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Late Capitalism, Urbanisation, and Cultures of Economic “Survivalism” in the BBC’s *Welcome to Lagos*

Aghogho Akpome

Abstract: This article examines the depiction of three impoverished Lagosian slums in the controversial British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentary, *Welcome to Lagos*, which highlights the negative impacts of globalised capitalism on urban culture in Nigeria’s commercial centre and biggest city. In recent times scholarship on postcolonial urbanisation has been marked by an important shift in focus from economic concerns to interest in the peculiar cultural dimensions of life in postcolonial cities. As this article argues, however, dominant depictions of postcolonial cities continue to highlight ways in which cultural responses to the harsh effects of late capitalism in such cities reflect economic strategies of what Mike Davis calls “informal survivalism.”

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Keywords: Nigeria, Lagos, urbanisation, globalisation, marginalisation, slums, living conditions, films

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There has been a vigorous attempt to redefine the African city in terms that do not reduce contemporary African urbanism to what Achille Mbembe (2008: 5) calls “the metanarrative of urbanization, modernization, and crisis.” The discourse of crisis is reflected in the use of terms such as “slum urbanism” (Pieterse 2014) and “rogue urbanism” (Pieterse and Simone 2013) in connection with urbanisation in postcolonial countries, in general, and in Africa, in particular. Timothy Luke (2003) proposes the less value-loaded terms “global cities” and “Global Cities” to differentiate between megacities in the Global South and those in the North, respectively – the latter term signifies the relatively higher concentrations and wider reach of the worldwide commercial command structures in the North.

Luke’s proposal is based on Saskia Sassen’s (1991, 2005) influential theorisation of the global city, in which she demonstrates that megacities are not only key features of contemporary globalisation but also critical determinants of the ways in which social spaces and temporalities are currently conceptualised. According to Sassen (2005: 1), global cities emerged in an international economic system where the nation is no longer the dominant spatial unit in the global exchange of capital, labour, goods, and services. This decline in the relevance of the nation has been accompanied by the rise of subnational spatial units whose loci of power are cities and regions. These cities thus became the “command points” (Sassen 2005: 2) from which processes of social, political, and economic exchange are controlled across territories that stretch beyond national boundaries.

Noting that Sassen’s initial focus is only on three specific cities in the northern hemisphere (New York, London, and Tokyo), Ashley Dawson and Brent H. Edwards (2004) call for closer scholarly attention to the global cities of the South, of which Lagos is an important example. They point out that these cities have become “an increasingly anomalous embodiment of the urban realm and public space” (Dawson and Edwards 2004: 1). They also demonstrate the need for a significant shift in theorisations of global cities away from analyses that use the major Western metropolises as a normative model and simultaneously view global cities in the Global South “either through a [limiting] developmental narrative or through a pluralistic framework” (Dawson and Edwards 2004: 2).

Writing in the same vein, Susan Parnell and Jennifer Robinson (2012) argue that the study of urbanisation needs to move beyond a mere critique of neoliberalism to more nuanced explorations of the complex realities that define contemporary city life in Africa. Sarah Nuttall (2004: 740) demonstrates the value of analytical approaches that highlight “[the African city’s] cultural dimensions as *city life and form*” (original emphasis).

Nuttall's work is part of a thriving body of scholarship on the various ways in which city life and space are contemplated as creative cultural forms that embody and document contemporary realities in the Global South (see also Nuttall and Mbembe 2008; Pieterse and Simone 2013).¹ Various scholars use a range of cultural texts, as well as novels and films, set in different postcolonial megacities to provide similar analyses in a special issue of *Social Text*, which “question[s] the focus on economic explanations that have characterized global studies scholarship” (Dawson and Edwards 2004: 1–2).

Yet, as argued in this article, rather than de-emphasising the salience of the economic dimensions of postcolonial urbanisation, the “cultural turn” in critical approaches to postcolonial cities has also, perhaps unwittingly, helped to reinforce the dominant role of globalised capitalism in these cities. While such approaches have demonstrated the sociocultural agency of the impoverished majority of city dwellers beyond doubt, the responses of residents to the dire material conditions of their urban experience invariably reflect economic cultures of “informal survivalism” (Davis 2004: 26). This is demonstrated in *Welcome to Lagos*, a controversial three-part observational television documentary series broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 2010.²

The documentary focuses on the lives of Nigerians who work and live in three of Lagos's most impoverished slums. According to the narrator, the series explores “life at the sharp end of [...] extreme urban environments” (BBC2 2010), using Lagos – the world's fastest growing megacity – as a case study. This article seeks to foreground the ways in which this series, as an important cultural and historical artefact, enables a productive enquiry into the links between late capitalism and contemporary urbanisation in a representative postcolonial megacity.

