

Jennifer Hart, *Making an African City: Technopolitics and the Infrastructure of Everyday Life in Colonial Accra*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press (hb US\$90 – 978 0 253 06932 0; pb US\$45 – 978 0 253 06933 7). 2024, 296 pp.

Jennifer Hart states early in the introduction, if it was not evident from the title, that *Making an African City* is a continuation of John Parker's excellent *Making the Town*.¹ Where Parker's book told the story of Accra as an indigenous Ga city transformed by the encounter of early colonialism (1880–1920), Hart's new book focuses on a later period (1890s–1950s) and the ways in which colonial technocratic governance affected the everyday lives of Accra's inhabitants.

The key figures in this history of Accra are colonial experts – sanitary inspectors, urban planners, medical professionals, architects, administrators – who envisioned 'modernist conceptions of order' (p. 2). Yet, Hart emphasizes the limitations of this colonial project and that power could not reshape the old, complex city in its own image. The book is also interested in how Accra's African urban inhabitants have contested, negotiated and contributed to the 'making' of these visions of the city yet to come.

As it follows the evolution of colonial regulation, the book is methodologically rooted in the colonial archive. Hart also makes use of African-owned newspapers and the minutes of the Accra town council to develop a more nuanced understanding of the contested politics of colonial modernity. Throughout, well-chosen long quotations from the archival material bring the potentially dry story of colonial technocrats and regulation to life.

Making an African City elaborates on several foundational themes in urban history – sanitation, disease, trade, mobility, housing – in five chapters that are roughly chronological. The first two chapters cover the entangled topics of sanitation and health, focusing largely on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here, Hart shows the ways in which the idea of a sanitary, healthy city became the central feature of colonial urban governance. Sanitary reform was individualized rather than approached structurally, and the practices of African everyday life were deemed illegal. Similarly, the interventions of tropical medicine pathologized individual African bodies and led to the physical segregation of European bodies in the urban landscape.

Chapter 3 traces how colonial regulation, often justified by sanitary concerns, favoured large 'expatriate firms' over established Ga traders. Importantly, it shows the ways in which this shift was accompanied by violent legal reform that made African socio-economic practice into 'nuisance', in the language of coloniality. Hart then makes an interesting leap into the historiography of decolonization. In a close analysis of the Watson Commission, an enquiry into the causes of nationwide riots in 1948,

¹ J. Parker (2000) *Making the Town: Ga state and society in early colonial Ghana*. Portsmouth NH, Oxford and Cape Town: Heinemann, James Currey and David Philip.

the chapter argues that this broad-based coalition of the disaffected was produced by the marginalization of African economic life over the first half of the twentieth century.

Chapter 4, on African automobility in Accra, develops themes from Hart's previous book, *Ghana on the Go*.² The chapter shows how Africans asserted, through horn honking and picking up passengers in their lorries, visions of mobility in the city that contradicted European ideas of driving and urban planning. Informed by oral histories collected from drivers and passengers active in the late colonial period, this chapter provides a bottom-up perspective on the theme of colonial regulation.

Chapter 5 turns to the theme of housing after the earthquake of 1939 destroyed much of Accra. The plans that emerged for the new Accra describe the modernist logic of urban development that underpinned the projects of both paternal late colonialism and postcolonial nationalism in Ghana. The scope of this chapter is impressive. It covers the commodification of land, the politics of ratepaying, the creation and demolition of 'slums', post-war housing estates, and tropical modernist master planning, all within the context of decolonization. Hart navigates this complexity well, but because of the breadth some of the nuances of this period are lacking.

Throughout the book, the history of colonial Accra is connected to the vital rubric of contemporary urban development across the global South: informality. Hart argues that the 'informal' is far from a neutral term by showing how it has been historically produced by colonial expertise. This is the book's most important contribution, but the connections between the past and the present remain somewhat underdeveloped and largely left to a thought-provoking and open-ended conclusion.

The text is supported by some photographs, both archival and shot by the author. These are helpful additions, but the images needed more thorough embedding. Frequently, they were temporally divorced from the history being discussed and there was no analysis of how the camera/photograph fits into the technopolitics of coloniality. This omission links to a broader de-emphasis on materiality that runs counter to some of the most interesting recent excavations of African urbanism by, for example, Emily Brownell, Constance Smith and Armelle Choplin. But these absences do not take away from the fascinating insights of Hart's book. *Making an African City* covers foundational themes in urban history and is, therefore, suitable for any historians interested in the city. More broadly, it should be read widely by scholars working across disciplines of urban studies, development studies and African studies.

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² J. Hart (2016) *Ghana on the Go: African mobility in the age of motor transportation*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press.