

OF RHYTHM AND AMALGAMATION: THE KNOT AS FORM OF THE URBAN

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Relying on mathematical theories of the Moebius strip, Filip De Boeck unravels the complex weaving and knotting together of forms of sociality and survival in urban Congo. Inhabiting the urban, writes De Boeck, requires strategies of amalgamation that resist being mapped linearly. This text was part of the panel on 'The Form of Confusion,' convened by Jane Guyer, and including work by Moises Lino e Silva, Kabiru Salami, and Soumhya Venkatesan. It was presented at the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism, WISER, 28th of June 2013.

In the urban-scapes of Central Africa, and most notably in its largest city, Kinshasa, 'disorder' and 'confusion' are two notions that immediately and irresistibly come to mind to capture the rhythms and flows of the urban surface and the forms of life it generates. These concepts are not only used analytically by anthropologists and social scientists, but they also belong to the daily vocabularies of the residents that inhabit the unsteady and bumpy terrains of urban life in this part of the world. Order, and even more its opposite, 'disorder', are terms commonly used by the members of Kinshasa's youth gangs, for example, to define themselves (as *bana désordre* – children of disorder) and to describe the unruly 'law' they impose upon the streets and neighborhoods of Kinshasa. In the towns and cities of neighboring Angola, *confusao* is a word often used to describe

the sense of an increasing lack of direction and orientation that characterizes everyday life in the urban context, a growing incapacity, also, to read meaning into the urban site, to understand the rules that govern life beyond the immediate surface of its chaotic appearance, and to give that life a purpose and finality other than mere survival. In Congo's urban context, people routinely translate this sense of confusion with the word *mystique*. For most in urban Congo it is increasingly common to designate people, things and situations as 'mystique', that is, as difficult to place, interpret and fully understand. As one of the organizing tropes of Central Africa's cityscapes, the word *mystique* seems to capture rather well the quality of urban existence, in all of its elusiveness and uncanny-ness.

As a basic structure of feeling and experience, to paraphrase Williams (1977), the 'form' of this *mystique* that permeates urban topographies may, perhaps, be best described as *rhythm*; the rhythms, paces, tones and echoes pulsating through the city's social life: its quickenings and thickenings of time and people, its releases and restraints, its sudden opportunities and eternal postponements, its ejaculations and constipations. Beyond the obvious level of the city's material infrastructures (its brick, its concrete, its cement and its corrugated iron sheets), and beyond the 'confusion' that the decrepit nature of this infrastructure constantly generates, the urban form is social as much as it is material. It is, therefore, of a much more ephemeral nature. Both spatially and temporally, it is constantly punctuated by the unpredictability of the waxing and waning of these rhythms; by the varying oscillations between connectedness and disconnection, between foreground and back- or underground, between surface, fold

and gap, between the wide and the close, the visible and the invisible, darkness and light, movement and motionlessness, continuity and discontinuity, flow and blockage, opening and closure. Urban living is ceaselessly rhythmized by its excesses and scarcities, its dispersals and immobilizations; by its homogeneity and heterogeneity, its total boundlessness and the totalitarian nature of its endless restrictions, its moments of -often violent- effervescence and the boredom of endless waiting that characterizes urban lives as well...

And since the city is rhythm, the urban form is often that of a verbal or musical architecture. A lot could be said here about the importance of rhetorics, both to exist in the city and to build the city (De Boeck 2011). Similarly, in the Congolese context, and particularly in the context of Kinshasa, both the historical material form and the lived form of the city is that of its music. In Central Africa, the city generated a new form of music, the *rumba ya lingala* that came of age with Franco and Tabu Ley, just like this music generated the novel form of the city, with its new iconic spaces (such as the bar) and its new time regimes (of labor and leisure).

To navigate successfully through all of the contradictions, the impossible possibilities and the changes of pace and rhythm that urban life constantly generates, demands a capacity of judgment that Kinnois (Kinshasa's inhabitants) commonly refer to as *mathématiques*... And indeed, to steer your life unharmed through all the pitfalls, all the possible and constantly changing parameters of your daily existence, seems to demand an advanced knowledge of higher mathematics and of topics such as chaos, fractals, and mobility, or of vectorial capacity and the dynamics of (social) transmission.

The often syncopal and staccato rhythms of the mental and material lines that people's lives describe within such urban terrain, with all of its 'bumpy incoherent surfaces and inexplicable narrow bottlenecks' (Guyer 2011: 477); the specific divisions and/or confluences of space, time, frequency and code that make and mark the form of urban life; and the multiple modes of transference, channeling, networking (or *branchement* as Congolese are more likely to call it) that characterize the urban world, have given rise to a pleiad of metaphors and images that social scientists, architects and urban planners have tried to apply to analytically capture the often paradoxical and rarely uni-directional or teleological movements the city undergoes, or to describe the thick layeredness of matter and time that characterizes urban existence. Think, for example of the notions of "entanglement" (Nuttall 2009), or of the rhizomatically non-orientable, the palimpsestual, or the multiplex, to name but a few...

What all of these have in common is **amalgamation**, or the process of combining or uniting multiple entities into one form.

