

Africa through my television

Africa Research Institute

COUNTERPOINTS



COUNTERPOINTS

The Counterpoints series presents a critical account of defining ideas, in and about Africa. The scope is broad, from international development policy to popular perceptions of the continent.

Counterpoints address ‘Big Picture’ questions, without the constraints of prevailing opinion and orthodoxy. The arguments are forward-looking but not speculative, informed by the present yet concerned with the future.

In publishing this series, Africa Research Institute hopes to foster competing ideas, discussion and debate. The views expressed in Counterpoints are those of the authors, and not those of Africa Research Institute.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Africa through my television was edited by Edward Paice. Aoiffe O’Brien managed publication. Images are reproduced with permission from KEO Films. Africa Research Institute would like to acknowledge the generous assistance of Richard Smith.

Published by Africa Research Institute
July 2010

ISBN 978-1-906329-10-5



Africa Research Institute

The BBC's three-part series *Welcome to Lagos* was widely praised, and criticised. Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka castigated the "colonialist idea of the noble savage which motivated the programme". The stories collected on a rubbish dump, in a meat market and beside the lagoon of Nigeria's 'Mega City' are sympathetically portrayed. But in depicting resourcefulness and the precarious nature of everyday urban life, the series emphasised the commonality of human experience. For viewers in Britain, seldom has Africa seemed so close to home.

By Michael Holden

One of the great things about television is that despite all recent attempts to render it obsolete, it can still take you by surprise. On the internet, you search for items you want. With television, even in its modern digital incarnation, you submit yourself to a schedule. You make your choices from someone else's shortlist. It is an apparatus made more potent by its limits. So when something substantial and surprising appears, it seems to do so with an immediacy that even the limitless accessibility of the internet can't match.

I mention this not in defence of channel surfing but as testament to how, in 35 years as a viewer and 15 as a critic, I have come to appreciate television's ability to show me how my interests lie in places and people I might not otherwise have known about, if it had been up to me to decide. I (and, I suspect, millions of others) owe much of what passes for my understanding of Africa to television. With the exception of outer space, I doubt there is a place more frequently portrayed but seldom visited by viewers. So while television shapes many foreign perceptions of Africa, can it ever 'get it right'?

'Getting it right' is, of course, an impossibility – especially when it comes to depicting a continent. But as an indicator of how one might aspire to a better portrayal of places so often misrepresented and spoken of in clichés, it is still a serviceable ambition. Given the limits of the televisual medium, a laudable aim might be just to 'do better'.

Clash of schedules

My childhood viewing of Africa typically included wild animals, fractious politics and appeals to end famine. Later, as a journalist, I spent time in refugee camps on the Tanzania-Rwanda border where I struggled to reconcile the need for sentient copy with the seemingly countless ambiguities and sub-plots thrown up by my surroundings. How, I wondered, in a place where so many forces seemed to be at work, do you get the measure of what it all might mean? The answer, or an answer, to this predicament is simply to let people tell their stories. But I didn't know that back then.

“My childhood viewing of Africa typically included wild animals, fractious politics and appeals to end famine.”

My most recent insight into life in Africa was delivered, unsurprisingly, as I sat on my sofa in England watching television. What was surprising, at least from my domestic perspective, was how *Welcome To Lagos*, a series of programmes I came across by accident, seemed to be drawing sense from a riot of stimuli similar to that which had confounded me a decade earlier. It may have been coincidence that the first programme was scheduled to clash with the UK's first televised election debate. The contrast of these broadcasts was an almost symphonic juxtaposition that no other medium but television can provide.

Fatigue with democracy, you could argue, is the preserve of those fortunate enough to languish under its advantages. On the evening of April 15th 2010 I could watch only a few seconds of the introduction to the first election debate before the urge to change channels was upon me. A touch of a button transported me from the sparring over British domestic policies to mind-boggling population growth in Lagos.

In just 60 years, the narrator informed me, the city's population has surged from 300,000 to 16 million and is still increasing rapidly. The aerial footage of slum dwellings in the opening scene of *Welcome To Lagos* spread well beyond the stretch of even my widescreen television. When Hollywood seeks to show anything on such a scale these days, it invariably resorts to computer-generated imagery.

This was real. And having fulfilled in grand style the first rule of modern commercial film-making – start big – the show had my attention. The camera descended from the sky onto its first location – the Olusun rubbish dump. “If you want an example of everything that’s fantastic about the people here,” advised our narrator, “then this is the place to start.”

Dump justice

Underscored by an aria, the opening footage followed men scrabbling through fresh loads of rubbish for anything of value. One aspect of the programme's agenda – to cultivate a sense of the sublime amid what might ordinarily pass as a scene of desperation – was duly established by the soundtrack. The audience was reminded that, “while people in the West agonise over recycling ... these guys just get on with it.” Thus chastised, I was mindful that on another channel British politicians were debating the minutiae of how local councils could best collect recycling from our doorsteps.

