

Urban Anthropology: Context, Ethnography and Interpretations

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Abstract: This essay summarizes aspects of a possible urban anthropology in Moroccan cities today. It looks at teaching, research project proposals, methods of fieldwork and the construction of texts. The knowledge of spoken language and historical perspective is emphasized. Kinship is seen as an especially useful way of generating knowledge and biographies. The article draws upon the author's experience of research in Moroccan and Tunisian urban settings and provides examples of his finding a voice that cuts across the lines of academic disciplines.

Keywords: Urban Fieldwork, Preparation, Writing-up, Language, Historical Context, Kinship.

The following discussion will address three dimensions of urban anthropology, (1) teaching, (2) problems and hypotheses of a research proposal, and (3) fieldwork and the construction of a text. I will begin with a brief account of the general context and conclude with some personal remarks regarding my research experience and interpretations of the results.

In his preface to *La globalización desde abajo: la otra economía mundial*¹ Keith Hart notes that three percent of the world's population (approximately one billion) lived in cities in 1800.² In 2015, the world's population reached seven billion; fifty percent are estimated to be inhabitants of cities. The human population growth over that period has averaged one and half percent annually and the growth of cities two percent. The average increase of energy production of three percent is double the rate of population increase. Among the main overall consequences, the distribution of increased energy production and economic growth has been grossly unequal. The large-scale organization of this process has taken the social forms of empires, nation-states, cities, corporations, capitalist markets, machine industry, global finance and telecommunication networks. Estimated demographic shifts from 1800 to 2100: in 1800, Europe (including Russia) had a population of 400 million, three times that of Africa, a quarter of the world's inhabitants, or thirty-six percent including the lands of the new European settlements, and

1. Keith Hart, "Prefacio," in *La globalización desde abajo: la otra economía mundial* eds. Carlos Alba Vega, Gutavo Lins Ribeiro, y Gordon Mathews (México: El Colegio de México, 2015), 9-26.

2. Ibid., 9-10.

it controlled four-fifths of inhabited land areas. By 2100, Asia is projected to have forty-three percent of the world's population (down from six percent in 2000), Africa three percent, and the New World, Europe, Russia and Oceania eighteen percent. Europe's share without Russia will be six percent.

Social and technical conditions in most places in today's world have brought about extensive urbanization, as well as the realities and effects of rapid transport and universal media. At the same time, what is now termed the 'informal economy' exists on a very wide scale in a world that has become arguably lawless, unregulated by state-made rules of law, locally, nationally or globally.

In such a given historical and global context, an urban anthropology might well concentrate on the variety of ways in which people experience economic life. For example, one could employ ethnographic descriptions of contemporary realities to elucidate the complexities of social networks and classes.

Some years ago, when I taught urban anthropology to English-speaking students, the main studies were those that focused on the United States and the Chicago School, particularly its slums and ghettos.³ I tried then to consider the methodologies and theories of these studies in regard to some of the cities I knew in the Middle East and North Africa and to my own work as a social historian of Salé in Morocco,⁴ and later as an anthropologist in Ksibet El Mediouni, a small town in Tunisia. Concerning Salé, much of the literature was concerned with the "Muslim City" model that was developed in the studies of Orientalists, like my mentor Gustave E. von Grunebaum,⁵ and in the ground-breaking work on social and economic structures in late medieval Aleppo and Damascus by Ira Lapidus.⁶ Soon thereafter the research by Hildred and Clifford Geertz, Lawrence. Rosen, Paul Rabinow, and Thomas Dichter⁷ on Sefrou and Dale Eickelman in Boujad,⁸ among others, were

3. For an overview, Ulf Hannerz, *Exploring the City: Inquiries Toward an Urban Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

4. Kenneth Brown, *People of Salé: Tradition and Change in a Moroccan City, 1830-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); idem. *Les gens de Salé: Tradition et changement dans une ville marocaine de 1830 à 1930* (Casablanca: Eddif, 2001).

