



RUA workshops
in Lagos and
Kinshasa – Page 2



Makoko interfaith
urban workshop –
Page 2



International workshop
on Religious
Urbanisation in Africa
– Page 3



UniLag methodology
Seminar and LSA
conference panel
– Page 4



RELIGIOUS URBANISATION IN AFRICA

Religious Urbanisation in Africa RUA Project Newsletter

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About the Religious Urbanisation in Africa project

Religious Urbanisation in Africa (RUA) is an international multidisciplinary project led by the university of Kent (UK), in partnership with the universities of Toronto, York, Kinshasa and Lagos. Its principal objective is to explore the links between religion, development and urbanisation in sub-Saharan African context.

The RUA Project is part of the British Academy Cities and Infrastructures Programme funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF).

Urbanisation and development are usually conceptualized through secular frameworks. In recent years, however, the economic and social impacts of urban religious actors and faith-based groups have been significant, in particular in developing countries.

For instance, many sub-Saharan African cities have been transformed by revivalist forms of Christian religiosity that promote – often spectacular – visions of urban development.

These visions often involve the creation of large self-contained spaces built on the urban periphery, in addition to providing basic infrastructure, health and education facilities.

Taking as case studies Lagos and Kinshasa – the most populated and fastest growing cities in sub-Saharan Africa – our project explores how these religious urban models engage with challenges of infrastructural development, urban social cohesion and inclusion, safety and sustainability. We are focusing on the following questions: How are religious and spiritual visions of the 'ideal city' materially articulated in actual religious urban developments and how do these cohere with or challenge existing modes of planning and development? Do religious urban spaces and infrastructures ameliorate or exacerbate everyday challenges faced by residents?

To explore the impact of religious urbanisation and provide both an evidence-base and practical recommendations aimed at promoting functioning civic urban culture our project includes three dedicated research work packages and one policy work package.

RUA Workshops in Lagos and Kinshasa (Summer 2018)

During the summer 2018 we ran a series workshops that adopted a problem-solving approach to religious urbanisation in order to facilitate new partnerships between governmental, non-governmental and FBO actors and a wide range of urban stakeholders in Lagos and Kinshasa. In Kinshasa, the Director of Urbanism and Housing and Vice-minister for Urbanism contributed to our main policy workshop, which was the first forum of its kind to address the tensions around government–FBO interactions, especially regarding service delivery, governance and urban citizenship. As such, the RUA project has initiated a much-needed dialogue in Kinshasa between secular and religious urban actors on the distinctive issues posed by religious urbanisation and FBO engagement in development.



1

Spotlight on Two Lagos Workshops Makoko Interfaith Urban Workshop

On Saturday 23 June, the RUA team (including all our researchers from Lagos and Kinshasa) visited Makoko in Lagos for a workshop. Makoko is situated on the waterfront and is one of the most famous slums in Lagos, perhaps even Nigeria. Makoko is visible from the Third Mainland Bridge and has been described as a 'city on stilts' due to the unique architecture of the dwellings and the self-made canoes that residents use to travel through its labyrinthine waterways (you can read more on Makoko here: www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/feb/23/makoko-lagos-danger-ingenuity-floating-slum). As a consequence of ongoing urban regeneration, hundreds of thousands of Makoko residents – comprised in the main of Ogu people, an ethnic group who descend from fishing communities from the Republic of Benin – live with a constant threat of eviction. Indeed, one workshop participant described Makoko as 'ripe fruit' for profit-hungry developers.

This event was co-ordinated by the project PI Dr David Garbin and Betty Abah, Executive Director of The Centre for Children's Health, Education, Orientation and Protection (CEE-HOPE), an organisation based in Lagos. The workshop, hosted by High Chief Baale Albert 'Jeje' Aide

was attended by a wide range of community and religious leaders, including local representatives from Christian, Muslim and Traditionalist communities.

Each leader was asked to introduce themselves and to provide an overview of their activities relating to urban development and infrastructure in the area. Issues on the agenda included the specific infrastructural characteristics (features, challenges, opportunities) of Makoko, links between Makoko and other parts of Lagos in terms of infrastructure provision, the contributions made by religious groups to infrastructure, including examples of best practice and a discussion of the wider role of Faith Based Organisations in urban contexts in Nigeria and Africa as a whole.

