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Aminu Ali

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**Aminu
ALI**

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**LAND, RELIGION
AND URBANISM:
THE GOSPEL TOWN**



AMINU ALI¹

LAND, RELIGION AND URBANISM: THE GOSPEL TOWN

Abstract:

This paper was written as part of the Masterclass “Sacred Urbanism: Entrepreneurial Religion, Infrastructure and the New Urbanism in Nigeria” held at the University of Ibadan in June 2017. The author carried out a day of field research at the Gospel Faith Mission International (GOFAMINT), located in Òjódò, Ibadan. This paper focuses on dynamics of appropriation of lands by GOFAMINT as a sacred space and the land regulation operated by the security services and the relevant institutions. It also looks at the provision by GOFAMINT of additional services, like water and power and how this illustrates the substitution.

Key words: land appropriation, Gospel Town, services

¹ Department of Sociology, Bayero University, Kano

1. Introduction

The unprecedented proliferation of prayer camps/cities in Nigeria has recently attracted scholarly attention. The growth of these ‘sacred cities’ is occasioned by the failure of governments at all levels to discharge their fundamental constitutional functions, and the growing impoverishment of Nigerians resulting from neo-liberal reforms (Ukah, 2014). Consequently, religious organisations have increasingly been taking over state’s functions. These organisations build massive and befitting ‘prayer camps,’ provide water, electricity, roads, and transport system, among other forms of infrastructure, in these camps. They also engage in entrepreneurial activities, such operating private estates, factories, universities, clinics, chalets, etc., which, in addition to generating revenue to sustain and expand the organisations, provide employment opportunities to their congregants. In essence, these organisations establish cities in the sacred space that attract people from different places. The life they live in this “sacred urban space” is not different from that they live in cities. In fact, it could be better.

The Gospel of Faith Mission International (GOFAMINT) is one of such religious organisations. It was established as a ministry in 1955 by Pastor R.A. George. The growth of the Church necessitated the desire to acquire more land. Thus, the GOFAMINT relocated to Òjòò in Ibadan city, Oyo state in 1991, where the administrative offices are still located. With the rapid growth of the congregation and church activities, GOFAMINT acquired a new land and moved to Alàkà, where the ‘Gospel town’ was established.

This report presents findings from a survey conducted to examine how desire to appropriate land to build a sacred urban space intersects with appropriation/intrusion of public space. It examines the strategies that GOFAMINT employs to acquire and expand its land for the construction of prayer city and the construction of the meaning and appropriate use of public space.

2. Research Questions

The study seeks to find answers to the following questions:

1. What are the GOFAMINT’s strategies of land acquisition/appropriation?
2. How does the GOFAMINT’s desire to acquire land and build sacred space intersect with appropriation of public space?

3. How do the GOFAMINT and the neighbouring communities construct the meaning and appropriate use of public space?

4. Strategies for Land Appropriation

GOFAMINT acquires lands through direct purchase from the land owners. They are usually located in suburb to make expansion easier. The Chief Security Officer of Gospel town revealed, during an interview, that they “raised money to buy land from villagers who used to reside here. When we relocated here, the land was not as big as this. We have been able to gradually expand it. The size of this land is about 30 acres.” This suggests that this huge piece of land was purchased in pieces from various villages that made up the area at the time. Similarly, a senior pastor in the Church disclosed that:

When we relocated to Ibadan in 1991, we bought a land around Òjódò. When the congregation grew, the need to expand became necessary. We, therefore, purchased the land we currently occupy from the people of Alàkà. The land is approximately 30 acres. With continued growth of the congregation and the need to further expand, we bought another 500 acres of land along Ibadan-Lagos express way. Plans are underway to relocate to the new area.

The District Pastor revealed that when the Church relocated to Ibadan from Lagos, they settled in Òjódò. They bought the land from the residents of this community. They later relocated to the land they currently occupy at Alàkà, which used to be a hideout of criminals. He added that :

“They have also acquired a new land along Ibadan Lagos express way. We are moving to our permanent camp there. We have 68,000-70,000 congregants; therefore, we need a bigger camp to accommodate them.”

