

## CHAPTER 5

# The City, According to Ekwensi . . . and Onuzo



Cyprian Ekwensi was born in 1920—an Igbo, but already an exemplar of his people’s outward mobility. His life began in Minna, a town in the Middle North on the railway. Later he spent a part of his childhood in Jos. A *Wikipedia* entry intriguingly lists his father’s occupation as storyteller and elephant hunter. His early beginnings may explain the fact that in his large and varied body of writings, a fair amount deals with Northern Nigerian topics, such as *Burning Grass* and *An African Night’s Entertainment* (both 1962)—both largely rural, with no Igbo visible.

He began to write in the 1940s for a variety of local outlets. A number of his books and booklets were intended for school use. At the same time, he made his living in other ways, in forestry and in pharmacy, in which he had some training. Then in the early 1950s, he came to Britain for several years.<sup>1</sup> By the time I met him briefly in Lagos in 1961, he was director of information services, with his office in the center of Lagos, and seated behind a large desk, with a color print of the young Queen Elizabeth on the wall behind his back. This was in the brief period just after the arrival of independence when she was still Nigerian head of state; the country’s presidency only came about in 1963.

He said he saw a certain danger in staying abroad too long, as one might get too impatient with things when one came home. By then he had just published *Jagua Nana* (1961). Before that, there was already *People of the City* (1954), published only a couple of years after Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. This earlier book was dedicated to “*West African Voices: a BBC programme.*” Some of his stories had been broadcast there.

With *People of the City* and *Jagua Nana*, Ekwensi made his reputation for portraying city life, especially in Lagos. In the first of them, he

begins by declaring that the city “shall be nameless,” but then the central figure, “a most colourful and eligible young bachelor,” Amusa Sango, is a crime reporter with the *West African Sensation*, which is a Lagos newspaper in at least three later Ekwensi novels. Amusa Sango, however, is active on both the day shift and the night shift, as he is also a very popular dance band leader. (No wonder he needs his “houseboy,” Sam, of uncertain age—“He could be fifteen or fifty.”) Hearing Amusa’s music filtering through the neighborhood from the club where he is playing, irritated husbands would observe their wives “drop their knitting and sewing and wriggle their hips, shoulders and breasts, sighing with nostalgia of musty nights years ago.” Early Nigerian fiction, not only by Ekwensi but by other male authors as well, tends to be strong on sensuality.<sup>2</sup> That would also go well with Amusa’s good friend Bayo: “Young, handsome, strong, idle and penniless: that was Bayo. You know him well. He’s in your city, too. He’s in every city in the world.” Bayo, however, falls in love with Suad, a young Lebanese woman, perhaps in her late teens, working with her cloth-trader elder brother in his shop. Apart from the ethnic dimension of this courtship—Lebanese men may accept the company of African women, but frown on unions the other way around—there is the complication that the newspapers are warning against a continued invasion of Lebanese and Syrian petty traders who push African traders out of business.

Amusa, for his part, and to begin with, is torn between two women. One is Aina, escaping from her marriage to a peasant in a village some sixty miles away, and greatly attracted to city life, surviving partly by petty theft, which at one point takes her to a brief jail sentence. The other is Beatrice, possibly even more attractive, married according to local custom to a British expatriate, with whom she has three children. But as the expatriate evidently has another marriage and family in his home country, there would seem to be no great future for Beatrice as his missus.

A third alternative turns out in the end not to matter so much. The *West African Sensation* sends Amusa to the East to report on the coalmine workers’ strike, and the violent response to it by the colonial power (see a little more about this in the next chapter, in the section about Enugu). While he is there in the East, he makes an excursion to the convent school nearby to see the girl whom his aging mother has selected to be his wife. She is pretty in a sweet, innocent way, but he realizes that he is not attracted to her. More continually in the story is the greedy landlord Lajide, whose constant juggling with properties and rentals inserts itself again and again into the lives of Amusa and his circle. Although Lajide already has eight wives, he continues to

be on the lookout for further possibilities. He makes some sort of deal with Beatrice, who becomes the manageress of the club where Amusa has been performing with his band—although by then he has terminated their employment. A little later, Beatrice joins up with Kofi, a truck driver more or less constantly on the road between Lagos and the Gold Coast, his home. At a point when Sango is down on his luck, Kofi suggests he should seek a new future in that hopeful country. Beatrice, on a last visit to Lajide, is beaten up by his remaining seven wives. The oldest one has recently died.