5. Gustave E. von Grunebaum, "The Structure of the Muslim Town," in *Islam, Essays in the Nature and Growth of a Cultural Tradition*, 141-58 (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1961).

6. Ira Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

7. Thomas W. Dichter, *Despite Good Intentions: Why Development Assistance to the Third World Has Failed* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

8. Dale Eickelman, *The Middle East: An Anthropological Approach* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1981); idem., *Moroccan Islam. Tradition and Society in a Pilgrimage Center* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976); idem., *Knowledge and Power in Morocco* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

beginning to appear, and they opened new horizons for teaching and thinking about an urban anthropology in the region, particularly in Morocco.

Equally significant in terms of general anthropological approaches to the Middle East were certain classical themes: honor, shame,⁹ kinship, patronage, hospitality, family, inheritance, friendship,¹⁰ gender segregation,¹¹ subordination of women, etc... Nonetheless, on the whole, studies of these themes in the Middle East and North Africa region were not considered by the anthropological mainstream to have contributed to its concern with theory.¹² Moreover, a lurking suspicion of a 'regional or cultural essentialism' in focusing on these categories – stereotypes of national cultures – was in the air and took shape.¹³

Clifford Geertz's great achievement in his writings on Morocco, as well as Indonesia, was to study local cultures in their own terms, and for their own sake. However, he did theorize, sometimes in my view wrongheadedly, but perhaps usefully from the heuristic point of view. I refer to his comparison in *Islam Observed* and to his generalized view of the *bazaar* economy in Muslim countries. He proposes with some eloquence that comparison is "being at once alike and yet very different, a kind of commentary on character,"¹⁴ and he poses the problem of the explanation of difference in those terms. Rodinson had another more succinct, clearer formulation: "every group is specific, but none is exceptional."¹⁵

Undoubtedly in a time of transition, theory and method in general social anthropology will continue to constitute the basic dimension of learning the discipline, as well as in urban anthropology. One maintains the conviction that theory differentiates projects based on fieldwork from other practices of ethnography, such as travel writing, novels or journalism – that the analytic

9. Jean G. Peristiany, *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2018).

10. Eric Wolf, "Kinship, Friendship and Patron-Client Relations," in *The Social Anthropology of Complex Societies*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Routledge, 1966), 1-22.

11. Germaine Tillon, *The Republic of Cousins: Women's Oppression in Mediterranean Society* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1983).

12. Albera, Dionigi, Anton Blok and Christian Bromberger. *L'anthropologie de la Méditerranée* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001).

13. Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation State* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

14. Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 4; idem., *The Social History of an Indonesian Town* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1965); Clifford Geertz, Hildred Geertz, and Lawrence Rosen. *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Susan Slyomovics, "Introduction to Clifford Geertz on Morocco: 'Why Sefrou? Why Anthropology? Why me?'," *The Journal of North African Studies* 14, 3-4 (2009): 317-25.

15. See his Preface to Abdellah Laroui, "Préface," in *L'idéologie arabe contemporaine* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1967).

method is necessary and can be objectified.¹⁶ Nonetheless, at least some anthropologists think that “fieldwork and theory aren’t what they used to be.”¹⁷ Theory becomes a rhetorical strategy that may be taught, a strategy in which explanation rather than insight emerges as the method to formulate questions. At the same time, the teaching of the ‘history’ of theory ought to demystify the notion of its cohesiveness, making it into an ethnographic object. For example, the complex urban entanglement of familiar categories such as kinship, ethnicity,¹⁸ class, and nation,¹⁹ may be considered as demonstrations of the difficulties in applying separate theoretical analyses. Theories, to use a familiar metaphor, thus become various recipes for cooking raw data.

In all events, theory has continued to be considered the foundation of the discipline. When I returned from field research in Morocco as a Fellow at the University of Chicago, I wanted to sit-in on “Systems,”²⁰ the obligatory graduate course for the formation of so-called professional anthropologists. When I introduced myself to the professor, David Schneider, author of *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*,²¹ as someone who was writing his thesis and working with Professor Geertz, I was refused permission to attend because the course was for what he called specialists, and I was informed, half-jokingly, that, in any case, Geertz was a poet, rather than an anthropologist!