Analysis of *Welcome to Lagos*

The starting point for this analysis is the special issue of *Social Text*. The essays in that collection examine the cultural dynamics of urbanisation and globalisation, using a range of cultural practices and texts, as well as novels and films, set in different megacities in the postcolonial world. The contributors highlight the importance of culture as a “mode of agency by

1 See below for Jonathan Haynes's (2007) influential study on representations of Lagos in Nollywood films.

2 It was aired over three episodes at prime time on BBC2 on 15, 22, and 29 April 2010 and on BBC1 on 19 and 26 June and 3 July of the same year.

which [inhabitants of megacities] wrench a space of self-fashioning and social impact away from the economic narrative that would paint them as powerless, as empty, as silent” (Dawson and Edwards 2004: 4). By focusing on the dire living conditions in extremely impoverished slums, *Welcome to Lagos* represents an unmistakable comment on the socio-economic implications of late capitalist expansion on postcolonial urbanisation. The conditions in these slums have been traced to widening social inequalities precipitated by the neoliberal economic policies that hold sway in most countries of the world today.

Perhaps the most conspicuous result of these macroeconomic trends, in terms of spatial configurations, is the emergence of slums as one of the defining characteristics of the postcolonial megacity. In this respect, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall (2008: 5) note that “Ways of seeing and reading contemporary African cities are [...] dominated by the metanarrative of urbanization, modernization, and crisis. Indeed, for many analysts, the defining feature of contemporary African cities is the slum.” The narrator of *Welcome to Lagos* reinforces this view with the repeated claim that up to three-quarters of Lagos residents live in slums, echoing a report by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme that states that 6 out of every 10 urban dwellers in sub-Saharan Africa live in slums (UN-Habitat 2007). This is the apparent reason why the producers of *Welcome to Lagos* focus almost exclusively on living conditions in three of the most deprived and impoverished slums in Lagos to the almost total exclusion of better endowed parts of the city.

Critical responses to *Welcome to Lagos* have so far focused on how it highlights the general challenges of contemporary urban planning, on the one hand (Gandy 2006; Smith 2015; Revell 2010), and portrays Nigeria, on the other (Nwaubani 2010; Abubakar 2011). With respect to the challenges of urban planning, the film has been compared to several cinematic explorations of other postcolonial megacities around the world, such as the multiple award-winning *Slumdog Millionaire* (2009) and the Channel 4 (UK) production *Slumming It* (2010) – both of which are set in ghettos in Mumbai, India’s largest city (see Jones and Sanyal 2015; Abubakar 2011; Revell 2010).

Regarding the overarching representational impact of *Welcome to Lagos*, responses are split between those who applaud the documentary’s apparent praise of the resourcefulness of its poor protagonists and those who condemn its perceived disparaging portrayal of Lagos, and by extension, Nigeria. Among the former group are Akin Ojumu (2010) and Rachael Cooke (2010). Cooke (2010: 45) describes the series as “great: one of the most moving, interesting [...] and uplifting things I have seen

in years.” Similarly, Michael Holden (2010: 1) argues that “in depicting resourcefulness and the precarious nature of everyday urban life, the series emphasized the commonality of human experience.” For his part, respected British film reviewer Sam Wollaston (2010: n.p.) extols the series as a “refreshingly [...] upbeat” documentary and as “a study of ingenuity and how people adapt to survive in places they shouldn’t really be able to function in at all.” Furthermore, he praises the filmmakers for their focus on the people in the slums. This, he argues, sets the series apart from similar productions which tend to glorify self-seeking charity organisations with dubious philanthropic objectives.

