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Douala as a “hybrid space”: Comparing online and offline representations of a Sub-Saharan city.

Abstract

With this study, we investigate the complex relationship between the physical and digital spaces of the city of Douala, Cameroon by comparing its online image against its local oral representations. Taking off from the results of an existing study reporting on the online image of the city, we investigate the Social Representations that locally relevant people have of Douala and uncover similarities and discrepancies of the two resulting representations. Outcomes from the analysis permit to reflect on the implications of these, and show an unripe, intermediate stage of the “hybrid Douala”, where the virtual space seems still not to be affecting the way the physical space is experienced, and where the gaps in the digital divide are perpetuated. At the same time, a strong local ownership of certain digital activities suggests how the online image of the city is in the process of being constructed and developed locally. As the spaces of the city start appearing online, the process of hybridization between the physical and the digital Douala is – slowly – taking place, and offline and online narratives, now rather detached, will possibly create soon a new image of the city to global online narratives.

Introduction

When landing in Douala, a chaotic metropolis on the Atlantic Ocean we are struck by its huge incongruences, as it often happens in these cases. Douala is the economic capital of Cameroun, a city characterized by a continuous horizontal expansion. Few prestigious neighbourhoods brag their historical monuments, economic activities, elegant fenced houses, luxury cars and clean streets. The rest of the city lacks basic public services such as regular power, access to water, formal sewers, and paved roads. Poverty and unemployment are widespread, and so is a general sense of insecurity and unsafety. Yet, its complex urban landscape features a new contemporary cultural life that is making of the city a landmark for festivals and art installations (Babina & Bell, 2008; ICU, 2012; Pucciarelli, 2014). We could not have understood this complexity solely on the information that can be found online about the city.

Many communities in non-western societies have not a voice online: connectivity and access is still an issue for many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, where many people neither access nor produce online content. According to Graham (2002), the way in which the local heritage is shaping the knowledge-based city has still to be adequately articulated. In Douala, the predominance of oral over printed and digital culture is evident. However, the use of digital media is growing quickly, fostered by the rapid adoption of mobile technologies, leapfrogging the use of printed media as information access means (Pucciarelli et al., 2013).

From a communication perspective, the study of the digital- and access- divides can shed light on what representations are created and whose voices are audible in the digital space – and by whom –, thus informing on the way communities are benefitting and empowered – or not – from being connected. From a geographic perspective, studying the voices that are contributing to shape their own geographies versus the ones that endure silent, in a sort of digital shadow, can inform understandings on the complex interactions between digital geographies and the physical space they refer to. New urban “hybrid spaces” (Graham, 1998; Paradiso et al., 2006; Silva, 2006; Zook, 2000; Zook & Graham, 2007) are, in fact, generated by the combination and interaction between online and offline spaces, which, in turn, changes the way social groups experience the place itself.

This study aims to investigate this complex relationship between physical and digital spaces in the case of Douala, by comparing the online image of the city against the local and oral representations of the city held by two groups of local people that have and still have not any experience of the online, so of the hybrid city. To do so, this article will, first, take off and describe results from an existing study depicting the online image of the city. Second, it will present the analysis qualitative and ethnographic data about local oral (offline) Social Representations (Moscovici, 1961) of the city. Finally, it will compare the online and offline resulting images, thus uncovering similarities and discrepancies of the two perspectives and reflecting on their implications.

The physical Douala

Douala is the oldest city of Cameroon. Strategically laying on the estuary of the river Wouri and on the Atlantic Ocean, the city has always been an entry point for explorers, colonizers and foreign traders. Since the independence of Cameroon, Douala has become the most important pole of the country for

migrants. The census of 1987 stresses how the foreign population in Douala back then was already higher than the native one (Evina Akam & Honoré Mimche, 2009).

The population growth generated a rapid, uncontrolled and horizontal urbanization of the city, affecting the way in which territory and city boundaries are perceived and represented by the population. Traditionally, the lands of Douala belonged to the native population and were organized according to family lineages (the so-called canton). In 2004, according to the territory administration and decentralization law (Loi n° 2004/018), lands were expropriated from the traditional authorities, all land contracts were declared illegal and lost their value, and the new Urban Community was decentralized into six administrative districts (Commune d'Arrondissement de Douala). These districts mirror the traditional division of cantons, which does not correspond to the names and boundaries of traditional villages.

The digital Douala

Douala as a digital city has been recently analysed in the work of Pucciarelli et. al. (2014). A map of the digital Douala was created on the bases of the geo-localisation of socio-economic activities operating at a local level. The emerging map highlights an uneven representation of the city, mainly positioned on the Atlantic coast and showing an online “visible Douala” where most of the activities are located. Concurrently, the map presents a “digital shadow”, corresponding to the inner neighbourhoods of the city and characterized by an online absence (Pucciarelli et al., 2014). A few exceptions are given by zones where industries have their headquarters, or by areas strategically positioned on main road trajectories. On a total of 118 neighbourhoods, only 36 have an online presence and emerge in the map. The “invisible Douala” constitutes 69.5% of the whole territory of the city. This territory includes underserved areas, spontaneously grown after rapid and uncontrolled urbanisation processes. Likewise, the map shows how only a small percentage (12.2%) of the socio-economic businesses registered in the city are represented online: almost half of them belong to the financial and commercial sector. Also, more than half of the online content (59.1%) is produced by local business that have decided to promote their activities through a website, while almost one third (27.1%) is controlled by foreign players, mostly including banks and insurances, international organizations and cooperation, transport, and import-exports.

This picture mirrors a clichéd image of the city as economic and commercial capital of the country. Activities such as art and culture or public administration lie almost invisible within the overall online landscape. However, few institutions appear to be very active even if the online presence of their economic category is, overall, scarce: art and cultural institutions, as well as security services, are not numerous, but very active online, suggesting a city evolving into the fight of crime and struggling to negotiate for itself the position of a cultural metropolis (see Figure 1).

