

HOUSING CHALLENGE AND GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION IN COLONIAL LAGOS, 1918-1960, A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Housing is an age-long social issue that traverses different epochs in recorded human history. One major challenges of the colonialism was housing provision in the urban centres, during this period, the colony of Lagos was faced with housing problem which caught the attention of the colonial authorities and the consequent housing provisions policies. Housing challenge in colonial Lagos is worthy of examination for a number of reasons. First is the fact that housing problem Lagosians, especially the poor were mostly affected. Second is the fact that housing challenge in Lagos during the period attracted a large number of social issues - worthy of mention are the racial and demographic problems generated during this period. This paper investigates and invariably provides a historical explanation to the housing policies adopted by the government in one of the earliest British colonial settlements in West Africa, Lagos. In accomplishing this herculean yet intriguing task, this paper relied wholly on archival and written materials.

Keys words: Housing, Challenge, Government, Intervention, Colonial, Lagos

Introduction

The need for housing is fundamental given that it is a basic necessity of life. Basically, it is generally acknowledged that after food, housing is next in the hierarchy of human needs. In the same manner, problems associated with housing have become common characteristics of all urbanising societies, and how to cope or even squarely address such challenges forms part of the process of socio-economic development. The rush to Lagos colony from the country side during the period under review has created the same kind of misery as existed in the nineteenth century cities of Europe and America. Nevertheless, industrialisation in those days was determined mainly by labour supply such that the cities grew as the jobs expanded. Conversely, the migration to the Lagos colony was often due to the lack of opportunity in the rural areas and the protectorates; a situation characterised by “rural push and urban pull.”

One of the major challenges faced by the colonial Lagos was inadequate housing, especially among low income and poor urban settlers. Around the sixteenth century, the Awori founded Lagos as a fishing settlement. It subsequently grew into an important commercial centre on the West African coast following waves of migration into the settlement, especially given its advantageous geographical location along the coast in the past five centuries (Faluyi, 2001). The flow of people into the settlement was so high that by the last quarter of the nineteenth century Lagos had become a melting pot of cultures. (Faluyi, 2001)

The migration and settlement of this fortune seeking people also facilitated a concomitant population increase in the colony. The fact that certain percentage of the total area of

Lagos colony consists of Lagoons, Creeks and Water-ways further accentuates the severe land constraints. Thus, social and infrastructural facilities are hardly able to keep pace with the expansion of Lagos colony and the rapid population growth. In addition, poor state of, and often times lack of infrastructures in the rural areas as well as the poor economic conditions in these locations, also catapulted the rush of rural dwellers usually to Lagos colony. Increase in birth rates as compared with low death rate also compounded the housing situation in addition to low and unattractive conditions for agricultural production. This alarming growth in population has increased pressure on existing infrastructures, especially housing facilities, leading to the gradual degradation of residential areas and the growth of slums in the colony. In fact, the population pressure of Lagos colony was heightened by inadequate housing provision for the continuous streams of migrants. Despite the efforts of both the public and individual in ameliorating these problems during the period, housing demand was largely unmet with the result that majority of the population find themselves in slums and shanty settlements. It is against this background that this paper examines in historical perspective the role of colonial government in the provision of housing in Lagos between 1918 and 1960; essentially to ascertain the rate of success by the government in achieving adequate housing provision for the people.

Colonial Intervention in Housing

By the first decade of the twentieth century, Lagos had evolved a threatening population that posed serious challenge to accommodation and altering the official physical planning of the city. As part of physical development of Lagos colony, the colonial authorities enacted the 1917 Township Ordinance. Distributing the urban land, constructing buildings and roads and physical planning of the city, was the main focus of the 1917 Township Ordinance. (Tijani, 2004) The ordinance however, was repulsive because of its creation of a Native Reservation (Township) and Government (European) Reservation Areas (GRA). (Tijani, 2004) By 1918, the colonial authorities deemed it proper to separate the Europeans/expatriates and Lagosians otherwise known as the “natives” in terms of resident areas. Hence, in 1918, the colonial administration established the Ikoyi GRA as the sole abode of expatriates and their families and dependants. Although, the establishment of the Ikoyi GRA was aimed at separating Europeans from their African counterparts, which in fact amounted to racial segregation, yet one cannot rule out the fact that it was also the first attempt at combating housing issues in colonial Lagos. The main intention of the British colonial administration in the establishment of the Ikoyi GRA was strictly to establish the notion that the Europeans were superior to the Africans in every spheres of human endeavour including housing and settlement pattern.

