

Jeremiah Ikongio

The Cultural Protocols of Free Trade

01/05

On October 15, 2015, a clash broke out between the residents of Okunraiye, a town in Ibeju Lekki, an area east of Lagos, and the workers of Dangote Industries Limited. Young members from the local community barricaded the entrance to the construction site of a new oil refinery, designed to process about 650,000 barrels of crude oil per day. Residents were protesting the breach of a Memorandum of Understanding agreed in 2007 between several towns in Ibeju Lekki and the Lagos State Government (LSG), along with the companies operating in the zone. The protest led to the death of a manager of Lekki Worldwide International Limited and the wrongful arrest and imprisonment of the *Baale*, or chief, of Tiye and Mobido, two nearby towns.

Okunraiye, Tiye, Mobido, and twenty-three other towns to the east of Lagos on the Lekki Peninsula form part of the Lekki Free Zone Corridor, approximately 60,000 hectares of land that started being forcefully acquired by LSG in 2005. With the intention to leapfrog from developing city to a global player and become an investment hub like Shenzhen, Dubai, or Singapore, the Lagos State Government envisions the transformation of the whole Lekki Peninsula – from Victoria Island in the west to Refuge Island in the east – into a “modern industrial mega city,”¹ including its own seaport and airport and home to about 3.4 million people.² While the realization of the Lekki Development Plan is still in its very early stages, the construction of the Lekki Free Zone (LFZ),³ Lagos Free Trade Zone (LFTZ),⁴ and the Lekki Deep Seaport (LekkiPort)⁵ are all currently underway.

The Lagos Free Trade Zone, established in 2001, is the first privately-owned Free Economic Zone (FEZ) in Nigeria. Tolaram Group, a multinational corporation with headquarters in Singapore, is developing the zone, which spreads over an area of 850 hectares and is scheduled to be fully operational by 2022. The Lekki Deep Sea Port, which is meant to be Nigeria’s deepest port, is located within the zone, and is promoted by Tolaram Group, LGS, and the Nigerian Port Authorities in partnership with China Harbour Engineering and Louis Berger, a US-based infrastructure and development company. Lekki Free Zone, on the other hand, is one of six pilot zones in Africa selected for support from the Chinese government under a special program that started in 2006 as part of China’s international program of trade and investment.⁶ Although their respective development plans vary, both zones aspire to blend industrial, commercial, residential, and recreational activities.

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Roadside billboard for Lekki Port. Photo: Jeremiah Ikongio, 2018.

1.

The discovery of oil in the Niger Delta in 1956 – four years prior to Nigeria’s independence from British colonial rule – had a tremendous impact on the country’s economic development. The inflows of revenues from crude oil exports, however, resulted in what is called the Dutch Disease, where the increase in economic development in one sector leads to the neglect of others, such as manufacturing and agriculture, which were the previous mainstays of Nigeria’s economy. As a consequence, Nigeria’s wealth and well-being has been tied ever since to the rise and fall of oil prices.

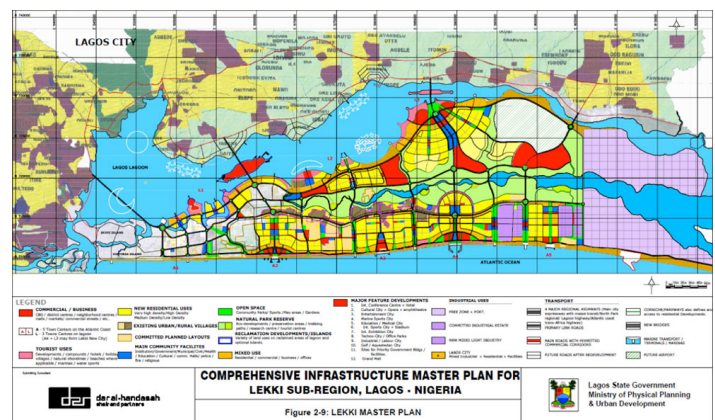
The collapse of oil prices in 1982 inflamed a severe economic crisis, to which the then-government led by Major-General Ibrahim Babangida responded by introducing Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in July 1986. In Nigeria, as elsewhere on the continent, the introduction of SAPs paved the way for the introduction of FEZs. In 1992, the Nigerian Export Processing Authority (NEPZA) – which is mandated with licensing, regulating and operating FEZ within the country – was established by the Babangida administration, and the building of Nigeria’s first FEZ, the Calabar Free Trade Zone (CTFZ), was commissioned.