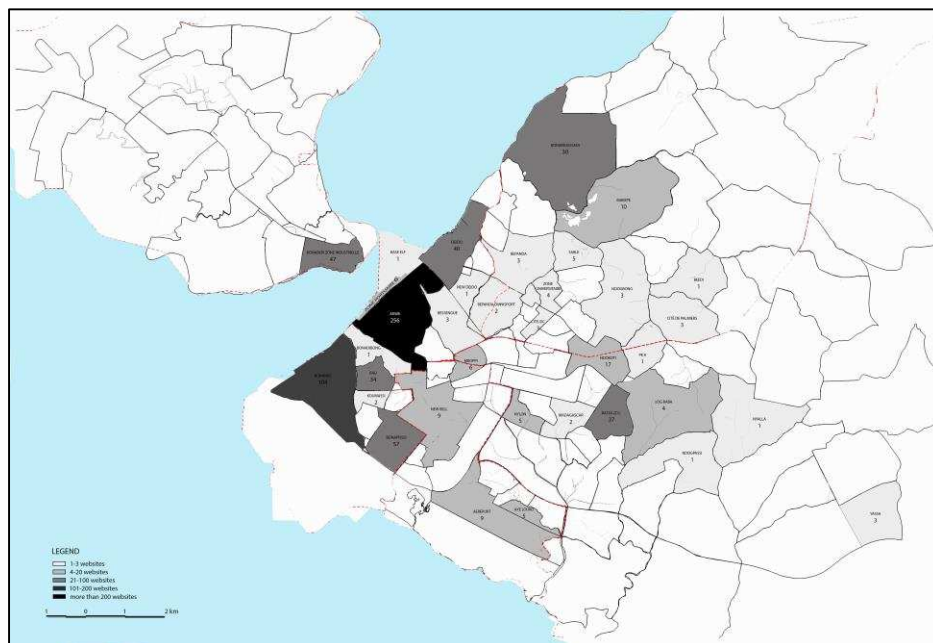


Figure 1 Map of visible and invisible online neighbourhoods of Douala (Pucciarelli et al., 2014). Darker neighbourhoods correspond to parts of the city that are more visible online.

This previous study on the representation of the digital Douala shows a strong gap between the physical and political division of the territory and its online presence. According to Graham (2008), the ways in

which places are represented online influence the way we perceive and interact with them. At the same time such ways create “hybrid spaces”: in fact, the Internet can alter the relative position and visibility of spaces. The capacity of the Internet to reduce distances (e.g.: through online disintermediation), but also to ignore in-between networked spaces, has been regarded both as a developmental enabler, and as “an economic and social revolution with the ability to fundamentally reshape the globe” in geographical terms (Graham, 2008, p. 775). Thus, “the informational shadows of cities”, the silenced and void areas, “truly matter” (Graham, 2013, p. 5) and the lack of online content about, and contributions from, certain places can indicate and further contribute to their marginalization and to the lack of negotiation power of its people.

Analysing silent (and silenced) voices becomes, then, fundamental to understand the geography of development (Graham, 2013). In this study, we will elicit offline social representations of Douala as emerging by locals’ ideas, values and practices, and compare them with the online image of the city.

Social Representations, Urban Spaces and Maps

Social Representations Theory (SRT) (Moscovici, 1961) has been employed as theoretical framework in this study for its implications in investigating both information and communication and spaces phenomena. Social representations (SR) focus on communication is stressed since their very first definition of means to enable individuals to communicate and to classify their world (ibid). Ever since, scholars have been underlining how SR are not only enablers of communication, but they also use it to shape and share phenomena (Laszlo, 1997).

Urban environments, as social representations, are social phenomena, product of different social groups interacting with a space throughout history (Alba, 2011). SRs have been extensively employed to investigate geographical spaces, giving rise to reflections on different topics –social memory anchored in space (Haas, 2001, 2004; Jodelet & Haas, 2007), residents’ urban experiences (Alba, 2002; Rikou, 1997), urban mobility (Marchand & Weiss, 2009), tourist versus residents’ views (De Rosa, 2012; De Rosa & Bocci, 2013), social imaginaries of cartographic maps (Arruda & Alba, 2007), and social, cultural and historical factors that come into play in city image making (Jodelet & Milgram, 1977) – and underlining that the relationship between individuals and environment is mediated by society and is dialectics. Individuals actively and continuously construct their physical environment, where their own identities and values are also negotiated (Farrauto & Ciuccarelli, 2010; Jodelet, 2010; Jodelet & Milgram, 1977). Individuals are social and cultural beings: they give relevance not only their personal perceptions, but also to what their community emphasizes (Alba, 2004; Jodelet, 1982).

At the same time, space has always been represented with maps: physical and mental maps, as language, are socio-cultural products, resulting from interactions with the environment and with other social actors. Milgram and Jodelet (1976), studying individual and collective maps of Paris, noticed that maps do not only express personal experiences of spaces, they also denote individuals’ social resources and give importance to social and integrative spaces. Since Geographical Information Systems (GIS) have been widely adopted, much has been written about the ways in maps and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have interconnected in holding sway over people’s daily lives, their movements, shifts, and perception of urban environments (Castells, 2003; Farrauto & Ciuccarelli, 2010; Pucciarelli & Cantoni, 2012; Zook & Graham, 2007).

This article presents a study of the SR of the city of Douala as perceived by locals. The local, indigenous knowledge about Douala will be analysed and compared against the global, online map of the city.

