

# RELIGIOUS URBANISATION IN AFRICA LAGOS WORKSHOP PROCEEDINGS

*June-July 2018*







# ABOUT THE RUA PROJECT

In recent years, the economic and social impact of religious actors and faith-based groups have been significant, in particular in large cities of the developing world. However this phenomenon has remained largely under-researched. In some contexts, for instance in African 'mega-cities', religious groups have been at the forefront of development initiatives often involving the creation of alternative urban spaces and large infrastructure and buildings providing key services in health care or education. In often difficult, informal and unstable urban environments do these religious spaces solve or exacerbate everyday problems faced by residents? How are religious groups reimagining the city they are shaping and transforming? Funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) through the British Academy, the RUA Project addresses these questions using a mixed methodology combining qualitative and quantitative research. Our project involves three groups of actors – development and urban experts, local residents living around key religious sites, and religious actors/institutions.

The research is conducted in two of the fastest growing cities in Africa – Lagos and Kinshasa. To explore the impact of religious urbanization 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.

The first Work Package is concerned with the production and use of Christian urban space in Lagos and Kinshasa, and the intersections between religious urban developments, infrastructures and the provision of utilities. The second Work Package investigates religious notions of the 'ideal city' in Lagos and Kinshasa and ways in which such notions become translated within each actually existing city. We consider how models of infrastructural development mobilized by religious actors are brought into tension with existing regimes of planning. We consider ideals of belonging and citizenship promoted by religious actors at local, national and transnational levels. The third Work Package explores how religion responds to the unpredictability and informality of everyday life in Lagos and Kinshasa. It is concerned with unravelling the complex moral economies deployed in the production and use of religious urban infrastructures. Of interest are the levels of trust that urban dwellers place in religious infrastructures and how this compares with trust in state institutions. To what extent do religious institutions provide symbolic and material resources to negotiate unpredictability and socio-economic uncertainties through production of urban/infrastructural space?

One the project's key objectives is to provide recommendations aimed at promoting civic urban culture in context of growing inequalities and widespread informalization of urban life in cities where religious actors play significant infrastructural roles.

You can find more information on our project here:  
<https://rua-project.ac.uk/>





# RUA INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON RELIGIOUS URBANISATION IN AFRICA

(Summary by Prof Immaculata Nwokoro, University of Lagos)

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CONFERENCE HALL, UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS

## Introduction

The workshop was organized to address the issue of religious urbanisation in Lagos and to document the perspectives of multi-stakeholder groups. Comprised of six individual presentations and three panel discussions (based around community organisations, clergy and professionals respectively), the workshop addressed the following questions:

- What are the main urban and planning challenges in Lagos?
- How do religious organizations influence urbanisation and infrastructure in Lagos?
- What are the main logistical and social challenges of religious urbanisation in Lagos?
- What should be done to address these issues?
- How do faith-based organisations become involved in planning/urbanisation?
- How do these urban challenges compare to those found in other African mega-cities?

The workshop stimulated critical discussion on the influence of religious organisations in urbanisation as well as the FBO – Government interface. Participants were drawn from academia, government, urban planning agencies, NGOs as well as Islamic and Christian clergy and community-based organisations.

## The presentations

- **Background to the Religious Urbanisation in Africa (RUA) Project** by Professor Simon Coleman provided a theoretical context to the project, its fit within the British Academy-funded 'Cities and Infrastructure' programme, as well as an introduction to the four work packages of the project: connectivity/inclusivity; the ideal city; public trust and the moral economies of religious infrastructures; and policy dissemination. Professor Coleman also highlighted the project's interdisciplinary and multi-institutional lens of enquiry and the mixed methods approach to data collection.

- **Religion, Urban Planning and Urban Challenges in Kinshasa** was presented by Dr Floribert Ntungila-Nkama of the University of Kinshasa. He highlighted the colonial (Belgian) influence on the development of Kinshasa, and identified the following as the most prevalent urban challenges: uncontrolled population growth and unprecedented urbanisation rate, environmental issues including especially climate change and natural disaster risks, governance challenges such as decentralisation, social justice and weak budgeting, accounting and legal framework at the urban scale. He also argued that urban development without urban planning complicates the land administration process and exacerbates peri-urban development. Poor access to housing and

basic services such as water and electricity were highlighted as particular problems. Political turmoil was identified as creating gaps in governance, service provision and development that religious organisations step in to fill, especially in terms of education and health. This type of intervention helps religious organisations to build strong goodwill and trust, especially among the poor. It was observed that the challenges in Lagos and Kinshasa regarding religious urbanisation are similar, but not yet at the same scale.

