

Abstract (Document Summary)

A brief overview of recent headlines about Africa says it all -- Africa is a place of intractable poverty, eternal warfare and aid-squandering corruption: "Spotlight falls on corruption in Africa," "Impoverished Africa needs allies," "African child soldiers create lost generation," "Africa struggles with crime, war, corruption and AIDS." Even Africa uber-champion Stephen Lewis describes African nations as "spectral caricatures of their former selves" that have lost their "vitality, growth and boundless expectation."

To get a glimpse of Africa's astonishing resilience and energy, join me for a beer at the Wato Bar in the centre of Accra, Ghana. The Wato has undergone a facelift over the past couple of years, but the "wonderful seediness" the tour books refer to is still there, steeped into the cement railings that thrust out into Lutterodt Circle like the prow of a ship. A rather rusty, down-at-the-heels tramp steamer, but a ship nonetheless.

The bow of the Wato extends out into the roily sea of Africa. Lutterodt Circle, once a real circle where the ebb and flow of Accra life proceeded unimpeded, has now been made more orderly by some foreign traffic consultant with stoplights and one-way streets. But even these changes can't check the activity below. Between the upper green metal rail and the lower cement wall is framed all of Africa -- restless, vivid, moving with its own pace and flow.

Full Text (976 words)

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A snapshot from a bar in Ghana shows a lively Africa and an indomitable people far different from the gloomy headlines

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With some trepidation at disagreeing with Stephen Lewis on any issue related to Africa, I would like to suggest that, despite the ravages visited upon Africa, much of the continent retains the same energy, hope and indomitability he discovered there as a youth.

After working in West Africa for the past 15 years, despite all the horrors and heartbreak I have seen, I retain a sense of irrational hope and optimism. Not, certainly, because of any belated Western debt-relief package or increased willingness to sincerely address the monstrous imbalance of global wealth distribution, but because of the resourcefulness and determination of Africans themselves.

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Tables are scattered along the railing of the second-storey bar for passengers of all sorts -- solo backpackers, Ghanaian students, Canadian aid workers, Accra couples out for a cold Star beer on a hot night.

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foreign traffic consultant with stoplights and one-way streets. But even these changes can't check the activity below. Between the upper green metal rail and the lower cement wall is framed all of Africa -- restless, vivid, moving with its own pace and flow.

It's all there. The women carrying impossibly heavy buckets of water on their heads, and somehow not spilling a drop as they hurry over curbs and between vehicles. The honking tro-tros, doors wide open, inviting passengers to jump in on the run. The dozens of yellow-panelled taxis waiting impatiently at the new stop lights. The children playing with ordinary drinking straws on the sidewalk. Older children coming home from school, looking sharp in their uniforms of beige shirts and tan shorts. Dignified women walking with pans of fish or piles of oranges on their heads. Street vendors selling beef kabobs, fried pig skin or sweet round cakes, at night in the smelly light of kerosene torches. And a madman in rags wandering through the heavy traffic, his illness somehow a charm against collision.

Over here near the post office a man has spread out a board of socks for sale, hundreds of pairs of socks. At the intersection an ancient Bedford truck, piled high with brown burlap bags of charcoal from the north and several people perched precariously on top, belches black smoke. A young couple, him in a stunningly white shirt, walk hand in hand in front of the truck across the circle and disappear down Nettey Road. A single man, about my age, with white chin whiskers leans against a sign post. We watch him for a moment, noticing a slight smile on his dark face.

Three young women (sisters?), all in long dresses of bright printed cloth, clasp hands gently and sway across the circle. Below us children run after each other, angrily shouting in Ga. Their bright smiles let us know the anger is part of the game. A young boy with a tiny home-made kite weaves through the traffic, somehow keeping one eye on the string and the other on the cars, trying to get his paper triangle aloft in the tricky breezes off the ocean not far away.

The Wato Club is on the edge of Jamestown, the oldest part of the city. On our left, rusted metal roofs form a jumbled patchwork. Louvered colonial window shutters hang lopsided and in disrepair. The grey unpainted wood of the buildings blend into a general sense of decay and dishevelment.

But the real Africa is in the circle in front of us, energetic, resourceful. Below, the stream of howling cars and crossing merchants and lovers continues unabated. The speakers from the cassette seller on the street below are belting out Highlife music. On the far edge of the circle, a building that lay uncompleted for six years is being finished. A young man grabs the back handles of a moving bus and pulls himself onto the bumper, grinning.

The view from the Wato is a microcosm of the continent, a place of committed, capable and imaginative people. Despite everything, its societies retain solid foundations of community, family and a long history of overcoming adversity.

Despite the very real "weight of oppression and despair" Mr. Lewis describes and the gloom and doom of daily headlines, don't count Africa out yet.

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[Illustration]

Photo: Don Sawyer, Citizen Special / The view from the Wato Bar in the centre of Accra, Ghana, reveals that the 'wonderful seediness' tour books exclaimed about has been maintained, and that Africans' energy and resourcefulness remain undiminished.