

*The Changing Residential Districts of Lagos: How the Past Has Created the Present and What Can Be Done about It*

Basirat Oyalowo, University of Lagos, Nigeria  
Timothy Nubi, University of Lagos, Nigeria  
Bose Okuntola, Lagos State University, Nigeria  
Olufemi Saibu, University of Lagos, Nigeria  
Oluwaseun Muraina, University of Lagos, Nigeria  
Olanrewaju Bakinson, Lagos State Lands Bureau, Nigeria

The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2019  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

The position of Lagos as Nigeria's economic centre is entrenched in its colonial past. This legacy continues to influence its residential areas today. The research work provides an analysis of the complexity surrounding low-income residential areas of Lagos since 1960, based on the work of Professor Akin Mabogunje, who had surveyed 605 properties in 21 communities across Lagos. Based on existing housing amenities, he had classified them as high grade, medium grade, lower grade and low grade residential areas. This research asks: In terms of quality of neighbourhood amenities, to what extent has the character of these neighbourhoods changed from their 1960 low grade classification? This research is necessary because these communities represent the inner slums of Lagos, and in order to proffer solutions to inherent problems, it is important to understand how colonial land policies brought about the slum origins of these communities. Lessons for the future can then become clearer. The study is based on a mixed methods approach suitable for multidisciplinary inquires. Quantitative data is gathered through a survey of the communities; with findings from historical records and in-depth interviews with residents to provide the qualitative research. This paper documents the work done so far, with focus on six districts. Preliminary findings indicate that in most cases, although they have undergone significant changes from being residential areas to mixed commercial-residential districts, these districts still remain in the same physically deplorable state as they were in 1968.

Keywords: Colonial Lagos, Residential Lagos, Slums

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## **Background**

Lagos State, perhaps more than any other state in Nigeria today, epitomises the legacy of deliberate economic and social colonial policies. From its position as the city with the most population, to its high density status and its designation as Nigeria's nerve centre, Lagos today reflects what Colonial Lagos was over 50 years ago: the nucleus of urbanization, a strong pull factor for youths in rural areas, a land of refuge and opportunity for the discerning, innovativeness in governance and infrastructure, a cacophony of interest groups advocating for rights over space and self-determination, a burst of real estate market with transactions firmly encased in both the formal and informal land markets.

The rental and capital values of real estate in general, represents a measure of the various factors such as design, room size, utilities and facilities that makes it desirable to potential owners or occupants. These factors coalesce at the larger scale to include accessibility to infrastructure and basic services, accessibility to basic requirements for work, school and leisure, drainage and commerce and so on, all of which combine to determine property values at the neighbourhood scale. Using these measures, the study carried out quantitative analysis of the current neighbourhood/housing conditions in six medium and low income residential areas in Lagos. It also reports on qualitative analysis of the state of the communities in the immediate post-colonial period, and compared it with the state of the communities today. Building on the work of Professor Akin L Mabogunje which classified 21 communities into four grades of high, medium, lower medium and low, based on neighbourhood amenities, this research will determine whether and to what extent low grade neighbourhoods have remained poor and proffer policy intervention to facilitate upgrades. This study is important because as Lagos continues to grow in population and spatial width, capturing peri-urban lands in neighbouring Ogun State, informal communities inhabited by low-income people continue to emerge. Expectedly, the inner city communities that had existed as low-income 'low grade' communities risk greater levels of deplorable condition if attention is not paid to them.

In subsequent sections of the paper, we provide a brief literature review surrounding the Key text used in our study (Urbanization in Nigeria by Professor Akin L. Mabogunje), within this section, a brief discussion on land policy in Colonial Lagos is presented, followed by a description of the residential districts of Lagos in 1968 as provided by Akin L. Mabogunje. In the section titled 'the current study' and thereafter provide the findings established so far on six of the residential districts that we have carried out. The final section concludes with an outlay of on-going work to complete the study.

