

📖 Theorizing the "African City" ▼

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An African Story

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To understand Africa, we need to start listening to those who live in it.

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Consider for a moment if you were to ask for a description of the daily lives of someone living in New York, you would find it strange if someone in South Korea gave you an elaborate explanation based on an understanding rooted in their own culture. In fact, you would find it downright ridiculous that a South Korean was telling the story of New York, rather than a New Yorker themselves. And it is this fundamental discrepancy which must be resolved to better understand urban Africa, that is if one wants to truly learn about it, they need to listen to those who actually live, work and play there. Because just like for an American story, one that takes into account the lived experience of an American, you would expect an American voice, for an African story one should listen to an African voice.

The importance of listening to African voices when trying to understand the rapidly developing urban population of the continent is interlinked in why we simply cannot just rely on outside voices. Consider how you might hear about Africa in general news stories or imagine it in passing. Have you ever heard about the city-read megacity-of Lagos? It is a city with a population likely larger than Florida and it is a place that is complex, diverse, rapidly changing, and likely to inform our understanding of the future of urbanity. It is a place that when described by the people who live there seems both impossible and yet intuitive.

But what you hear from the average Western or outside observer is not the story that someone like Kunlé Adeyemi, a local Lagosian has to tell. For him Lagos is a place marked by remarkable community “self-regulation” that created within a “place that was very difficult to live in... opportunities” out of nothing. Adeyemi would tell you stories about a woman who operated a fish stall and provided for her children an opportunity to attend Harvard. He would describe to you a “people that are innovative [and always] ready to adapt.”¹ Of a Lagos that is moving forward politically, economically and socially.




Okotie Eboh Street, Lagos, Nigeria,
photo by Obinna Okerekeocha on
Unsplash.

This though, is not what you would hear from someone who does not understand the nuances, the history, the people of a place. Compare Adeyemi to George Packer, a famous American journalist who in describing the city commented within a few lines that “all of Lagos seems to be burning.” For him the same community innovation and adaptation we might celebrate as examples of human ingenuity, is merely an “adaptation to hardship.”² Now you might pause here for a moment and think, but there is some truth to Mr. Packer’s statements. The point here is not whether Lagos is some perfect utopia, it is not. The point here is if someone came inside your home, with your own unique way of doing things, your own understanding of how things should work alongside those whom you call family, and decried it as backward, you would want a chance to explain yourself, no?


Practically speaking, if we do not listen to African voices that challenge our own bias, then we simply feed into the perceptions that we have of African cities. If we imagine an African city as

impoverished chaos with no future, why would we invest or travel there? And without those things how would African cities develop? If we do not believe that African cities can have projects like Eko-Atlantic, on par with the most innovative housing developments in the world, then Africa’s ability to continue to create them will constantly be crippled.

Hence why, to understand the story of African urbanity, in all its uniqueness, we need to listen to Africans, for the same reason why you would rightly feel that for someone to understand your story, they would have to listen to your voice.

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