

Namibia: “The Cleanest City in Africa”

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When Windhoek was selected to host the Africities 2000 Summit, then-Mayor of Windhoek Immanuel Ngatjizeko positioned the city in terms of its “cleanliness” as an attribute setting Windhoek apart and a reputational jewel to be jealously guarded. Its status as the “cleanest city in Africa” was peddled by City of Windhoek officials until Kigali snatched the “crown” from Windhoek around 2015/2016. Arguably, this status did not come by chance, but was (and is) a result of an entrenched culture of cleanliness among Windhoek residents. But perhaps the obsession with cleanliness is not only attributable to the residents. To be sure, a fixation on cleanliness straddles both German and South African colonial periods, underpinned by the racist “civilizing mission”.

After the German occupation ended, South African authorities tightened control of the towns of southern and central Namibia. In 1932 they extended the 1924 Natives (Urban Areas) Proclamation that imposed controls on the entry of black women into urban areas. At that time the municipality of Windhoek also began forced removals of “undesirables”, albeit on a fairly small scale, to the “reserves”. African women were particularly targeted with crackdowns on illegal beer brewing. In 1939 an attempt was made to subject women to compulsory examinations for venereal disease, which they resisted with some success. Women gathered in several towns, and on 20 March of that year about 100 angry women openly defied the new measures by demonstrating in front of government buildings in Windhoek. Rocks were thrown and windows broken. Although women were eventually subjected to forced examinations under threat of deportation in 1939, there were no more such examinations in later years.

When the authorities embarked upon forced removals to “clean up” the spatial segregation during the implementation of the apartheid schemes in the late 1950s, matters came to a head. In 1959 residents rose up in a revolt against their forced removal from Windhoek’s main (“Old”) town to the new apartheid-era township of Katutura, more than eight kilometres northwest of the city centre. In Namibian historiography, the December 1959 uprising is regularly presented as the beginning of the nationalist liberation struggle.

Nowadays, as calls for decolonising space gain traction, it is interesting how Windhoek and its urban planners respond. Do those in charge of urban planning in the Namibian capital embrace the development of an African city, which usually means combining a range of activities within the urban space, such as informal street trading, food stalls, etc. next to the headquarters of banks and industrial corporations? Windhoek does not embrace an African vision. Instead, it brings to the fore a revisionist urbanism that contradicts the demands of the postcolonial African city.

The structuring of urban space is never an innocent undertaking. It is invariably imbued with ideas, desires, prescriptions, and prohibitions. How cities are planned and structured Urban planning determine urban behaviour in various ways. This is not to say that urban dwellers have no agency: constant negotiations, sometimes of an antagonistic nature, take place continuously. Through various views and practices regarding what the city is or should be, bureaucrats use instruments such as by-laws to determine which activities take place and where. Oftentimes, the origins of urban

imaginaries in African cities draw inspiration from elsewhere through imitation. Worth recalling is that medical and other public authorities in South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century were imbued with the imagery of infectious disease as a social metaphor that interacted powerfully with racial attitudes, influencing policies and shaping institutions of segregation. In the following, municipal bureaucratic practices will be observed to the extent which they proscribe and prescribe urban modes of living with a particular reference to cleanliness.

Tracing the Discourse of Cleanliness

A preoccupation with “cleanliness” spans successive City of Windhoek mayors. In a way, this points to the connection between colonial discourses and contemporary urban politics. The former Mayor of the City of Windhoek, Mathew Shikongo, proclaimed that Windhoek was determined to “stay clean” while launching the Solid Waste-Free Environment Project in 2004. Ten years later, the then-Mayor of Windhoek Agnes Kafula noted at a commissioning of waste removal trucks that the “cleanliness of Windhoek is renowned!” Cleanliness is consistently peddled by authorities through symbolism and advertising. As recently as October 2015, then-Mayor of Windhoek Muesee Kazapua was reported to be leading a march of volunteers to ostensibly “regain Windhoek’s status as the cleanest city in Africa”. The fact that successive Windhoek mayors peddled cleanliness without fail suggests that it is an integral part of what Windhoek is as a city—from the perspective of municipal officials. Billboards compelling denizens to desist from littering are particularly concentrated in northwestern parts of the city, where cleanliness is markedly wanting compared to the squeaky-clean Central Business District and its immediate surroundings.