The new land covers approximately 500 acres. GOFAMINT has expressed the possibilities of a wide range of infrastructural projects, including the possibility of a University.

A retired resident pastor and a church historian further explained that the residents of the villages: Adésòkàn (which is now called Adégbìtè), Alàkà, Olúgbòde, & Abútu were the primary vendors of the land occupied by GOFAMINT. They bought the lands from them in parcels and clustered them to form a large piece. The largest part of the land was purchased from Adésòkàn, which is why the name of the village is on the general surveyed plan of the entire camp (see plate 01). Alàkà is the second biggest vendor to Adésòkàn. The land sold by residents of Alàkà village covers the area occupied by the church auditorium. The chalets all the way to the edge of the residential houses within the

camp. Although the largest portion of the Gospel town falls under Adésòkàn village, the area occupied by the GOFAMINT was widely called Alàká until later when the Organisation's (GOFAMINT's) popularity caused the camp and the immediate extended areas to be collectively called Gospel town.

Government regulation on land acquisition does not seem to hinder the GOFAMINT's quest to appropriate land. The District Pastor revealed that:

as for government, we do not face any stringent regulation regarding land acquisition. We have always been able to meet the legal requirements of obtaining land. The only regulation we found stringent was that of the tenure of general overseers of churches that affected the general overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God. But the government has called back this code and has since regretted its action.



Plate 01: Title section of the survey plan of 1983 (Ajadi, 2017)

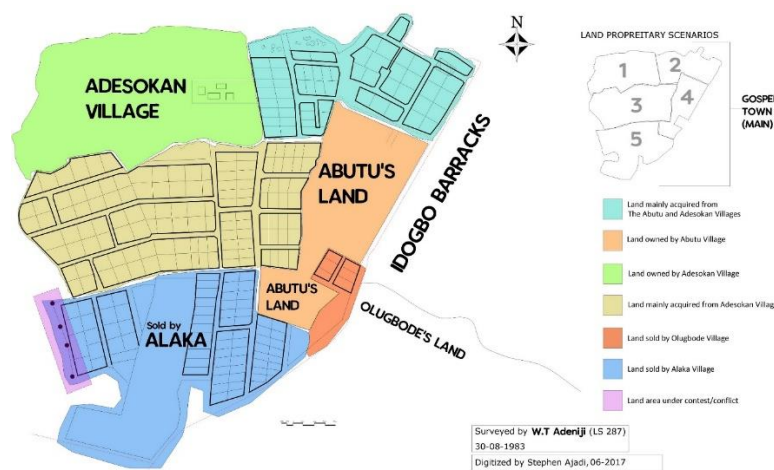


Figure 01: Land proprietary scenarios showing vendors and current ownership (Ajadi, 2017)

The rapid growth of church congregation and enthusiasts are driving the expansion of GOFAMINT and its quest for land appropriation.

The development of bigger plans involving infrastructure as the financial power of the church grows. The Church visions requires more space.

5. Sacred Urbanism and Entrepreneurial Activities in Gospel Town

The Gospel town attracts people from Ibadan and other cities and towns in Nigeria to live for different reasons. Some live for spiritual reasons, others for residents. The residents of this town live a typical urban life but guided by ethical and moral principles. Some of the residents of the town are congregants of GOFAMINT; others are Christians of different denominations, and even non-Christian faithful. The residents are people from different ethnic and religious groups. The Gospel town has multi-ethnic and multi-religious tendencies, which illustrates the diversity of Nigerian cities. The multi-religious nature of this sacred space, as serendipitous as it sounds, reflects the character of south-western Nigeria's cities.

The 30 acre land contains a number of structures, such as school, clinic, chalets, residential houses, restaurant, etc. Although these were not originally built for commercial purposes, they have become a source of income. The Church has also a water treatment plant, dedicated transformers and power generators. It has a number of employees: guards, teachers, nurses, doctors, cooks, etc. The District Pastor disclosed that they:

“provide all the infrastructures you find on our camp. Governments have failed in providing infrastructures.”