Methodology

Drawing on Moscovici’s SR Theory (1961) this study is guided by two research questions:

1. What are the social representations local people have of the city of Douala?
2. How are these local representations (mis)aligned with the representations of the city that are produced online?

The theory of SR was used in the data generation phase as well as in the subsequent analysis. According to Moscovici’s tenets of SR (1988), the data generation process elicited a wide set of locally shared ideas, values and practices, both referring to the city and to specific neighbourhoods that were carefully selected on the basis of available city maps. Data were generated during a two-month field-work – November and

December 2013 – through ethnographic field notes, 40 in-depth interviews with local residents, and one focus group with public administration employees.

Data collection

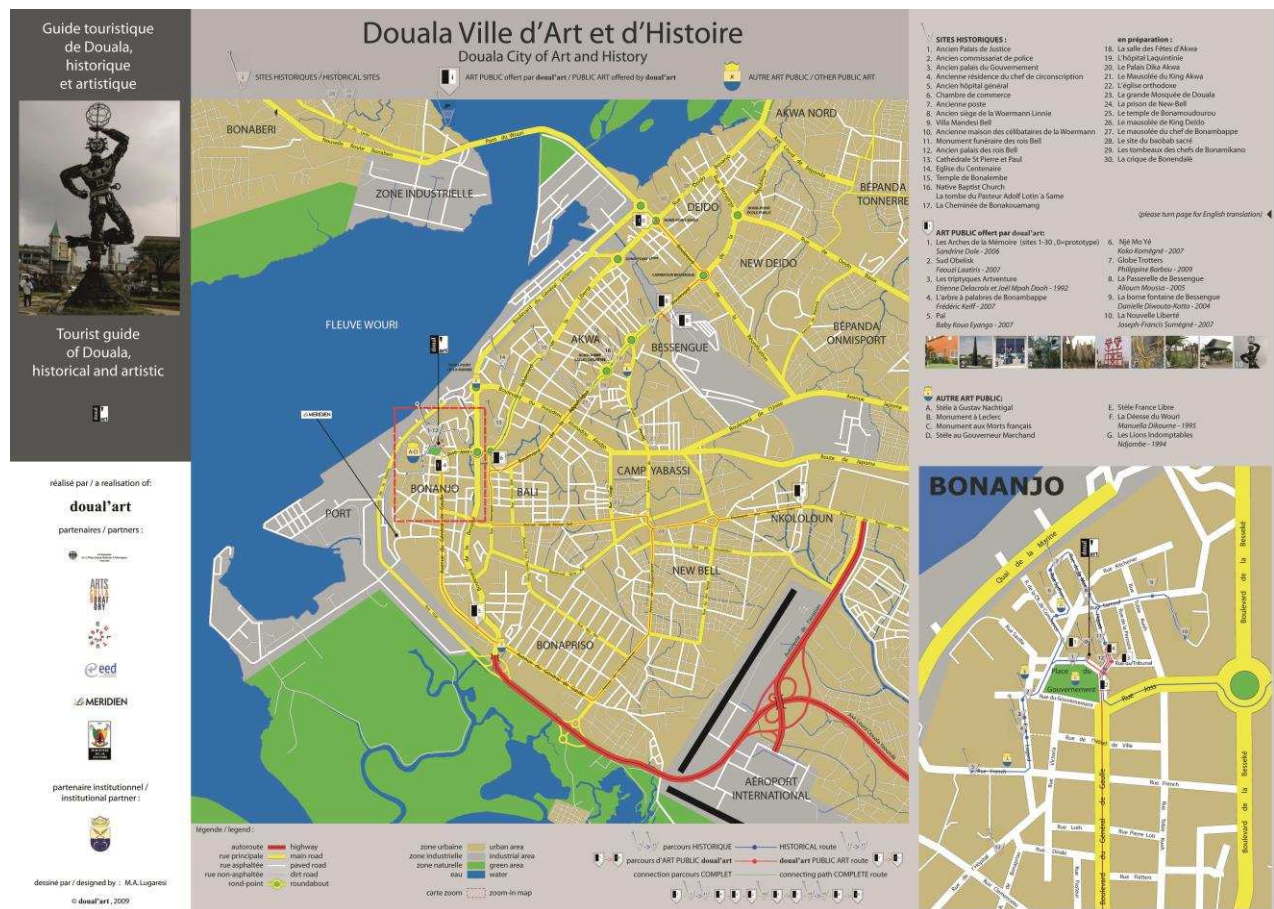


Figure 2 Tourist guide map of Douala

The 22 mapped neighbourhoods have all been visited. Ethnographic observations, photos, and interviews with personalities of the neighbourhood were generated in each of them, for a total of 40 interviews. Interviewees were selected according to two criteria:

1. People who communicate information about the city only orally. This resulted in 30 interviews, mostly with traditional chiefs of the areas (chefs du village) or older people who directly experienced the process of urbanization and were able to narrate the changes in the area since the independence. When necessary, these interviews were integrated with interviews with medium-highly educated personalities who had a deep knowledge of their neighbourhood: history teachers, tourist guides, government officials, retailers, and members of the community who were recommended by other inhabitants because of their community commitment.
2. People who communicate information about the city (also) digitally. This includes one group and nine individual interviews. All interviewees had a specific role in the city (economic, cultural and touristic, real estate, political). Individual interviewees involved a journalist, an essay writer, a photographer, a TV director/cultural producer, a cultural centre communication manager, a destination manager, a hotel owner, the municipality urban centre director, and a politician of the opposition (also owner of a cabaret restaurant). The group interview involved six municipality employees who manage the website of the city (www.douala-city.org) - two working in institutional communication, one from public relations, a cooperation specialist, and two multimedia graphic designers.