The Plague of 1924-30 and Its Impact on Housing

The plague, deadly and devastating disease which withered Lagos in the 1920s and 1930s started from Oko-Awo. This particular area of Lagos community had always been the haven of health hazards or disaster prior to the outbreak of the plague. The Oko-Awo area of Lagos during the period under review was filthy, swampy, overcrowded and infested with rats. Within three months of its outbreak, 318 people were reported dead; while over 60,000 were inoculated. (*Nigerian Pioneer*, 24 November 1924) Oko-Awo itself was evacuated. The plague got worse in 1926 when 476 deaths resulted from 490 reported cases. The newspaper stated further that there was a drop to 163 cases and 159 deaths in

1927 (up to December 22) but the respective figures rose to 514 and 504 in 1928. (Nigerian Pioneer, 26 December 1928) The swiftness and harshness of the plague ultimately prompted some response from the then indifferent colonial government regarding housing provision.

Consequently, the Lieutenant-Governor, Southern Provinces and the Administrator of the Colony met with representatives of the Lagos community on 1 October 1924 to discuss government proposals to develop residential areas on the mainland to relieve the overcrowded Island and forestall a reappearance of the plague. (Nigerian Pioneer, 3 October 1924) The colonial officials unfolded plans to develop what later became the Yaba Housing Scheme. The entire project including compensation, road construction, erection of buildings and the provision of water and electricity would involve the expenditure of between £200,000 and £220,000. (Olukoju, 1993) This was the overall cost of evacuating some 10,000 people from the Island. The development of the Yaba Housing Scheme was therefore part of the British colonial administration effort at easing Lagos Central of overcrowding, which was a direct result of population explosion and housing shortage. The stage was thus set for the development of the Yaba Housing Scheme. Meanwhile, efforts continued to be made to improve the living conditions on the Island. These involved the demolition of fetid structures, reclamation and drainage of swamps, and re-housing.

Lagos Executive Development Board (LEDB)

The outcome of the plagued equally necessitated the establishment of the Lagos Executive Development Board (LEDB) by the colonial government in 1929 charged with carrying out a comprehensive programme of town planning and housing provisions in the city.

LEDB's Housing Activities in the 1950s

It is evident that the Lagos Executive Development Board (LEDB) from its inception in 1929 remained the main agency of the colonial Government in the planning and development of the city of Lagos. The reclamation of swamps in the Island, Ikoyi, Apapa and Ebute-Metta and the development of the senior staff housing estates in Ikoyi, Apapa, and East Marina were some of the achievements of the LEDB in the early years of its establishment and urban development of Lagos.

Beginning from the early fifties (50s), the choice of the activities of the LEDB was expanded due to two important developments. The first was the changing underlying political philosophy in urban development following the approach of national independence, a change from overriding emphasis on housing for government officials to a concern for adequate housing for the public in general. The second development of the period was increasing pressure of population, especially of the demand for accommodation by the high-income workers in government and in non-government services. (Sada and Adefolalu, 1975)

The LEDB responded to the new developments by a new programme of land reclamation and housing development for both high and low income class and for the government as well as non-government workers. Notable among the new estates were Victoria Island, Apapa and Ikoyi extensions, Surulere and Ilupeju. In Victoria Island, some 1,500 acres in area that lay south of Lagos Island and is part of the coastal sand bar, low-lying and swampy, having the special advantage of sea-front and beach were earmarked for