The development of FEZs only really started to kick-off as the country transitioned from military to civilian rule in 1999. Consecutive civilian administrations – from Obasanjo to Buhari – shelved the “economic policy of guided liberalization” that was adopted by the military rulers throughout the 1990s and started to fully commit to economic liberalization in order to diversify and stabilize Nigeria’s economy. Within this environment, FEZs have played an increasingly prominent role. They are propagated as policy instruments to strengthen the industrial sector, and hence have become

integral features of economic transformation agendas, such as Nigeria Vision 20:2020.⁷

In terms of investments, exports, and employment generation, African zones have generally fallen behind their peers on other continents due to poor infrastructural development and a generally hostile business environment.⁸ Regardless of what is done inside the zones, their success determines on their ability to link to global markets, by way ports, roads, and electricity.⁹

In 2006, as part of the implementation of its eleventh five-year plan, and in keeping with the expansion of policies in support of trade and overseas investment (sometimes called “Going Global” or *Zou Chuqu*), the Chinese government indicated that it would establish up to fifty overseas economic and trade cooperation zones worldwide, without giving a timeframe.¹⁰ The Beijing summit on the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) held in November 2006 pledged that three to five of these would be located in Africa. In 2016 again, the Chinese government announced that it would support the establishment of an additional fifty overseas “economic and trade cooperation zones.” Of the nineteen zones that have been approved so far, five are in Africa, and two in Nigeria.¹¹



Dar Al-Handasah, "Comprehensive Infrastructure Master Plan for Lekki Sub-Region, Lagos, Nigeria," 2006. Source: Lagos State Government Ministry of Physical Planning & Urban Development.

2.

The “startup area” of the Lekki Free Zone Development Company (LFZDC), a 150-hectare “demonstration” of the entire Lagos Free Trade Zone, is located directly across from Tiye. Tiye is one of the first twelve towns whose land was taken by the government in order to develop the Lekki Free Zone Corridor. The most important people in these communities have had no access to relevant information about the prospective developments taking place around them, and more importantly, their forcefully taken lands. These initiatives have not been met without

resistance, though. Tiye's Baale, Chief Mojitafa, was jailed as a result of demonstrations. Over the past few years, I have been working with Chief Mojitafa to collect documents that they might be able to use in their ongoing struggle.¹²

LFZDC's startup area is fenced off and fronted by an intimidating gate complex. In order to enter, you need an appointment, but after writing numerous emails requesting meetings and interviews, I still have yet to be granted access. Access protocols are the same at Lekkiport and the Lagos Free Trade Zone. Driving to Lekki Free Zone, which is more than a two-hour trip by car from central Lagos, you pass traffic signs in both English and Chinese – a prominent feature familiar from elsewhere in Lagos, like the Lagos Rail Mass Transit project currently underway. Then there are the ghost houses, skeletons of speculative gated communities scattered along the main Lekki Expressway that divides the Atlantic beach from the lagoon. These communities tend to have billboards out front that feature a digital rendering of pretty houses and the promise of a safe community. While little more than an indication of the belief that there will be influx of people to this part of Lagos soon, according to local residents, there has been a steady rise of new residents seeking accommodation due to industrial work prospects.

Even though the aims of the Lagos State Government with the development of Lekki is to appeal to investors, develop the community, provide jobs, and improve the lives of its people, the implementation of these projects have deprived the local communities and households of their livelihood, customs, and values.¹³ Public and private investors from China are largely responsible for ensuring that access roads are usable, especially for large trucks plying with building materials or industrial products, as well as the construction of the port, yet they are hardly held accountable for the environmental and social repercussions of their projects. They bring their own workers rather than employ local labor, while also sourcing for most materials from China. As a result, local communities have become marginalized. While residents tend to be intrigued by the development prospects that come with the Free Zones, once they actually get underway, there is often neglect and outright non-fulfilment of promises, insufficient or unfair compensation, and disregard for biodiversity.

Fast-forward to 2019, almost twenty years after the Lagos Free Trade Zone was established, and the plight of the indigenes remains mostly unchanged. While there is little to no violence or physical challenge from the community against the owners of these new factories and industrial plants, how long will this peace last? "I mean

look at the Niger Delta," the Baale of Tiye says to me. "There was just too much taking without giving back. It looked like the people were being cheated. That's what brought about all of the struggles in the Niger Delta. And then we saw all sorts of things." The Baale is referring to the insurgency in Rivers State, where residents took up arms to fight against exploitation and the loss of livelihood. "Now you see that they fought for themselves and the cheating has stopped, or at least reduced. I mean, they're enjoying a bit – The Niger Delta people."

