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SABO

AS A SACRED URBAN SPACE:

ITS GOVERNANCE,

GROUPS

AND INFRASTRUCTURE



TEMITOPE OJO¹, MORUF MUDASIRU²

**SABO AS A SACRED URBAN SPACE: ITS GOVERNANCE,
GROUPS AND INFRASTRUCTURE**

Abstract:

This paper is based on research undertaken during the Masterclass “Sacred and Urbanism: Entrepreneurial Religion, Infrastructure and the New Urbanism in Nigeria” held at the University of Ibadan in June 2017. A team of postgraduate students carried out a day of field research in the area of the Sabo Central Mosque in Ibadan. The paper is a field report on their experience. It focuses on the interactions between the religious space, the government and its agencies. The paper also looks at the coexistence of the various groups in the community.

Key words: Urban space, urban governance, infrastructure, Ibadan

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1. Introduction: the Settlement

Of all the “native strangers” in Ibadan today, there is no doubt that the Hausa of Sabo stand out as the most exclusive and they occupy an undeniably unique position as a sharply delineated ethnic group, even though they were among the first of the “stranger migrants” to settle in Ibadan. Essentially, the Hausa community in Ibadan remains very distinct in their dress styles, food and customs, and prioritise their language even in their dealings with other ethnic groups (Cohen, 1967). The Hausa are one of the best known ethnic groups that are active in long distance trading through West Africa; they usually move far away from their original homeland in the Savannah country, in parts of what is known as Northern Nigeria. They are very much distinct as a group who are essentially, proud of their customs, beliefs and practices, and their Arabic learnings. As such, many of the migrants may pose as religious teacher, diviner, butcher, barbers, commission agents, bag makers and leather workers, among other occupations.

Sabo presents a clustered population of Hausa migrants found in many towns and cities in the non-Northern states of Nigeria, particularly in the South-West. It has grown over time to become a stereotypically homogenous settlement which has recently become heterogeneous, through a tolerant absorption of other tribes. Sabo is a Hausa word shortened from “*Sabo ngeri*” which means “New Town”. Sabo is the centre of the Hausa economic, social and cultural life in Ibadan. In addition, religion provides a common cultural denominator for the inhabitants of the Sabo community, as many of them profess Islam which highlights their enlarged ethnic identity. However, across the Muslim world, the Central Mosque is regarded as a sacred space for spiritual purpose among Muslim faithful. But at Sabo, the Central Mosque is the hub of all activities and all issues revolved around it. This is because major decisions are decided right inside this sacred space.

In the light of these observations, this study aims to examine the pattern and nature of the relationship between the religious space, the government and its agencies, as well as the peaceful co-existence in Sabo among the various groups that emerged in the community

Barber within the Central Mosque



A craftsman and his wares in the vicinity of the Mosque



Mai Ruwa (Water Seller)

over time. We examine these issues through primary source materials and field research that involves semi-structured and in-depth interviews with various interest groups; religious and traditional leaders and other stakeholder groups in the community. Although our sample is relatively small, it reflects a balance between the various interest groups; dominant and minority ethnic groups.

2. A Brief History of Sabo

Here in Ibadan, it is difficult to ascertain the exact time of the creation of the “New Town”. The field work conducted at this site created a contact with the “*Waziri*”, Mr. A, who happens to be the second-in-

command to the *Sarki* of the entire Sabo settlement. Secretary of the Central Mosque, of the key figures, granted audience the interview we conducted was a around seventy



Aerial View of Sabo Community

The one who to man

years old, but was brought to Sabo in 1954 and has been there since then. The closest this research got to determine the age of Sabo through the interviews conducted during the field trip was a chat with the

Waziri who assumed³ to be fifty-eight years and claimed that his father, who died at the age of one hundred and fifteen years, was born there, in Sabo. This report was consistent with two other respondents who have close round figures to the Waziri's and therefore it could be safe to posit that Sabo is not less than a hundred years old.

It was also gathered that they originally settled at Oja-Oba area of Ibadan before being resettled in the present site over a hundred years ago. They were resettled because of their growing numbers and the threat their growth posed to the indigenes of Ibadanland.

3. Social Life and Infrastructural Ties in Sabo Community

As it is a common phenomenon and practice with all trading communities, a very fundamental basis of social life among the Hausa in Sabo is the belief that virtue exists only in hard work, and that leisure and leisure activities undermines virtues living. In other words, Hausa community in Sabo tend to eschew indolence and opportunities provided by large market space in Ibadan. However, in spite of their economic importance and the vigour of their social life, the Hausa community in Ibadan participates actively in the politics of the city, and far below what one might be expected from migrant people in a Yoruba town. In fact, their political involvement reflects both the nature of their traditional practice in such matter and the operation of a strong sense of social and political identification with the host community, rather than with their city of origin.

However, since relational function focuses on building the network of relationships that are needed to fulfil needs and accomplish the vision of the organization, this perfectly explains the pattern and nature of the relationship between the Sabo community and the larger Ibadan community which necessitated the cordial relationship that the Sabo community enjoins today.