In Central-African cultural registers, the idea of amalgamation and combination has always been expressed by the form of the knot, and by processes of knotting, tying, connecting, weaving and intertwining (De Boeck 1991). As 'limit situations,' knots are both conjuncts and disjuncts. They may simultaneously express the idea of interlinking, connecting, border-crossing and the transposition of meaning from one field to another. Or they might, on the contrary, express acts or states of disconnection, of the untying of integrative links. They may also represent closure, blockage, and suffocation. Throughout large parts of Central Africa, the notion of the knot

and the act of knotting are often used as metaphors to express states of physical health, of social well-being, of physical and social reproduction and, more metaphorically, of acts of 'world-making', i.e. the establishment and replenishing of social and cultural orders (through ritual, for example). But simultaneously, the notion of the knot might also express and denote the opposite of all this: it might refer to physical illness, social disintegration, witchcraft, conflict and death. In many Bantu languages, the words connoting the form of the knot or the idea of interlinking often derive from the proto-Bantu **-dungu*. The notion of 'underworld' (*kalunga*), or the name commonly given to the idea of a supreme being or energetic force-field (*nzambi mpungu*) throughout central Africa, share this same proto-Bantu root. Similarly, the idea of life and life-force itself (*mooyi* or variations thereof) is conceptualized in terms of the joining or knotting together of male and female complementary opposites.

I suggest that the knot, as polymorphic form of amalgamation, perfectly captures the rhythm of the city as well. It offers us the material form of an autochthonous conceptual meta-discourse about the specific nature of the rhythm of (urban) life. (And it should be noted that acts of knotting and weaving in this particular cultural setting are, above all, about balance, rhythm and the (corporeal) rhythm-ing of the world. This necessitates a more elaborate ethnography, but good starting points to ethnographically ground this idea would be Devisch 1993, for example, or Geurts 2002).

Knots bring us to processes of divination and to the divinatory apparatus itself, to the baskets or bags that diviners in this part of the world use (cf. Silva 2011). Like urban existence itself, these

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containers consist of a border-crossing amalgamation of various objects, materials and substances of human, animal and vegetal origin. Though often in a more underground way because of the hegemony of Neo-Pentecostalist discourses and practices, diviners continue to operate in the city, and they have incorporated, amalgamated and 'knotted' the city into their baskets by incorporating many of the commodities or objects the urban world produces (photos, for example, or locks, plastic dolls, car parts, and many other items such as batteries or cell phone parts that metonymically represent the 'modern' urban world and that allow the diviner to say something about the impact of that world upon one's physical and mental state.

But the inalienable part of the material object repertoire that constitutes the baskets diviners use during their divinatory séances all over Southern Congo and large parts of northern Angola and Zambia is, again, a particular form of knot, known as *kata* (a Cokwe word that refers to entwinement, enclosure, as well as the idea of rupture). In the divinatory context, this particular *kata* is of crucial importance as a representation of the rhythms of the flow of life, of energy, breath and vitality. The knot in question has a Moebius-shaped form, consisting of spooled – up strips of palm leaves that are woven into a single whole. Often these knots appear in pairs, representing the knot's double nature (of flow and closure etc –see above) (cf. Fig. 1 & 2).



Fig.1 Showing *kata* as part of a Shinji divination basket.
Photo: Philip De Boeck.

Webster describes the Moebius strip or band as “a mathematical object, or a physical representation of it, which is a two-dimensional sheet with only one surface. It is constructed or visualized as a rectangle, one end of which is held fixed while the opposite end is twisted through a 180 degree angle and joined to the fixed end. It is a two-dimensional object that can only exist in a three-dimensional space.”

Although the divinatory knot is a not pure Moebius shape, because, upon close inspection, it has two surfaces and therefore more than one side and one boundary component, it still seems to share the Moebius strip’s mathematical property of being non-orientable and endless or without origin. In the case of the divinatory knot, when one looks closely, there is an origin, a specific starting point for the winding of the various layers of the parallel lines that are woven into a knot, but this origin cannot easily be perceived; it is ‘forgotten’, and therefore the knot seems to be realized as a ruled surface, i.e. a surface in affine space (an affine space is what is left of a vector space after one has forgotten which point is the origin.)



Fig. 2 Showing *kata* as part of a Shinji divination basket.
Photo: Philip De Boeck.

In other words, such a Moebius-like shape or geometric structure forms a translation or permutation of the Euclidian map, generalizing the affine properties (the properties of parallel lines) within Euclidian space, offering projective maps to chart the particular rhythms of parallel, spiraling and yet intersecting lines without origin or end.

Such a Moebius form therefore seems to fit and describe the plane of the city rather well: its unsteady topology and the miraculous unfolding of the non-orientable lines of people’s lives within it. Non-orientable because never straight, these lives can indeed for the most part be described as deviations of straightness, always opening up to the unexpected, with all of the ‘mathematics’ that living in constant confusion and improvisation entails. Translating the necessity to connect and knot yourself into as many networks as possible, the knot also expresses the possible dangers that every connection may bring along. Here, the divinatory knot refers less to the structural properties of the Moebius ring that

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so much inspired someone like Lévi-Strauss, but it brings us closer to the topological operation of inter-knotting that the Borromean rings represented for Lacan: urban living in the shape of a constant attempt at finding ways to ‘stitch’ lacks and losses together, to revert to the Lacanian notion of *suture*. Sutures suggest the possibility of closing wounds, of generating realignments, and of opening up alternatives, because sutures also point to new kinds of creativity with (spatial and temporal) beginnings, and therefore with new forms of interactivity, as Nancy Hunt (2013) reminds us. The lack needs, and demands, to be overcome in order to survive and form a collectivity in the city. But the same lack also constantly drives individual and collective desire, and therefore the very rhythm of the city itself, as dream and nightmare, the theatre of rise and fall.

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