Meanwhile, Amusa runs into a second Beatrice, whom he saves from a difficult situation at a funeral service for the great nationalist pioneer De Periera (whose name sounds rather Afro-Brazilian, although Ekwensi's spelling may be doubtful), who has died at the age of eighty-three. This Beatrice is again extremely beautiful, but Sango must be disappointed when she tells him that her fiancé is a third-year medical student in Edinburgh. When he returns, and she has trained as a nurse, they plan to open their own hospital in the remote interior. The big city does not really need any more doctors.

Bayo, for his part, is about to have a hurried wedding with Suad, before her brother has a chance to fly her back to their country of origin to prevent that. But the brother shows up with a gun and kills both of them, before disappearing only to commit suicide himself. Amusa reports this complicated story, with its racial overtones, for the *West African Sensation*, but this becomes so controversial that his superior at the paper, an expatriate named McMaster, who had just recently offered to promote him, now fires him instead. At this point, neither the trumpet-playing night shift nor the journalistic daytime work are going well.

Toward the end of the book, Aina shows up again, telling Amusa that he is the father of the baby she is pregnant with. And then still later, a number of arrivals, departures, and deaths result in a rather different final cast of characters. But Sam the houseboy, the second Beatrice, Kofi the truck driver, the first Beatrice's expatriate common-law husband, and Amusa himself are all still there. The ending is happy and a bit unexpected.

*People of the City* offers a slice of lively urban imagery set in a time of late colonial transition. The lingering dominance of expatriates is resented, with the exception of a few who happen to have non-British surnames. Perhaps it surprises a little that Nigerian ethnic divides hardly draw any mention, but this may to some extent go with the gesture of keeping the city nameless.

The story also includes a motif that recurs here and there in Nigerian fiction—the overseas significant other. This may be a loved one, yet to return to become a been-to; or a partner (more often a she than a he) who returned home after failing to adapt to Nigerian life; or someone who remained at home, one partner in what is understood to be a conventional marriage, while the other partner engages in transnational bigamy by way of a common-law union in Nigeria; or someone in working life, such as the editor at his desk in London or New York. There may be other varieties as well.

When we get to *Jagua Nana* (1961), Ekwensi's Lagos already seems rather familiar. Knees, armpits, breasts, shoulders, and thighs are all there already in the first paragraph. Jagua, or Jagwa, no longer so young, is so called not after the feline animal (which is not African anyway), but after the British prestige car. Good looks, stunning fashions. She likes to think of Freddie, a teacher who lives in the same house, as her young boyfriend. He continues reasonably studious, hoping to go to England for legal studies, and Jagua wants to support those plans—so he can then come back and marry her, after she is no longer attractive enough to draw other men. The difference between Jagua and Freddie becomes clear enough when he takes her along to a British Council lecture event (on “Some Personal Recollections on the Passing of White Imperialism in Nigeria”), where he joins all these other educated men in laughing in the right place at the lecturer's jokes, while Jagua just sits there bored. She walks out and heads for the Tropicana nightclub, where Freddie joins her a little later. But then he walks out. He cannot stand the mixed company of more senior men of varied West African (some already been-tos) and Syrian backgrounds where Jagua feels at home, with her experience of having been in the fashion business along the coast. (Accra was a center.) At this stage it turns out that there is actually a triangular drama. Freddie is getting more attracted to young, sweet Nancy. Nancy's parents are Sierra Leoneans, and Jagua used to do Nancy's mother's hair. Both Jagua and Freddie are Igbo, although as Ekwensi shows, in Lagos they speak Pidgin English to each other.

