

Shady democracy

Shelter from the sun in urban Africa is a public resource and site of civic life, but is under threat from economic forces with roots in colonial city planning, writes *Lesley Lokko*



PAUL SCHUTZER / LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION / GETTY IMAGES

Queen Elizabeth waves to spectators (opposite) in Tamale, Ghana, 1961, as President Kwame Nkrumah shades her with an umbrella from the unrelenting sun. Ghana had in turn been under the British umbrella when it was a British colony 1867-1957. The canopies of trees shade the community from the blazing Ghanaian sun (right). However, they are now often indiscriminately chopped down with no mandate, in the name of rampant development

The OED's primary definition of 'shade' is 'comparative darkness and coolness caused by shelter from direct sunlight'. In African cities from Kinshasa to Khartoum, trees are the primary source of shade, providing not only respite from the blinding light but also from the heat. In places where the midday temperature can rise to over 40°C, the chance to sit – even for 10 minutes – under a neem tree is more than simply welcome: it is essential. All over the continent, in informal settlements, central business districts, affluent suburbs and marketplaces, you will find people sitting under trees, trading, gossiping, arguing, eating – the full panoply of urban daily life. Heated political debates take place, especially in new democracies nearing elections; men get their hair cut; mobile phone stockists hustle customers; and women cook on tiny open-flame pots, expertly catering to mealtime crowds.

Shade is not regulated: it is accidental, democratic, public-spirited. In a neat reversal of planning methodologies, these clusters of urban and public activity spring up simply where shade can be found. No one remembers who planted the trees, or indeed to whom they might 'belong'. Trees are ubiquitous and, thanks largely to the climate, require little maintenance. A low-hanging branch is as likely to be lopped off by an irritated barber as by the municipality. Colonial powers sought to solidify their presence and control through town-planning mechanisms such as tree planting, so as populations surged and cities grew during this period, it is



LESLEY LOKKO

common to find the older, planned suburbs of cities like Accra, Abidjan and Ouagadougou literally covered in shade, while the newer developments and informal settlements are often bare or devoid of such coverage.

In recent years, however, accompanying the rapid and explosive urbanisation patterns across Africa, shade has increasingly become under attack. This war on shade is fuelled on the one hand by rising land values, and on the other, weak planning governance. The old colonial map of Accra, for example, is being replaced by a newer map of multi-national, capital-intense development, marrying South African-style gated suburbs and Dubai-inspired business districts (albeit without the dizzying height). Luxury apartment blocks backed by a mix of local and Chinese finance and US-style shopping malls cater to the burgeoning middle classes. Since many of the most desirable areas coincide neatly with the tree-lined colonial portions of town, it is not unusual to walk, cycle or drive past a cluster of trees on a street corner one morning, to find the same trees hacked down overnight as land is cleared for new uses.

In Accra in June 2019, less than a year ago, astonishingly, Ghana's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was forced to issue a statement to say that it had 'no knowledge of felled trees', referring to the 140 mature trees that were cut down (apparently overnight) in the city's parks and gardens, located inconveniently in one of the highest-value areas of the capital. Awula Serwah, the coordinator of the NGO Eco-Conscious Citizens GH (ECCGH), writing in the

In the absence of trees, parasols along offer street traders at least some respite from the scorching sun along Oxford Street in Accra

PETER TREANOR / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



‘The war on shade is fuelled on the one hand by rising land values, and on the other, by weak planning governance’

newspaper, *The Daily Statesman*, said ‘it beggars belief that about 140 trees were destroyed on land owned by a government department whose mandate is to promote tree-planting. God placed us in the Garden of Eden and asked us to take care of it for a reason. Accra cannot just be a city of apartment blocks and shopping malls’.

Outrage and protest notwithstanding, the felling of trees within the city’s parks and gardens is part of a long history of the reduction of green cover that has taken place over the past century as the country modernised. According to Lyn-Kristin Hozek of the Department of African Studies and Anthropology at the University of Birmingham, ‘in 1986, about 38 per cent of Accra was covered in vegetation (including trees, smaller plants and shrubs), which declined to about 13.5 per cent in 2013’. The difference is most stark between neighbourhoods of differing socio-economic class, with the wealthier neighbourhoods having successfully slowed down the rate of destruction. Hozek’s article opens with a telling description. ‘A group of five men reading the Quran, protected from the midday sun by a tree’s dense canopy; the trunks of large road-side trees decorated with flags of the competing political parties; a populous colony of bats hanging in the mahoganies.’

Africa’s relationship with democracy has always been portrayed as shady, that is to say, loose and inexpertly applied. My home continent is the ‘heart of darkness’, immortalised by Joseph Conrad who was subsequently vilified by Chinua Achebe and Edward Said

in 1975 and 1995 respectively. The long list of words associated with ‘darkness’ is poignant and uncomfortable: black; blackness; dark; dusk; gloom; gloaming; murk; night; shadows; and shade. I am from Ghana, West Africa, but am now a member of the African diaspora, those who live more or less permanently outside the continent. Here in the US, I’m generally described as an architect or academic ‘of colour’, which perhaps isn’t as damning a statement as Ann Widdicombe’s on Michael Howard, whom she accused of having ‘something of the night about him’, but it’s certainly an addendum. In Ghana, those ‘of colour’ so comprehensively outnumber those ‘without’, that the distinction is meaningless. There are differences among peoples, to be sure, but skin colour isn’t really one of them.

The long and complex history of Africa’s myriad relationships with the rest of the world has brought darkness, or perhaps more accurately, ‘non-whiteness’, into sharp relief. In the seemingly inexplicable shift towards the right across too many formerly liberal Western democracies to count, darkness increasingly matters. Whether discussing the ‘dark’ forces of terrorism; police killings that disproportionately target young black men; or immigration policies that demonise ‘darkies’ seeking the same economic opportunities that built America, Australia and Canada, darkness is going nowhere. The term implies the ‘otherness’ that Richard Sennett speaks of so eloquently and yet, confusingly, the same ‘otherness’ that shapes our sense of self, our communities, our cities, and our idea of citizenship.