- **Religion, urban planning and urban challenges in Lagos** was presented by Professor Immaculata Nwokoro, who provided a brief background to urbanisation in Lagos and a brief description of the RUA case study sites. She identified the following as urban



challenges facing Lagos: ineffective planning agencies, extensive housing deficits, slums, urban mobility and sanitation challenges, with resultant widespread poverty and inequality. The latter problems are compounded by a lack of access to city resources by most citizens. Professor Nwokoro then highlighted the role of religious organisations in bridging the gaps in governance, raising the question of whether poverty plays a role in increased religiosity. It was argued the phenomenon of religious infrastructural expansion is neglected by urban planners and built environment experts in Lagos. She went on to identify the bureaucratic challenges in the urban planning framework, the challenges of spiralling population growth and the dominance of informality as being other key issues facing urban planners. In her critical analysis, Professor Nwokoro stressed the role played by religious organisations in recent gentrification dynamics, illegal change of land use (engendering incompatible land uses) and extensive land acquisition. While religion was portrayed as a major determinant of peri-urbanisation, it was noted how Pentecostal churches (rather than Catholic and Anglican churches for instance) are the main actors in this process. Finally, it was established that in addition to the poor, middle and higher income groups in Lagos are also increasingly trusting/relying on religious organisations for service provision. The case of some Pentecostal churches running coaching classes and career advancement/ job placement events was highlighted. It was described how new forms of religious urbanisation could drive local economic development and provided employment opportunities.

- **Religion and the City: Perspectives from Lagos** was presented by Aro Ismaila, an urban development expert who discussed the paradox of religious activities in Lagos. He started by highlighting the population growth in Lagos and the impact of this upon governance structures. He emphasised that although progress has been made, many projects are not inclusive and are hampered by inconsistencies between policy and implementation, alluding to the lack of adequate data in many governance decisions. Mr Ismaila referred to the proliferation of megachurches in Lagos, several claiming to possess 'the largest auditorium in the world'. He also outlined the influence of religious organisations in developing large-scale camp sites or satellite towns as well as taking over the traditional work of government. Using the

RCCG Redemption Camp as a case study, he showed plans for the site, pointing to various land uses – economic, recreational etc. In agreement with previous presenters he argued that 'camps built by churches continue to provide services that ought to be provided by the government'. While religious organisations were responsible for traffic congestion, noise pollution, land use conversion, an increase in land value and peri-urbanisation, the paradox is that they are also very active in road construction, provision of boreholes and health and education services across the city. He explained that such interventions were primarily focused on the immediate areas where churches are located and are therefore not necessarily aimed at broader 'altruistic development'. Mr Ismaila drew attention to the growing political influence that religious organisations have, suggesting that changes in land use and zoning decisions are sometimes made at the behest of the religious organisations. He used the example of a church whose members organised a public protest after the church was shut down by the government for town planning contraventions. He also pointed to the risk of land banking in some church camps, and the potential of use vacant lands for reprehensible activities. Mr Ismaila concluded that 'the challenges we face today with religious organisations are due to poor planning of the past'.

- **Urban Challenges and Faith-based organisation work in Makoko** was presented by Betty Abah of CEE-HOPE, a local NGO. Ms Abah began by stating 'Lagos can be complex, especially for the urban poor, and the sheer issue of existence is a major challenge'. According to Ms Abah, 'Makoko is the symbol of the community whose rights in