The interview protocol for the first group of interviewees included questions on both the neighbourhood and the city, including:

- Tracing a historical pathway of the neighbourhood urbanization process and events marking the memory of its inhabitants;

- Talking about common commercial and socio-cultural practices of the neighbourhood and the city;
- Providing three keywords to describe the neighbourhood and the city;
- Defining the neighbourhood and the city landmarks, relatively to both mobility and tourism.

Based on the professional role of the second group of interviewees, questions have also covered the specificity of their sectors within the city: dealing with tourism, cultural, political, social, and urban issues.

Data analysis

To understand the (offline) social representations local people have of the city of Douala, we employed SRT as “both an approach, a way of looking at social phenomena, and a system describing and explaining them” (Moscovici, 1988, pp. 212-213)

A bottom-up analysis on interviews was performed in order to uncover:

- Local practices — by identifying and describing popular activities in the neighbourhoods and in the city as a whole;
- Popular narratives — by eliciting and explaining keywords representing Douala as well as interviewees’ own neighbourhoods;
- Landmarks of the city — by defining landmarks connected to mobility, tourism and emotions.

In this article, we focus only on the analysis of local practices and popular narratives (points a and b). At first, practices and narratives have been coded separately. “In vivo” codes (capturing the terminology of participants) have been usually preferred, such as “Douala ville cosmopolite” (Douala cosmopolitan city), “Douala capital économique” (Douala economic capital), “Douala la rebelle” (Douala the rebel). The codes have been indexed on the basis of the frequency they have emerged within the interviews. Then, they have been conceptualized into broader, thematic categories. Some leading codes have become concepts: “Douala ville cosmopolite” became a broader concept including different codes, such as “Douala Cameroun in miniatures”, “Douala the crossroad of Cameroun”, “Douala multi-ethnic city”, “Douala tolerant city”, etc. Leading codes related to popular narratives and practices were merged into a single theme in order to provide the complex picture of the city (in the case cited above, the concept “Douala ville cosmopolite” became a theme including also the concept of “immigration” emerging from the analysis of local practices) and to be able to compare it with the digital Douala.

To compare alignments and discrepancies between online and offline representation of the city, similarities and contradictions between the narratives emerging from the analysis of the digital Douala (coming from the interpretation of online visible and invisible practices, their origins, and the neighbourhood where they are located) were compared against locals’ SRs of the city.

Outcomes

The ethnographic fieldwork and interviews showed that locals’ SR of the neighbourhoods is quite different from the one represented on the map. The 22 neighbourhoods appearing on the available map were not enough to reflect the socio-cognitive perceptions of the locals, who perceived them only as container areas of 118 neighbourhoods.

Thematically, locals’ SR highlight how the city of Douala is like a millefeuille (named after a cake meaning “a thousand sheets”), presenting several layers of complexity:

«The city of Douala is a millefeuille, meaning that there are various layers, it is a millefeuille to define its complexity; it is possible to stroll it in a horizontal way, simply like that; and then to descend from the first layer up to internal one. The model of the millefeuille is an intent to do a chronic fiction. Altogether, you have all the cultural, economic, social parts, all is overlapped and comes together at the same time, all is *here, all develops here [...], and it lights up at the same time [...]* it is not possible to write it in a homogeneous way. »¹. (L. Manga, personal communication, Douala, December 2013).

In the next sections, we will present Douala SRs according to the main shared themes emerged by the analysis.

¹ All quotes from interviews have been translated from French by the authors.

Douala ville cosmopolite, Douala capital économique

Douala is defined “the cosmopolitan city” and “the economic capital” likewise Paris is defined the “capital of love” in the Western world. These are the leitmotifs most frequently used by locals to define their city. The two concepts seem to have been learnt by heart and are automatically associated to the city, similarly to the song recorded at the beginning of a tape.

These definitions talk about a socially shared set of values, ideas and practices: first, portraying Douala as a cosmopolitan city is to consider the city as the neuralgic point of a country characterized by huge national and international immigration flows of people in search of jobs, cheap labour, and better life conditions. The cosmopolitan Douala is indeed often described as the crossroad of Cameroun, the “Africa in miniature”, hosting different cities within the same environment as reported by the writer Lionel Manga: «there are several cities within this very same city today» (L. Manga, personal communication, Douala, December 2013).

Second, Douala presents a heterogeneous human mosaic (Domosh et al., 2011): the adjective “cosmopolitan” embeds the concept of diversity of the population, a multi-ethnic city where people from different villages and regions of Cameroun, as well as from different countries, coexist, and where the native ethnic group, the dualas, are a minority if compared to the immigrant population: «here, the *autochthones that we call “the Doualas” are a minority in relationship to everyone else*», as suggested by the TV Director and cultural producer Ndoumbe Vincent (personal communication, Douala, December 2013). Defining Douala as cosmopolitan offers the image of a city that is tolerant, welcoming, with an intrinsic attitude towards international integration and acceptance of differences. This extremely positive image given by locals is in contrast with the traditional problems and conflicts related to ethnicity and land occupation.

The cosmopolitan representation of Douala is strongly related to the definition of the city as the economic capital of the country. «The city life of Douala begins with the activity of the harbour», suggests Valère Epée, professor of linguistic and master of the Sawa tradition (personal communication, Douala, November 2013). However, the concept of economic capital can be read at different levels: on the one hand, the public administration focuses the meaning “economic city” outwards, towards global concepts, emphasizing Douala as the industrial and economic heart of Cameroun, a commercial gateway for European business, which is attractive for investments, and is competitive at the global level. Douala is a city that allows foreigners to work with a certain freedom to operate (without strict laws and infringements). The main urban investments are often subcontracted to foreign companies (in particular from France and China), who make huge profit. Therefore, foreigners just consider Douala a city where to work and sleep.

