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**LIFE IN A RELIGIOUS SPACE:
THE CASE OF
GOSPEL TOWN,
IBADAN**



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Abstract:

This paper was written as a field report during the Masterclass “Sacred Urbanism: Entrepreneurial Religion, Infrastructure and the New Urbanism in Nigeria” held at the University of Ibadan in June 2017. A group of postgraduate students conducted a day of field research at the Gospel Faith Mission International (GOFAMINT) located in Ojoo, Ibadan. They examined regulation mechanisms in the premises of the Gospel Town and land ownership among other topics.

Keywords: religious community, enclave, land ownership

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In Nigeria, it is no longer uncommon to find religious bodies appropriating considerable tracts of land for purposes that fall outside the purview of religion. In some of these cases, religious bodies have been instrumental in driving what could be termed ‘sacred urbanism’. This development has necessitated series of intellectual questions which have been engaged in various works by Coleman, AlSayyad and Massoumi, Ukah, Adeboye, Ojo among others³. These issues inform this ethnographic inquiry about the Gospel Town, Alaka in Ibadan.

What, today qualifies as the Gospel Town, is quite different from what it used to be. According to official sources, the town presently covers 30 acres along Igbo-Oloyin, Alaka Village in Ojoo, Ibadan. However, it originally spanned some 50 acres of land⁴. While the reasons for its eventual shrinkage would be pointed out subsequently, the important point here is that the boundaries of Gospel Town are blurry⁵. The first (Inter-)National Convention of the Gospel Faith Mission International (GOFAMINT) was held on the site in August 1991, but the land had been owned since 1983⁶.

At the outset, after procuring the landed property, the church sold out a segment which was intended as a residential section exclusively to GOFAMINT members. It was intended that the buyers would develop their respective part of the tract, in order that a built environment of and for members of the same denomination would be ultimately achieved. However, it was not long before several of these members began to resell their holdings to others—and in some cases, without bias for denomination or religion. Economic downturn could be adduced as one reason for the unconditional re-sale of the land. Some GOFAMINT members were cash-strapped and resolved to exchange their landed property for its monetary value. In addition, they were perhaps unable to find another fellow

³ Simon Coleman, “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Urbanism,” in *When God Comes to Town: Religious Traditions in Urban Contexts*, eds. Rik Pinxten and Lisa Dikomitis (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009): 33-44; Nezar AlSayyad and Mejjan Massoumi, eds., *The Fundamental City?: Religiosity and the Remaking of Urban Space* (London: Routledge, 2011); Asonzeh Ukah, “Redeeming Urban Spaces: The Ambivalence of Building A Pentecostal City in Lagos, Nigeria,” in *Global Prayers: Contemporary Manifestations of the Religious in the City*, eds. Jochen Becker, et al (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2014): 178-197; Olufunke Adeboye, “‘A Church in a Cinema Hall?’: Pentecostal Appropriation of Public Space in Nigeria,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 42 (2012): 145-171; Matthews Ojo, “Of Saints and Sinners: Pentecostalism and the Paradox of Social Transformation in Modern Nigeria,” Inaugural Lecturer Series 227, Ile-Ife, 2010.

⁴ Interview with Pastor P. K. O., Administrative Officer and District Overseer, Gospel Faith Mission International, Ibadan District, 21 March, 2017.

⁵ Interview with Pastor I., Retired District Overseer, Gospel Town, Alaka, Ibadan, 21 March, 2017

⁶ Survey Plan.

member who could offer a better price. As a consequence, they simply went ahead to resell it to the highest bidder without regards for faith. This explains the present multi-denominational and bi-religious composition of the residential part of the estate. Perhaps, another reason for the indiscriminate sale issues from a fracas that greeted the leadership transition in the aftermath of the demise of the founder-predecessor, Pastor Reuben George, in 1987. It was gathered that, not long after Rev. Elijah Oludele Abina, the incumbent General Overseer of the Church, assumed leadership, some members of the George family began to feel side-lined, and, in response, went ahead to indiscriminately sell off parcels of the land belonging to them, even to Muslims⁷. Moreover, the initial buyers were not bound by any legal stipulation that could prevent them from reselling the land to non-members of GOFAMINT or to non-Christians⁸.