The workshop was lively and discussions lasted for more than two hours. The overwhelming focus was on the most pressing issue currently facing residents: the stress caused by the threat of displacement. The RUA team learnt about the legal ambiguity of homes built on water and the need for documents to prove 'ownership' and the right to remain, the May attack on the nearby Acts of Apostles church by rogue police officers



2

which was perceived to be linked to 'land grabs' by Lagos State Government (for more information read: <http://saharareporters.com/2018/05/11/five-killed-police-lagos-task-force-and-land-grabbers-raid-makoko>), the mobilization of faith groups against land grabs including protests at Lagos Police HQ, the importance of testimony among slum dwellers in the absence of official or mainstream media recognition of their plight, the trust placed in local chiefs and religious leaders and the disdain shown towards politicians who seem only interested in votes come election time, the lack of trust in the police and how Makoko should be viewed as an asset to the city rather than a liability or a 'stain' to be removed (as one leader defiantly put it, 'We are not dirty!').

The workshop offered a forum through which a wide array of religious and community groups came together to discuss their common predicament. Whereas much of our research project focuses on how religious organisations are building city infrastructure, in Makoko our attention was directed towards how religious actors are being mobilised to resist encroachments on residential city space by the state and developers. The workshop assumed a capacity-building purpose as community and faith representatives engaged together with the common aim of safeguarding homes and the rights of residents. This struggle is ongoing and we will be carefully monitoring developments.

International Workshop on Religious Urbanisation in Africa (University of Lagos, 26 June 2018)

The workshop addressed the issue of religious urbanisation in Africa, documenting the perspectives of multi-stakeholder groups. More specifically the workshop addressed the following issues and problematics:

- What are the main urban and planning challenges in Lagos?
- How do religious organisations influence urbanisation and infrastructure in Lagos?
- What are the main challenges of religious urbanisation in African cities?



3

- What will be done to address these issues?
- How do faith based organizations get involved in planning/urbanisation?
- How do these urban challenges compare to those found in other African mega-cities?

The workshop consisted of six presentations and three panel discussions designed to stimulate discussion and debate on the state of urbanisation in African cities, the influence of religious organisations on the production of urban space, and on the relations between FBOs and the State/public authorities at different scales. Participants included academics, government representatives, urban planners, members of Islamic and Christian communities and representatives of community-based organisations and NGOs.

During the workshop, **Prof Simon Coleman (University of Toronto)** provided a theoretical context to the RUA project and the GCRF 'Cities and infrastructure' programme. He then presented the work packages of the project stressing its interdisciplinary approach. **Dr Floribert Ntungila-Nkama (University of Kinshasa)** talked about 'Religion, Urban Planning and Urban Challenges in Kinshasa'. He underlined the role of colonial urbanism on the development of Kinshasa, and identified the most prevalent urban and infrastructural challenges in the DRC capital. It was observed that, though similar in nature, the challenges in Lagos out-scale those of Kinshasa in size and amplitude. Some case studies were presented of how religious organisations fill in the institutional gaps in education and health care provision.

Prof Immaculata Nwokoro (University of Lagos) then identified the following as prevalent urban challenges in Lagos: ineffective planning institutions, extensive housing deficits, slumification, urban mobility and sanitation challenges – with resultant widespread poverty, inequality and exclusion. Her presentation examined the role of religious organisations in bridging the gaps in governance and raised the issue of accessibility and inclusiveness. Prof Nwokoro also discussed the impact of some religious organisations in terms of gentrification and extensive land acquisition in mega-Lagos.

- 1 Kinshasa policy workshop participants
- 2 Discussions led by activist Bety Abbah
- 3-4 International Workshop on Religious Urbanisation in Africa (University of Lagos, 26 June 2018)



4

Aro Ismaila, planner and urban development specialist discussed the multiple paradoxes of religious urbanisation. He stressed the negative impact of religious urbanisation (traffic congestion, noise pollution, land use conversion and distortion of layout plans), but also religious contributions in infrastructural development, health and education. He also pointed out that these interventions were primarily locally focused and he raised the issues of accessibility and sustainability of religious urbanisation. **Betty Abah of CEE-HOPE (cee-hope.org)**, a NGO working in Lagos informal communities, then talked about the influence of religious leaders in local communities and the high level of trust placed on religious leaders by residents of communities like Makoko. She emphasised the work of FBOs in providing services to the community and acting as 'sanctuaries' in a context of uncertainty and growing socio-spatial insecurity. Another workshop speaker was **Pastor Godman Akinlabi** from the Elevation Church, who outlined the responsibility of the church to society and spoke about the ways in which his local church contributed to community development and was supportive of victims of forced evictions in various Lagos contexts.

