

Opposites do attract

Whilst the old adage says that opposites attract, some have debunked this notion as belonging more to the realm of fantasy than being in tune with reality. In the case of Old News #6, however it seems that opposites do attract – that of two contrasting cities. On one hand there is Lagos, Nigeria, a rapidly transforming megapolis with a population of over fifteen million inhabitants and on the other, Malmö, Sweden, with a modest population of approximately two hundred and ninety thousand people is represented by 160 nationalities. In this technological, interconnected global age, the faraway has metamorphosed into the nearby and the ways in which seemingly distant countries, peoples and cultures interact has become increasingly intertwined.

I participated for the first time in the Old News project in 2007 making a small curatorial contribution in the company of over 20 other curators from around the world. This 2009 edition with its larger input inspired me to delve into the history of print media in Nigeria. It has a history dating back to the middle of the 19th Century with the arrival of European missionaries. Nigeria's first newspaper Iwe Ironhin (1859) was started by Rev Henry Townsend with Nigerian Bishop Ajayi Crowther (who was the first to translate the Bible into Yoruba).

However one of the first fully indigenous newspapers in the country was West African Pilot started by journalist Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904–1996) who went on to become Nigeria's first post-independence President (1963–66). The paper was set up in 1937 as a tool to combat colonialism and engage with the long struggle for independence. But what I found interesting about the paper is its commitment to use an artform to take messages to the masses – through visual images that could be easily read. Azikiwe employed the services of one of Nigerian's first generation modern artist Akinola Lasekan (1916–74). Lasekan was a painter, cartoonist and educationalist. I focus on Lasekan and cartoons because the work begun in the earlier part of the 20th century seems significantly appropriate in 2009 as the nascent democracy of Nigeria goes through much turmoil – social, political and economic – reflected in many of the newspaper cuttings by the artists from Lagos. Once again to struggle is on. Cartoons seem to be making a big comeback as a prominent way to engage and inform the masses and through this medium the condition of our time is brilliantly captured through the eyes of the Lagos artists through the Old News Project.

Bisi Silva

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