Apart from the transformer donated by the current Governor's wife, all other infrastructures were provided by the Church. This buttresses Ukah's (2014) position that the involvement of religious organisation in the provision of social services is occasioned by the failure of governments. The CSO also states:

We have built a number of structures, such as auditorium, halls, residential houses, and 20 chalets. The houses are occupied by members and non-members while the chalets are used to accommodate principal officers of the church, or members of other Christian organisations who come for retreat. We rent our halls for burial and wedding ceremonies.

The presence of these revenue-driving infrastructure and services demonstrate that GOFAMINT, like some other religious organisations in the south-western Nigeria, has transcended the

traditional function of religious organisations. This is yet another example of the growing configuration of religion in market capitalism. The finding is consistent with that of Ukah (2014), in his study of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) in Nigeria. He found that the RCCG is the largest private estate owner in Nigeria. It has quite a number of commercial ventures. Similarly, Lanz and Oosterbaan (2016) show how religion has become “a constitutive force of contemporary capitalism” and an integral force in the “construction of urban space.” This phenomenon (configuration of religion in contemporary capitalism) is what Lanz and Oosterbaan aptly call ‘entrepreneurial religion.’

6. Constructing the Meaning and Appropriation of Public and Sacred Spaces

GOFAMINT has been experiencing exponential growth in its membership size and activities. As such, the need for space appropriation is inevitably cardinal to its strategy for expansion of the Gospel town. Also, the mutual co-existence between the neighbouring communities and the Gospel town suggests that the former could use, in one way or the other, the latter’s space. This use and appropriation manifests in intrusion of both the public and sacred spaces, which is central in understanding the relationship between GOFAMINT and the neighbouring community. For instance, it has been observed that the camp lacks a complete perimeter fence, which makes it permeable. The level of permeability (see figure 02) of the Gospel town is evident in its gradient demarcation of space. The demarcation appears to loosen up as one goes through the guarded main gate in the South through to the North. This manifests in the democratisation of pedestrian space around and through the town. Similarly, GOFAMINT allows traders access to the town during conventions and other large events. Everyone screened is allowed to mount stands and sell during such events. Alcohol, narcotics and anything illegal are not allowed to be sold. Therefore, land permeability is fostered by the lack of a full perimeter fence, limited optional access to the main road by the camp outsiders, and the inclusive commercial propensity of the camp.



Figure 02: Digitized survey plan of GOFAMINT, showing characters of permeability

However, the seeming openness of certain sides of the camp has some soft demarcations to control vehicles (see plate 03). These demarcations are usually left open during the day but are under close watch at night. They control only vehicles as pedestrians can seep through the rather wide interstitial spaces between (and through) the barricades. Consequently, passers-by ‘intrude’ into the camp’s premises. Though the camp does not bar them from passing, the security men and a pastor complained that some of these passers-by are indecently dressed, which suggests to them that they do not recognise the sanctity or sacredness of the camp.



Plate 03: soft space demarcation at the northern periphery of the camp (Ajadi, 2017)

Although the camp is big enough to accommodate weekly worshipers without blocking the road, the mammoth crowd gathered at the Church's Annual Convention and similar events cause huge traffic gridlocks on the road. Consequently, to ameliorate the hardship this creates to other road users, the Church engages traffic warders. The district Pastor revealed that during conventions, congregants' vehicles cause traffic.

“What we do is to call the police and road safety officials to control the traffic. Though we do block road for other users, they do not complain because they are also beneficiaries of the convention. This is because it boosts economic activities in the area.”

The preceding statement indicates that while GOFAMINT recognizes the road as a public space, it rationalises temporary or partial intrusion of this space. Despite this, the relationship between the Gospel town and the neighbouring communities, according to the CSO of the Town, remains cordial.

“Our relationship with people in the neighbouring community is cordial. Our activities do not inconvenience them.”

