

Death in Lagos



It seems I share with many of my anthropological colleagues a taste for detective stories, and I think there is a particular kind of affinity involved. It is not that we choose this sort of fiction so much for literary qualities, which these stories may or may not have, but rather that we turn to them as another, more relaxed, kind of studying sideways. These stories may to a degree resemble our field situations: we may get to know a certain number of people reasonably well, but around them there is also a wider setting providing a sense of place. It is also true that mystery writers and anthropologists have increasingly converged on urban scenes. Sherlock Holmes with his Baker Street address may at one time have been rather unusual, when more writers set their stories in somewhat remote, otherwise idyllic settings. (Field-working anthropologists used to be village people too.) Now Sara Paretsky takes us to Chicago; Linda Fairweather, to New York; George Pelecanos, to Washington. These are complex, unpredictable places—less transparent, with more anonymity.

It is also true that detective stories have gone global.¹ When I feel like traveling in my reading (which, perhaps also for other anthropologists, is most of the time), detective stories can take me to Venice, Istanbul, Vientiane, Shanghai, or Tokyo—sometimes entailing time travel into the past as well. For a visit to West Africa, I can choose the company of Afropolitan (Ghanaian-Californian) Kwei Quartey, and learn about Accra in his *Children of the Street* (2011).² If I want to stay home, as a Stockholmer, I can turn to the strikingly successful “Millennium Trilogy” of Stieg Larsson.

Where has Nigeria figured in this genre? Nowhere particularly prominently, as I understand it. True, genres can be more or less blurred, so it may be that there are elements of mystery in some well-known novels. It is not that Nigerian authors have stayed away from

it either—in Wendy Griswold’s (2000) overview of Nigerian fiction, she classifies about a hundred novels, out of a total of 476, as belonging in a crime genre. Yet she does not have all that much to say about them. They seem to find readers (and publishers) at home, but may be mostly forgettable.

But Lagos is no idyll. On my shelf I find *Bloodbath at Lobster Close*, by Dickson Ighavini (1980), in Macmillan’s Pacesetters series devoted to African authors. “Lobster Close” is in a well-to-do suburb of a city named Portkano—but since it is a capital city, with foreign embassies, in a country where more or less shady petroleum deals are a major business, and with key people having more or less recognizably Nigerian names, Portkano can hardly be anyplace but Lagos. Frank Jirinde, a successful businessman, lives with his family at Lobster Close. He is threatened on the phone; a young child of his is kidnapped; police officers at various levels are involved, as well as the local criminal hierarchy. But two important persons are expatriates. One is a criminal of British-Lebanese heritage, with a past as a soldier of fortune here and there in the world’s conflicts. The other is Jirinde’s wife—and it turns out rather late in the story that this sensible, heroic woman is British by birth. (The author may have been pleased with this surprise element in the text, but since there is a young white woman with Black children on the cover of the paperback book, the reader may have got the idea rather earlier.)

Bloodbath at Lobster Close is a rather short book, certainly action-packed, but there is not much vivid portrayal of either key persons or the urban setting. It hardly stands out as a very significant contribution to the genre. Soon after, Dickson Ighavini wrote a couple more books, which I have not read, and I find no traces of a continued writing career.

Cyprian Ekwensi makes an even briefer early excursion into the crime story genre, with *Yaba Round-about Murder* (1962) fitting into his other Lagos writings. This one is fifty-five pages long, really a pamphlet, locally published.

Another mystery story is explicitly set mainly in Lagos, although the author is American, not Nigerian. The novel is *An African Affair*, by Nina Darnton, published in 2012. Darnton lived in Lagos in the 1970s as the wife of John Darnton, the *New York Times* correspondent referred to in chapter 8, and while the precise period in which her story is set is vague, some signs point in this direction. There is a ruthless military dictatorship, with its headquarters at Dodan Barracks, Lagos—there is no capital at Abuja yet. The occasional reference to Internet use, on the other hand, does not fit with that.