## **Literature Review**

A few academics have taken cognisance of the key role colonial land policies played in redefining rights of land ownerships in Lagos, which they identified with process and civilization and essential to the growth of Lagos economy, however this has not been sufficiently traced to the current state of the city's residential areas, which currently face problems of over-crowding and lack of physical and social amenities. For instance, Cole (1975) provided a narrative of the socio-political history of Lagos in the colonial period, with very little reference to land policy and economic

development. Akinola and Alao's work (1991) studied the industrial development of Lagos in the post-colonial period; Davies (2009) examined the various land policies of the colonial government and their impact on the development of Lagos as an urban city. Animashaun (2011) focussed on land in Lagos, examining the extent to which the colonial government, through its land acquisition policies affected indigenous settlement on Iru-land. Okuntola's (Forthcoming) paper on the European business community and colonial land policy in Lagos sheds light on the delineation of some parts of Lagos as low or high income neighbourhood, the differential provisions of socio-economic infrastructures in Lagos and the role of the colonial business group in the expansion of commercial orbits of Lagos. She observes how these emerging developments continued to affect the history of Lagos up till date. She argues that the underdevelopment of the areas occupied by indigenous people in Lagos up till now can be understood against the background of these government-business relations. Despite these recent works, our study seeks to develop on the seminal work of Akin L Mabogunje, titled 'Urbanization in Nigeria' published in 1968. The book is composed of twelve chapters, inclusive of introductory and conclusive chapters. It traced the history of urbanization in Northern and Southern Nigeria from before colonialization to the current (then, 1968). It establishes the impact of colonial policies and laws on urban configuration and ultimately dwelt on two key south-western Nigeria cities: Ibadan and Lagos as case studies of varying policy outcomes. While Ibadan, the sprawling historical city of warriors, local slave merchants and cottage craftsmanship epitomised a legacy of a Nigerian 'traditional metropolis', Lagos with its coastal location was seen as the 'most spectacular' of the modern cities which emerged from European influence and subsequent colonial administration.

In focussing two chapters on Lagos, Mabogunje presented a narrative that provides a deep overview of the rise of Lagos as a colonial outlier, its growth as a Port city and how, with the abolition of slave trade, the city grew on legitimate commerce and manufacturing to create major pull factors for peoples of Yoruba origin from other parts of western Nigeria, other Nigerians, freed slaves from Sierra Leone to Brazil, merchants and of course, the colonial government. A most profound section examines the residential districts of Lagos and presents his grades of residential districts. This is the focus of our work will be examined more thoroughly in subsequent sections.

Since our study dwells on the colonial legacy of the residential districts of Lagos, and examines through qualitative and quantitative means, how the past land allocation decisions have remained influential today, how changes have emanated and the implication of this for the future spatial allocation of Lagos; It is important, to first set this discussion in context, so a brief narrative of land matters in Pre-Colonial Lagos is presented.

### **Land Policy in Colonial Lagos**

What is today called Lagos State emerged from Lagos Island. The Island itself started as a fishing ground for the Awori, the earliest settlers in the pre-colonial period, but it gradually and systematically became the hub of the new international trade from 1850s onwards. Before then, it was largely lagoons, creeks and river estuaries rather than its swampy lands that stimulated the economic development of the Island. The lagoons were themselves valuable economic asset as their waterways linked with the hinterland Rivers, particularly the Ogun enabled effective inter- group socio-

economic and cultural relations between the *Awori* and the other Yoruba communities in the hinterland. Lagos' geographical location made it an ideal port for overseas trade on West African coast and its inland waterways provided accessibility to other parts of Yorubaland (Harunah 1987; Agiri 1987).

The same pull-factor brought in the liberated Africans, the Saro and Amaro from Sierra-Leone in search of trade for survival. They also found the emerging overseas commerce in palm oil on West African coast suitable, and Lagos and its immediate hinterland attractive and conducive for settlement. Some ex-slaves or commoners also gained access into overseas trade and made accumulation of land in Lagos as part of their wealth. As middlemen in produce trade, they also made demand for land either from the Lagos Oba or chiefs for housing and commercial purposes. Many European merchants in the early days of produce trade satisfied their demand for land for factories, ware houses and living quarters from leases on land in the Marina, partly from the Chiefs or indigenous traders. The resulting contestation for land amongst such diverse stakeholder (Government, European traders, Immigrants and indigenous owners) has far-reaching impact on Lagos today.