In training students and preparing them for the field as well as writing a thesis, it does seem to me that the tried and tested exercise of composing and presenting a research proposal, which focuses on hypotheses formulated on the basis of theory and methodology, remains the best method. At the same time, the student should show a critical awareness that these are speculative and that an open-mindedness in the field and in writing-up is essential. Max Gluckman would talk of this in terms of the necessity to “follow one’s nose” in fieldwork. In studying any aspect of a city, some knowledge of the spoken language and

16. Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1988).

17. R. Jon McGee and Richard L. Warms, eds, *Theory in Social and Cultural Anthropology: An Encyclopedia* (London: Sage, 2013); Dominic Boyer, James D. Faubion and George E. Marcus, *Theory Can Be More Than It Used to Be: Learning anthropology’s Method in a Time of Transition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

18. Emrys L. Peters, *The Bedouin of Cyrenaica: Studies in Personal and Corporate Power*. Edited by Jack Goody and Emanuel Marx (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

19. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

20. Jane Schneider, “Anthropology and the Cold War Mediterranean,” *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 41, 1 (2012): 107-29.

21. David M. Schneider, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984); see also Meyer Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order: the Legacy of Lewis Henry Morgan* (New York: Routledge, 1969); Eric Wolf, “Kinship, Friendship and Patron-Client Relations,” in *The Social Anthropology of Complex Societies*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Routledge, 1966), 1-22.; Marshall Sahlins, “What Kinship Is (part one),” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17, 1 (2011): 2-19.

of the historical context will initially have to be attained. Once in the field, this knowledge needs to increase gradually and makes possible the recognition of 'smells' to follow, of ideas for constructing a thesis and of ways to go about discovering the information needed to make sense of the subject.

I must admit to a long absence from actively teaching and preparing graduate students for the field. 'Long' means almost 30 years! I'm well aware that many changes in these matters have taken place among those engaged in transmitting the knowledge and practice of anthropology. I know these only partially. However, in the interim, I have been engaged in the study of quite a few Mediterranean cities, the experiences and results of which I would like to share with the hope that they may contribute to the urban anthropology of Morocco.²²

In the initial study that I did for a thesis on the city of Salé (1965-67), I came from training in Islamic Studies. But I had been equally influenced by reading texts from social history and anthropology, in particular, by the work of Oscar Lewis, with his insistence on recording what people actually said and thought, by work drawing on oral histories of the Spanish civil war, and by the writing of Jan Vansina on Africa.²³ As a consequence, that created a desire to master Moroccan Arabic within my capacities and to identify informants old enough to teach me things about the past of the city, insofar as I could urge them along to remember and share with me their versions of the past. Interviews were complemented by research in written sources, printed and archival. The acquired information collected over a period of two years eventually provided a framework for a thesis covering a period of approximately one century, or three generations. It was a study in urban social history, flowing from the past forward, from 1830 to 1930. It insisted on the presence of 'real' people and actual events. There were in my explanations, to be sure, theoretical 'models' and 'categories' in the manner in which I addressed my analysis to discussions in different fields from historians to anthropologists. The thesis, written while I was a fellow at the Committee for New Nations at the University of Chicago, profited greatly from the presence of those working at the time on Sefrou. Clifford Geertz's *Social History of an Indonesian Town*, and other of his writings have continually

22. For relevant studies in the Mediterranean context, see David Abulafia, "A Globalized Mediterranean 1900-2000," in *The Mediterranean in History* ed. David Abulafia (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003), 283-312; Gadi Algazi, "Diversity Rules: Peregrine Horden and Nicolas Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea*," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 20, 2 (2005): 227-45; Naor Ben-Yehoyada, *The Mediterranean Incarnate: Region Formation between Sicily and Tunisia since World War II*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); John Davis, *People of the Mediterranean: An Essay in Comparative Social Anthropology* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1977); H. Driessen, "Mediterranean Port Cities: Cosmopolitan Reconsidered," *History and Anthropology* 16, 1 (2005): 12-41.