Somehow Freddie gets enough funding together to fly away to England and get started on more studying. Jagua goes out to the airport to see him off. To begin with, she gets a steady stream of letters from him, but after a while it slows down to a trickle. So she goes to a letter writer in the street, who helps her compose a letter to him.

Then the book turns out not to be purely a Lagos story. Jagua gets on a long-distance mammy-wagon for an exhausting journey east, even if

she manages to claim the privileged single seat next to the driver. She goes first to see her elderly, ailing parents in a village near Onitsha; her father is a reverend. From there she proceeds beyond Port Harcourt, partly by canoe, to Freddie's home village, to make its acquaintance. It is a place with old, dilapidated houses in the Niger Delta area.

It comes as a bit of a shock to find Nancy and her mother already there. One early morning when Jagua goes down to the nearby stream for a bath, she finds Nancy already there. After a heated exchange, Nancy swims away—but is captured by young men from the hostile village across the stream. Feeling guilty, Jagua dresses up in her very best and goes over there to see the village chief. This is a middle-aged man of approximately Jagua's age, who has three wives, but he has never met anybody like this visitor before. With all her sophistication she has no trouble seducing him. He has Nancy released at her request, and wants to pay a bride-price to keep Jagua for himself. Jagua, however, prefers to return to Lagos. On her way, she makes a stop at Onitsha to see her trader brother, who wants her to remain and get busy in respectable commerce. But no, Lagos is waiting with the Tropicana, where Jimo Ladi and his Leopards are still playing.

Another sweet young man, Dennis, comes her way—but he turns out to be a member of a gang of thieves, who can use her as a fence for stolen gold. The police come to raid her rooms after a tipoff.

Then, however, there is also Uncle Taiwo, now and then at Tropicana, with loads of money and involved in party politics. Basically there are two parties, simply named Other Party One and Other Party Two—that is, OP1 and OP2. (Perhaps Ekwensi the civil servant does not want to come too close to more real-sounding party names here.) Jagua begins working with him for OP2, campaigning among market women. Things get more complicated when Freddie shows up again, having returned from England, with Nancy, now his wife (with two children), who had joined him there. Overseas, he had already joined the local branch of OP1, and now he is with that party organization in Lagos. The election campaign becomes very violent, and Uncle Taiwo and Freddie are opposing candidates for the same council seat. Dennis turns up again as one of the street fighters for OP1. Freddie is killed in a street battle between the parties, but, as public opinion turns against OP2 with this, Uncle Taiwo still loses the election, a personal disaster for him.

Jagua's life in Lagos has turned quite disorganized by the time her Onitsha brother turns up looking for her. Back in the village, their father is dying and wants a last encounter with his wayward daughter. They return there, but too late. He is already dead. While Jagua lingers in the village, a young woman who has recently been more or less her

understudy in Lagos shows up with news from the big city. Dennis has been hanged for a variety of crimes. Uncle Taiwo's dead body has been found at a centrally located roundabout. So Jagua gets around to open a package with which Uncle Taiwo has entrusted her—and there she finds a very large amount of cash, in pound notes.

She travels back to Freddie's village once more, and finds that the village across the stream has been prospering under the progressive leadership of the chief who had once been her suitor. Without looking him up, she donates a considerable sum to education in that village. And then, becoming impatient with life in her parental village, she has her brother help her acquire a very good sewing machine. The last we see of Jagua, she is setting herself up to become a merchant princess in Onitsha.

At least initially, yet another city novel by Ekwensi takes us away from Lagos: *Iska* (first published in 1966, in paperback 1968) starts in Kaduna, the Northern city created as a modern, colonial-period regional capital by Governor Lugard.<sup>3</sup> It begins with a Romeo-and-Juliet story of ethnicity. The main figure, Filia, is Igbo, in her late teens, light-skinned and good-looking, just about finishing her education at a Roman Catholic convent school, a diaspora girl who has never lived in Igboland. The young man who spots her and seeks her out is a Northerner, a junior civil servant. They fall in love and expect a future together. But their personal encounter is set within the context of ethnic interrelations as they are in the mid-twentieth century, early postcolonial urban North. As Ekwensi (1968: 12–13) puts it,

Between Ibo and Hausa at that particular time the gulf was wide. Normally the Ibo man worked like a steam engine, multiplied like the guinea pig and effervesced with honesty. The Hausa man was tolerant, philosophical, accommodating, believing that whatever would be would be. Both had lived peacefully together for a hundred years. Then came politics—the vulture's foot that spoiled the stew.