During the second part of the workshop, a **multi-faith panel session** was convened with representatives of Christian and Muslim FBOs and chaired by **Dr Taibat Lawanson (University of Lagos)**. The themes of the discussion included tensions with state agencies, coherence between urban planning and religious urban 'visions', multiple (and potentially competing) understandings of development. This was followed by an **urban experts panel** comprising social scientists, urban scholars, planners and representatives of government agencies at various levels. Issues discussed included conflicts over planning regulations, socio-environmental consequences of religious urbanisation, and social exclusion of non-member of the organisations in these localities. Discussing decentralised planning pursued by some FBOs and 'mega churches', the panel stressed the need for stronger engagement between government and religious bodies on issues of urban development in a context of rapid demographic growth, suburbanisation and increasing inequities in infrastructural provision.

RUA Panel at the Lagos Studies Association (LSA) Conference, 22 June 2018, University of Lagos

The Lagos Studies Association (LSA) is an international, interdisciplinary organisation bringing together scholars, students, activists, artists, teachers, donors, policymakers, and development professionals. The Lagos Conference 'is gradually becoming a major avenue to shape the trajectory of knowledge on the city in years to come [...] providing a fertile ground to train new generation of Lagos, Nigerian, and African studies scholars and help harmonize the intellectual energies of academics working across multiple fields and disciplines' (<https://lagosstudies.wcu.edu/>).

Six of our members took part in a dedicated RUA panel at the annual conference of the LSA, taking place at the University of Lagos between the 19 and 23 June 2018. The RUA panel included the following papers:

- Calnan, M. 'A Leap of Faith: Trust relations and Faith-Based Urbanization'
- Coleman, S. "Pentecostalism, Urbanisation and 'Development'"
- Garbin, D. 'Religion and the Alter City'
- Millington, G. 'The Infrastructural Turn in Urban Theory and Religious Urbanisation in Africa'
- Mokoko Gampiot, A. 'Two Case Studies of Religious Health Urbanisation in the DRC: Kimbanguist Hospital and the Misericorde Hospital in Kinshasa'
- Moyet, X. 'Covenant University as a Case Study for Digital Infrastructure'



UniLag Methodology Seminar

On Monday 25 June 2018, at the University of Lagos, Faculty of Management Sciences, the RUA team organised an international seminar primarily aimed at UniLag undergraduate and postgraduate students. Presentations by RUA researchers addressed the challenges of social research, the impact of interdisciplinarity and the role of mixed methodologies. Drawing upon some of the preliminary findings of the RUA project, the themes covered during the seminar included: infrastructure and urban politics, the interplay of health, trust and urban development, multi-sited urban ethnography, and transnational religious dynamics. The seminar was hosted by Prof Owolabi Kuye and Dr Akeem Akinwale.

Future events and conference presentations

- The RUA team will co-sponsor and participate in a workshop on the theme of 'Holy Infrastructures', to be held at the University of Toronto on October 10, 2018. This workshop will help to disseminate preliminary results of the project to other scholars working on infrastructure at the University.

Forthcoming presentations include:

- Garbin, D, Coleman, S. and Millington, G. 'Chronotopes of religious urbanisation: planning visions and infrastructural politics in Lagos, Nigeria', Understanding urban religion Heritage, public space and governance International Workshop, Barcelona, 25-27 October 2018
- Millington, G. 'Religion, development and the infrastructural turn in urban theory: reflections from Lagos and Kinshasa', American Geographical Association annual conference, Washington DC, 3-7 April 2019
- Coleman, S. 'Frontiers of knowledge: Planning Pentecostal infrastructures in the mega-city', Presidential Lecture, Society for the Anthropology of Religion, University of Toronto, 21-23 May, 2019