

📖 Theorizing the "African City" ▼

Spring 2023

Published on Feb 21, 2023

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# Unraveling Urban African Terrain

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A reflection on analytical ways to position oneself to authentically learn about the African landscape

by *Isa Krebs*

Published on Feb 21, 2023

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To understand the dynamic terrain of urban Africa, one must conscientiously take the time to adequately particularize and dissect the intricacy of the region's rich history and culture, which has influenced current-day disparities between rapidly modernizing cities and areas of immense poverty. While exploring African culture, learners may turn to literature to gain a more comprehensive array of knowledge. While doing so, learners must take the time to unravel the layers of the literary resources they utilize. Often, there may be false assumptions embedded in an author's narrative. Inaccurate, exaggerated portrayals of African terrain can perpetuate the circulation of unproductive stereotypes outside of Africa's borders. Thus,

African literature can serve as either a beneficial or detrimental learning tool, depending on the degree of intellectual contemplation the reader puts forth. Through the literature, I have been exposed to thus far, I found value in prioritizing the recognition of my inherent bias, cultural and geographical differences, and lack of sufficient knowledge of the African landscape. Therefore, the most important tool is developing one's analytical lens. In doing so, one becomes better equipped to identify vital elements of Africa's identity, such as the impact of European colonialism, third-world stereotypes, and the function of an urban Africa in literature.


Literature provides learners with a tangible way to better understand these aforementioned complexities. George Packer's *The Megacity*, an article highlighting the disparaging conditions of Lagos' "slums," is one such piece that pushes readers to use their analytical lens. Packer compiles various stories about Lagosians' failure to escape cyclical poverty due to Lagos' flawed economy. One striking example was the story of,


"a girl from Ibo country...said that she had been told by a woman that would get restaurant work in Lagos. Upon arrival, she discovered that she owed the woman more than two hundred dollars for transport and that the restaurant job didn't exist...She is now a prostitute." <sup>1</sup>

Similar to this story, the entirety of Packer's article is consumed with portrayals of individuals living in Lagos' "slums" that have fallen victim to deceit, poverty, and promiscuity. Upon first glance at the stories and images included, a learner will likely deduce that the purpose of Packer's article was to elicit agency within a first-world audience. However, an analytical learner must then ask a twofold question – why have Lagosians been put in a position that warrants aid; and are the Lagosians the true beneficiary of Packer's message? When unraveling the meaning of the African megacity, it becomes evident that the colonization of Africa has put many countries in an adverse developmental position. However, one cannot conclude that a lack of sanitation, rampant homelessness, hazardous environmental conditions, and economic failure characterizes all African cities.

Rather, Lagos is a rapidly urbanizing city that boasts numerous socioeconomic opportunities. Most notable is the recent creation of the Ekoatlantic – a city constructed by forward-thinking Lagosians to stimulate the city's economy, technological advancements, and real estate.<sup>2</sup> This modern metropolis humanizes Lagosians. Rather than imagining Lagos as "hell on earth," as Packer alludes to, the learner realizes Lagos is similar to modern cities around the world with pockets of extreme poverty and wealth and a large middle class in between.

Thus, the juxtaposition of these two sources highlights the importance of critical analysis. To a degree, the relationship between analyzing literature and analyzing urban African terrain becomes analogous. Both examinations require the learner to begin on a clean slate, acknowledging one's inherent bias and limited knowledge. Consequently, one becomes increasingly prepared for the challenge of ridding one's mind of preconceived notions that enable Western stereotypes, spread both in text and dialogue, to prevail.

FOOTNOTES • 2 

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