Actually, Ekwensi is a little inconsistent about the young man Dan Kaybi's background—it seems he is actually of mixed Nupe-Fulani parentage, but as a sort of generalized modern Northerner he seems for most purposes to count as Hausa. Filia, for her part, is likened early on to a wind (that is, *Iska* in Hausa). Her life will “blow across everything.”

As her father dies, having returned back to his village of origin, Filia goes there on her first visit to the ethnic homeland. While there, she learns that her northern fiancé has died as a result of intervening in a Hausa-Igbo gang brawl in his favorite bar in Kaduna. She is under

some pressure to accept one rather mature Igbo suitor in the village, but rejects him, returns briefly to Kaduna, and then proceeds to Lagos to stay at first with a senior sister and brother-in-law—she hopes for a career as a model.

From there on, this becomes very much another Lagos story: one of partying, job-seeking, networking, driving about in fast cars, finding a roof over one's head, smoking "wee-wee" (cannabis). Betrayed wives show up to bawl out their civil-service husbands (experts at passing the buck) at their offices. Filia, however, succeeds in establishing herself as a model, so her face appears in ads for "soft drinks, sewing machines, toilet soaps, special fabrics." Meanwhile, other men also pass through her life's experience. One is a rent-a-thug available to any political grouping willing to pay him for beating up its adversaries. Another is Piska Dabra, street apostle, with a pointed cap resembling a bishop's, leader of the Prayer People, a mixed collection of people deeply in need of something or other. In the end, Piska Dabra wades out into the lagoon and drowns. Filia gets more seriously involved with Dapo Ladele, who reminds her of Dan Kaybi, her first love. Dapo Ladele is a successful political correspondent at the *West African Sensation*. Actually, he is already married to a British girl, but she has returned to the United Kingdom and is not expected to come back—she could not stand Lagos. Then, however, politics, and Filia's slight engagement with it, again turn complicated. The suitor she once rejected back in the Igbo village is now in Lagos, a parliamentarian engaged in a breakaway from the major party he has earlier represented. His partners in the new enterprise are a Northerner, Dan Kaybi's father, and a Westerner, married to Dan Kaybi's sister—who would have been Filia's sister-in-law if things had gone well, and who was a good friend from Kaduna school days. (So the Lagos political world seems very small.) But Filia's old Igbo suitor is under a cloud after having sold communal land at home and thereafter privatized the earnings so that he could send his children to Oxford and Cambridge. Dapo Ladele agrees to edit a new newspaper, the *Reformer*, on behalf of the new political party, which is already splitting up and on its road to certain failure. And against his better judgment, but to make a handsome personal profit, he writes and publishes a piece heaping praise on his new patron, that corrupt old suitor of Filia's, who is again making advances toward her (to be his Lagos woman, aside from the wife he has back in the village). Filia is deeply disappointed in Dapo, and begins to think about the possibility of a future pursuing her modeling career abroad—England, France, America . . .

But that is not to be. In the end, Filia is indeed, as it were, “gone with the wind.” And Dapo Ladele receives a final message from his wife in London, informing him that she will never again come to Lagos.

Once more a portrayal of the lives, in large part on the night shift, of more-or-less successful Lagosians and their more dubious hangers-on. This may well be what, at least at the time, appealed most to readerships both in Nigeria and abroad. That “vulture’s foot” of politics is also forever present. In this somewhat later book, there are yet stronger hints of those Afropolitan linkages than before, with Filia’s career dreams overseas and that expatriate ex-wife-to-be. And at the same time, there is the street preacher addressing the lumpenproletariat, already encountered among the Afro-Brazilians in Olinto’s *The Water House*, and showing up in later Lagos stories, such as Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon*—see chapter 9.