The story is more developed than *Bloodbath at Lobster Close*, in style and in plot. But while it is placed in Nigeria, Nigerians actually play a limited role in it. The journalist heroine is Lindsay, visiting correspondent from the *New York Globe*, and the people surrounding her are in large part other foreign correspondents and diplomats (including intelligence services). Their sociable exchanges are not local Nigerian gossip, but the gossip of the Africa newsbeat:

We just got back from Zaire. Incredible. Kinshasa is still the same scary place. You remember Gabe Weston from the *LA Times*? He hid in the hotel the whole time. He kept coming up with phony reasons not to come with us. Wrote his piece from the bar at the Continental. The rest of us tried to get by the military blockades and talk to villagers about the Australian stringer who disappeared. (Darnton 2012: 31)

These, then, are expatriates in safari suits, not longtimers in Nigeria, and in large part based in the affluent quarters of suburban Ikoyi, next to major embassies.³ At Ikoyi Club, a rather run-down vestige of colonial times, they will encounter those wealthy locals who “somehow had managed to remain anglophiles—so brainwashed that even now, more than three decades after independence, they thought anything British was the height of sophistication” (2012: 128). (That would place the story in the 1990s.) Lindsay’s steward refuses to call her by her first name instead of “madam.”

Central Lagos becomes visible mostly in traffic jams. As newspeople and diplomats, however, these expats are intensely interested in the Nigerian political scene. There is an energetic opposition seeking a return to civilian rule, and a series of murders, and there are rumors of coups and countercoups, and one real coup; the Nigerian North-South divide is necessarily an ingredient here. On the other side of town, in rather rundown Surulere, there is an establishment named the Juju House, the entertainment compound where Bayo Awollowa Soti, mostly just known as Bayo, lives with some twenty beautiful young wives, plays his celebrated Afro-beat on his saxophone, and also engages in radical politics. Surely a close-enough portrait of Fela Kuti and his Afrika Shrine. In the novel Bayo dies, however, of a heart attack as soldiers are taking him to the prison after having burned down Juju House. A bit later, Bayo’s next in command is killed.

One of Lindsay’s new friends, with headquarters in London and New York, deals in African arts, mostly carved wood sculptures, so he can tell her about Yoruba *ibeji* twin figures. Moreover, he takes her on an excursion to Osogbo (not an entirely safe trip, as there are road bandits), quite far into Yorubaland, where they meet an expatriate

of Austrian background, who has in her own way “gone native”: the sculptress–batik artist–priestess Roxanne Reinstadler. Darnton’s model for this figure is obviously Susanne Wenger, the real-life Austrian famously based in Osogbo (see chapter 6). Lindsay can get a good feature story out of the meeting with Roxanne if she can only manage to file it on time. Keeping in touch with the New York office from Lagos is just about always a problem.

So a web of mystery is woven. The expatriates turn out not always to be what they at first seem to be. Who knew what about whom, and when? Petroleum and drugs are what much of the game is about, involving successive dictators as well. There are rumors of mercenaries, assassination managers from Solutions Incorporated. Even Darnton’s title, *An African Affair*, has a double meaning. As the story ends, Lindsay is back in Europe, trying to figure out what her life and her career are coming to.

Another expatriate journalist character, Guy Collins, offers the first-person narrative in *Easy Motion Tourist*, the debut thriller by Leye Adenle (2016, published by Cassava Republic Press). No uncertainty about the period here: this is definitely twenty-first-century Lagos. Well over a half century after Cyprian Ekwensi’s depiction of the seamy side of city life, it has all become so much more glaring: enormously wealthy (but poverty-stricken next door), enormously corrupt, enormously promiscuous, whether on a cash basis or not. Much of the action takes place on Victoria Island, which the Nigerian and expatriate elite would much like to have to themselves as a sort of giant gated community, and so there is great anxiety when the word is out that some sort of a ritual murder of a young woman (evidently a prostitute) has taken place there. For one thing, they do not want international media attention.

That journalist Collins, however, is an Englishman working for British news radio. Occasionally he tries to present himself as a BBC correspondent for the sake of prestige, but this is not really true. He has been sent out by a modest news site on the Internet, to cover an upcoming election, and happens to be on site, coming out of a nightclub close to the Eko Hotel where he has stayed, around the moment when that murder is discovered. Consequently, he may become a convenient suspect. Having been placed under arrest, however, he is rescued from a prison cell by the heroine of the story, Amaka, lawyer and tough, smart activist for Street Samaritans—an organization that does not so much aim to get prostitutes to leave their trade as to try and keep them safe.

