaux, 1995 and Ross, *Sufi City: Urban Design and Archetypes in Touba*, Rochester, 2006, 143–147, 185–187.

¹¹ With a resident population of more than 850,000 (2013 census), rapidly-growing Touba is the second largest city in Senegal after the capital Dakar, with its more than three million people. Touba is a holy Mouride city, established by Cheikh Amadou Bamba. For a note on Ross's lecture see E. Ross, Marabout republics then and now: configuring Muslim towns in Senegal, *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara* 16 (2002) 35.

¹² Ross, *Sufi City* and E. Ross, The grid plan in the history of Senegalese urban design, in: C.N. Silva (Ed.), *Urban Planning in Sub-Saharan Africa*, New York, 2015, 110–128.

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