Amidst this competition for land, there were attempts by government to dictate the ownership and use of land. The first of such became possible with The 1861 Treaty of Cession of Lagos to the British Crown, which first abrogated all private rights of property to the Crown, which in the opinion of the colonial government was to "render them more valuable to the natives". The Treaty of Cession stipulated that all lands in the Island of Lagos were subject to Crown grants, which conveyed to the Crown:

The Port and Island of Lagos, with all its rights profits, territories and appurtenances whatsoever thereunto belonging and as well the profits and revenue as the direct full and absolute dominion and sovereignty of the said port, island and premises with all the royalties thereof fully entirely and absolutely. The inhabitants, however, "being still suffered to live there.

The first land area of interest to the European ruling class was the Eastern district of the Lagos Island such as Iru, Palma, Lekki and the strip of the beach between the lagoons and the sea from Lagos to Iddo Island, which were also ceded to the Crown (Animashaun, 1911:28). While the Marina became the site for commercial premises, land in Ikoyi was considered suitable as residential area for colonial administrators, missionaries and merchants, being the off-shore land close to the Marina. Marina and its environs gradually became the hub of commerce, banking and shipping on West African coast from where the business community established their branches into the hinterland. In the 1860s Governor John Glover acquired 1,690 acres from Chief Onikoyi out of the 2,600 acres of land. The acquired land became the nucleus of the European residential settlement in Ikoyi. Between 1911 and 1927 the colonial government had taken over the bulk of Oniru landed properties in Victoria Island as far as the Alamakun village. The abrogation of all private rights of property ensured that land could be appropriated by the government for various uses.

The end of the First World War ushered in trade boom and the commercial community, foreign and African seized the opportunity to enlarge their business frontiers. The need for expansion put more pressure on land for residential and commercial premises by all the stakeholders. Shortly before the War, the European business community had been worried about the need to improve the socio-economic

infrastructures at the Lagos port and the need for more land for residential use. This they know would entail acquiring more land from the indigenes. In 1928, government enacted another Public Lands Acquisition Ordinance, which not only coordinated the pre-War land policies, but also enlarged the land under the Crown grants.

The implication of these land appropriations for residential districts in Lagos today is the focus of the research on which this paper is based.

### **Mabogunje's Classification of the Residential Districts of Lagos.**

Mabogunje (1968) classified 21 communities into four grades of high, medium, lower medium and low, based on neighbourhood amenities and rental values. He classified residential districts where more than 50% of the homes were let at a monthly rent of 2pounds or more per room as medium grade. Districts where only 50% of the homes or less than were let at a monthly rent of 2 pounds or more were graded as low to medium low. However, he was able to come up with the following classifications based on these indices:

**High Grade Residential Districts:** Nine districts fell under this category and had the common characteristics of being well planned residential layouts. They are also the product of direct Government land appropriation for residential use-age by the government, government agencies and European entrepreneurs.

**Identified Residential Districts:** East Marina and Victoria Island, Ikoyi, Apapa, The 'Railway Compound', North Yaba, Itire Estate, Palm Grove Estate, Maryland and Ikeja Reservation and Housing Estate.

**Income Class:** These areas catered for the top political elites, top classes in commerce and industry.

Dating from the 1850s when the British Council established the Consulate here, this district today accommodates the political leaders of the Federation. Here is the Governor's Lodge, the Prime Minister's Lodge and the lodges of a few other high-ranking ministers of State. The remaining members of the political elite as well as most of the top civil servants are to be found in the Ikoyi Reservation. ....' (Mabogunje 1968:300).

**Physical Layout:** These areas are built to low density, with adequate set-backs and lawns.

The Density of housing is generally much lower than the average for Lagos and most houses stand in the midst of well-kept lawns surrounded by neatly trimmed hedges...generally single family homes' (Mabogunje 1968:300).

**Medium Grade Residential Districts:** These are neighbourhoods that have been planned and laid out during the colonial period.

**Identified Residential Districts:** Surulere Estate, Yaba, Ebute Metta East, and North Eastern Lagos: Lafiaji, Brazilian Quarters, Oke Suna and Araromi.