Gospel Town can be described as a religious enclave, even if its perimeters fencing has never been completed. Its broadly defined scope is of a religiously heterogenous composition. For one, the smaller Gospel Town is an estate owned by a religious body and with a modest number of chalets, lodgings and apartments for some limited (semi-)permanent residents who are just members of the church or who work for its mission. There is as well a theological seminary which awards a bachelor's degree equivalent with students who reside within the camp. The broader town is, to a large extent, populated by members of the same denominational affiliation. However, some, like Mr. B.O., a lecturer at the mission's theological seminary, are of the view that the fact that the space is not fully fenced off makes it "porous and open to any sort of undesirable element"⁹. For instance, contrary to the rules of the church, women wearing trousers, who, in most cases, are residents of the neighbouring communities, could be seen going in and out of the camp. Mr. B.O opines that the incomplete perimeter fencing of the complex speaks to some negligence on the part of the camp's managers. Conversely, some other respondents are of the opinion that the church demonstrates its loving and accommodating spirit by not cordoning off the space completely in order to grant residents of the neighbouring communities right of way privileges¹⁰.

Owing to the resultant religiously diversified makeup of its population, the Gospel Town's residential section was ceded off from the main religious grounds. As such, Gospel Town can be loosely construed to encompass the larger heterogeneous community. This larger community still enjoys many of the facilities provided by the church. For instance, the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Interview with Pastor O., op. cit.

⁹ Interview with Mr. B. O., Lecturer, Reuben George Theological Seminary, Gospel Town, Alaka, Ibadan, 21 March, 2017.

¹⁰ Interviews with Mr. T. E., and Evangelist O. S., op. cit..

transformer, clinic, school and water provided by the church serves the larger community.

The major pull factors which encouraged settlement within the initial Gospel Town are: its relative serenity and peaceful ambience compared to the larger Ibadan society, a sense of security, and proximity to place of worship or work. The family of Mrs. O. A. A., for instance, took up residence in the camp because her husband is a staff of the mission¹¹. Equally, taking up residence within a community of people of same faith motivated a number of people to choose to settle within the Gospel Town¹². However, with regards to the loosely defined town, this last factor changed significantly when members of the church who initially bought parcels of land within the estate sold out their landed properties unbiasedly. As such, at present an uncompleted mosque¹³ and a couple of churches of denominations other than the GOFAMINT are at different levels of construction within the extension of the Gospel Town.

Space within the Gospel Town is moralized, as there are some set of rules, albeit unwritten, guiding residence within it. However, females are not allowed to put on trousers, and must not expose their cleavages. Also, smoking and the sale of alcohol is not permitted within the main camp. There is a curfew within the camp, which lasts between 12 midnight and 5am for the one week when the (inter-)national convention is held, and between 10pm and 6am on a regular day¹⁴. Indeed, one resident of the camp describes life within it as some sort of “regimented lifestyle¹⁵”. While some residents of the town, especially the non-GOFAMINT members, tend to be critical of the moralisation of the space and the regimentation of life within the Gospel Town, all the respondents sampled in this study proudly declared that they cherish the serenity and absence of decadence which results.

There is a Disciplinary Committee which is charged with ensuring compliance with the regulations. “There are few instances when incorrigible defaulters have been sent packing from the camp,” relates the CSO¹⁶. For the larger mixed community, there is a Landlord’s Association

¹¹ Interview with Mrs. O. A. A., Assistant Headmistress, GOFAMINT Nursery and Primary School, Gospel Town, Alaka, Ibadan, 21 March, 2017.

¹² Interview with Mr. T. E., Account Officer, Gospel Town, Alaka, Ibadan, 21 March, 2017.

¹³ A heated argument sprang up with regards to the building of the mosque, and, reportedly, it was ultimately resolved that its construction be discontinued. However, the few Muslims within the area still observe their daily prayers within it—uncompleted as it is.

¹⁴ Interview with Evangelist O.S., Chief Security Officer, Gospel Town, Alaka, Ibadan, 21 March, 2017.

¹⁵ Ibid; L., a Muslim resident, Gospel Town, Alaka, Ibadan, 21 March, 2017

¹⁶ Interview with Evangelist O. S., CSO, op. cit.

which is charged with the responsibility of ensuring peaceful coexistence of residents.

At present, administration of the Gospel Town is in the hands of different Heads of Departments, who are answerable to the Director of Hospitality, who is in turn accountable to a Board of Directors. Previously, a Camp Manager, who is answerable to an Estate Manager, oversees the administration of the religious camp. Some of the departments vital for the smooth running of the camp are: Maintenance, Security, Education, etc. staffed with GOFAMINT members who are resident within the camp¹⁷.