On the other hand, inhabitants focus the meaning of economic capital inwards, towards daily practices. Douala is the city of job opportunities, where people come to get a better life: «there is always a strategy to earn 2000 CFA²» (F. Etienne, personal communication, Douala, November 2013). Self-motivation and flexibility are, indeed, essential to get a job in a city where, despite poverty and a high unemployment rate, 73.8% of the economy is estimated to be produced within the informal market (Communauté Urbaine Douala, 2008).

The city creates opportunities by offering people, especially youngsters, the chance to “*se débrouiller*” (scrape along), living or surviving with two or three extemporaneous jobs such as improvised fruit, peanuts or quinquilleries sellers. Instability and economic uncertainty are connected with the high crime rate that characterize Douala.

Violence and urban disorder

Another recurring theme is the representation of Douala as an unsafe and insecure city, because of the overflowing violence and the so-called “urban disorder”. Crime-related violence is diffused in almost every neighbourhood. Crime is represented by the so-called banditism, including physical and verbal violence, robberies, pick-pocketing and aggressions. Criminals are rarely caught and punished, expression of a widespread corruption, which often allows the bandits to be released from jail on the same day they are arrested. Popular justice is the only frequently enforced action to fight crime, leading to public executions. Criminals tied up in tyres or punched until they faint and then set on fire near gas stations are not infrequent. These linciages publiques (public lynching) are not stopped by the police. In some neighbourhoods, the consistency of popular justice has dramatically decreased the crime rate, as Fouku Etienne, chief of the Brazzaville neighbourhood, declared.

² Around 3 euros.

Douala is often described as an anarchical city, where risks and dangers are usually related to urban disorder. Frank Danjou, French real estate manager, restaurant owner, and inhabitant of Youpwé, specifies that:

«It is not about chaos, the proper term is anarchy. The anarchy that reigns here, as you see, I love it, this anarchy which means that there is no order, no rules. Anarchy is societal. Anarchy creates opportunities» (personal communication, Douala, December 2013).

The definition of urban disorder includes practices and social behaviours related to traffic, informal markets, urbanization processes, and unhealthy environments within the city.

Transport issues

The most common transport means in Douala are taxis and moto-taxis. The complete absence of public transport, the lack of street infrastructures (lighting, traffic signs, paved streets, sidewalks) and traffic rules enforcement make of Douala a very undisciplined city traffic-wise, and almost impracticable for pedestrians. As reported by Samuel Eitel Tak'A Manga, retired employee at the Ministry of Finance, who lives in Akwa:

«when people circulate anyhow, when public lightning lacks in the neighborhoods, when the police is absent, when you cannot quickly access to some places because of traffic jams or road conditions, this generates security problems.» (personal communication, Douala, November 2013).

Referring to the Ancien Route of Bonaberi, Edouard Yetchang, chief of the New Deïdo neighbourhood, declares that:

«this road does not allow pedestrians to walk without being scared, but what we are witnessing is that there are people on motorcycles who are going to compete aggressively with vehicles» (personal communication, Douala, December 2013).

The urban chaos is often due to bendskineurs, the fearless moto-taxi drivers who have mobilised the city starting from the 1990s and whose circulation has been forbidden in some neighbourhoods (Bonanjo, Bali, and Deïdo) in order to avoid chaos. However, Samuel Eitel Tak'A Manga (and the majority of wealthy people), claims that:

«These bikes, there are hundreds, thousands that ride messy, cars too are driving messy, in a way that here there is the absolute mess» (personal communication, Douala, November 2013).

The lower middle class prefers using motorbikes albeit their constant traffic violations (no driving licences, no helmets, driving in opposite traffic direction), because it is cheaper and faster in the pervasive traffic jams (embouteillage) of the city, and it permits to reach unpaved streets, in neighbourhood where cars could not access. Transportation across the city is quite expensive, so people move throughout their neighbourhoods only to satisfy most essential needs (going to work, to the market, to visit relatives and friends, etc.).



Figure 3 Traffic in the neighbourhood of Ndokoti, Douala (Sados, 2013).

Informal markets

Informal markets in Douala represent around 70% of the economic activities. According to the majority of the people interviewed, informal markets are one of the major causes of urban disorder: peddlers, who are not given public spaces dedicated to markets, occupy any available spot, improvising their stands on sidewalks, near crossroads or beside formal businesses, thus impeding people to walk:

«Especially in some remote areas, such as Ndokoti, which are not very closed to the center, it is usual to find the road completely occupied by the market. There is no way to circulate by car, because there are buggers who arrive at the market, they settle wherever they want, without considering at all the sidewalk at the point to occupy the carriageway» (Djatche André Roosevelt, employee at the CUD – Municipality of Douala, personal communication, Douala, November 2013).

Informal markets also involve crime diffusion and increase pickpocketing incidents.

City urbanization

Descriptions of Douala as an “anarchic city” usually refer to houses: «the urbanisation has completely overtaken the authorities» (Lionel Manga, personal communication, Douala, December 2013).

Except for the colonial quarters of Bonanjo, Bali, Bonapriso and the recent urbanisation of Bonamoussadi, Kotto and Maképé, Douala’s houses are built on terrains with no cadastral value, having been confiscated by the State to Sawa’s traditional chiefs, but still sold to the population and bought again from tribal chiefs. Purchase agreements signed between private citizens in the last 50 years do not have any legal value.

«In the majority of cases they are people who have bought (the terrain) in their original village, and that here are more or less squatters. They may hold titles, they have documents, but they are half-titles, as they are not official, because they have bought them from the chief of blocks, or the chief of the neighbourhood or the chief of

the village. This means that the property of the land has been negotiated, that people have paid someone for what they have bought, but they have papers without any official value, as they are not regularly registered at the real estate registry» (F. Danjou, personal communication, Douala, December 2013).