reclamation.(Sada and Adefolalu, 1975) The preliminary survey for its development was completed in 1958, the reclamation and work began the same year. The reclamation project, which involved draining of its many pools and filling with sand was completed in three phases. During the first and second phases, 150 acres and 250 acres of land respectively were reclaimed, while the final phase involved an area of 1,300 acres.(Sada and Adefolalu,1975) The average cost of the reclamation per acre was put at £7,000, (LEBD Annual Report, 1961-1962) which point to the high cost of land development in Lagos. The area was laid out for private development, although a substantial part of it was also used for government housing for parliamentarians and foreign embassies. Under the Town Planning Ordinance No. 46 of 1948 a new extension of Apapa Estate covering some 1,000 acres was embarked upon. The Work which commenced in 1950 and was completed in 1958. (EBD Annual Report, 1961-1962) Here also, the land was planned and sold to private developers. A programme of expansion was similarly launched in Ikoyi in 1918. It involved the reclamation of some 258 acres of land in the north-east, south-east and south-west part of the Island. (Sada and Adefolalu, 1975)

The main reason for the reclamation in addition to reducing multiplications of slums in the city, were the intention to make more land available for the expansion of the city; and to provide houses to Lagosians in different social categories – low and medium income earners. Those within these social classes, especially those in the low income category were the culprits founding unplanned settlements with make shift buildings otherwise or officially regarded as slum. Hence, the government felt land reclamation and the construction of houses for families within these social classes would reduce multiplication of slums and the disruption of official lay-out of the city. Undoubtedly, it was the need for housing as a result of proximity to places of work, the high rate in rent and inadequate land that have led to the disruption of official plan and lay out of the city and the evolution of slums.

The Surulere Residential Estate in the view of Sada and Adefolalu was “the most complex of its kind in Lagos.” This conclusion by these scholars was due to the fact that the estate unlike others consists of all categories of people as regards social status – high income, intermediate and low income housing sections. Here segregation equally exists but based on types of apartments, however, families of different social categories lived in the same vicinity, which allows for social integration. The Surulere-Itire sector was a freehold residential estate covering 138 acres of land and providing for 712 residential building plots. (Sada and Adefolalu, 1975) The houses were built and sold on mortgage basis to the public. The plots, unlike the colonial land-use layouts in Ikoyi, were planned so as to effect economy in land use although each home was allowed a medium space as playground for the children. (Sada and Adefolalu, 1975) The density of housing varied from 5 to 8 per acre. The buildings were of three main types; the single family two-storey, the single family bungalows and the multi-family flats(Sada and Adefolalu, 1975)

The next part of the estate, which was called the Surulere Re-housing Estate, was part of the slum clearance scheme of the Colonial Government. It was meant to house the large number of families estimated at 20,000 persons(Sada and Adefolalu, 1975) displaced as a result of slum clearance in Central Lagos (Lagos Island). The displaced persons were to stay in Surulere Re-housing Estate temporarily, pending the construction of new

buildings in Central Lagos. But the reverse was the case as the re-housed population could not return to Lagos because: they did not have the money to develop the homes in Central Lagos in accordance with government specifications; while their new environment was also considered pleasant enough. One important point, which require emphasis was that the politics that was inherent in the re-allocation of plots to the original owners that were temporarily displaced from Lagos Island. As should be expected many of them would rather sell their plots, because most of these demolished houses were owned by extended or polygamous families who would prefer selling to rebuilding due to their number. On the other hand, some of them who wanted their land were not considered by the official of the LEDB and other agencies involved who would rather favour their close associate and other influential Lagosians.

In description, the re-housing estate consists of 913 low-cost houses, which were laid out in terraces and in three-storey building complexes. Each family was provided with one to three bed rooms, including a bed-sitter, and equipped with self-contained amenities of kitchen, water closet and bath. The subsidised rental was £1.50 per room as contrasted to £14 per room in private owned apartments. (Sada and Adefolalu, 1975)

The Obele-Odan is the third colonial government housing scheme in Surulere. The housing scheme consists of 600 houses for the low-income group. Once more, the standard of social amenities was so high and so difficult to control tenancy that the houses gradually passed into the hands of the lower middle income class through sub-lease (Daily Times, 15 May 1972) This implied that corruption which hunts the country is not a recent phenomenon; rather it has eaten deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian society since the colonial period. Housing provision and allocation had been marred with corrupt practices since the colonial period such that houses provided for the low-income group consequently ended up in the hands of the middle income class. The unsatisfactory experiences in government housing for the low-income class in Surulere seriously called for a re-examination of the housing policy for the low-income groups.