every angle have been violated'. Unlike in higher income areas, the sacredness of the religious ground is not respected by law enforcement agencies, pointing to how a church in Makoko was recently burnt down during an attempted eviction. She stressed the influence of religious leaders in local communities, and the high trust placed upon religious leaders by local residents. Ms Abah explains that 'Because government is detached from the people, the only respite and hope is religion and the religious leaders are those they [the community] can run to for help. Religious leaders are very powerful and wield a lot of influence in the community.' She continued, 'If you want to get anything done in a place like Makoko, you have to go through the religious leaders. Politicians go through them, government officials go through them. Even NGOs have to go through them'. But this relationship is more ambiguous than it may first appear. In Makoko, religious leaders and traditional chiefs are the major decision makers, though the perception among some residents is that traditional leaders can be co-opted by politicians. But religious organisations in Makoko do have a positive influence, insisted Ms Abah. They provide palliative measures and aid rebuilding efforts of the community. Some even offer scholarships. She also discussed how FBOs provide services to society and how the church is often seen as a sanctuary. Religious leaders offer hope beyond the material circumstances Makoko residents find themselves: 'They offer hope of eternal life and a better future, miracles and divine breakthrough'.

- **The City Church** was presented by Pastor Godman Akinlabi from the Elevation Church, who outlined the responsibility of the church to the city and to society: 'Religion is not complete without being aware of the environment, people and their plights, and socio-economic conditions. It is not only about taking people to God or heaven, it is also about creating heaven on earth – a place of harmony, productivity, goodness and emotional wellness'. He stated that from colonial times, the church has had an important influence on Lagos, with the CMS (Christian Missionary Society) bus stop providing a physical reflection of the intersection between the church, the market and the state. Hence, one cannot easily separate the church from the affairs of the state. However, in recent times, Pastor Akinlabi argued, the government has ignored the church, even though the church is



## RUA INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON RELIGIOUS URBANISATION IN AFRICA (CONT)



knowledgeable about the most basic needs of society. Development in Africa can only happen 'If the religious institutions and the government come into some kind of developmental collaboration'. He also revealed ongoing discussions among religious groups on the subject of 'How do we take charge when the government is failing?' According to the pastor, the city church should support the less privileged, provide empowerment for church members, organise community impact initiatives, and contribute to the national discourse, that, in turn, can lead to the shaping of policy. He then highlighted some ways his local church in Lekki contributes to community development, especially in Jakande Estate – a slum community close to the church. In the pastor's view, his church often intervenes in activities that would be expected to be the responsibility of

government. This includes providing soup kitchens and vocational training for adults and infrastructural interventions before and during flooding incidents. His church also collaborates with other Christian missions. For example, rather than building a school, the church provides scholarships to the Baptist Academy School. Instead of building a hospital, the church collaborates with the Catholic St Kizito's hospital to provide access to medical care for the community. The Elevation Church has been involved in donating equipment to nearby government health centres, the training of police and Federal road safety corps, road construction and even providing infrastructural interventions such as the reconstruction of sewage and toilet facilities at the local schools and prisons. He described also how the church has encouraged voter registration and wider political participation. The Pastor spoke

about empowering members of the church through career advancement and mentoring programmes as well as enterprise development initiatives. He emphasised that some of the experts invited to participate in these programmes are not church members (or even Christians) because 'Our people need to know how to run their business well and we want to be part of their success story'.



## Key discussion points from the three panel sessions

- Community Based Organisations:** The following issues were discussed: the limits of urban planning institutions to enforce governance on the city; the significant political influence of some faith-based organisations; the relationship between urban exclusion, poverty and religiosity; the extent to which colonial governance has shaped urban development; the ideological underpinnings of religious organisations and their expansions. The panel agreed that religious organisations exert a growing influence on Nigerian society and are key actors in shaping urban forms and structures.
- Clergy:** A multi-faith panel session was convened and the following issues were discussed: the need for enhanced interfaith cooperation among religious leaders; the tensions around government – FBO interactions, especially regarding public service delivery; the problem of the growing prioritisation of government-capitalist relations over government-people relationship. The panel session also highlighted how FBOs bridge the gaps between poor urban management/planning and the everyday needs of the city residents. It was also pointed out that many religious organisations flagrantly contravene planning regulations especially in terms of noise, car park facilities and zoning. The panel agreed that government should work in partnership with religious organisations in delivering development goals.
- Experts:** this panel was composed of academics, built environment practitioners, planners, users of religious urban facilities and representatives of government bodies. It was agreed by the panel that a fundamental issue is the lack of a 'city vision' by the government, hence the general lack of direction in societal response to various urban issues. Other points raised in the discussion included: the disregard for planning regulations by some religious organisations and the negative environmental consequences of this for nearby residents and the social exclusion of non-member of the organisations in these localities; the growing disconnect between government and society, prompting religious bodies to bridge the urban infrastructural gap but also highlighting the need for stronger engagement between government and religious bodies on issues of development. The panel also discussed how the 'aspirational architecture' of



