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**THE LAND QUESTION  
AND STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY  
IN SABO, IBADAN**



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**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. A team of postgraduate students conducted a day of field research in the area of Sabo Central Mosque in Ibadan. This paper displays their main findings. It crucially analyses the land acquisition process in the neighborhood and the effects of the mosque in shaping the urban environment. It also looks at the spatial negotiation between religious and political elites in the area.

**Key words:** Sabo, land, spatial negotiation, religious space

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## 1. Background

A sloppy area of land with thickly forested swampy, ringed by a sub-standard tarred road from the west, kept apart from its immediate neighbour by a mounted over-head bridge from the east, 'Sabo' area of Mokola of Ibadan metropolis houses the oldest Hausa migrant community in Olubadan land.

*Sabo*, an abridged version of *Sabon Gari*, literally means a 'new town', represents a socio-spatial configuration beyond the surface meaning of a settlement. It represents identity formation of migrants who are mainly Hausa-speaking people, as the Hausa etymology of the area portrays, living in a seemingly segregated area within the larger homogenous community of Yoruba. The concept of *Sabon Gari* is widely found across many states in northern Nigeria, and arguably West African sub-region (Adamu, 1973), for settlements established by *Hausawa*. Historical records show that most of these settlements identified as *Sabon Gari* are basically established by long-distance Hausa traders, so the Sabo of Ibadan.

The pattern of settlement reorganization in Sabo is typical with the core cities of the defunct Sokoto caliphate emirates of northern Nigeria on the one hand and that of the historic city of Ibadan on the other.

Several scholarly works have been produced on the cityscape of Ibadan. Some existing contributions consciously research Ibadan city and migrant communities of Hausa people with focus on the sociocultural and economic interactions with the indigenous communities<sup>3</sup>. This work however seeks to extend knowledge on sacred space within the realities of how it shapes spatial religious infrastructure and development that informs new urban structure.

## 2. Research questions

How land is acquired for construction of sacred space?

How important is the central mosque space to the Sabo community?

How peace, conflict and development are negotiated between the Sabo religio-political elites and their host community over the question of land?

Oral traditions consistently attribute the establishment of the area to the *Hausawa* who were said to have been deported/ejected from Oja-Oba (market of the king) by Oba of Mokola having ostensibly accused them

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<sup>3</sup>Mabogunje & B. Awe (eds.) *The City of Ibadan*. Cambridge University Press, p. 117-127

of contempt with his supreme authority.<sup>4</sup> there was no fact to establish this claim, but subsequent cross-cultural migration into the area played significant role in its development. The few *Hausawa* that were deported to the area as an act of punishment were credited with the ‘hectic project’ of developing ‘abandoned’ and ‘badly located’ land otherwise would not have been habitable. The absence of accurate historical information with which to trace the origin of the area necessitates developing a conjecture around multiple oral sources generated that the area developed during the post-jihad development. Post-jihad development was occasioned by relative peace that led to the opening up of traffic that saw upsurge in the migration flows and cross-cultural contacts among different people of the region.

In line with this historical discourse, Harold Olofson described social mobility as one of the most striking characteristics of the Hausa society in western Nigeria<sup>5</sup>. Some accounts claim that the area developed after the amalgamation of 1914. The community evolved by a process of chain migration an eventual settlement. According to Alhaji Yusuf Safiyanu, he understands his parents who were part of the early settlers migrated from the north and were primarily cattle Normads and Kolanut traders.<sup>6</sup>

Oral informants suggest that <sup>7</sup> Sabo comprises of several socio-linguistic units. But most of them accepted Hausa as their language of communication. The ruling *sarki*, alhaji ahmad sikiru, decentralizes power to representatives of other ethnic stocks. Sabo has its own demarcation but growth in population has expanded greatly leading to the establishment of new areas.

However, construction of mosque space in sabo was one of the most important symbolic project conducted and enduring legacy bequeathed by the early settlers of the area. The establishment of central mosque in sabo was a landmark in the construction of muslim-hausa identity in ibadan. The process for securing the land demonstrated dynamic power relations, involving the religious and traditional elites of sabo, led by mallam audu dungurun,<sup>8</sup> the olubadan and the sultan of sokoto, the leader of muslim

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Alhaji Sani Ibrahim (Danasabe), 68, Secretary, Sabo Central Mosque Committee, 21.06.2017

<sup>5</sup> H. Olofson, “YawonDandi”: A Hausa Category of Migration” Journal of the International African Institute, Vol. 46, No. 1 (1976), p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> Oral interview with Yusuf Sayafina, Nyerere Street, Sabo, Ibadan

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Prince I.A.O., 29, community teacher, born in Sabo, Ile-Iso area and A. T., 56, Bureau De Change, Sabo