23. Michael Roberts and Kenneth Brown, *Using Oral Sources: Vansina and Beyond* no. 4. (Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 1980).

provided inspiration. Somehow, this period at the University of Chicago, my readings and discussions there, led me to think that I might somehow become a 'real' anthropologist (despite the refusal to allow me to attend the course on systems!). When I found myself in the job market and applied for a position in Anthropology at the University of Manchester, some colleagues at Chicago were prepared to recommend me. One of them, Professor Nur Yalman, told me that I only had to read *Social Anthropology* by Godfrey Lienhardt and *Main Currents in Sociological Thought* by Raymond Aron to complete my new academic identity. I did so diligently.

I got the job and soon was in one of the finest departments of anthropology – founded by Max Gluckman, headed by Emrys Peters, and with a dozen first-class colleagues. In time, I was teaching Urban Anthropology in the Middle East and a part of "Great Traditions," which was a year-long course on Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam taught with my colleagues Bruce Kapferer and Chris Fuller who knew these traditions very well. Unfortunately, we never achieved our ambition of creating a canon in the spirit of Robert Redfield and the Chicago School. At the same time at Manchester, I had my nose rubbed in the classics of the discipline thanks to the supervision system.

From 1975 to 1976, I had research leave in Tunisia, in a small town (*balda, bourg*) of some 8000 souls, Ksibet El Mediouni, on the coast of the Sahel region, south of Monastir. The subject was social change, ethnographic method, and reading history backwards from the present to wherever informants might lead me. Using an aerial map of the town, some houses were arbitrarily selected from different areas. With the help of an assistant, we arranged interviews with the heads of these households. We began with the time-honored diagramming of genealogies, including, of course, ties through marriage. From these, we noted individual biographies as detailed as possible from the lives of as many of those who figured on each genealogy, as each informant could or would provide. Painstaking yet fascinating work, to be sure, the method opened up and led to the accumulation of an enormous amount of information from which a reconstruction of social change could emerge. Indeed, from one such biography, I have written an account of an overall process of very many aspects of how the town had changed.

To give an idea of how I now narrate and communicate my knowledge and sense of cities, here are two examples from my own writings.

The first uses a biographical sketch to relate the social history of a Tunisian town.²⁴ A shortened version of the English version was published in Edmund Burke, III's *Struggle and Survival in the Middle East*.²⁵

24. Kenneth Brown, "Mohammed Ameer, un compagnon tunisien," *Egypte/Monde arabe* 2 (1990): 95-119.

25. Kenneth Brown, "Muhammad Ameer: A Tunisian Comrade," in *Struggle and Survival in the Middle East*, ed. Edmund Burke III (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 251-67.

“Ameur, known as “Mog” and nicknamed “er-Rafiq,” was born from out of the sea. His village of fishermen, olive cultivators and weavers lies along the Mediterranean coast a half dozen miles south of the Tunisian town of Monastir in the region of the Sahel. Its called Ksibet El Mediouni which means The Little Casbah of the Holyman Abdallah from Mediouna, Morocco. The name ‘Mog’ was apparently passed on to Ameur from his grandfather who had served in the Ottoman army in the last half of the 19th century. It is the Turkish term (mugh) for Magian, i.e. a Zoroastrian priest, and in Ottoman Turkish had a scope of meaning that included fire worshipper, disciple, pir, spiritual teacher, a frequenter of taverns, innkeeper, vintner. Not a very complimentary term, and indeed a name by which people referred to rather than addressed him. As for his nickname ‘er-Rafiq,’ it means gentle, soft, tender, gracious, courteous, and it is the word for a travelling companion and for a comrade (of the communist variety). A Quranic verse (IV. 71) employs the term: “And very good will be those as companions, (in Paradise after the journey of life!).”