Welcome to Lagos then began to introduce us to its ‘characters’. First came Eric – aka Vocal Slender – a young man raised on the streets and working on the dump to further his ambitions as a singer. Eric seemed cheerful, optimistic, articulate and religious. At no point did he bemoan his situation.

Before I could dwell on the differences between my world and Eric's, or the gulf between our respective enthusiasm for pursuing our errands, we met Joseph. Here was a man whose dignity amid the hills of litter put even Eric in the shade. A dealer in salvaged commodities, he explained that, “our business is just like the stock market ... only difference is the suit

and the tie and the fine shoes.” More classical music followed, as Joseph erected a tattered beach umbrella over his domain.

Joseph took us to his home, a modest room furnished with cast-offs from the dump, restored through his endeavour to working order. “All the rich people, they don’t like to conserve things,” he said. Joseph introduced us to “my beautiful wife,” whom he had met on the dump, and his young daughters, Peace and Patience. A nuclear family thriving in what might at first appear to be a post-apocalyptic scene. In a moment of candour a lesser documentary might have lingered over, Joseph – abandoned by his mother in a polygamous marriage and raised by sundry aunts – observed that “there is a difference between motherly love, and someone taking care of you.” Unlike the traffic jammed on the freeways above the dump, *Welcome To Lagos* moved on.

At the Oluwainshola meat market, another resourceful protagonist emerged. Gabriel, a former student of agricultural science, had developed a process of refining blood from slaughtered cattle into animal feed. His method involved boiling it up over old tyres and drying it in the sun. To the untrained and foreign eye this looked like a ghastly business. Gabriel thought differently: “I like a hard job. But that’s just my policy, my opinion. So I love doing it.”

Within these vignettes the harsher realities of life on the margins of this burgeoning community were revealed. At the height of the dry season the dump caught fire. When the rains came, it turned to slime. Arguments broke out over clothes. Eric, after a night on the town pursuing his dreams as a pop star, came back to the dump and partially blinded another man in a fight.

The righteous autonomy of those forced to look after themselves came to the fore. The dump’s default government – a scavengers’ parliament, seen earlier banishing a thief on pain of death – ordered Eric to stop working until his case was resolved. Denied an income, Eric was unable to negotiate compensation with his victim. The dump committee had a whip

round to cover the man's hospital expenses, and Eric returned to work under a five-year instalment plan to cover his compensation payments. This arrangement proved a remarkable coda to one of the most edifying and inspiring hours of documentary television I had watched in years.

Mixed reviews

As I considered what I had seen, I became aware of potential pitfalls in the programme's format. Perhaps I was reacting emotionally to a kind of false paradigm, a handful of anomalous and plainly subjective claims plucked from a city of 16 million? Stories that suggested an uplifting response to poverty, an *esprit de corps* among the underclass. Surely, these sentiments made the subjects easier to ignore as soon as the programme had finished? Well, maybe, but in retrospect I thought not.

Welcome to Lagos was one of the only examples of television which reflected something of the Africa that I remembered. Sometimes overwhelming and often contradictory, these individual testimonies illustrated the ingenuity and spirit behind the images. I was mindful of some underlying commonalities. People are people across any continental divide.

“To me, it was a programme about urbanisation, and people coping admirably – at times even enviably – in circumstances which might exist in any world city at some point in the future. It just happened to be Lagos today.”

The concurrence, over three weeks, of the scenes from Lagos with the UK election debates cast my own country's affairs into an embarrassing context. The government of the dump dealt with serious crime seriously quickly, while the aspirant British leaders continued to debate a swollen prison population and a public purse unable to sustain the burden of the state. While it was hardly a comparison of like-for-like, it seemed for a moment that Olusun had the edge on Westminster. But some African writers have appeared less impressed.



Gabriel boiling blood



Joseph showing scavenged copper wire

Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka derided “this colonialist idea of the noble savage which motivated the programme”, and added that “it was patronising and condescending”. Soyinka’s view was deployed in an *African Business* editorial by Anver Versi, who went on to bemoan the ‘persistent image of Africa as helpless and unable to solve its problems.’ *Welcome to Lagos*, in his opinion, served ‘to titillate viewers with yet another slice of backward Africa’. The Lagos local authorities called on the BBC to “repair the damage this series has caused our city and our country.”¹ I saw nothing backward or helpless about it – quite the reverse. To me, it was a series about urbanisation, and people coping admirably – at times even enviably – in circumstances which might exist in any world city at some point in the future. It just happened to be Lagos today.

The second episode opened with an assertion from the increasingly avuncular narrator that, “life in the ghettos isn’t all about poverty, pollution and cholera, you know”. The people in and around Makoko (described somewhat disingenuously as “Lagos’s version of Venice”) were “successfully adapting to realities of modern life in ways in which you, in the so-called developed world, could not imagine.”