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Tiye. Photo: Jeremiah Ikongio.

3.

This illustration by the *Baale* shows a repetition of a past failures by the Nigerian government to involve the citizenry in infrastructural planning and development. In a context like Nigeria, where the informal sector accounts for 65% of the GDP, it is difficult to imagine how the interaction between the FEZs and the domestic economy will actually play out.¹⁴ Lagos is notorious for its failing physical infrastructure, which is most palpably exemplified by dismal roads and frequent power-cuts. Abdoulmaliq Simone's remarks on the state of the African city capture the lived reality of the majority of Lagos's inhabitants:

Increasing numbers of Africans are situated in what could be called half-built environments: underdeveloped, overused, fragmented, and often makeshift urban infrastructures where essential services are erratic or costly and whose inefficiencies spread and urbanize disease.¹⁵

In order to understand the ways in which individuals navigate and survive in such an environment that is marked by instability and

disruption, Simone frames the notion of “people as infrastructure.” He writes:

African cities are characterized by incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used. These intersections, particularly in the last two decades, have depended on the ability of residents to engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices. These conjunctions become an infrastructure – a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city.¹⁶

Nigeria has a very unique history of spatial planning and development. The Nigerian Government should therefore be aware of this when transferring a Chinese concept to Nigeria without consideration for local factors and socio-cultural histories. Both Nigerian and Chinese governments should be transparent and accountable to the public on past and future deals while ensuring better integration and interaction with the local community. The Chinese government should create better skill acquisition and exchange programs for more Nigerians through open calls and not private deals with politicians’ close acquaintances. And Nigerian citizens should hold their government accountable to become involved.

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Jeremiah Ikongio is an artist creating new media, performance, interactive and immersive art projects. Based in Lagos, he deals with topics such as infrastructure, (hyper)identity and archiving. He is a Magnum Foundation Fellow, a 2018–2019 Digital Earth Fellow, as well a World Press Photo grantee.

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1
“Lekki Free Zone Investment Brochure,” □.

2
Lagos State Government Center of Excellence, “Lekki Master Plan,” □. See also Lagos State Government, “Lagos State Development Plan 2012–2025,” □.

3
Lekki Free Zone Development Company, □.

4
Lagos Free Trade Zone, □.

5
Lekki Port, □.

6
United Nations Human Settlements Programme, *State of the World's Cities 2012/2013: Prosperity of Cities* (Nairobi/New York: Routledge, 2013), 129, □.

7
An ambitious development plan that was adopted in 2009 with the aim to transform Nigeria into one of the first 20 economies in the world by the year 2020

8
Thomas Farole, *Special Economic Zones in Africa: Comparing Performance and Learning from Global Experience* (World Bank, 2011), □.

9
Ibid., 11.

10
Deborah Bräutigam and Tang Xiaoyang, “African Shenzhen: China’s Special Economic Zones in Africa,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 49, no. 1 (2010): 29.

11
The other three are in Ethiopia, Mauritius, Zambia.

12
These include the “Lekki Free Zone Investment Brochure,” which details investment opportunities and how one can propose a project in LFZ, is produced by Lekki Free Zone Development Company, the Lagos State Government, and China-Africa Investment Limited; *Urban Planning Processes in Lagos*, a detailed report on the city’s “Policies, Laws, Planning Instruments, Strategies, and Actors of Urban Projects, Urban Development, and Urban Services” published by Heinrich Böll Stiftung Nigeria and Fabulous Urban, a Zürich-based architecture firm; and “Land Acquisition, Compensation And Resettlement In Developing Economies: Nigeria As A Case Study,” an essay by David Kayode Oluwamotemi that uses the Lekki Free Zone Corridor as an exemplary reference for government land acquisition and compensation in Nigeria.

13

UN Habitat warns that promoting economic prosperity through such an entrepreneurial view of the city often happens at the expense of the habitat and livelihoods of the poor. See United Nations Human Settlements Programme, *State of the World's Cities* (2013).

14
Bank of Industry, *Annual Report & Accounts* (2018), □.

15
AbdouMaliq Simone, “People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg” *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 425.

16
Ibid.: 425.