The lack of real estate titles is one of the most serious issues contested by the population, because it worsens social disparity. Apart from the unlawful buildings which characterize Douala depending on the problem of the land property, the demographic growth of the population over the last 50 years has brought to a horizontal urbanization of the city, causing deforestation and the occupation of high flood risk areas. Therefore, houses have been built in a spontaneous and not organized way, next to each other, using recycled materials and in areas where the access to basic services such as drinking water, electricity and paved streets is quite limited or, in some cases, does not exist.

Unhealthy environment

In Douala the constant violation of civic codes by inhabitants while travelling, selling goods and building houses generates major consequences on the environment. The difficult climate and the absence of environmental education contribute to make of Douala a very dirty and unhealthy city.

Moreover, as reported by Danielle Hélène Ngondjo Son from the institutional communication office at the Municipality of Douala:

«The negative image which is often saddled on Douala, is that of a “ville poubelle” (trash city). This is because people do not put much emphasis on the quality of life they lead; you will easily see someone eating a banana and throwing peels on the ground without embarrassment; and even if you tell him, he will answer that “Hysacam³” will do it» (personal communication, Douala, November 2013).

Every year precipitations reach around 1600 cm. Many neighbourhoods are built on muddy and argillous land. Floods are regular. In addition, garbage is thrown on the ground and is not collected by Hysacam, established only in 2007, where roads are not paved. The lack of sewers and drainage systems contribute to retain raining water and garbage, creating puddles and dirty drains that become cove of mosquitos, insects, mice and diseases. Caroline Nadège Ngouegni, journalist and tourism guide in Douala, reports the difficult mission of respecting the environment in Douala:

«I take the example of a neighbour who was pouring dirty water with trash waste in the gutters, suddenly I stopped her telling that this was not normal. You have a garbage bin and then there is Hysacam that pass by here to collect garbage; what does it cost you to gather your garbage, put it in a bin, and pour the water into the gutter?» (Personal communication, Douala, November 2013).

«Douala la belle, Douala la rebelle»

According to Mathias Ngamo, journalist of Douala,

«the city of Douala is like a beautiful woman who does not take care of *herself*... who has everything to be nice, but she *doesn't put* the right make up *on her*, she *doesn't* take care enough of herself» (personal communication, Douala, December 2013).

“Douala la belle” (Douala beautiful city) and “Douala la rebelle” (Douala the rebel city) are other two redundant definitions given by the population anytime they are asked to identify some keywords in order to describe their city.

“Douala la belle” refers to the capability of the city to be attractive, both in economic and cultural terms. Locals depict Douala as the most modern city of Cameroon, a changing and cutting-edge city in terms of urbanization, roads, electricity, technology, internet connection. It's a place where you can find everything to the point it becomes a stressful city. At the same time it is a fast and living city «full of perfumes, full of colours, full of life» (L. Manga, personal communication, Douala, December 2013). Douala is beautiful also because it has a history to tell and to exhibit through its colonial architecture, as well as a culture, the Sawa, to preserve through its music and traditional events (in particular the Ngondo). In the last 20 years

³ Municipality waste collection service.

Douala witnessed also an impressive production of public art installations. “We argue that a city must have a human face, and that public art installations contribute to humanize the city, to provide an *aesthetic soul to the environment, not as a decoration, but as an aesthetic reflective marker*” asserts Marilyn Douala Bell, president of doual’art, a locally-based art institution, which has produced around 30 permanent public artworks and 50 temporal installations; it has reconstructed the history of 30 colonial monuments of the city and organized a cultural-touristic path around them (personal communication, 8 January 2013).

Monumental installations have been set up in the middle of traffic roundabouts (Fig. 4); murals or small-scale sculptures have been placed on passageways of informal settlements, architectural installations have been integrated near marginalised residential neighbourhoods. According to the citizens, public art has generated an impact on the urban transformations, contributing to improve the reputation of some districts, increasing economical activities, and encouraging the municipality to take care of places that otherwise would have remained isolated (including for example the wasting collection system around installations).



Figure 4 La nouvelle liberté, Joseph-Francis Sumegné

«If I can add something, I would say actions like this (referring to the work of the artist Tracey Rose within a primary school) are really good. They awaken. They awaken great people, as well as small children. » (Ms. David, teacher of The CBC Babylon school11, personal communication December 2012).

At the same time, people report that the beautiful Douala completely lack of cultural and touristic public policies and infrastructures. Douala is not a tourist destination but it's a compulsory hub for people who are visiting Cameroon. The majority of tourists in Douala are business travellers or people visiting their family, and their touristic paths are limited to Bonanjo historical places and Bonapriso restaurants.

Douala “la rebelle” mainly refers to the city as the centre of the civil disobedience of the country «*everybody knows that the majority of Douala’s inhabitants are against the power*» reports Cyrille Sam Mbaka, vice-president of the Union Démocratique Camerounaise, the first opposition party in Cameroon (personal communication, Douala, December 2013).

The biggest political opposition campaigns started in Douala: the ones bringing to the independence of Cameroon in 1960s (thanks to which Douala is also considered the city of the national heroes), the events causing the political repressions of the last 20 years, such as the so-called ghost cities in 1990-1991, the terror regime caused by the commendement operationel of 2001, and the émeutes de la faims in 2008 (Konings, 1996; Malaquais, 2009; ONDH, 2009; Simone, 2005).

Douala is not only a rebel city, it is also a city of conflict. This representation refers to tribal problems between the native Dualas and immigrants coming from the west region of Cameroun, the Bamiléké:

«We are not all Cameroonians the same way. We don't live Douala in the same way. There is not a homogeneity of view» (V. Ndoumbe, personal communication, Douala, December 2013).