Venetian Lagos

The three interwoven stories of the second episode centred on a 65 year-old fisherman living in a stilt house over Lagos lagoon with his 18 children and five grandchildren. Sure enough, Chubey was not inclined to let circumstances get in the way of business. When he wasn’t building a fish farm in the polluted waters around his home, he was busy trying to extend the structure so that he might take in a lodger. To build his extension, Chubey needed wood. At the Ebute Metta sawmills, we encountered Paul, a machine operator, and his assistants, Sunday and Afiz. Newly-arrived from their villages, Sunday and Afiz claimed to be adults but looked no older than 14. Up-river, at the source of the timber, we were introduced to Moses, a student who pays for his tuition by cutting down trees and floating them downstream to the city.

Behind what seemed a national predisposition to hard work and exuberance, subtler and potentially more troubling tales emerged. Chubey was concerned that his teenage son might be heading off the rails. A succession of scenes revealed a drama that could have been played out between generations anywhere in the world. The goings-on only appeared distinctively 'African' when Chubey called in the local herbalist to administer preparations which, he said, would make his son less vulnerable to knives and gunfire. Even this scene was succinctly explained by Chubey. "We don't have money so we use traditional wisdom. We do this to guard ourselves. The men with money can have security behind their gates, but we don't have that. We use the things we know to protect ourselves." What, after all, did they have to lose?

At the timber mill, an operator was fatally electrocuted, the second in a month, and work stopped for three days of mourning – not a provision, as far as I am aware, granted to workers in Britain's Victorian mills or on a modern European building site. "Other people plan for a trip on a plane," said one mill worker, "we plan for funerals." It was the people themselves, not their employers, or any 'authority', who provided funds for the dead man to be returned to his home town and family.

Rather than appearing helpless, the protagonists seemed so resilient and connected that their stories might illustrate any number of political theories – from Marxism to Anarchism and all points in between. But the series remained attentive to its own ironies. However much these displays of self-reliance might make British viewers twitch at their own idle consumerism, it was clear that the people of Makoko were eager for a taste of the prosperity they had thrived so vividly without. "Money is why we are in the city," said Paul, "looking for money, fetching for money, when money is hiding always up and down. We believe that one day we will grab it."

People, just people

In the final instalment, unstoppable force met an immovable object as the government's 'Mega City development squad' moved in to clear the slums. The human stories of this collision emphasised complex (and by extension universal) predicaments, rather than parochial caricatures. Esther had lived in a shack on Kuramo beach for seven years. Twice she had been evicted, yet every month on sanitation day she swept her section of the coastline clean. Try implementing that in Blackpool.

The case for urban planning was made by Zagedi, who broke up illegal buildings with the same zeal that had once constructed them, and taught traditional dancing in the evening. Under the auspices of the Mega City project, his mission is to make Lagos "the Singapore of Africa". Three hours in the company of the slum dwellers made it difficult – though not entirely impossible – to see how that might be a laudable pursuit. Faced with eviction, Esther summed up one of the abiding lessons of the series. "They say that tough times never last, but that tough people do."

“Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray – a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate.”
Chinua Achebe

In the course of preparing this piece, I was directed to Chinua Achebe's essay on racism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness*. In his masterful deconstruction of what he calls the West's 'comforting myths' of Africa, Achebe makes the following observation:

'For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry, the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilisation and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilisation, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity it could say with faith and feeling: there go I but for the grace of God. Africa is to Europe

as the picture is to *Dorian Gray* – a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate.’²

Whatever the denizens of Lagos’s more permanent structures might think of the BBC’s portrayal of their city, the series offered a perfect counterpoint to Achebe’s allegation. The comparison with Lagos does not bring reassurance in Britain – in fact, quite the reverse. It fostered some guilt, which is easy enough. More importantly, it illustrated what we all have in common. Indeed it proved far closer to Achebe’s preferred interpretation of Africa, seen ‘not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystifications but quite simply as a continent of people – not angels but not rudimentary souls either – just people. Often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society.’

Welcome to Lagos was prime time television, albeit pitched in a slot competing with the popular, but somehow less edifying, election debates. This is important, given that most of our televised experience of Africa is bundled tightly and dramatically under the banner of ‘news’. The tales behind the headlines are more often shown later at night on less popular channels, or not at all. But here was a story allowed to unfold over a full three hours.

As I write, the football World Cup is upon us. The televised perspective seems to have reverted to the usual well-intentioned caricatures. Supporters from South Africa were reported on ITV to be “clutching tickets as though they were the gold they used to mine just a few miles away”. Of course, I am still seeing Africa through the prism of television, but in *Welcome To Lagos* it has seldom seemed so close to home.

2 Chinua Achebe, ‘An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*’, *Massachusetts Review*, No. 18, 1977.





Esther collecting water



Makoko

The Author

Michael Holden is a journalist, author and screenwriter who lives in London. His book *All Ears*, a selection from his regular column in the Guardian newspaper, is available from Guardian Books. He is a contributing editor to Esquire and has been writing about television since 1994.

Africa Research Institute

Africa Research Institute is a non-partisan think tank based in London. Our mission is to draw attention to ideas which have worked in Africa, and to identify new ideas where needed.

For copies of our publications, please contact us on 020 7222 4006 or visit www.africaresearchinstitute.org

Registered charity 1118470

Africa Research Institute

COUNTERPOINTS