By contrast, Anver Versi (2010: 9) has argued that the film reflects a representational practice in Western media that uses “a long-outdated template of Africa as a ‘dark continent’ full of misery, backwardness, hunger and despair.” The British-based Nigerian author, Tricia Adaobi Nwaubani (2010: n.p.) provides a short summary of the anger that the film generated among many Nigerians, both prominent individuals and ordinary citizens, as well as government officials:

“There was this colonialist idea of the noble savage which motivated the programme,” Wole Soyinka said about the documentary. “It was patronising and condescending.” Dalhatu Tafida, Nigeria’s high commissioner to the UK, described the documentary as, “a calculated attempt to bring Nigeria and its hardworking people to international odium and scorn.” Facebook pages and blogs have also been ablaze. “They are giving us a bad image,” many Nigerians fume. Meanwhile, the Lagos state government has submitted a formal complaint to the BBC, calling on the corporation to commission an alternative series to “repair the damage we believe this series has caused to our image.”

Abubakar (2011: 153) describes the sharp differences in responses to the film as “an age-old ideological and cultural contrast in perception.” He argues, like Versi, that while the portrayal of how impoverished slum dwellers “endured (and ‘enjoyed’) the harsh life of Lagos slums served as a source of entertainment to some Western audiences, it was seen by many Nigerians as a deliberate attempt to sustain the stereotypical Western depiction of Africans as ‘savages’” (Abubakar 2011: 152–153). This echoes Jonathan Haynes’ (2007) instructive summary, in which he highlights the limitations of the celebratory portrayals of the conditions of residents who bear the brunt of the city’s problems. He cites commentaries that criticise such depictions for “ignor[ing] the suffering of the poor and the predation of many arrangements in the informal sector” (Gandy 2005; Packer 2006) and for “overestim[ing] the extent to which

coping with adversity is stimulating, rather than depressing.” However, he argues that “the point that existing vocabularies and analytical frames of reference from urban planning and other disciplines are trapped in an almost entirely negative contemplation of Lagos’s deficiencies and failures and are inadequate in showing how things actually operate needs to be given its due” (Haynes 2007: 132).

Most of the footage is filmed in three locations: the Olososun rubbish dump, a former floating fishing settlement called Makoko, and on Kuramo beach. In addition, there is extensive filming at the Oluwanishola cattle market and impoverished areas of the Ebute-Meta settlement. Other locations that feature include the Ajegunle ghetto, parts of the sprawling Agege area, unidentified parts of the city, and areas in adjoining Ogun state – one of which is said to be a hundred kilometres from Lagos. Together, these densely populated slums present a picture of extreme poverty, pollution, and environmental degradation. The physical surroundings of the settlements are characterised by disorder, the conspicuous absence of basic amenities and public sanitation, and the pervasive presence of waste and putrefaction.

The home of one protagonist is furnished almost entirely with items from the dumpsite, while another lives on the site and washes himself in the open. Some earn a living as scavengers, whereas others carry out their vocations using processes and equipment that are obsolete and sometimes extremely hazardous. In addition, those who live on the beach contend with unpredictable flooding from the Atlantic Ocean coupled with the constant threat of their shanties being flattened without warning by government officials, who are portrayed as being high-handed. Using a variety of shots, camera angles, and movements, as well as sustained interviews and narratives, the series pays detailed attention not only to the protagonists’ living conditions but also to their individual lives. It explores their aspirations and the difficulties they face as they pursue their livelihoods amidst the acute lack of physical, economic, and social infrastructure. These characters have attracted praise from the film’s producers and some commentators for the resourcefulness and optimism they demonstrate despite the inhuman conditions they face.

Although the squalor and deprivation that dominate the documentary relate more specifically to slums, the title of the series implies that it is an overarching representation of postcolonial urban dystopian spaces. It also implies that this representation extends to every part of Lagos, a city that is so often deployed as both metaphor and metonym for the entire country (see Iheakaram 1979). Karima Jeffery (2010: 99) writes more specifically about postcolonial littoral cities, describing them as a

literary trope and as “a fluid icon for representation, an emblematic space that can mirror the flux many subaltern figures may experience when they are forced to negotiate the social conditions and hegemony as a result of colonization.”