The conflict between the natives and the Bamiléké is very deep: they acquired more lands and higher social position than the natives and, today, they are more numerous than the Dualas. Immigrants are not emotionally attached to the city, they do not feel to belong to the city:

«when they will die, they will be moved to their original village: within the city everybody is foreigner» (V. Epée, personal communication, Douala, November 2013).

L'ambiance de la joie

Despite people's everyday life difficulties, in Douala a general optimism is perceived between young people: «despite pockets are empty, we get by» asserts Ngouegni while she describes the charm of the city (personal communication, Douala, November 2013). In Douala there are no cultural entertainment centres like cinemas and theatres. There are cultural centres or art spaces (e.g., doual'art or the Mam gallery), but the public is not numerous, elitist and often lack education more than interest in art.

At the same time, «in Douala, there is the “ambiance”, isn't it?» stresses Victor Ndjhoya, communication manager of doual'art (personal communication, Douala, November 2013). Ambiance refers to the night-time atmosphere reflecting in the profusion of bars, discos, restaurants and cheap stands, where music and lights combine with food, alcohol and women. Eating, drinking, dancing and making love are the activities that are set in Douala's *rues de la joie* (literally “street of happiness”), attended by thousands of young people. The biggest and oldest *rue de la joie* is in Deïdo, followed by the *rue de la joie-Bali*, more chic and popular among artists and foreigners, until the more recent, but not less popular, *Ange Rafael*, near the University.

«The rue de la joie-Deïdo, is simply special. It's a place you cannot find everywhere. The immigration, people hanging out, the delicious grilled fish, so much fun. Deïdo is really a pleasant place, where there is a melting pot of people, and where you don't feel observed. When you are in Deïdo, you are part of the crowd, differently from what happens in other neighborhoods where it's so easy to label people.» (V. Ndjhoya, personal communication, Douala, November 2013).

One of the most frequently stressed points is that in the *rues de la joie* nobody is a stranger. Everybody feels at ease and ethnic conflicts have no followers. Security is still an issue, but more for foreigners than for locals. Almost each popular neighbourhood has its own *rue de la joie*, but some are only popular within the same neighbourhood. Also Akwa has its own ambiance: the neighbourhood where foreign sailors have always gone ashore and stopped, «Akwa is the heart of prostitution» suggests the writer Lionel Manga (personal communication, Douala, December 2013). However, entertainment in Akwa is also made of ambitious young people trying to enter in exclusive, expensive and well-served clubs and discos.

In Deïdo and Ange Rafael, the so-called “snack bars” are very popular: free entry or very cheap clubs, they are considered more exclusive than bars, but less than Akwa's discos. While adults and old people meet to have a beer in bars, young university students prefer snack bars to meet and dance. Contrarily to bars, snack bars open only at night and are more expensive and luxurious, as declared by Clement Totchak, a second-year university student living in the Zone Universitaire:

«Within the snack bar, there is the luxury. The luxury is everything that young people love: furniture, leather chairs, giant and flat TV screens, all kinds of services, which are managed by woman in the majority of cases. You can find differences also on the clothing style, which conforms to the luxury.» (personal communication, Douala, November 2013).

Seen by the youngsters as the main entertainment offer of the city, gathering thousands of people, the *ambiance de la joie* is considered by adults as a synonym of urban chaos, where bars, snack bars and discos create a noisy environment, characterized by violence, prostitution and alcohol.

Social inequalities and the quest for well-being

The last theme emerging from the interviews is the description of the city as a place of injustice, corruption and social polarization between those employed and unemployed people.

«The dynamic in Douala is the “trouble for life”, it’s the informality, it’s survival, is the research of daily sustenance.» (V. Ndoumbe, personal communication, Douala, December 2013).

Social inequalities begin with the urban management and the inability to run and supervise projects by the public administration. According to Cyrille Sam Mbaka, in Douala the «first stone» philosophy rules in politics:

«Everything for them is to start. It’s for this reason that the policy of the “first stone” is not as good as the inauguration policy. This is because, when the “first stone” is managed by certain Cameroonians, you can be sure that it will never end» (personal communication, Douala, December 2013)

This corrupt public system increases inhabitants’ poverty because it does not guarantee access to new jobs, essential needs (water, food, health), and public services (electricity, roads, security). Moreover, a widespread system of privileges and references is part of private life, allowing easier and faster access to information and services to some and excluding others.

These inequalities directly feed the so-called Douala's dream. Different from the American dream of self-confidence and dedication, the Douala dream implies a future dominated by the god of money, where value is given in making money without effort, success, and belongings. According to many chiefs, this model is caused by the modernization of the city and the loss of ancestral values.

At the same time, inequalities increase the birth of organizations in the poorest neighbourhoods. People participate to the so called reunions simply to meet in a well-known place, out of the house and the working place, where drinking something is not mandatory to have the possibility to stop and discuss. Also, people take part to organizations according to their interests, which can be related to the neighbourhood management, to the culture or ethnic group they belong to, or to their social status, like students’ organizations.

«They talk among them, they collect money (the so-called tontines), but they will never bring an action which allows (political ideas) to come out, and their parents tell them: “when you go there, above all, don’t start doing politics”. Because doing politics, means that soon the BIR⁴ can arrive.» (L. Manga, personal communication, Douala, December 2013).

All members are expected to pay a registration fee, then meet periodically and collect money to fulfil members’ needs. They are real microcredit organisations, where the member who receives money on loan is forced to repay it and to lend a sum in turn to another member.

«The environment here is the mutual help, people do not have much, but they are pooling for something, there are still some forms of values. Regarding the so-called tontines it’s not about cooperation, it is not the same thing; it is about sharing with the obligation to repay; and if you don’t reimburse, so, they could kill you.» (F. Danjou, personal communication, Douala, December 2013).