I can imagine Cyprian Ekwensi rising from that desk with the portrait of the Queen behind him, and going home to write about Jagua Nana. We come back to him in chapter 15. Fast forward now to Chibundu Onuzo’s *Welcome to Lagos* (2017), some sixty years after *People of the City*. In the years between, literary Lagos has been rather densely populated: by Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri, Chris Abani, Teju Cole, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and others. *Welcome to Lagos* is Onuzo’s second novel—the first, *The Spider King’s Daughter* (2012), was published when she was twenty-one, an intriguing tale of two young Lagosians, girl and boy, engaging with each other. Onuzo was always very mature for her age. The daughter of two Lagos doctors, she left for an English boarding school at age fourteen, and the author presentation in this second book says she was then also working for her doctorate at King’s College London. One could note interesting historical connections to Amos Tutuola: Faber and Faber, who first took on Tutuola, now publishes Onuzo, and her first book was shortlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize.

Lagos has changed, but even if political power is now in Abuja, it is still the Big City.<sup>4</sup> (One could reflect that the contrast between the two has symbolic parallels elsewhere—between Washington, D.C., and New York, Canberra and Sydney, Brasilia and Rio de Janeiro, even Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.) It keeps growing, too, and newcomers can have a difficult time getting a roof over their heads. To begin with, the odd cluster of people at the center of Onuzo’s story, escaping from native as well as governmental violence in the country’s southeast, stay under a bridge through their nights, before finding an empty basement in what they take to be an abandoned house.



Only it is not quite so abandoned. It belongs to a prominent politician, a titled chief who, finding himself out of luck in Abuja, disappears from there with a large sum of government money. He makes his way to his old house in Lagos and finds the handful of people in its basement. They seize him; one of them reports it all to the editor-publisher of an ambitious but mostly unsuccessful reformist newspaper, and that journalist makes his way to the basement to interview the politician. He gets a story, including major counterallegations against people in power in Abuja; when he publishes it, his newspaper office is burned down, evidently on order from higher up, and he has to escape to London, where he had once gone for his university education, and where his family still happens to have an apartment. And where he also has an old girl friend, now divorced, with two daughters, and working for the BBC.

Meanwhile, that group in the basement, under the soft leadership of a former army officer who had fled when he just could not take the cruelty of his superior officer against civilians any longer, takes the money that their politician prisoner has appropriated and starts distributing it to local schools, to improve their facilities and educational standards. The politician-chief begins to cooperate in this venture, until it is time for him to flee—but it is too late. He is imprisoned, yet treated increasingly well, then released . . . Let us leave the story there.

It is now an era, however, of a lot of money in some circles, and very little in others, of more or less instantaneous moves between relative opulence and homeless poverty, of quick journeys between Lagos and London, and of lots and lots of international phone calls. Even if one sees some similarities, this is no longer the Lagos of Jagua Nana.

## Notes

1. Lindfors (2010: 111–177) offers a more detailed account of Ekwensi's early life and writings. He is clearly more impressed by the quantity rather than the literary quality of the latter.
2. See, for example, Chukwuemeka Ike's ([1970]1971: 32) description of a faculty wife at the University of Songhai:

She was under 5 foot, with a waste [*sic*] that her houseboys likened to the trunk of a baobab, and which earned her the nickname of *gwongwolo*. One could hardly say she had a waist; for the space between her hips and her chest appeared to have been very carefully filled in. But for her breasts, her circumference would have been uniform from armpit to hip. These were proportionately large . . . . She could walk faster than

most other women, even though the tremor caused by her footsteps shook nearby houses.

3. There happens to be another brief portrayal of postcolonial Kaduna in a fairly satirical short story by the Sri Lankan writer Ashok Ferrey (2009: 10–27). Kaduna, for a period, had some number of South Asian residents, leading rather modest expatriate lives.
4. I note Adichie’s (2017) comment about a new generation of designers: “Most were in Lagos, the most stylish city in the world, where fashion is the one true democracy: from the western-label-loving elite class, to the working poor in their beautifully put-together outfits bought second-hand.”

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