The deplorable economic conditions of the slums featured in *Welcome to Lagos* is dramatised through a visual and aesthetic strategy that focuses on images and sustained scenes of extreme material, environmental, and infrastructural abjection. Both close-up and panoramic shots of refuse, sewerage, and decrepit shanties form the overwhelming themes of the first and second parts of the series. The landscapes of the Olososun dump, the Olwanishola cattle market, Makoko, and the shanty town on Kuramo energetically show the environmental disaster that has resulted from the complete absence of planned drainages, potable water, roads, housing, and waste disposal facilities in these places. In the scene that closes the first episode (in which Makoko is introduced), the elderly protagonist Chubbey is filmed from the outside of an open-air latrine with plank walls covering the lower part of his body up to the neck. He announces that “there is no odour. If you *shit* here, the water will wash it away” (emphasis added). In another scene at the dumpsite, another protagonist named Eric and the narrator observe, respectively, that whenever it rains, the place becomes “very horrible” making life “a whole lot harder and *smellier*” for the scavengers (emphasis added).

Images of environmental degradation and spatial disorder provide the backdrop for the characters whose personal appearance and immediate personal circumstances are largely burlesque. This is especially true of the scavengers in the first episode, who are mostly dressed in dirty-looking rags. In one scene, for example, a close-up shot exposes a huge tear under the right sleeve of Joseph’s coat, and the umbrella under which he shelters from the sun is in tatters – so also is the threadbare piece of dirty lace that serves as a curtain for Eric’s cardboard shanty, which strongly resembles the “office” in which Paul, the sawmill operator in episode three, sleeps. Eric and his friends have no toilets or bathrooms, and so they have to wash themselves in the open while surrounded by garbage.

The image of abjection is reinforced in the depiction of the rather crude means of livelihood of the protagonists. Whether it is lumbering timber or sorting scrap metal, the characters use the most basic tools and archaic methods³ in their respective trades. Without the benefit of elec-

3 For example, one character is shown heating cow blood using discarded vehicle tyres as fuel; another ferries logs over a hundred kilometre waterways with wooden rafts; and a young lady delivers a baby in a shack on the beach.

tricity and modern equipment, their daily tasks are performed in ways that are excessively laborious and tortuous. This is exemplified by Gabriel, who processes cattle blood at the Oluwanishola cattle market using discarded vehicle tyres as a source of fuel. “It is a very stressful work,” he says. “The heat of the tyres, the heat of the fire, it *tortures* you” (emphasis added). Therefore, in spite of their resilience and resourcefulness, their productivity is minimal, and what the majority of them earn is only “just enough to live on” (BBC2 2010). Furthermore, the specific conditions of their lives and vocations expose them daily to numerous hazards that sometimes prove deadly. A case in point is the death of two sawmill operators who were electrocuted at work within two weeks of each other just before the filming of the series.

The sustained and intense focus on filth can be understood in both literal and figurative ways. In a literal sense, the graphic depiction of waste, as well as the characters’ and narrator’s choice of language functions as a cinematic technique that evokes certain affective reactions among viewers, such as disgust, surprise, and shock. Figuratively, the pervasive imagery of waste can be understood to symbolise the socio-economic status of the slum and the postcolonial megacity within the context not only of globalised neoliberal capitalism but also of a post-colonial sociopolitical dystopia (see Morrison 2015; Chakrabarty 2002). Representations of this type in postcolonial African discourses reflect, as Sarah Lincoln (2008: 99) points out, “the continent’s continued status as a ‘remnant’ of globalization – a waste product, trash heap, disposable raw material, and degraded offcut of the processes that have so greatly enriched, dignified and beautified their beneficiaries.”

Focusing on African cinema, Kenneth Harrow (2013) traces the use of trash as a recurring trope in visual depictions of socio-economic realities in the postcolonial world in general and Africa in particular. Noting that the practice has spawned a plethora of theorisations which link “the material to the psychological, sociological, and political,” he suggests that “trash, above all, applies to people who have been dismissed from the community, marginalized and forgotten, turned into ‘bare lives’ in ‘states of exception’ for others to study and pity” (Harrow 2013: x, 1). His argument that the trope of trash is used to “define the lives of the poor” (Harrow 2013: 1) sheds light on the significance of the imagery of refuse, environmental degradation, and abject poverty used as the preponderant visual aesthetic in *Welcome to Lagos*. A close reading of the film therefore demonstrates the various ways in which the slum and the slum dweller both figure as the offcuts and detritus of the globalised economy.

