Inventing British Cities

By Vivian Bickford-Smith

Abstract

This paper looks at the relationship between Cities and British national identity (Britishness) in Africa. The argument is that when doing so it is useful to revisit Eric Hobsbawm’s concept, the ‘Invention of Tradition’. This enables us to understand, if we did not already, that a City can be seen as a complex combination of what Hobsbawm called ‘Political’ and ‘Social’ Traditions (whether newly invented or not) that promote national identities from both ‘above’ and ‘below’. These traditions consist of material and ideological elements like architecture, monuments, urban design, parades, flags, anthems, and other ritual and regalia. These are ‘invented’ or promoted not just by central states but by municipalities, and members of other civic institutions and associations. All work in combination to convey national identity. In addition, they do so together with the wide range of visual, aural and literary media ‘clustered’ (as Hobsbawm put it) in an urban environment, which are part of urban life and help explain and promote national traditions and values. The extent to which cities in Africa were or became British, predictably varied according to a number of criteria that include: length of British Rule; the number of British settlers; the extent of segregation; whether the city was in an area or period where/when British policy was either assimilation or indirect rule; whether it was originally a British settlement; and the extent of other counter nationalisms present. The end of Empire led, of course, to new urban inventions of tradition that promoted the new nation.