

Research report for

Lagos: Ownership and Identities: Exhibition and Intellectual Debates

Funders: Cluster of Excellence in African Studies, University of Bayreuth & African Cluster Centre, University of Lagos

Conveners –

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Introduction

Lagos: Ownership and Identities was a month-long event held in November 2 – 29, 2020. It consisted of a series of roundtables, photography and documentary exhibitions, mentoring workshops and documentary production.

The core objective of the Lagos Ownership and Identities convening was to interrogate how historical patterns of identity are contributing to contemporary reconfigurations of citizenship and mobility processes of both indigenes and residents in Lagos, Nigeria's largest city.

Lagos is a melting pot of diverse ethnic groups in both Nigeria and in the West African axis. The city has grown from a small fishing village since its founding in the 16th century to a vast metropolis of over 23 million people in present day Nigeria. After about five centuries since the founding of the city, the ownership and identity of Lagos has remained controversial, among history scholars and traditional historians of Lagos, and even in urban life around the city.

The reexamination and reanalysis of the migration history of Lagos was targeted with the notion of bringing diverse stakeholders together to achieve a common ground concerning issues of indigene status, citizenship and even social identities in the face of modernist aspirations of the state. The exhibition and series of roundtable meetings sought to produce a holistic documentation and substantiation about Lagos across oral, written and graphic forms of expression.

This was achieved as indigenes, settlers, scholars, artists, activists and members of the general public engaged with the theme of Lagos. Due to COVID-19 limitations, the scale of all meetings was expanded, hence participation was extended beyond the physical meetings initially intended for a total audience of about 200 participants to encompass blended meetings and an active virtual participation from interested persons, numbering over 350 from Lagos and beyond.

This report will summarize the various activities, key learnings, research output/contributions to knowledge and opportunities for further research.

1. Documentation

Microsite

A project microsite (https://iads.unilag.edu.ng/lacc/?page_id=1617) was developed to provide publicity for the various events.

In addition, we have placed on the site a bibliographic compendium of relevant academic articles, opinion pieces and weblinks on Lagos life, history and socio-political dimensions. This list will be periodically updated to provide access to the wider narratives on the Lagos story.

Think pieces

We invited fifteen artists, activists, researchers and policy makers to contribute to the discourse by submitting short think-pieces on Lagos. The interviews with prominent Lagosians and policy makers were also transcribed and documented. They can be accessed here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1w77d3O4Cbe8XQxgy_fH-GwwYzft-8el-/view).

Key learnings: The Lagos Ownership and Identities debate is multi-sectoral. The contested origins of the city have had significant impact on the emerging socio-economic patterns . The multidisciplinary engagement has resulted in more reflexive – reflective understanding of the Lagos story.

2. Discourse

Keynote lectures

The Keynote lecture of the event titled *African Urbanisms: Histories, Trajectories and Challenges* was delivered by Prof. Dr. Enocent Msindo, Professor of African History and the Director of the African Cluster Centre, University of Rhodes, South Africa. The lecture discussed the many facets of urban space as well as the political, economic and sociological character of the African city. In elucidating on our understanding of the patterns and impacts of contested urban spaces, Prof. Dr. Msindo took a *long duree* approach by examining the deeper histories of African urbanisms, noting how each epoch transformed the city spaces according to the dominant economic and political forces at play.

The closing lecture was delivered by Prof. Dr. Taibat Lawanson and entitled - *Lagos: Who Owns the City? Reflections and Emerging Perspectives for Research and Engagement*. The lecture discussed the key learnings of the various activities of the month – by seeking to establish a pattern in the ownership and identity narratives and experiences of African

cities in general and Lagos in particular in response to both colonial and post-colonial requirements. The lecture highlighted how these experiences have resulted in exacerbating contemporary contestations around urbanisation, migration and access in Lagos.

Roundtable Discussions

There were two roundtable discussions convened to explore the views of different stakeholders on both historical and contemporary interpretations of social identities and ownership in Lagos. They were well attended.

The opening roundtable session was held on November 3, 2020, and titled: *Historical Discourse on Origins, Identities and Colonial Disruptions in Lagos* discussed various facets of Lagos origin and highlighted the undercurrents of political aspirations, federal-state interface and the influx of migrants as being responsible for recurrent tensions.