There is a lingering feud between the Gospel town and its neighbouring community over the ownership of an area with water dam located on the Church premises (see plate 02, which shows the area still in dispute). What is in dispute is not the land per se, but the dam on it. The residents of Alàkà maintain that the land deal the entered into with GOFAMINT does not involve the transfer of the dam. The dam is currently being used by both GOFAMINT and Alàkà community.

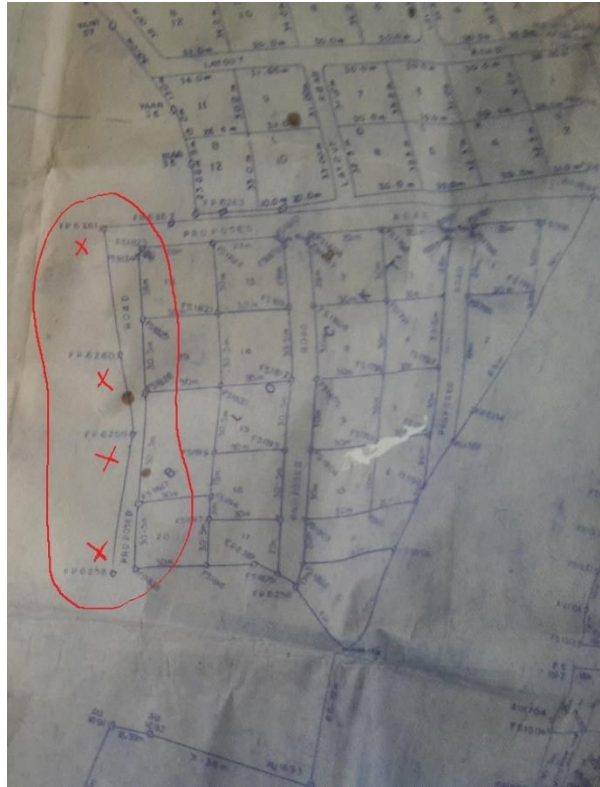


Plate 02: Section of the Alàkà-sold land still under conflict showing contested beacons (Ajadi, 2017)

7. Conflict over Location's Nomenclature

The growing popularity of the GOFAMINT and permeable interactions with nearby residents has evolved a new nomenclature of the entire area (the camp and its neighbouring communities). The place hitherto largely known as Alàkà is now generally called Gospel town. This, according to one of the Church's pastors, does not go down well with the residents of Alàkà, who fear that the new name gradually erodes the ancestral identity of their village. They express dismay over the conspicuous GOFAMINT's billboards (see plate 04) and frown at those who write the address of the area as 'Gospel Town'. He added that the residents of Alàkà area have since threatened to sue GOFAMINT over the matter. This is also a good example of public space intrusion.



Plate 04: Large billboards depicting GOFAMINT and adjoining regions as ‘Gospel Town’ (Ajadi, 2017)

The GOFAMINT’s style of public space appropriation is, to a reasonable extent, different and less sophisticated than that of the RCCG as documented by Adeboye (2012). In addition to blocking road for other users due to traffic gridlock caused by congregants’ vehicles, RCCG conduct church services in cinemas, clubs, hotels, among other public spaces.

Conclusion

As a religious organisation, GOFAMINT is have been witnessing unprecedented growth of its size and activities. It has also surpassed the traditional function of religious organisations. It has established and continued to expand its prayer camp and poses the capacity to provide infrastructure, jobs and other services in this camp. There are indications that religious organizations, like GOFAMINT, will continue to grow as governments continue to fail in carrying their duties. In other words, people will continue to recourse to religious bodies for services which, ordinarily, should have been provided by the State.

The quest for land to build sacred cities has been one of the major preoccupations of religious organisations like GOFAMINT. In some cases, it leads to appropriation of public spaces with potential of generating conflicts over the use of this space. It should be noted that GOFAMINT has certain peculiar tendencies. For instance, unlike other organizations, such as the RCCG and Winners (Living Faith), its camp is permeable, which explains why its interaction with its neighbouring is more noticeable.

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