Principally, basic amenities such as potable water, drainages, alternative power, and healthcare within the camp are provided by the mission. There is a water treatment plant which draws water from a dam located within the camp; a clinic, a primary school, and an electricity plant for generating alternative power within the camp¹⁸. However, for electric power, the entire complex is connected to the public grid, but residents provide their own alternative power using generators, and their water by digging wells, and perhaps, drilling boreholes.

On the economic front, in line with Mrs. Bola Oluyemi's lamentation, the Gospel Town can hardly be described as a business community. "Except during the couple of weeks in August when conventions are held or periods when the facility is let out to other Christian denominations for retreats, conferences, camping, and the likes, business does not thrive here¹⁹." During these periods, the neighbourhood becomes very lively and becomes an economic hub. Not only do residents within the camp and other neighbours become petty-traders, they also let out rooms in their apartments to campers seeking lodgings. Various forms of menial services such as transport business, janitorial services, laundry services, etc. are some other economic activities that thrive during the camp's peak periods. At other times, the tempo of business activities within the Gospel Town is at its lowest ebb, and residents generally seek their means of livelihood in different other parts of Ibadan²⁰.

Residents of and neighbors to the Gospel Town have to bear up with issues in the form of traffic congestion and religious noise resulting from activities within the camp. But a respondent pointed out that the benefits

¹⁷ Interview with Mr. T. E., op. cit.

¹⁸ Interview with Mrs. B. O., Staff at the Women Hostel, Gospel Town, Alaka, Ibadan, 21 March, 2017.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Alh. A. A., Trader and Muslim Resident of Gospel Town, Alaka, Ibadan, 21 March, 2017.

that the people enjoy from the activities of the church compensates for these side effects²¹.

Inhabitants of the town agree that life in a religious enclave has its uniqueness. Residents relate to the sense of serenity that staying in a religious space offers; they aver that the milieu is very peaceful and appealing. This was a recurring theme in the testimonies of most respondents, regardless of denomination or faith. Criminally minded people, social vices, decadence and anti-social behaviours are reportedly rare in the Gospel Town²². “Squabbles and conflicts are uncommon here,” offers the Camp’s CSO, and in the rare event that a minor misunderstanding occurs between or among residents, there are always pastors around, even within the Landlord’s Association, to help settle matters amicably²³. However, Mr. T.E pointed out that some residents lament the fact that the camp does not offer easy access to public institutions such as banks, markets, library, etc²⁴.

Fundamentally, a top official of the camp is of the opinion that bodies such as PFN and CAN and perhaps JNIA and NSCIA should be at forefront of initiatives to replicate similar religious enclaves in different parts of the country²⁵.¹ He argues that living in a religious enclave contributes to social harmony and peaceful coexistence which are prerequisites for nation building. According to him, this is especially imperative in the face of recent developments relating to inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions that threaten the unity of the Nigerian nation.

In the final analysis, while it must be conceded that there is a valid point in this line of thought, it is crucial to pay a mind to the possibilities of tensions that may arise as a result of the appropriation of once “public” spaces by religious bodies. As exemplified in the case of the Gospel Town, tensions could arise between a religious enclave and indigenes of the immediate larger community over the eclipse of a town’s original name due to the sheer popularity of the enclave’s toponym. Equally, there could be issues over land appropriation as it relates to irreconcilable perceptions of appropriate use of space; noise pollution, traffic congestion, and so on.

²¹ Interview with P. O., op. cit.

²² Ibid; Interview with Mrs. F. F., Teacher and Resident, Gospel Town, Alaka, Ibadan, 21 March, 2017; Mrs. A., op. cit.

²³ Interview with Evangelist O. S., CSO, op. cit.

²⁴ Interview with Mr. T. E., op. cit.

²⁵ PFN is Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria; CAN is Christian Association of Nigeria; JNIA is Jamaat Nasr al-Islam; and NSCIA is the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs.

This point is a central issue in the works of Olufunke Adeboye and Al-Sayyad²⁶.²



The uncompleted mosque



A non-GOFAMINT church in the Gospel Town

²⁶ Adeboye, “Church in a Cinema Hall?, op. cit.; Alsayyad and Massoumi, *The Fundamental City?*, op. cit.



The Chalets