The Lagos scene has bandits named Catch-Fire, Go-Slow, and Knockout; there is the police officer Hot-Temper as well. They are all in

the plot. Kalashnikovs, Uzis, and AK-47s are their tools. Not so much depth perhaps, but action, action, action (divided into 61 chapters).

After a brief encounter in bed, Guy Collins becomes quite attached to Amaka. His editor orders him back to London, as the election he was supposed to cover no longer seems terribly newsworthy. But Guy is catching on to another, better, story by way of Amaka. He gets quite worried when he learns that she has gone to see one extremely wealthy businessman, ostensibly to beg for a donation to Street Samaritans, but really to find out where that wealth comes from. A friendly exchange, with lunch provided by the host's private Chinese cook, and at which the host hints at amorous intentions, ends with a dose of chloroform. Amaka loses consciousness. Guy, knowing where she is, goes there with a local collaborator to rescue her, but they get stuck in a traffic jam for a long while.

That host-turned-enemy decides it is time to escape—by air, to a hideout in Accra, although he tries quickly to spread the word that he is going to the United States to see family members. Guy and his partner catch a glimpse of his car as it leaves, and follow in his tracks as discreetly as they can, into a slum, where the millionaire has his bandit following. He unloads Amaka's unconscious body from the car trunk and takes it into the gangsters' house. Guy and his partner, whom he had thought was a local journalist but who turns out to be a policeman in disguise, follow them into the house, where somehow more police also turn up. There is a shootout, where Amaka and Guy are among the survivors. That millionaire, on the other hand, who has indeed been in a lucrative trade in body parts, is killed. It is time for Guy to catch his flight to London, but as he and Amaka kiss each other farewell, it is clear that they both expect to see each other again.

Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014) is again definitely a work of the present, but only uncertainly in a crime genre. Okorafor is an Afropolitan, professor of creative writing at the University of Buffalo (part of the State University of New York). It originated as a screenplay for a Nollywood movie, and then became at least as lively as a book. The two central figures are women: Adaora, a marine biologist and Igbo, with her family home and her own aquatic laboratory only minutes from Bar Beach (again, on Victoria Island); and Ayodele, who emerges from the sea and quickly acquires a Yoruba name. But Ayodele is actually extraterrestrial, amphibious, forever shapeshifting.

There are other people more or less continuously involved in the story: a Ghanaian star rapper; a Nigerian army soldier; Adaora's husband, Chris, an affluent jet-hopping accountant in international business who has a German MBA degree and who has also become

a born-again Christian (and thinks Ayodele is a marine witch); Chris' mother, a forever-meddling, trouble-making mother-in-law; Father Oke, a self-made bishop with his congregation mostly in the street (but with Chris as a generous donor); and a reporter for the *Nigerian Times* who has been a sometime CNN correspondent. At least in Adaora's memory, there is the rather improbable figure of a Tuareg expert diver from the Sahara desert. Rather late, the president of Nigeria also turns up, with two of his three wives. He has just returned from life-saving heart surgery in Saudi Arabia; he had been worried that he would have to turn over his high office to the vice-president, Wishwell Williams, whom he saw as a money-grubbing Christian blockhead with a stupid name.⁴

Several of these people happen to meet on that beach:

In many ways, Bar Beach was a perfect sample of Nigerian society. It was a place of mixing. The ocean mixed with the land and the wealthy mixed with the poor. Bar Beach attracted drug dealers, squatters, various accents and languages, seagulls, garbage, biting flies, tourists, all kinds of religious zealots, hawkers, prostitutes, johns, water-loving children and their careless parents. The beachside bars and small restaurants were the most popular hangout spots. Bar Beach's waters were too wild for any serious swimming. Even the best swimmers risked a watery death by its many rip currents. (Okorafor 2014: 7)

"A perfect sample of Nigerian society"? No hard-working farmers, no Fulani pastoralists here. Once more, rather more a sample of Lagos. Yet as we move off the beach, we encounter other groups and settings as well: the pioneer LGBT movement Black Nexus, an Internet café where most of the customers seem to engage habitually in their infamous "419" financial scams with victims abroad, and the Area Boys, street children grown into teenagers waiting for the sunset, after which their criminal activities can proceed even more freely.⁵

Scenes shift rapidly between fifty-seven brief (sometimes extremely brief) chapters, rather like in Adenle's book. It is at Bar Beach that Ayodele comes out of the water. Apparently, she had been a swordfish a moment earlier, and then continues to take on different forms—at one point, a green lizard.