Sometimes organizations, and students’ ones in particular, are just aimed to arrange parties, courses to support students or environmental awareness activities.

Discussion: comparing the digital and the physical Douala

The analysis presented in these sections highlights important alignments and misalignments between online and offline representations of Douala. Beyond territorial differences, the narrative of Douala as financial capital is clearly emergent both in the oral and in the digital city. However, some differences

⁴ Bataillon d’Intervention Rapide, a special military group working under the direction of the president Paul Biya.

emerge in the way (i) offline representations do not consider banks, while they result to be the business most represented online; (ii) the digital city does not represent the whole informal market, which is the most frequent represented offline activity. Offline representations connected to the economic importance of the city are not linked to formally established businesses, but with the city's dynamic job market and business possibilities.

The strong offline narrative of Douala as a cosmopolitan city does not appear in the online analysis. Being "cosmopolitan" is mainly connected, in offline local views, to national and international migration. Internal migration is indeed an important phenomenon as, since 1987, the number of people coming from other regions surpassed the autochthonous population. The representation of the online city, instead, shows an important international presence of businesses - 27.1% of the online players come from abroad (see: Pucciarelli et al., 2014) -, while the melting pot of Cameroonians ethnic groups is not evident - only 13.8% of online players come from Cameroonian cities outside Douala and 59.1% from Douala itself -.

As a side-note, the cosmopolitan treat of Douala is not reflected by its touristic offer. Offline, a lack of infrastructures and of tourism policies are highlighted, mirrored by a very scarce presence of hospitality practices - 5.6% - within the whole online landscape. Communication, media and technology online foreign presence is quite high - 30.2% and 28.6% respectively -, underlining how countries of the Southern hemisphere still strongly depend on Northern countries in these areas. Yet, more than half of these activities (51.2% communication and media and 55.1% for technology) are created and registered in Cameroon, showing local efforts in creating and growing an independent media scene.

Transportation is an emerging theme, both online and offline. Offline representations underline how Douala's urban chaos mostly depends on a lack of public transport, the presence of *benskineurs* and the absence of traffic regulation enforcement. This is somehow confirmed by the fact that the online presence of this theme is mainly dependent on international activities, reinforcing the idea of a lack of formally organized infrastructure at the local level.

The themes of security, public administration and entertainment are almost invisible in the representation of the digital city. While the lack of public administration is not surprising in the light of the diffused representation of Douala's urban chaos, the gap between the online presence of security and entertainment activities - 0.8% and 0.6% respectively - and the narratives told by the inhabitants is striking. Offline representations depict a city that is strongly violent and unsafe, due to criminality, informal settlements and unhealthy environment. At the same time, they present a sparkling and young entertainment scene, the *ambiance de la joie*. Bars, snack bars and nightclubs do not appear in online narratives even if they are attended by young and more tech savvy people. Finally, although in Douala very few institutions are involved in promoting art and culture, they are very active in communicating their activities and their voice is starting to have an impact in the online representation of the city.

Conclusions

This study analyzes the hybrid space of the city of Douala, where different, complementary images of the city interweave: not just the digital and the physical spaces, where our study took off, but also the visible and invisible ones, the formal and informal, the local and the international. All these images need to be read, as suggested by our interviewees, as a *millefeuille*, thousand layers depicting an image of the city.

The analysis of SRs of Douala by offline and online producers of information allowed us to unveil the practices and the cultural richness of the physical Douala, which are largely missing in the map of the digital city. People's daily life, practices, ideas and values, such as the need and concerns about security, leisure activities, and the informal economy are not emerging from the representation of the city that is transmitted online, and they are probably transmitted and negotiated through different, more informal communication channels (e.g.: word of mouth, radio).

The same way, even overlapping narratives about Douala, such as the most diffused image of Douala as financial capital, can, in fact, assume different meanings when read separately or compared to the practices that contribute to shape this image of the city. While the socio-economic activities emerging at the digital level mostly reflect either a formal aspect of people daily lives or are addressed to an external, international audience, the economic activities emerging by our SR analysis show an image of the city where many informal financial activities take place. The loud voice of banks and insurances within the digital Douala is not a shared social practice: local people do not use formal financial institutions, which are not part of their SR of the city. What is missing within the online representation of the city is often

mostly related to the sphere of informality of locals' daily lives. At this stage, the different, sometimes converging, narratives of the city need to be read in a complementary way, and understood according to the different perspectives and consumptions they refer to.

Limits of this study include the selection of the interviewees, including only one local representative social group - the chiefs of the neighbourhoods – and the use of the only available map of the city – a touristic one – as the point of reference for the analysis of the visible and invisible spaces. While we think that more detailed representations would be given by employing an instrument showing all the 118 neighbourhoods of the city and among more social groups, we believe the results of this analysis to shed light on interesting phenomena of a city that is only recently developing its online face.

We are, in fact, at an unripe, intermediate stage of the “hybrid Douala”, where the virtual space seems still not to be affecting the way in which inhabitants experience the physical space. The majority of local people do not benefit of most of the information that is available online, as that is not part of their local practices. The image of the digital city, thus, reflects the gap between those who have and those who have not access to ICTs, and might reclose the latter in the shadow of the “informal city” even further, leaving their voices underrepresented in the global online discourses. However, the presence of a strong local ownership of certain digital activities (e.g.: communication and media, technology, art and culture) suggests that the online image of the city is in the process of being constructed and developed locally. As the spaces of the city start appearing online, the process of hybridization between the physical and the digital Douala is – slowly – taking place, and offline and online narratives, now rather detached, will possibly influence each other and communicate to global online narratives a pretty different image of the city.

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