<sup>8</sup> Mallam Audu Dungurun was originally from Katsina. He was said to be cattle trader. Dungurun was popular among the early settlers of Sabo, the status that earned him the title of *Sarkin Hausawa* of Sabo. He used his position to secure permission from the Sultan of Sokoto, the highest religious authority of Muslims in northern Nigeria to build a mosque.

faithfuls of nigeria. Oral source claims that the sultan of sokoto had to write formally to the olubadan, soliciting him to ‘allow’ the mosque structure to be erected.<sup>9</sup>

The construction of the mosque guaranteed assertion of social and religious identity of hausa muslim migrants in a contested socio-religious space of the larger ibadan. It also complimented redefinition of social status as the ‘right’ to conduct prayer ritual, especially on friday, was secured. Subsequently, residential and commercial areas proliferated around it.

The question of how peace, conflict and development are negotiated between the sabo religio-political elites and their host community over the question of land lies in the structure of leadership of the sabo community. He mediates peace. The *sarkin hausawa* presides over legislative matters in the community with support of his deputies. The popularity of sabo central mosque and its religious importance has attracted political figures in the larger ibadan community to the area. Oral tradition claims that before elections interested candidates usually take up mini projects and provide assistance to the sabo central mosque community, thereby turning the sacred space into a nerve centre for political mobilization. This sometimes pulls favour in the side of the candidates. In retrospect, some of the politicians have been responsive while the irresponsive ones are often stereotyped “atm”.

### **3. Major findings**

The reason for the deportation/ejection of the earliest hausa traders from oja-oba was purely economic. They contested the economic power of the indigenous yoruba in controlling sales, export and import in oja-oba.

There was a dynamic power relation in the process for acquisition of land space for construction of central mosque. The space was initially denied not on the basis of being requested by the *hausawa* but perhaps was seen as a potential ‘weapon’ for the latter to compete with religious authority of olubadan. With formal permission to construct a sacred space, the sabo elites, it seemed, extended their control over the intervening land to develop residential and commercial enclaves.

Land is acquired through the means of purchase or allocation by *sarkin hausawa* within the context of sabo. The proliferation of sacred space in sabo is an indicative of demographic expansion of the area, although religious authority of sabo chief imam is arguably intact for, with the

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Alhaji Sani Ibrahim (Danasabe), 68, Secretary, Sabo Central Mosque Committee, 21.06.2017

exception of the recent *izala* pentecostalism, he remains the overall religious authority permitting commissioning of newly built sacred space. There are occasional intra-doctrinal polemics between the *izala* and *sufis* (*qadiriyya* and *tijjaniyya*) over appropriation of sacred space but yet rarely break the rank of sense of commonness of the people. There is some degree of doctrinal tolerance between different groups mentioned, moreso between the *qadiris* and the *tijjanis*. The central mosque is said to be utilized by both *sufi* groups at appropriate times. Thus the central becomes a centre for mass mobilization for followers into the fold of different religious group.

The *hausa* language and *islam* are a unifying force among residents of *sabo*. *Sabo* houses nationals other than *nigerians* – *malians*, *senegalese*, *togolese*, *ghanians*, *ghambians* etc – but blended much that they have been culturally integrated into the mainstream *sabo* community. But there is little instance of co-habitation between the *yoruba* host community and *sabo*.

#### **Concrete circumstance: some examples**

The first contact with *sabo* community opens up with an organized begging community nearby *mokola* area known as *zongo*, with a huge crowd of physically challenged persons averagely of an older population with their children helping in the business. The area is organised as against the usual stereotype of being a dusty, clumsy, rugged and all sorts of names. Proceeding on the road paths towards the left direction is very busy and economic centre known as *sabo suya*, here you find different kinds of *suya* joint and artisans such as fashion designers, petty traders etc.



It is captivating that there are different shops, open spaces, rooms used for worship and prayer centres. Preceding from there is the most popular street, inyerere street where the central most is located.



There seem to be miscommunication between the sabo community elite and the ifra research team. The first person we have engaged in the in-depth personal interview, the secretary of the central mosque committee, complained to us that he was not aware of our coming because he was not informed prior and attempted to reject us on the basis of that. It was after we demonstrated to him the essence of the research he agreed to give us audience for some minutes. But interestingly, he later appeared to be curious in responding to our questions, a situation that extended the interview for over an hour. We experienced a similar challenge at the palace of *sarkin hausawa*. While going round through the alleyways of sabo 'hanging on' to observe surface of social life, we were approached in aggressive way by three men demanding that we should identify ourselves. We informed them of our mission and the permission we were earlier granted by the central mosque and the waziri but insisted that we should have been attached with someone known in the environment to lead us around.