The closing roundtable held on the 29th of November, 2020. The theme of the session is *Current Tensions: Indigeneship, Citizenship and the Right to the City*. The land conflict and issues around forced evictions, indigene-settler tensions and the urban form of Lagos were discussed. The roundtable highlighted the gaps in land tenure systems and the need for urban planning interventions and enhanced dialogue between land holder and community members

Key learnings: Academic inquiries have focused on the historicization of the Lagos origin without necessarily linking to the impact on land ownership, architecture, access to basic services. The colonial era activities have significant impact on the emerging migration patterns into the city as well as socio-economic dimensions. This multidisciplinary engagement recommended land reforms and strengthening of local government mechanisms for public engagement.

3. Documentary

The documentary – Lagos: Ownership and Identities - focused on the conflicting claims to Lagos' origins and histories. It highlighted the multi-form nature of the city, and the various waves of migration from pre-colonial through colonial until modern day and how these have shaped the urban form.

The documentary script was developed based on literature study, historical discussions around the original ownership of Lagos, issues of migration, ethnicity, and the formation of ethnic enclaves, as well as more contemporary mobilities and social identities of the various groups that make up Lagos.

In producing the documentary, qualitative research design was deployed – through narration and interviews. The conveners of the workshop, who narrated the script also interviewed six prominent Lagosians representative of the different narratives of Lagos

origin, as well as the policy makers i.e., local government chairman and commissioner for physical planning and urban development who are custodians of contemporary city making practices.

The documentary was premiered on November 2, 2020 and uploaded to YouTube for public engagement <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyELCBM6ORQ>. As at February 28, 2021, there have been about 1000 views, and a heated public debate on the issue.

Key learnings: *Issues of origin and identity have a major role to play in city formation and growth. Contested origins have significant socio-political undertones. Engaging the public in intellectual discourse requires sensitivity and objectivity*

4. Exhibition

There Lagos ownership and Identities Exhibition was both in-site at the gallery of the Institute for African and Diaspora studies and virtually at <https://www.artsteps.com/embed/5f9ffd8275885b4af3d508b7/560/315>. The exhibition was visited by over 500 guests (254 in-site at the University of Lagos and 344 virtually as at February 28, 2021).

It included exhibition of photographic materials, audio-visual interpretations, and historic texts. The exhibition focused on the various subjects of identity and ownership of Lagos, including reflections on architecture, urban form, everyday life and socio-economic disruptions. Contributors included both seasoned and emerging photographers and art collectors. The Lagos State Records and Archives Bureau was the only institutional exhibitor. (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1w77d3O4Cbe8XQxgy_fH-GwwYzft-8eI/view).

The exhibition commenced with a musical dance presentation of indigenous Lagos stories by the Lagos State Cultural troupe.

The Lagos State Records and Archives Bureau (LASRAB) presented via photographic materials on the evolution of human and infrastructure in Lagos – focusing on politics, lifestyle, and commerce.

Amaize Ojeikere highlighted the changes in Lagos urban form by presenting striking images of the iconic Lagos Christ Church Cathedral from the 1960s and 2000s. The photographs were his and his father's – late professional photographer JD 'Okhai Ojeikere. The pictures depicted Lagos of 1960s as a serene and tranquil environment, and quite difficult to reconcile with today's Lagos, that is chaotic and lacking in environmental consciousness. Deji Akinpelu body of works spoke to the disruptive patterns of Lagos modernist aspirations, highlighting transitions of urban spaces through spatial displacement of the poor.

Ebun Akinbo, explored social and cultural nuances in Badagry, Lagos utilizing life stories and audio-visual recordings to highlight the linkages between the history of slave trade and current realities of descendants of affected families.

Olasupo Shasore and Oludamola Adebowale presented archival materials and historical texts from the colonial and early independence era. Such materials include handwritten letters and correspondences of the colonial periods, proclamations and maps.

COVID 19

The exhibition also presented the work of contemporary photographer - Olu Daniels – who collaborated with researchers – ACC Principal Investigators Dr. Akin-Otiko and Dr. Fayemi – in documenting everyday life in Lagos markets and bus parks during the COVID-19 lockdown period.

Artists Panel Session

An interactive session was organized on the 18th of November, 2020 to engage with the Lagos Art Community on the subject of Lagos Ownership and Identities. The panel was comprised the exhibitors who all espoused on their interpretations of the theme of the exhibition and their lived experiences with regards to same. made up of the photographers of the exhibition.