In a saying widely cited in Tunisia people are cautioned to select their neighbor before the house to be lived in and to select their travelling companion before the path to be taken). Ameur, as I shall henceforth refer to him, was indeed a most gentle companion. While doing fieldwork in Ksibet in 1975-76, I made the happy choice of Ameur as one of my informants. (To be honest, he had selected himself.). By then Ameur had been around a while. He had emerged in Ksibet in 1917, and 68 years later, in 1985, he made it his final resting place. During the last ten years of his life we became friends, came to know, like and teach one another through conversations and later by correspondence.”²⁶

The second illustration recounts a visit to Algiers in 1993 on the eve of the “Dark days of War,” in preparation for the review *Mediterraneans* which I edited:

“I told myself, and they told me, “go to Algiers and see for yourself!” I did, went for a week, looked and listened as best I could. But the truth is that I hardly discovered my bearings. People seemed to be carrying on their lives somehow, despite the difficult circumstances; but I felt continually lost, both in the space of the city and in the complexity of “*The Algerian Situation*.” Algerians laughed when I said I was lost. Eventually, they assured me, one learns to find one’s way around Algiers. As for “*The Situation*” they consoled me: it’s normal to feel lost; there

26. Brown, “Mohammed Ameur, un compagnon tunisien,” see, <https://journals.openedition.org/ema/226>.

are so many things to be taken into consideration. So much has happened since the October 1988 riots. The possible scenarios for the future are so varied. With patience and kindness, the Algerians I met with gave me directions, guidance. Nonetheless, I felt that they, too, seemed somewhat lost. There was great uncertainty and anxiety about the future. People seemed to be vacillating between hope and fear.”

These examples of ethnography – which may or may not be considered as “narrative,” i.e., implying an argument – seem well suited to characterizing many aspects of urban life in small towns, or even large cities.

“Another tried and tested manner of research and explanation, namely, kinship, does remain in my opinion quite central to an urban anthropology, however reconsidered and transformed. Such a method and text will depend on knowledge of the local language and of the general history and context of the city in question. The dependence on access to trustworthy informants will seem perhaps rather familiar in the anthropological trade, but is not to be taken for granted. Genealogies and the relations of kinship of men and women that stem from them have proven in my experience to be the best and most reliable means of gathering information and understanding of the people and places studied. Nevertheless, the discussion admittedly remains limited to a very small sample when one considers the size of cities in Morocco today.”

Recently, I participated in a dialogue with Professor Mohammed Naciri concerning heritage sites in Salé. We soon began discussing transformations of the city,²⁷ formerly considered an ideal type of “citadinité,” of urban culture. Is Salé with its now nearly one million inhabitants “simply” an enormous extension of Rabat or, perhaps as some claim, the second biggest city in Morocco after Casablanca? And who lives there, where do they come from, and what do they do with their lives? I daresay that my notions of limited qualitative fieldwork might not be very helpful in generally making sense of what is going on. Is one reduced to quantitative research to present an overall image, or selected ethnographic portraits? I am faced with this dilemma at present in writing about five Middle Eastern and North African cities – Tangier, Oran, Tunis, Tripoli, and Alexandria.

It would be misleading to claim that the project I have undertaken is one of “urban anthropology.” It is, however, very much informed and guided by training and experience in the discipline and by Gluckman’s metaphor of “following one’s nose.”²⁸ The standard definition of social-cultural

27. Mohammed Naciri, *Desirs de ville* (Casablanca: Economie Critique, 2017).

28. Max Gluckman, *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa: Collective Essays* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1963).

anthropology provided by the American Anthropological Association on its website is “to make the strange seem familiar and the familiar seem strange:” this does express what is intended through ‘storytelling’ about selected aspects of these cities. The distinction between social science and literature may hopefully disappear in the process. Such a process of composition will draw upon a combination of participant observation in fieldwork, one’s notes, statistics, historical contexts from reading, online research, and excerpts from the voices and writings of local inhabitants, as well as outsiders.