Although the narrator is silent about the role of globalised neoliberal capitalism in shaping conditions in the slums of Lagos, iconic images of and allusions to the globalised economy appear throughout the series in various forms. This happens mainly through the ubiquitous presence of the logos of major international brands and business organisations like the electronics giant, Samsung. In this way, the central role of multinational corporations in the local socio-economic calculus is subtly registered. There are also short scenes in which some characters discuss games between the major European football teams they support.⁴ Further indication of how the slum and the city are circumscribed within an increasingly globalised system is given when the narrator observes that the availability and cost of cattle at the Oluwanishola cattle market is sometimes determined by wars and droughts in places as far away as Chad and Sudan.

But the best example of the various ways in which the slum and slum dwellers are inscribed into global commerce is provided by Joseph, a scrap dealer who buys hand-picked recyclable trash from scavengers. Joseph informs viewers that his business is “just like the stock market,” both of which depend on international currency exchange rates. He notes, however, that people like him and those in international financial centres are at the opposite ends of a vastly unequal economic equation. Whereas those at one end are able to afford – in Joseph’s words – “suit[s] and [...] tie[s] and fine shoes,” those at the other end only get “a very small piece of the action” and earn less than enough to make a decent livelihood. People like Joseph thus live in what Anthony Downey (2009: 109) calls a “limbo-like state that is largely preoccupied with acquiring and sustaining the essentials of life.”

Nonetheless, there remains a sense in which the protagonists of *Welcome to Lagos* demonstrate a certain amount of what has been called “squatter agency” (see Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2013). Many slum dwellers and squatters in different parts of the world are known not only to develop successful and diverse cultural responses to their dire socio-economic realities but also to affirm their humanity and existence beyond, and in spite of, the dominant economic ethos of the postmodern milieu (see Roy 2010). Yet, as Dawson and Edwards have demonstrated, more often than not, urban cultures in postcolonial megacities invariably reflect strategies of economic survival.

4 Indeed, support for foreign (especially European) football clubs is a good example of how transnational allegiances increasingly characterize local culture in contemporary Nigeria.

Conclusion: Self-Narratives of Informal and Economic Survivalism

Throughout the series, the main protagonists act as tour guides to the viewer. Alternating with the narrator, each character provides information about his or her identity, personal circumstances, vocation, struggles, and aspirations. This functions as a realism technique, which apparently enhances the credibility of the information provided while also enhancing the entertainment quality of the narrative as a whole. However, the seemingly exaggerated enthusiasm of the characters, who repeatedly announce that they “love” or “like” their abject and precarious conditions, suggests mimicry. For example, after admitting that his job is “very stressful” and that the heat from burning discarded vehicle tires “tortures” him, Gabriel immediately declares, with a visibly exaggerated smile, “I love something hard. I like a hard job. I love doing it.” Such illogicality may add to the apparent spectacle of life in the dump, which may be an intended objective of the production. Indeed, the suggestion that these slum dwellers actually “enjoyed” (Abubakar 2011: 152) their suffering is unconvincing and exposes the filmmakers to accusations of paternalism.

It is perhaps more plausible to interpret the self-representations of the protagonists as self-narratives and cultural discourses of socio-economic survivalism. Through the foregoing modes and narratives of self-representation, as well as the more subtle ways in which the economic networks of global capital are registered, the documentary series enables a productive exploration of the links between late capitalism and contemporary urbanisation in a highly significant and representative postcolonial urban centre like Lagos.

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Spätkapitalismus, Urbanisierung und Kulturen des ökonomischen „Überlebens“ in der BBC-Produktion „Welcome to Lagos“

Zusammenfassung: Der Autor dieses Beitrag analysiert die Darstellung von drei Slums in Lagos in der kontroversen BBC-Dokumentation „Welcome to Lagos“, in der negative Folgen des globalisierten Kapitalismus auf die städtische Kultur der größten Stadt und des kommerziellen Zentrums Nigerias beleuchtet werden. In jüngster Zeit lag der Focus der Forschungen zur postkolonialen Urbanisierung nicht mehr vor allem auf ökonomischen Fragen, sondern auf den besonderen kulturellen Dimensionen des Lebens in postkolonialen Städten. Der Autor argumentiert, dass demgegenüber die Darstellungen postkolonialer Städte immer noch in erster Linie zeigen, in welcher Form kulturelle Reaktionen auf die brutalen Auswirkungen des Spätkapitalismus ökonomische Strategien reflektieren, die Mike Davis als „informal survivalism“ bezeichnet hat.

Schlagwörter: Nigeria, Lagos, Urbanisierung, Globalisierung, Marginalisierung, Slum, Lebensbedingungen, Film