

Temitayo  
**OLOFINLUA**

Adegboyega  
**ADEDIRE**

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THE MEANING  
OF LIVING IN A  
RELIGIOUS SPACE:  
THE SABO N GARI  
EXAMPLE



ADEDIRE ADEGBOYEGA<sup>1</sup>, OLOFINLUA TEMITAYO<sup>2</sup>

**THE MEANING OF LIVING IN A RELIGIOUS SPACE: THE  
*SABON GARI* EXAMPLE**

**Abstract:**

This paper was written as a field report for the Masterclass “Sacred Urbanism: Entrepreneurial Religion, Infrastructure and the New Urbanism in Nigeria” held at the University of Ibadan in June 2017. During the Masterclass, a team of postgraduate students conducted a day of field research in the area of the Sabo Central Mosque in Ibadan. They notably paid attention to the negotiation of the space by residents and users of the area. They also looked at inter-faith relations, membership conditions to the sacred community and spatial appropriation dynamics.

**Keywords:** Spatial appropriation, inter-faith relations, Mosque

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<sup>1</sup> Department of History, University of Ibadan

<sup>2</sup> Department of Cultural and Media Studies, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan

“*Allahu Akhbar*” the muezzin calls Muslims to prayers from several minarets of the many mosques that line the main road. There are over twenty mosques, with different billboards, some belonging to different sects. On the street, small shops with money changers beckon on passers-by for patronage. Several vehicles, some for sale, line the sidewalks. Behind this road, are several small living areas with no well-defined arrangement; small gutters filled with water; in front of some of these houses are tables for selling several clothing material. Small bulbs glimmer through the shanties as many electric wires can be seen connecting houses. Tucked between these mosques and shanties are two churches: Bishara Baptist Church and United African Apostolic Church. Welcome to Sabo, a largely Northern Muslim settlement with other ethnicities and nationalities that live and work together in Ibadan, Oyo state.

The coexistence of two major world religions within the same sacred space presents a new vista for the study of sacred entrepreneurship within an urban space. The questions then are: **how is sovereignty exercised on the residents of this sacred space? How is intra-faith relations negotiated? What does it require to be a member of this sacred community? How are sacred spaces appropriated?** This work provides insights to these questions.



*Aerial View of Sabo*

The emergence of Sabo as a sacred space is connected to its origin as a living area, though there are several postulations around this. Cohen (1967, 118) states that settlement in Sabo Quarters began in 1916 with 400 settlers. Cohen connects the ethnic exclusivity to excommunication from the main living area by the host community. Upon arrival in the area now known as Sabo, they mixed with the few occupants of the then outskirts of the city. Their religion, Islam also became dominant but not without challenges. During this period, increasing threats to the quarter’s autonomy and Hausa exclusiveness in the city contributed to the emergence of Sabo as a religious space. Majority of the Hausas in the quarters aligned themselves with the

Tidjaniyya Order after the visit of a senior member of the Order in 1950. This transformed the religious ethos of Sabo residents. Consequently, two daily rites—the morning *wird* and the evening *wazifa*, and one long rite, the *dhikr*, on Friday after noon—were added to the normal five daily prayers. Today, this has not changed much. Mohammed Sanusi, a Muslim foreign exchange dealer in Sabo states that the average Hausa man in Sabo spends about an hour and twenty-two minutes on ritual every weekday and about three hours every Friday<sup>3</sup>. This becomes a departure from the norm because of the universality of Islam which states that a man can perform his daily prayers anywhere he chooses, on his own or with others. But a Tidjani initiate must have at least the evening prayer ritual duty (the *wazifa*) under the Tidjani leader, the *mukaddam*, from whom he gets his instructions, unless of course he happens to be travelling. (Cohen, 1967, 125)

A major turning point in the history of the sacred space in Sabo occurred in 1952 when it achieved ritual autonomy. By implication, Muslims could now hold Jumat services in the quarter's Central Mosque under its chief and chief imam. (Cohen 1967, 118). The more Sabo drew Northern immigrants from different parts of the country, the bigger the service became and the smaller the Central Mosque—which is the biggest of the mosques—for the adherents. Consequently, Friday's mid-day is a massive gathering which means that the main road that passes through Sabo transforms from an economic hub to a prayer ground. The road is blocked; all economic activities are stopped and the voice of muezzin leads Muslim believers to Allah. This has implications for all the occupants of Sabo area, Christian or Muslim, resident or traders.

First, once it is prayer time, movement is restricted. Adewusi Helen, a Christian trader remains in her shop during this period and no purchases are made. Christian traders along the road did not seem to have any problem with this use of infrastructure as prayer ground. When asked about the impact of this economic lull on her business, she said: "It does not happen every day; it only happens for between ten and fifteen minutes on Friday, so we manage. It is important to tolerate one another<sup>4</sup>." In a space like this, tolerance is important for different people with different ethnic and religious affiliations in order to be peaceful co-existence. Second, prayer time could also be an advantage for some sellers. Oluwafunmilayo Adeniyi, a trader in drinks says that the exodus of worshippers after the Jumat service boosts her business as worshippers patronise her for goods and other wares<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview Mohammed Sanusi, Forex Trader, 21 June 2017

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Mrs. Adewusi Hellen, Trader, 21 June, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Oluwafunmilayo Adeniyi, 21 June, 2017

Any attempt to disturb the ritual is frowned at. Adeniyi, who is a Christian and loves Christian gospel songs, says that she has been asked on several occasions to reduce the volume of the music any time the ritual is on. When asked if the noise from the blaring speakers from the mosques affect them, Adewusi and Adeniyi said that they were used to it<sup>6</sup>. Related to this, events associated with Islam, have implications for economy in the settlement. For instance, during the fasting period, there is a reduction in patronage for the food-related sector. During this period, it is difficult to see any open restaurant in the area.

