

Book Review

Lagos, A City at Work

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Lagos: A city at work is a book that mixes the mediums of design, photography and text to offer a compelling insight into the economic, socio-political and cultural diversities that have influenced contemporary urban life in Lagos and Africa. Published by the Lagos based Glendora Publications, the book is a collective effort between a number of contributors, chiefly Kunle Tejuosho and Weyinmi Atigbi and including Rem Koolhaas. At the centre of their research is Nigeria's vast and controversial capital city, yet the book also confronts many of the ideas and realities around African cities in general. Its authors aim to illustrate the impact of a volatile political milieu on the nature of urban life in many African urban spaces. *Lagos, a city at work* provides the space for readers to access Lagos and other African urban spaces. It highlights the cosmopolitanism, corruption, moral decadence, mismanagement, and basic hardships that pervade city life in Lagos. However, as authors observe:

We were intrigued that despite the lack of urban regulatory processes and often calculated sense of bureaucratic trappings to control and frustrate in order to further corrupt practices, the Lagosian always displays this in explicable drive to modify and defy (bend and break) while at the same time devise informal methods of livelihood (getting ahead and beyond)... this creative energy is a very powerful mindset.¹

Despite this, the overarching sense of Lagos is that of a difficult and challenging space.

The authors trace the origins of Lagos to four centuries ago, the 1600s, when the city was used as a war camp for the Benin Empire. The British occupied the camp in 1851 after defeating the monarchical authority established for the war camp by the Benin Empire. With colonialism came the introduction of property taxes that forced Nigeria's rural people into Lagos to search for work in the city's industries. The result of this rural to urban migration was a convergence of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. This sparked a massive population explosion, a factor which characterises contemporary Lagos.

Nowadays, the authors point out that the population growth has not been commensurate with the development of the city because of mismanagement. Poor service delivery has forced the inhabitants to be innovative and seek alternative ways of living, such as disposing their own refuse or resorting to

generators as an alternative source of energy. Visual images of overflowing rubbish dumps and hundreds of famed yellow buses are used to aid the reader to envision a congested and difficult Lagos.

The authors add:

A short inventory throws up images of ‘dysfunction’, which reveal access to electricity as a well spaced out incidence; the visual disappearance of potable drinking water, and the kick and jerk public transportation that is devoid of coordination.... communication via telephony is way out of ordinary reach.²

The population explosion coupled with the untimely dearth of industry owing to the military coups that dogged Nigeria in the nineties also sparked an increase in unemployment rates. This, according to the book, gave rise to high crime rates, the birth of an informal sector characterising modern Lagos and a competition for resources that fuelled the expulsion of other African nationals from the city. The expulsion is reminiscent of the 2008 xenophobic attacks in South Africa. The impact of this is destructive on many levels:

...insecure ruling classes in Nigeria, afraid of losing power and incapable or priming the economy, have deflected the attention from their inadequacies by expelling Ghanaians in see saws of mutual attrition. Of course, the sheer spectacle of members of one ethnic group or nationality being expelled from a city to give living room to supposed indigenes offends the idea of a city as a *civis*.³

A failure to effectively implement urban projects and policies is also a contributory factor to Lagos’ lack of formal development. An example is the city’s decision to halt of the construction of a bridge linking Lekki Peninsula and Lagos Island. This would have eased traffic congestion. Furthermore, the authors note that while locale-specific actions are not being implemented, policymakers have been quick to adopt western policies at the expense of the socio-economic development of their communities. For instance, local government replaced the Lagos plan of action with the New York plan of action, a structural adjustment programme propagated by the World Bank. Using this example, the authors expose an emerging school of thought which argues for decreased reliance on donor funding and the West. How this disengagement may be done is not clear however to the reader. Nor, one might argue is it clear to African nations who are bound to western economic and political policies. With examples such as these, the portrait of Lagos is one of a poor, unmanageable and dependent city.

However, the text also challenged some of the typical idioms used to describe city life and in so doing imply that Lagos has the capacity to display a different type of urban form. The authors agree that cities are epitome of disorder but refute approaches that ignore the conflicting and varied experiences of urban life here. The book points out that most analyses of cities ignore that the urban space is both ‘moral’ and ‘immoral.’ Rather than opting to describe it as solely degenerate of moral values, the authors argue that Lagos can also be read as a

‘bastion of opportunity.’ In the very limitations of the formal economy is born an informal system that works for the people. Choices become creative and alternative, shifting and often transient and yet, this creates the space for Lagosians to define who they are and how they operate in the sprawling mass of the capital.

The aim of the book is clearly to capture the ‘energy of survival, anxieties of hope and attitude of resilience,’ to describe the volatile living conditions of its inhabitants and provide an ‘authentic visual and graphic reality’ of Lagos. The artful use of imagery and allegory has managed to engage the reader in the often conflicted, multifarious experiences of Lagos. The use of visual images makes the book rich and exciting, and interdisciplinary. Drawing on popular imagery, the reader witnesses the life of the Lagosian and the way of the city. For instance, dilapidated slums and a mass of street traders illustrate the ballooning of the informal sector. The framing of Lagos reflects the idea that the continent’s issues are similar and yet the authors suggest a re-evaluation of this attitude, making it worthwhile for anyone engaged with the urban question to read. While the authors do not provide a solution to the problems raised in the book, they give valuable insight into areas that need attention in order for African cities to start breaking this stigma, as well as developing into cities that can empower the lives of their inhabitants.

At times, the style of the text is quite daunting, comprised often of heavy jargon. This can be distracting for those not schooled in urban discourse or unfamiliar with some of the ideas presented in the book. The authors do however compensate for this by using metaphor and allegory and by using African literature to abet their arguments. This provides a refreshing style of writing and a rich scope to the ideas found here.

Tracing the development of Lagos to its historical origins provides an interesting and historical account of the origins of the city, along with the problems it faces today. This grants a necessary context to the city ‘at work.’ This is a book that successfully confronts the very real issues of the city: the congestion, dearth of leadership, water and electricity shortages. Yet, it also presents alternative ways of reading this city in a way that allows for different possibilities in African urban thought.

Notes

¹Lagos, A City at Work. Tejuosho, K. & A. Weyinmi (Lagos: Glendora Publications, 2003), p.3

² *Ibid*, p.13

³ *Ibid*, p.99