**Income Class:** These areas were majorly occupied by 'landlords' in the professional classes with tenants in 'white collar' employment of government and commerce who wanted to be close to their places of work on the Marina. The communities were fairly distinctive in character, with Yaba attracting more of the white collar employees and Ebute Metta attracting people on lower socio-economic scale and houses laid out in grid iron pattern. Surulere housed people of middle income, usually tenants of families who had been located to the district from the 1956 slum clearance of Central Lagos and who let out their homes to augment their home repayment plan of the houses allocated to them at the Surulere Estate.

**Physical Layout:** The density of housing was generally about 12 to 16 per acre. There are very few houses with gardens and fewer still with garages. Majority of the houses are modest, small size bungalows which show an 'almost continuous wallage with hardly any interruption between the houses'.

**Lower Medium Grade Residential Districts:** These are districts though planned, started out as slum areas. These districts

'constitute an oasis of planned layouts in a wilderness of confused housing,...with Idumagbo Avenue a wide street of which the traffic flow has considerably reduced by the crowd of petty traders lining it on both sides with their movable 'counters'.'

**Identified Residential Districts:** Western Mainland-Ebute Metta West, Ojuelegba; Central Lagos-Isale gangan and Oko-Owo; Obalende.

**Income Class:** Some of these areas were attractive to traders, immigrants from Ghana and Togo (for example, Obalende).

**Physical Layout:** These areas started out as unplanned, but by 1930, they were declared town-planning areas with re-planning after the second world war; consisting of speculative buildings of large, storied houses with numerous rooms for hire to immigrants coming into Lagos at this time.

### **Low Grade Residential Districts**

**Identified Residential Districts:** These are areas that have never been planned, and

With their narrow, confused lanes and generally poor housing conditions, they represent the oldest parts of residential Lagos that have not received town planning attention.

**Identified Residential Districts:** Old Lagos: Faji, Idumashagbe, Idumota-Alakoro, Idumagbo, Ereko-Agarawu, Olowogbowo, Offin-Itolo and Ebute Ero; North Central Lagos: Okepopo, Epetedo; Mushin, Yaba East, Somolu and Ajegunle-Ajeromi.

**Income Class:** Basically low income people and indigenous residents

## **The Current Study**

As this conference presentation is part of a larger study which is still in progress, we present early assessments from qualitative studies carried out so far on 8 of these communities selected predominantly from the lower medium and low grade residential districts. The 8 residential districts are: Mushin, Yaba East, Obalende, Ojuelegba, Ebute Metta West, Ebute Ero and Somolu. These were selected on the basis of later classifications as slum areas by reports such as the SNC Lavallin Report of 1995, which identified 42 slum communities in Lagos. The 8 selected residential areas were included in this report. Obalende, Mushin, Somolu and Ajegunle-Ajeromi were distinctively identified in the report, while larger swathes of Yaba East, Ebute Metta West and Ebute Ero were broken down into smaller communities identified as slums in the report.

Qualitative assessment included in-depth interviews with residents and observation with evidence captured with photographs. Undergraduate students studying this area with the co-authors also developed a 15minute documentary (as a pedagogical exercise) from these.

We present excerpts of what was found to be the condition of six identified slum communities today, with the notion of providing detailed findings on causality to the colonial land policies in other research platforms as appropriate after study completion.

## **The Situation Today**

### **Lower-Medium Grade Residential Districts: Ebute Metta West, Ojuelegba and Obalende.**

Ebute-Metta West today still retains similar characteristics as made it attractive to immigrants in the colonial period, which is accessibility to locations on the Island and Mainland. However, access to amenities such as water supply is still challenging, as the picture shows. The Main street is characterized by street trading, the nature of informal economy that lends an air of disorganization to street aesthetics and contributes to solid waste generation in the area, reflecting in part, Mabogunge's stereotypical description of it being an area descriptive of slums not for lack of infrastructure but on account of being inhabited by the 'type of people who tend to make the area return to slum conditions after it has been planned.'