The mosques also have political significance. Out of the over twenty mosques in Sabo, three main mosques reflect the diversity of Islam: Izalatu Mosque, Sabo Central Mosque and the Mosque for the Yorubas. On the other hand, it also mirrors the tribal cleavages expressed in the building of ‘rival secessionist Friday mosque’, the Izalatu Mosque. The Central Mosque has the largest population in comparison to others. Traditionally, the Friday mid-day prayers are attended in one central mosque by all Muslims living in the town. Present during the ritual are their political representative and the Chief Imam. A sermon is given by the Imam; a special blessing is said for the ruler, the ritual community, and for the whole Islamic community (Cohen 1967, 118). Politicians also use the platform as a launch pad for political dreams to soar however, the Central Mosque that attracts most ‘infrastructural goodwill’. This is seen in the different projects carrying the names of different politicians belonging to different political parties. When it comes to receiving goodwill, the mosque has no political allegiance. For instance, the water tank in front of the mosque shows it was donated by a politician belonging to the Peoples’ Democratic Party. Alhaji Sanni Ibrahim, the Secretary of the Sabo Central Mosque said that the mosque was painted; its windows and tiles were fixed, all by different political aspirants belonging to different parties<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Mrs. Adewusi Hellen, Trader, 21 June, 2017

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Alhaji Sanni Ibrahim, 21 June, 2017



*Sabo Central Mosque*



*One of the Buses of Sabo Central Mosque*



*Another Central Mosque in Sabo of Yoruba Extraction*



*The Jamatu Iزالatu Bidah Waikamatic Sunnah Mosque in Sabo*

Despite this appropriation of space during Jumat, people are free to practise their religions without hindrance. In this community littered with mosques is also home to two churches: Bishara Baptist Church (BBC) and United African Apostolic Church (UACC). Members of the BBC are Christians of northern extraction. The church which was

established in 1914 as stipulated on its signpost is located on a plot of land almost at the 'invisible' boundary of the Sabo community right before Mokola Roundabout. In describing the members of BBC, Mohammed Sanusi<sup>8</sup>, a Muslim categorised them as 'outcasts' who rejected Allah. He further stated that a core northerner will never turn to Christianity as an alternative form of religion no matter what. The gated church compound, largely active during church services, has some commercial activity around it. Along the perimeters of its fence, there are several small shops where several products are sold. The shop owners are both Christian and Muslim.

In the same vein, UACC was established in 1956, and located in the middle of the suburb with no signpost to direct visitors. Despite being 200-member strong, there is no Northern member except during Cross-over services on the last day of the year. Affirming this Pastor Ayorinde, a senior member of the church stated 'when they attend this special programme, they attend in the dead of the night due to fear from their husband that they might be punished<sup>9</sup>.' Ayorinde also says that although they have neighbours who are both Christians and Muslims, the residents of the area do not complain about noise pollution when they have programmes; neither do they as Christians feel disturbed when Muslims are praying<sup>10</sup>.



*The United Apostolic Church of Christ*

In Sabo, besides Yoruba and the Hausa, other African nationalities like the Gambians, Sierra-Leoneans, Malians and Senegalese have also made a home there. It encompasses all the Hausa, and, indeed even non-Hausa "strangers" in the region. As Miangu (1990) records:

Note also that not all the people from the North speak Hausa or Fulani. There are the Nupe from Kwara and Niger; Zuru from Sokoto; Gwari from Kaduna and Niger, and Kambari from Sokoto. Even most of the

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Mohammed Sanusi, 21 June, 2017

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mr. Ayorinde, 21 June, 2017

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Mr. Ayorinde 21 June, 2017

people from the Jos area don't know the Hausa or Fulani language but they are still regarded as Hausa or Fulani. Even the people from Benue State such as the Tiv, Idoma, Igala and the rest are addressed as Hausa by the Yoruba, Igbo, and the Kalabari (Salamone 1996, 126)

Tijani Biliamin, a fashion designer, gives credence to Miangu's assertion when he opines that apart from the usual Hausa people, these "other" Sabo residents live and ply their trade there without disturbance<sup>11</sup>. Once one makes Sabo a home, security within the space is guaranteed, many said. Jeremiah, a resident emphasises the sense of communalism that exists in Sabo whereby members of the community support one another in cases of police arrest. Although there is no written moral code for behaviour within Sabo, many state that anyone who dresses indecently within the community may be booed. Anyone who also commits any form of illegality will also be punished.

Despite this lack of a written "Constitution", the community remains well organised. The Waziri and Yerima<sup>12</sup> of the palace associate this with the establishment of committees who attend to several matters that arise in the community. It is interesting to note that despite the "slummy" nature of Sabo, the community has uninterrupted power supply because as residents note, their electricity is connected to the same source as the Government House. However, the community lacks several infrastructures which elude it, despite its political power.

Sabo remains a unique, sacred, non-fundamentalist space that typifies a peaceful cohabitation of both religious groups. Research shows that the area has changed since its early days (Cohen 1967, 1). Today, not only are there more ethnic and national groups, they all live together in peace even though Islam remains the dominant religion. With emerging trends of ethno-religious crisis across the world, Sabo is a prototype of peaceful co-existence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Tijani Biliamin, 21 June, 2017

<sup>12</sup> Interview with the Waziri, Alhaji Yinusa Atiku, 21 June, 2017