An art historian, Dr. Jimoh Ganiyu presented a paper titled *Lagos Ownership and Identities: Concretizing History in Stills*, https://iads.unilag.edu.ng/lacc/?page_id=2465 in which he discussed, using the exhibition images, how art has been employed as means of concretizing, interrogating and documenting realities, and how the past played significant role in interrogating the present in dealing with the discourse of ownership and identities in a sociocultural stratum.

The panel session was quite interactive, with 52 Members of the University and larger Lagos Art community participating and engaging in a critical discourse on the displayed images and the larger context of appropriating public space for culture.

Mentoring

In order to use the Lagos Ownership and Identities theme as a platform for mentoring, student photographers were invited to participate in the exhibition. A call was sent out to them to submit sample creative work and a short essay describing their Lagos experience. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the call was limited to University of Lagos students across all disciplines. Out of about 100 students that responded to the call, five were selected from disciplines of Sociology, Linguistics, Creative Arts and Civil Engineering. Their works which speak to the theme of identity in Lagos were featured in the month-long exhibition.

The students also participated in the Artist Session, had one on one session with the senior exhibitors and had the rare chance to visit photography studios. It is expected that the mentoring session will give more clarity to student photographers on their chosen path.

Key learnings: The artist session highlighted the need for more art-academia interaction, and the linkages between lived experiences in the city and artistic interpretation of social identities. The use of photography as a research method was also highlighted. The mentoring session also provided an avenue for generational diversity and to see the city through the eyes of youth.

Conclusion

The activities and multidisciplinary engagements with the Lagos: Ownership and Identities narrative has revealed the interconnectedness of historic and contemporary contestations for urban citizenship.

We conclude that the key drivers of social identity tensions in Lagos are

- i. Urbanization: Patterns of urban form reflect social identities and the city's quest for modernism. Land rights are interlinked with identities, therefore ethnic enclaves and the quest for urban recognition along ethnic and socio-economic lines are emblematic of same.
Alongside the changing urban form is the loss of built environment heritage and core identifiers of the city's unique status – from markets to shrines, buildings of historic significance and even the city's historical districts and local communities
- ii. Migration: The tensions surrounding claims to Lagos ownership and the varying accounts of Lagos histories are due in part to the waves of migration into the city due to its economic and political status. The current cosmopolitan nature of Lagos increases these tensions especially on the basis of socio-economic status, hence the tension in the city, either on the basis of socio-economic status (forced evictions vs gated communities) or ethnicity (primarily Lagos is a no-man's land notion).
- iii. Poor documentation: There is lack of adequate verifiable empirical documentation of historic and contemporary accounts of the growth of Lagos across various sectors and the implications of same. Oral history tends to be distorted over time, hence the diversity of claims to the ownership of the city. The language

Relevance to the Cluster's agenda

The various activities and outcome align with the Cluster's agenda in the following ways:

- Reflexivity: Reflections on the real value of urban citizenship and/or indigeneship were highlighted. Furthermore, the artists sessions highlighted how depictions of

everyday life also reveal how city residents negotiate access to urban space and resources

- Multiplicity: The Lagos Ownership and Identities narrative was explored across academic, cultural, art and policy dimensions. Interpretation across gender and generational scales were also presented. This revealed that *Lagos has several identities that must be further interrogated and documented – across different disciplines, methodologies and fora.*
- Relationality: The *diversity, dynamism and complexity of Lagos should be embraced and studied cross-sectionally - co-producing solutions among academics, civil society and policy actors.*

Research Impact and Opportunities

Since November 2020, the following are some activities that were conceived/kickstarted on the back of the monthlong activities.

- The documentary has been submitted to the African World Documentary Film Festival for consideration in the 2021 festival call.
- Engagement with Lagos Records and Archives Bureau LASRAB towards preservation/restoration of specific historic buildings in Lagos Island
- Engagement with Isale Eko Descendants union on issues of town planning and social renaissance in the historic Isale Eko district
- Explore opportunities for further research within the cluster and beyond in the following areas:
 - Explore colonial mapping of Brazil – Lagos linkages (*ongoing conversation with colleagues in Bahia*)
 - Exploration on language transitions – outlining the various modifications to Lagos names and places, as well as Yoruba language terms that emanate from these migration trajectories (*developing proposal for ACC small grant funding*)
 - Exploration of migration and mobility flows across West Africa – with specific focus on understanding language and ethnic enclaves (*proposal already submitted to current Cluster funding call*)



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