## Getting Water in Ebute Metta



Photo credits: Department of Estate Management, 2019



Typical Street Layout in Ebute Metta



Similar narratives can be made about the current state of Obalende and Ojuelegba. Obalende, which had been a residential outposts for people of various tribal backgrounds. Obalende now hosts various commercial activities and a few institutional buildings such as High Courts. The presence of the High Court has influenced retail trading in the adjoining neighbourhoods as many shops sell only legal retinues to complement the law courts. Nevertheless, there is a high predominance of street trading and other informal sector activities in Obalende. Its old residential buildings are being converted into commercial and mixed use buildings to accommodate the influx of new small scale business activities. The area however still suffers from physical obsolescence with lack of drainage being evident. Similarly, although Ojuelegba still remains predominantly residential, spatial expansion into the commercial zones in Yaba projects an area fast becoming commercial, with buildings fronting on major access roads being sold off or being reconstructed into more modern mixed use buildings. The retail commercial activities here are diverse, from eateries, to bars, vehicle spare parts dealerships, bookshops and clothes stores. Residents report that water supply is predominantly from private boreholes dug in individual houses, and in some areas, water is accessed through public taps. A few streets also benefited from a Government sponsored metered water supply which is now defunct.

### **Lower Grade Residential Districts: Idumagbo, Mushin and Somolu.**

Mabogunje's description of Idumagbo was of a residential area, but the area has now changed to reflect both commercial and residential land uses, and from a mono-cultural area with predominantly Yorubas, mixed with traders of Ibo origin who come to trade but find living quarters close to their shops. Buildings are predominantly



mixed used, with retail shops taking the ground floor, upper floors being used for warehousing goods and for residential purposes. Newer buildings such as banking halls are also evident to complement the intense commercial activities taking place here.

Idumagbo Road



Nnamdi  
Azikiwe Street



Photo credits: Department of Estate Management, 2019

Mushin is interesting in its diversity which changes almost from street to street. It is a residential area that has large areas of traditional open markets such as Idi-Oro, Oloosa and Ojuwoye. The residential buildings in the adjoining areas to these markets have over the years, also been turned to mixed-use buildings, with commercial activities typically on first two floors and residential on the last two floors. The waste generated by these markets often flow to adjoin access routes, giving the newcomer an air of untidiness. The residential areas of Mushin are also differentiated almost by the streets, with swathes of closely built traditional houses with narrow streets and no drainages, to houses recently rebuilt. On its part, Fola Agoro is a residential district in Shomolu, serving the need for accommodation of several important tertiary institutions in Lagos; for example, the University of Lagos, The Yaba College of Technology and the Federal Technical College. It is a high density residential area, highly characterized by its fairly good, clean and well connected motor able roads as well as drainage systems and drainage channels. The youthful population it serves has influenced the commercial activities attracted to this area with night clubs, eateries, clothing stores, predominating. As with other residential districts, most of the buildings close to the major roads are being daily sold off and reconverted to mixed use commercial and residential spaces.

## Housing typologies in Fola Agoro

Photo credits: Department of Estate Management, 2019



### Conclusion

The work that has been done so far presents reflections of current social, economic and physical state of six lower medium and low grade residential districts of Lagos. It is underpinned by a concern to understand whether (and to what extent) residential districts in Lagos have retained the physical outlook that characterised them in the immediate post-colonial period. The qualitative aspect of the work, done through observation and pictorial analyses, reveal that although there have been changes, these have predominantly been towards commercialisation of erstwhile residential areas into mixed use communities, with the dominant activity being retail commercials, most of which is firmly located in the informal sector. Erstwhile traditional homesteads continue to be rapidly redeveloped into mixed use commercial-residential buildings, with the ground floor being devoted to retail/trading, second floors being used as stores/warehouses and last floors being given over to residential uses. The influx of retail entrepreneurs to Lagos contributes to this densities. However, physical infrastructure have not been seen to keep up with the pace of change, therefore the districts still retain their dismal outlook. The research work will proceed to quantitative analysis of this change, measured from household surveys on the physical, economic and social facilities, rental index creation and analysis and also an examination of government's intervention in these communities over the years. The final outcome of research could help establish a linkage between colonial land policies and the present; and what can be done to ameliorate the negative changes. The findings from the work will therefore form the basis for policy advice on appropriate methods and process of intervention in these communities.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to acknowledge the 2018/2019 and 2017/2018 final year classes of the Department of Estate Management who took part in the field work for this study.

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**Contact email:** [boyalow@unilag.edu.ng](mailto:boyalow@unilag.edu.ng)