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megachurches is often implemented without the guidance of built environment professionals. Furthermore, the integration of the activities of FBOs to the prison system was identified as an ideal lever for prison reforms. The panel endorsed the view that government needs to articulate a comprehensive vision for Lagos and that public consultation must occur prior to the urbanising activities of religious organisations.

### Participants' responses

During the open discussion, the following points were made:

- The proliferation of religious urbanisation is a direct reflection of the economic challenges in Nigeria. Because religious organisations do not contribute significantly to the GDP, they will be a transient phenomenon that will fizzle out when the economy picks up and more people become employed. This argument was nuanced by other participants who argued that a large number of religious organisations attract better off, middle-class followers, and that seeing poverty as the unique factor of increased societal religiosity was too simplistic.
- It will be difficult to enforce planning standards for religious uses owing to the sensitivities of people towards religion in the city. This is more so because many political leaders also hold leadership positions in religious organisations
- Religious organisations are selectively inclusive, and increasingly tend to advocate for issues that concern the middle classes rather than the poor. For example, NGOs and charitable organisations lead the conversation on forced evictions whereas religious organisations tend not to get involved, even when their members are victims. The proliferation of high fee-paying (and therefore often inaccessible/exclusive) educational institutions was also highlighted.
- There is a need to understand the dichotomy of uncontrolled development and urban planning administration. Uncontrolled development reflects how people create, move and interact with urban space. The key challenge is for planning agencies and administrative actors to adapt their own visions to these everyday manifestations of urban life.
- Cities reflect their colonial histories ideologically, spatially, economically and socially. Hence the religious dynamic is often influenced by (post)colonial temporalities. The older churches attest to this, more than the newer Pentecostal assemblies.
- How does religious urbanisation improve or exacerbate security concerns, especially in relation to the dangers of extremism in Nigeria?
- Many religious organisations provide infrastructure only to the extent of easing members access to their premises, rather than contributing to wider community development.
- Planning approvals for religious organisations should be halted until issues regarding noise, traffic and change of use associated with their activities are resolved.



# MAKOKO INTERFAITH URBAN WORKSHOP

On Saturday June 23rd, the RUA team (including RUA 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' because of the unique architecture of the dwellings and the self-made canoes that residents use to travel through its labyrinthine waterways. 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 Principal Investigator 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 in his palace, was attended by a wide range of community and religious leaders of varied ages, 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. Each also took the opportunity to welcome the visiting researchers personally. 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, with everybody contributing. 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 2018 attack on the nearby Acts of Apostles church by rogue police officers, which was perceived to be linked to 'land grabs' by Lagos State Government, the mobilisation 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!').



## MAKOKO INTERFAITH URBAN WORKSHOP (CONT)

There was, however, disagreement over the role that Pentecostal churches could play in the struggle, with one sceptical participant stating that 'The GOs forget us, what have they done up to now?', while another claimed that 'Lagos State government is 60% Redeemed!' referring to high levels of RCCG membership among city politicians. A different view was offered by a young pastor from MFM, who suggested Makoko residents become more involved with his church. He passionately explained that 'Government has decided to develop our community. The rich will be living here. It is going to be beautiful, but it is not for us'. He continued, 'Our plans are better, but without documents, they will move us'. Another participant suggested that 'We, in Makoko, cannot fight the Nigerian government, only God can intervene'. The relationship between Makoko and politicians was agreed by all to be strained, with High Chief 'Jeje' concluding that 'They [politicians] love our votes, but they don't love our spirit'.

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 the RUA 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. In conversation, one representative also noted the environmental effects of state intervention in a vulnerable area such as Makoko, noting that government-sponsored dredging was having a detrimental effect on the lagoon, so that 'the government is tampering with nature's current'. 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 the RUA team will be carefully monitoring developments.