Under the theme of “My Waste, My Responsibility” developed as part of the Mayoral Cleaning Campaign in January 2013, Windhoek dwellers were urged to keep the city clean because “it is important”, as the text read, preceded by the injunction of “let’s keep our city clean”. In peddling the idea of cleanliness further, the tourism portal on the official City of Windhoek website reads:

“Windhoek is often described as one of the cleanest capitals in Africa and visitors are *surprised* that this city, considered to be part of deepest Africa, offers all modern amenities that conform to some of the world’s highest standards”.

Three things are made clear in the aforementioned advert-like posturing: firstly, there is the valorisation of cleanliness based on external validation, that is, appraisal from outsiders that then galvanizes and encourages efforts to counter images of derelict and filthy African cities portrayed in the media. Secondly, an implicit supposition that “deepest Africa” (less sophisticated and defined by lack) is not in a position to offer particular amenities or services associated with modern cities. Yet this portrayal of African cities as dysfunctional and dystopian in various respects has not gone unchallenged. It follows that when the urban historian Bill Freund observes that “there is no dearth of scholarly material that sees African cities as essentially dysfunctional and dangerous places”, he is essentially stating a widely held critique of scholarship casting urban Africa through the rubric of chaos and disorder. Thirdly, moreover, the element of surprise alluded to in the marketing gimmick has less to do with the availability of amenities and services as it does the implied superior quality of these amenities, comparable to the “world’s highest standards”.

“It looks just like a small city in a European country”

As a municipal official I interviewed recounted, tourists and other visitors would say this about Windhoek: “it looks just like a small city in a European country”. The savouring of the European comparison reveals an aspiration and informs views of what is to be maintained at whatever cost if Windhoek is to hold onto the fantasy bureaucrats envisage and imagine.

Comparisons with Europe are primarily made in terms of the “management of the City of Windhoek having been exemplary such that a high standard has been maintained in the provision of services, cleanliness and maintenance of infrastructure”. This kind of positioning ostensibly makes Windhoek “unique”, for such comparisons cannot be made about a number of other African cities perceived to be chaotic, dysfunctional, and signifiers of the general failure of African states.

What Is at Stake?

Ongoing, competing claims over urban space suggest that the apartheid city has been reanimated—if not repurposed—for the dominance of profit and the financialization of everything. Spatial exclusion correspondingly becomes the organizing principle, as evinced by constant “harassment” of street vendors and their confinement to specific spaces so as not to blemish the city’s squeaky-clean image, particularly within the Central Business District. Indeed, those who were spatially excluded from the city during previous years are today pushed aside by the economic configurations that valorise and promote activities allowing maximum channelling of capital into municipal coffers.

Within this neoliberal city posturing, the vignette below demonstrates how far city officials are prepared to go with regard to erasing or obliterating activities that are untaxable:

In August 2010, a 31-year-old Jan Markus was arrested for washing a car for payment in Windhoek’s city centre. After being convicted, he was sent to prison for three months as he could not afford to pay the alternative sentence of a N\$300 fine. “The Windhoek City Police’s Superintendent Johan Kellerman, who arrested Markus on August 6, told Magistrate Jermaine Muchali ... that according to the City’s by-laws people are not even allowed to dust a car standing in the road, never mind wash it. Kellerman told the magistrate he had picked up Markus for washing a car on the street on July 31 already, but because Markus had his small baby with him he was feeling sorry for him and let him off with a warning”.

This snippet could point to overregulation, for there seems to be a fixation on rule enforcement to reign in ordinary and petty economic activities on which the urban poor eke out a living. Many argue that regulatory systems such as licencing, zoning, code enforcement, along with health and safety inspections open opportunities for some at the expense of others.

The fixation on “hygiene and cleanliness” is not a ritualistic exercise devoid of meaning. In her famous book *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas explains the social implications of the concept of “dirt”. Dirt is not simply an opposite of cleanliness. Instead, she links dirt to the subversion of order: “dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is ... an effort to organise the environment”. Douglas’s frame of “chasing dirt” appears to be an apt description of what happens with the resolute addiction to cleanliness in Namibia’s capital. Windhoek city officials are probably not governed by an anxiety to escape disease, but “by a desire to re-order an environment to make it conform to an idea”.

What is at stake, then, is that the obsession with cleanliness supersedes the needs of the poor who eke out a living from petty trading. This resolve to chase dirt is particularly enforced within the Central Business District for the “tourist gaze”. What is peddled is an explicit and unwavering desire to project a sanitized image of the city to visitors and tourists. Without over-emphasizing Windhoek’s importance, what happens in this city reveals a thing or two about urban policy directions in Namibia.

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