Long before that, however, it has become clear that Ayodele did not come alone. She belongs to a band of extraterrestrials with uncertain intentions and different guises. As they arrive with an eruption in the sea and then a threatening series of tidal waves, chaos reigns in Lagos. People try to escape to their home villages or by plane overseas, but the latter turns out to be impossible, as the airport closes down.

Fisayo, smart secretary in an office by day, finding her customers as a high-class Bar Beach prostitute by night, witnesses aliens coming

ashore, and decides to resist the invasion—with texted signs and with a gun. When she sees Ayodele in a crowd, she shoots her, but Adaora, who is also there, observes that Ayodele turns into a mist. And then Fisayo somehow fades away and is forever gone. Ayodele has pulled her apart at a molecular level.

Fisayo shooting Ayodele is one of few instances of real violence in *Lagoon*. Otherwise, people sort of die or disappear, if they have not turned into something else. Father Oke, the bishop, meets Mami Wata at the beach, then vanishes walking into the ocean. Ayodele finally becomes a smoke, turning into a fog spreading over Lagos, with the attractive smell of garden eggs (a popular, small local variant of eggplant, or aubergine). With this farewell, things seem to take a happy turn. The president goes on television to address the nation, speaking out against corruption and other social evils.

Lagoon ends with a set of reading group questions (as befits a book by a professor of creative writing). One of them goes as follows: “Should *Lagoon* be categorized as science fiction, fantasy, African literature, American literature, Nigerian literature, Naijamerican (Nigerian-American) literature, magical realism, thriller, suspense, literary, or something else? Why?”

Good question. Perhaps it is a genre-defying book that Amos Tutuola would have enjoyed? One may be reminded, too, of arguments over where to place Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991) in the literary order of genres. In any case, somebody might do a dissertation on the recurrent appearances of *mamiwatas* (“mammy-waters,” mermaids) and madmen in Nigerian fiction—both representatives of uncertainty. The madmen show a certain resemblance to the varieties of street preachers, such as Father Oke. And the extraterrestrial Ayodele is not entirely unlike a *mamiwata*, although she can take on other shapes as well.

We could give some thought, too, to the fact that Nina Darnton, Leye Adenle, and Nnedi Okorafor all have women as key figures in their books, yet not really of the policewoman/detective heroine type we find elsewhere in the genre—with Sara Paretsky in Chicago, for example. In Stockholm, Stieg Larsson’s Lisbeth Salander, as a trickster figure, perhaps becomes a little like Ayodele. But given the role of successful, strong, enterprising women in Nigerian business, one could imagine the possibility of creating a local detective heroine.

Of course, not all Nigerian detective stories have to be set in Lagos, however much that may attract the imagination. Why not a mystery in Kano, with the hero/heroine problem-solver moving, in some period, between the walled Old City and the *sabon gari*, the migrants’ quarter?

Notes

1. On the globalization of crime fiction, see Nilsson, Damrosch, and D'haen 2017. I have commented on the affinity between ethnography and detective stories in another context (Hannerz 2013).
2. Quartey's books are with a major New York publisher, and evidently intended in large part for an American market. The fact that paperback editions carry review blurbs from magazines such as *Ebony* and *Essence* suggests that Black Americans are expected to take some special interest in them.
3. Decades earlier, in *No Longer at Ease*, Chinua Achebe (1960: 18) offered his view of Ikoyi: "For all its luxurious bungalows and flats and its extensive greenery, Ikoyi was like a graveyard. It had no corporate life—at any rate for those Africans who lived there. They had not always lived there, of course. It was once a European reserve. But things had changed, and some Africans in 'European posts' had been given houses in Ikoyi." And this is Cyprian Ekwensi (1961: 51) about Ikoyi, as seen through the eyes of Jagua Nana: "The Government Reservation where the white men and the Africans high up in the civil service lived. Ikoyi where the streets were straight and smooth, where they played golf on the open sands: a reservation complete with its own police station, electricity base, motor-boat beaches, a romantic place."
4. "Wishwell Williams" could possibly remind us of Goodluck Jonathan, a Southern vice-president who ascended to the presidency with the death, after long illness, of a Northern president.
5. For an extended discussion of "419" scams, see Daniel Jordan Smith 2007: 28–52.

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