Mining Sounds: Lagos-Cairo
A Personal Reflection on Soundscapes

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“I would be somewhere, and the everyday sounds suddenly seemed as interesting to me as the sounds of any music I could hear inside the concert hall. They just seemed so rich that I wanted to document moments of listening. I came to regard the act of listening as a way of making music. I regarded it as a creative activity – finding music in the environment around me.”

Bill Fontana

Sitting on the low wall underneath the Obalende bus park flyover on a hot Lagos afternoon, these words of Bill Fontana easily come to mind. His insight on music, creativity and environment underscores my creative interventions on Lagos and its glut of everyday sounds. I am lost in trance, totally oblivious of the immediate surroundings except for the syncopated nature of the bustles and hustles that characterise the Obalende bus park. This has completely taken me. I am not just listening, I am also documenting this moment of listening as part of my Lagos soundscapes project – an artistic enquiry to examine the status of Lagos as a mega-city through a sum of its acoustic character. With these recordings, I create an archive of sounds that are definitive of Lagos, and I also creatively utilise these sounds (raw or retouched) as installations in virtual and public spaces.

Obalende, which is a major bus park, bus stop and bus route in Lagos, has become my favourite sound foraging turf. In the course of my ongoing Lagos by Bus audio series, I have visited Obalende most frequently, either while en route to other bus parks, given its centrality as a transit hub, or heading strictly to Obalende for recording sessions. I am continually intrigued by its immense cultural diversity, a melting pot of sorts for the ethnically rich and diverse Lagos; a microcosm of Nigeria, a country of more than 150 million people and with more than 250 ethnic groups.

Yoruba is the predominant language spoken in Lagos together with Pidgin English, hence in the Lagos soundscapes recordings it is a major audio highlight. Yet, in my recording sessions at Obalende, it is not out of place to hear the continuous interjections of popular music rendered in other Nigerian vernacular languages. In one instance, Flavour’s hit, Nuwa Baby, rendered in Igbo dominates a corner of the Obalende atmospheric space. Around where I sit, the Hausa hawkers selling sweets and cigarettes chat away. Above this din, I can hear indistinct and not easily recognisable languages and dialects from both stationery and mobile hawkers.

It is practically impossible to take in all the happenings at Obalende visually, the endless sea of human traffic and countless yellow buses merging in and out of the other, impinge and obstruct ones vision. Sound becomes the most potent way of creative interrogation; you have to rely on your ears as the main auditory channel for reading the cacophonic landscape. As a commuter,
you have to rely on your ears to locate the bus that will take you to your destination. In my creative engagement with Obalende as a site of human enterprise and mobility, I am interested in the relationship between passengers and objects of mobility (buses); how passengers are able to successfully locate the correct buses going to their individual destinations amid the chaos.

As someone invested in sounds, I am particularly focused on the interesting link between the spoken word as sound and mobility, especially when the line of vision is impaired by the tromp l’œil and almost surreal effects that characterise Obalende. Here, I am speaking of verbal mapping in the sense that passengers seek out voices of bus conductors to direct them to the correct buses leading to their respective destinations. Obalende and Lagos bus routes, in general, are acoustically mapped in careful cartographic delineations. As a passenger, you have to listen carefully to the verbal maps emanating from the bus conductors or else you end up taking the wrong bus.

I wager to say that these verbal maps are proof of authenticity, without which Lagos would sound like any other city in the world. Lagos is not the only city in the world where there are loads of intractable traffic, hawkers, generators and loud street music going on ceaselessly. Yet, it is probably the only city in the world with these peculiar verbal maps. And, they abound plentifully in bus parks. The verbal maps extend beyond the bus conductors – who, like opera conductors, direct passengers to their buses – to include street vendors calling out to potential customers, who return the calls if interested in their wares. This dialogue of commerce adds an interesting dimension to the soundscape. In all, the visual is trumped in favour of sound or spoken word and its many simulacra.
From my vantage point, I listen and document all the happenings. I do not go about setting up microphones and wiring up to some fancy sound recording equipment. For one, Lagosians are averse to any sort of invasion, and in this case of having any kind of recording equipment pointing at them. Second, one has to be very agile, mobile and quick to hit ‘start’ and ‘stop’ record buttons when capturing Lagos. Things happen impromptu here. Rare chances or blips in the moment have to be captured and at the same time you have to save recording space.

I try to look very casual, as much as possible as not to be conspicuous. This is a pretty tough challenge given my 6’6” frame. I use a binaural microphone most times, connected to a portable recorder, which I carry in my bag with an external backup USB battery pack and memory cards for long recording sessions. With these sound foraging devices I delve into this acoustic world of *okadas* (commercial motorcycle operators), commercial buses, vehicle horns, hawkers, commuters, confidence tricksters, salesmen and monophonic verbal maps.

My choice of binaural microphones is the fact that they are inconspicuous. They look like earbud headphones and hence, allow me to operate incognito. More importantly, they help for two-channel recordings that are created by placing two omni-directional microphones in or close to the ears. This technique allows for the accurate capture of sonic information coming from all directions, helping to produce very realistic recordings when listened to through headphones.