4. Sabo Leadership and the Oyo State Government

Having a smooth relationship with the State government regardless of the party in power, there are still agitations about being denied some amenities, state jobs and especially, a political position higher than a Ward Councillor. Even though the government has ensured the stability of electrical power in the Sabo community, they still feel marginalized about other provisions. This is according to Mr. S, a 70-year old man, who was born in Ibadan and speaks Yoruba language

³ **assumed:** The Waziri does not know his exact birthdate but by some calculations with some contemporaries and some important dates around the time of his birth, he could safely assume he is fifty-eight years old.

fluently, and who is the General Secretary to the main Central Mosque. He has been in the post for over thirty years now. He reports:

“Our people are very conscious of their political environment and as such are usually involved in order to ensure continuing peace in our community and we also mobilize them for elections. As you can see this our Central Mosque is the first point of call for politicians and the Mosque has enjoyed tremendous renovation in recent years due to frantic efforts by different political parties and groups soliciting for our vote. As such, we often participate in politics and governance in order to protect our territory and business in Ibadan.

For me, two key figures stand out in these respects, they are the late Ibadan prominent sons of blessed memory that usually make our request to be paramount and ensure that we are not being cheated in the scheme of things. These are Alhaji Lamidi Adebidu and Alhaji Aare Arisekola Alao. But among the Governors since return to democratic governance, Chief Adebayo Alao Akala is a good example of good governance and we called him “the ATM Governor”.ⁱ

No doubt the Hausa people at the Sabo community represent one of the many non-Ibadan communities in Ibadan and were attracted largely by the trading opportunities of the early eighteenth century but in broad terms, the community at Ibadan show a characteristic similar to those found in other part of Yoruba towns and cities. Coexistence with other tribes as foreigners has not always been easy hence the need for a haven of their own where they can feel safe, at home and secure. They subtly become indispensable to the economy of their new environment through their crafts, manpower and other services they render as a group.

Similarly, the present generation of Hausa migrants maintains a robust cordial relationship as much as possible which have matured greatly to the extent that the younger generation now identify mostly with the Ibadan norms and values, and prefer to be seen as indigenes. In other words, this present generation of Hausa children tend to ignore the

conventions and social systems of the town, though still maintains a consciousness of this language and belonging, but are rather adapted to responding to changes in the social environment in Ibadan. Therefore, the Sabo identity and separateness is changing over time to exclusiveness and participation in local politics of the day.

In the hierarchy of power in Sabo community, the *Sarki* is the supreme power and the *Waziri*, his deputy. The *Waziri* is the only authority in the leadership of Sabo who can check the *Sarki*'s sovereignty and decision either in his presence or his absence. The *Sarki* has a sixty-five-man cabinet who helps him in the governing of the Sabo community. All these cabinet members are men. The Secretary to the main Central Mosque, S., reinforces the patriarchal hierarchy of the Muslim faith and well adopted by the Hausas. He says that the role designated to the women is home management and provision of sexual satisfaction to their husbands.ⁱⁱ

Four families within the Sabo community are eligible to become *Sarki*. They include the Audu Dungurun, Amodu Bature, Nagarika and the Isiaka families. The *Waziri* has only three families who vie for its occupancy. These positions are not political and are not operated run by tenures but are lifetime appointments. They can be checked, tried and removed if found guilty of certain offences⁴.

A dominantly Islamic environment, worshippers are very devout and take the Juma'at very seriously. There are three Central Mosques to which, on Friday, roads are briefly blocked during Juma'at prayers to create more space for worship. One of the three was founded for the Yorubas within the space to worship in. Speakers and twitters are strategically positioned in a way that its sound production overrides the other neighbouring mosques. Noise is no pollution in the Sabo community. From observation, the louder it gets, the better. There is a possibility that people just could not complain. In all, there are more than twenty mosques within the Sabo community. But there are churches too –two of them, one for Hausa worshippers and the other for Yoruba worshippers.

⁴ **offences:** There are procedures to follow in ousting an incumbent *Sarki* or *Waziri* but those were not revealed.



Traders at the entrance of the Central Mosque

In the past, there have been tensions between the inhabitants of Sabo and outsiders in the past but none has really escalated beyond the powers of the Sabo leaders. The toughest to handle to date was the June 12, 1993 post-election crisis. All Hausas all over Ibadan were ordered to run to Sabo for safety and defend it. If you defended Sabo, you were safe.ⁱⁱⁱ

Another notable crisis that rocked Sabo was the intra-communal crack which happened in 2010 when a younger generation of worshippers of the main Central Mosque revolted and confronted the older generation about the doctrines being taught. This became a tension in which the Chief Imam of Ibadan had to create a truce by granting the “challengers” the permission to build another Central Mosque. The mosque is now the Izalat Central Mosque with its congregation name “*Jama’atu Izalat al-Bid’a wa Iqamat al-Sunna*. It simply means “The Movement against Innovation in Favour of a Return to the Sunna”.



Izalat Central Mosque



Sabo Central Mosque viewed from Izalat Mosque

There is also a good relationship with the Nigeria Police whereby if a member of the Sabo community is found guilty of an offence, before being handed to the Police, s/he is first tried at the Sarki's palace to know the weight of the offence. If it reaches beyond the powers of the Sabo authorities, they hand the culprit over to the police. And if it is a mild offence, they would mete out a punishment commensurate to it.

Conclusively, the Sabo community needs to be more proactive in order to continue to enjoy the desired dividends of democracy in Ibadan. As interrelatedness does not have to be created—it already exists—but it can be expanded and strengthened for good of the people. Perhaps, economic activities are always the basis of a far-flung Diasporas, which consists of a network of localized Hausa communities in Ibadan.

ⁱ Interview with Mr. S the Secretary of the Mosque.

ⁱⁱ Interview with the Waziri of the Sarki's Palace

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with Mr. A.

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LIST OF INTERVIEWS

1. Interview with the Secretary of the Mosque, Mr.S.
2. Interview with the Waziri of the Sarki’s Palace, Alhaji Y. A.
3. Interview with Alhaji T. B.