



Renegade Book Club

Book Review

Lagos: Supernatural City by Tim Cocks

Sunday, 20th August, 2023

“This is a frantic, mystical journey through Africa's biggest metropolis: Lagos. Going beyond the popular images of mad traffic or crowded slums, we learn of the incredible feats Lagosians pull off to survive their broken-down city, and the secret enabling them to cope with the chaos and precarity of Nigeria's most populous centre: spirituality. A female street fighter in a male-dominated mafia extortion business. Two powerful chiefs locked in a deadly feud over billion-dollar real estate. An oil tycoon who gambles her fortune on televangelists' prophecies. A rubbish scavenger dreaming of a reggae career. A fisherman's son trying to save Makoko, the 'floating slum', from demolition. A priestess to a river goddess selling sand to feed Lagos's construction boom. Belief in unseen forces unites these figures, as does their commitment to worshipping them--at shrines, in mosques and in churches. In this extraordinary city, Tim Cocks uncovers something universal about human nature in the face of danger and high uncertainty: our tendency to place faith in a realm beyond.” Book Review(on the sleeve of the book)

The author was the Reuters Nigeria bureau chief between 2011-2015. He posited that the people in the book are all real and their stories are true. He stated that the book was not about his own experience of Lagos but he allowed the lives of Lagosians speak for themselves.

This is by far the best book one has read on present day Lagos history. Most of the other books dwelt on the history of British conquest and a lot of events that happened in the yesteryears.

In this book, the author was frank about the current security situation in Lagos compared to other big cities around the world where he opined that: “The people on this book mostly live on the extremes of Lagos, a city that has more of them than most (extremes and people). Predictably, that means there is violence. But I'd hate the reader to come away with the impression that

Lagos is somehow an exceptionally violent place. Its homicide rate compared favourably with cities in the northern United States, and extremely well set against the city in which I live, Johannesburg. Armed robbery and kidnapping are everywhere, and local politicians have an ugly habit of settling scores on the streets. But I doubt this is more so than in quite a number of developing cities, and Lagos is safer than many.” Preface (page xiv).

He wrote insightfully about Lagos traffic and how the police escorts of the Big men are more for clearing traffic than security.

Similarly, one found the author’s analysis of the sounds of the distinct parts of Lagos interesting. He wrote on page 57 that:

“Each part of Lagos had its distinct sound, like Ikeja, the state capital running off the northern end of Third Mainland Bridge, in the shadow of the deceased Afrobeat legend Fela Kuti. Ajegunle had taken a different route from that blazed by Fela’s hypnotic, funk-infused music, with its blaring horns and dancing girls. Saxophones and trumpets are expensive in the ghetto. Casio keyboards less so. Musicians there veered towards synthesized reggae-pop and especially its younger offshoot, dancehall. Singers emulated ragamuffin stars like Bernie Man and Sean Paul. They smoked copious weed and called God ‘Jah’. The Rastafarian narrative, with its curious blend of pan-African nationalism and Old Testament prophecy, it’s talk of oppression by a greedy, self serving ‘Babylon’, and it’s hope for redemption into an equitable ‘Zion’ always struck a chord in impoverished Ajegunle.”

He delved into the various versions of the history of Lagos. He somewhat settled for the one that suggested that the Binis conquered but chose to rule in harmony with the Idejo chiefs (landowning chieftaincy class of Lagos) similar to the indirect rule theory propounded by Lord Lugard and adopted by the British colonial government over most of their oversea territories.

The author went to town on the complex nature of small deities and ancestral spirits that have guided the lives of many West Africans for millennia. The nature of religions harmony in Lagos was consistent in the book. Most of the personalities contained in the books practiced Islam or Christianity side by side with traditional religions without any qualms.

He was quite explicit about the brands of Christianity that have been forged with a very local - and entrepreneurial - flavour. The author meets one of them, a certain Chris Oyakhilome. According to the first part of a long list of

accolades on his website, he has "a divine ability to decipher, decrypt and demystify the deeper meanings and messages of the Bible hereby delivering to mankind Cocks observes these claims with a certain irony. "As with other popular pastors, his spiritual gifts have generated substantial material ones. He flies around in a chartered private jet, and wears a gold -trim tunic and gold-buckle shoes with a fancy Swiss watch."

Pentecostal churches are everywhere in Lagos, as are mosques - both offering a certain succour for the difficult lives that the vast majority of Lagosians lead. Cocks explains: **"Head north up the Lagos-Ibadan expressway and the slums of the Lagos mainland give way to vast estates owned by preachers with names like 'Winners Chapel' and 'The Mountain of Fire and Miracles' while billboards feature sharp-suited Nigerian pastors advertising a 'Three-Day War to Kill the Witches'.** **"Some venues fit as many as a quarter of a million people, and many of their pastors are multi-millionaires."** Shockingly, and refreshingly, he x-rayed the life of the founder of a successful upstream company Brittonia-U and her spiritual fatherly relationship with the late T.B. Joshua and what she perceived as the late cleric spiritual impact on her business.

One found his incisive investigative narrative of the history and current state of Makoko, Maroko, Olusosun and Ajah quite illuminating.

On Makoko, the African Venice, he spoke about Noah who has managed to maintain a school with the assistance of donations from charities and tourists. He also miraculously saved the community for forceful eviction through his association with the foreign tourists and media. A sustainability focused architect, Isimeme Etomi, was also given her flowers having taught in Makoko as part of her National Youth Service Corp programme and seen as "the most reliable defender of Makoko in the world outside." The history of the collapsed floating school by Kunle Adeyemi and its disconnection from the needs of the people of Makoko was also narrated. The irony of the lack of government presence in Makoko was referenced when he wrote that "despite an almost total lack of police presence, Makoko is still thought to have one of the lowest crime rates in all of Lagos."

On Maroko and Ajah, he spoke about the real estate based on ancestral claim of the Onirus, Elegushis and the Olumegbo. With focus on the late Olumegbon of Lagos, Chief Fatai Lawal and his interactions. The gang wars between his army of boys and that of the rival families, Ojupon and Ogunsemo.

The sand dredging business on the Lekki axis also got an exhaustive coverage with spotlight on one of the dealers, Kemi.

Olusosun, the waste and scavenging den of Lagos, was not left out. The book profiled Olusosun's poster boy: Eric from Ajegunle, who found himself in a BBC documentary and became famous as a scavenger turned motivational speaker. Life at Olusosun was also x-rayed.

The preface, epilogue and the sources were quite helpful. Though I wonder why books don't contain indexes anymore? They are usually helpful for cross referencing.

In surmise, an exhaustively educational and fantastic book on contemporary Lagos, its history and its back streets.

Thank you.

'Wale Irokosu

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