Although my recordings, which are composed of various generated elements, might be considered as noise by many – hence the street notion, ‘Lagos is noisy’ – I consider these elements as raw properties of music sounds such as pitch, dynamics, tone, colour and duration. But more importantly, they are stanzas and sonnets in my orchestra of Lagos soundscape. Under the flyover, just by the intersection of crossroads, is where all these sounds converge and it is my favourite spot. I observe yellow buses spewing passengers and listen to their inputs to the Obalende soundscape composition. Interesting additions are phone conversations, arguments, and shout outs. These soundscapes are composed in every passing second and when put together they create an unexplained buzz that defines the acoustic character of Lagos.
Lagos, like any other city, has a peculiar buzz that derives from its soundscape and which helps
to create a sense of place. In some instances, two cities can share some peculiarities as well as
differences. Here, I am thinking about Cairo’s soundscape and how it reminds me of Lagos,
particularly its vehicular traffic, insane gridlocks and the sea of humans trudging the sidewalks
of its downtown. The first time I really paid attention to Egypt’s soundscape was while inside
the Ramses train station, which reminded me of Obalende. Although the visual impressions and
auditory effects are not exactly the same, for some unexplained reason I did get the Obalende
buzz right there.

After spending three weeks in Alexandria during my first trip to Egypt, I was disconcerted by
the serenity and quietude of the city and was beginning to long for the chaos of Lagos. As I
disembarked from the train at the Ramses train station in Cairo, during my return journey to
Lagos, I picked up the energy and rush and was quickly transported back to Obalende. It felt
like alighting from a bus in Obalende. It was Lagos in North Africa. What Cairo shares with
Lagos includes, among others, vehicular intensity and the frequency of the use of car horns.
Both cities are also projected as major African mega-cities and currently share a population of
more than 35 million between them.

In Cairo the teeming crowds navigating the city, the vehicles, their horns, loud cries of hawkers,
commercial and private drivers, loud music and the accentuated calls for prayer generate the
melange of sounds. I have never been to any other cities where car horns are as indiscriminately
abused as they are in Cairo and Lagos. ‘Abused’ is probably a misnomer, because these horns
are actually functional. Car horns in both cities are used for warnings, to hurl insults as well as
for on-road intimidation. The car horns are also used to stake unique identities on the part of
commuter buses and other kinds of commercial transportation in Lagos. These cars are fitted
with melodious horns to attract attention. I heard exactly the same type of horn coming from
vehicles in Cairo, which suggests the same function.

In Cairo, however, car horns transcend these pedantry functions and are more creatively used
during weddings. A convoy of cars making its way to the wedding venue starts a specific ‘horning’
beat, which is picked up by other cars in solidarity and as witnesses to the wedding. Even when
other cars are not part of the wedding’s motorcade, they join by tooting their car horns in
unison. This situation is infectious and the ‘wedding beat’ soon fills the streets in celebration of
the wedding ceremony. I found this quite remarkable.

One thing I really enjoyed was hearing birds on the little trees in downtown Cairo. Imagine
these birds being able to coexist and feel safe in the midst of all the noise and people. They also
contributed to the soundscape.

I am still not very sure why Ramses train station reminded me of the Obalende bus park. Maybe
it is because they are both transitory and connecting points for commuters, and hence have
almost the same kind of produced sound. Or maybe it is because I had my Egypt sonic baptism
at the Ramses station. For now I have tied it down as favourite a recording space as Obalende.
Ramses station is proof of how sound plays an active role in connecting us to places, acting as
mnemonics. The few times I have come back to Cairo, after my initial sonic experience, I have
been at peace with the sounds of the city. I always settle in once we leave the airport, looking
forward to ‘sounding out’ the city as my taxi crawls through the traffic on its way downtown.

Viscerally speaking, I know Lagos and Cairo are sonically connected, but I have not done as
extensive work on Cairo’s soundscape to enable me shed more light on this relationship. However,
I have been listening to Lagos for some time now and paying close attention to Obalende.
During a recent post-recording listening session, I discovered that the bus park authorities
just added a new bus route. In my last recording I did not hear the new route being verbally
mapped. It also dawned on me that the vocals emanating from the bullhorns located where the Yaba-bound buses are situated had been announcing ‘Ibadan’ all the while. It took me more than a month to realise this. The proximity to the Oshodi-bound buses (right opposite) did not help matters. Oshodi is my favourite in situ verbal map and I always get carried away listening to the bus conductors calling it.

Recently a new bullhorn went up, advertising the Ajah route in a way that reminds one of a radio station play. First, there is 60 seconds of music to attract your attention, and just when you begin to pay attention the music is disrupted by the verbal mapper announcing the bus routes. It is an excellent strategy to ensure that announcements are heard above the din in this cacophonous space.

There is a new salesman (called a Dogaman in Nigerian parlance) lurking by the Ojuelegba-bound buses selling a variant of medicine, which he claims cures all ailments, from syphilis to gonorrhoea. He also advertises a 100 per cent herbal and very potent local Viagra. There is the Fuji musician, who stands beside Oshodi-bound buses hawking his album. He has been operating from this same spot since the beginning of my Obalende recording sessions. Business must be good or he would have relocated. The ice cream guy has changed his push-truck soundtrack from the regular jingle to Celine Dion’s Titanic soundtrack. The latter was a big hit in Nigeria and maybe it could boost his ice cream sales.

Moving beyond the on-site sounds and visuals of Obalende, I have come to the realisation that it is easier to focus and listen when sounds are transferred to a different space, such as a studio or a gallery, where interfering visuals become less obstructing. The visuals become less of a hindrance to the auditory organ when placed in a space different to the recording space. At Obalende I get distracted by a lot of things, which poses a major hindrance to the creative task of recording. When I am back in my studio with the recordings, I can completely lock into the sound, reimmerse myself in the sounds of Obalende, as they stream through my earphones.

There are no buses or okadas or conductors or hawkers present, but their presence can be heard. I bring the exterior into the interior and I am forced to listen and observe with the possibility of selecting a different soundscape at a flick of the button.

I intend to share this experience of the Lagos soundscape project and open people’s ears to the city. However, Lagos is only a point of departure as I except to widen my immersive scope to include other cities that I have visited or intend to visit.

I wonder, how will downtown Cairo sound when layered over the Obalende bus park?