An example from my ongoing writing on Oran may indicate what is intended: the dramatist, Abdelqadir Alloula was assassinated, probably by the GIA, during the Algerian civil war. His biography and plays written in Algerian Arabic, the vernacular language of everyday cultural and social life, lead me to discuss the language question, and the matter of education in Oran; to considerations of insurrections and wars over time as they have affected the city and its populations; to the assassination of Cheb Hasni, Oran’s famous rai singer; to the importance of music and its past and present place in the life of the city; to arguments about the situations of women in the writing of Kemal Daoud; to the present political crisis and the forms it has taken in Oran. This is the intuitive construction of a text, the pathway of writing, that I have in mind.

Because of the nature of the book and its limitations – a tale of five cities – much of the narrative has to depend on sketches and storytelling, literary artifices, as well as a claim to anthropological knowledge.²⁹ These are intended as matters of recognition rather than investigations, or data. The presentation and its style does not accept that literature and anthropology (or social science in general) be taken as self-contained activities marginal to contemporary social-economic and political realities, or to ‘globalization from below.’ Moreover, the form of presentation takes on, admittedly en passant, some of the major issues of urban and societal change, themes of ‘modernism,’ ‘disenchantment with the gods and sacredness,’ ‘popular nationalism,’ ‘fundamentalism.’ It aims to provoke an interest in these grand subjects. Of course, the imagined audience for such a text is not essentially that of urban anthropologists. Implicitly, nonetheless, it argues that anthropology can/should reach further than its academic discipline.

29. A further aspect of the subject at hand cannot be treated in this essay, but need to be kept in mind regarding the teaching of anthropology, the preparation of students for field research, the writing and construction of texts. As a source of knowledge, the age of the Internet has become and will remain formidable and inescapable. As Hart notes, “[w]e already know that fieldwork will never be the same again because of the digital revolution,” and that “the discipline must reflect the social and technological implications” of the age of the Internet. See Keith Hart, “An Anthropologist in the World Revolution,” *Anthropology Today* 25, 6 (2009): 24-25.

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الأنثروبولوجيا الحضرية: السياق والإثنوغرافيا والتفسيرات

ملخص: يلخص هذا المقال بعض جوانب الأنثروبولوجيا الحضرية المحتملة بالمدن المغربية في الزمن الراهن. ويبحث في قضايا التدريس ومقترحات المشاريع البحثية وأساليب العمل الميداني وبناء النصوص. وقد تم التأكيد على أهمية معرفة اللغة المتداولة واعتماد المقاربة التاريخية. ويُنظر إلى القرابة على أنها طريقة مفيدة بشكل خاص لتوليد المعرفة والسير الذاتية. ويعتمد المقال بالأساس على خبرة المؤلف التي اكتسبها بعد تجارب بحثية ودراسية شملت البيئات الحضرية المغربية والتونسية، كما يقدم أمثلة عبر من خلالها على إيجاد صوفاً يتجاوز بالعبور حدود التخصصات الأكاديمية الضيقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العمل الميداني الحضري، الإعداد، الكتابة، اللغة، السياق التاريخي، القرابة.

Anthropologie urbaine: Contexte, ethnographie et interprétations

Résumé: Cet essai résume les aspects d'une éventuelle anthropologie urbaine dans les villes marocaines d'aujourd'hui. Il s'intéresse à l'enseignement, aux propositions de projets de recherche, aux méthodes de travail de terrain et à la construction de textes. L'accent est mis sur la connaissance de la langue parlée et de la perspective historique. La parenté est considérée comme un moyen particulièrement utile de générer des connaissances et des biographies. L'article s'appuie sur l'expérience de recherche de l'auteur dans les milieux urbains marocains et tunisiens et fournit des exemples de sa découverte d'une voix qui transcende les lignes des disciplines académiques.

Mots-clés: Travail de terrain urbain, préparation, rédaction, langue, contexte historique, parenté.