The Mayoral Council and Housing efforts, 1950-1958

The British at the end of the Second World War passed two laws to address the rapid urbanization in Nigeria and particularly the Lagos colony. The first was in 1946, when the Nigerian Town and Country Planning Act was enacted in order to improve upon earlier efforts at physical planning and administration of Lagos colony and other parts of Nigeria. The second was the enactment of the Lagos Local Government Ordinance of 1950 that created a Mayoral Council for the city. The Mayoral Council or the “New Town Council” as it was called in official circles was an attempt to meet the urban administrative needs of Lagos colony. (Tijani, 2004) The New Town Council paid attention to the provisions of housing to Lagosians, with housing schemes and rent control as major priority.

The all-African Town Council inherited some problems from the previous administration. The provision of houses at an affordable cost to Lagosians seemed to be uppermost on the minds of members. Consequently, a housing committee was appointed on 5 December 1950 to consider the recommendations of the “Final Reports of the Rent Control Committee” earlier set up by the government in October 1949. (Sada and Adefolalu, 1975; see also Colonial Annual Report, 1950-1951) The committee was also charged with the responsibility of building government houses for the growing

population in Lagos. Such houses, would be let at economic rents. These were probably embarked upon to make houses and accommodations available to Lagosians at affordable rent rates.

For effectiveness and speedy provision of the much needed affordable housing to the ever growing population of Lagos the committee worked with other government departments that were connected with housing. In this regard, the committee worked with the Land Department, the Lagos Executive Development Board (LEDB), and Town Engineer. The committee was charged with the task of the construction and provision of five hundred thousand housing scheme in Lagos. Under this arrangement, the goal was to build 50 houses every year.

Through the Estates and General Purpose Committee, the housing committee asked military authorities to make available the Obalende area for the construction of first fifty (50) houses (NAI File 001, 30: 1950) in that part of Lagos. This was done probably in preparation for the country's independence and Lagos being the capital of Nigeria was expected to get fair share of housing provision by the colonial authority of the period. The need for land therefore would have prompted the housing committee to beckon on the military authorities to release the Obalende land for the construction of housing to the ever growing population of the city. Prior to the period under review, Obalende had been in the hands of the military authorities since the 1900. This definitely made the housing committee inaugurated by the Lagos Mayoral Council to seek the permission of the military for the construction of housing estate in the Obalende for residents of Lagos.

The town Clerk, Municipal Treasurer and the Town Engineer were charged with the responsibility of working out other areas that could be acquired for the housing scheme, proposed rent, and all logistics that would make the effort fruitful. On 12 May 1952, these officials of the Town Council reported to the Committee. (Tijani,, 2004) On an assumed density of 30 people per acre, an assumed living space of 50 square feet per person and an assumed figure for the cost of the land, it was estimated that the cost, including land, site work and services for one room, would cost £ 260 with estimated loan charges of £18.50. (Tijani,, 2004) Two rooms would cost £ 420 with estimated loan charges of £29.5.3. While three and four rooms were put at £ 580 and £ 740 respectively. The estimated loan charges were £ 40.5.8 for three rooms, and £ 51.5.11 for four rooms. In order to cover the cost and allow for the payment of rates by the tenant, the monthly rents were set at £2.0.7, £3.5.0, £4.9.7 and £5.14.0 (NAI LTC Council Minutes, 1952) respectively.

In 1951, the LEDB considered a project to provide for the clearance of a seventy (70) acres triangular block of land in the thickly populated commercial district of Lagos Island where approximately 30,000 indigenous Lagosians resided. (Marris, 1964) The LEDB under the plan was to purchase the designated area, redevelop it with open spaces, wider streets and new plot layout and then at 120 per cent of the acquisition cost, and sell it back to the original owners who were expected to rebuild according to the modern standards. (Baker 1974) Unlike the old building pattern characterised by in adequate planning and layouts, the objectives of the LEDB were to provide better health conditions, stimulate the construction of improved housing, relieve traffic jams and modernize the city so that the nation could be proud of its capital and economic hub.

Due to the anticipated increase in the value of the property it was expected that the original owners would scramble for the repurchase of their plots, but the indigenes who

owned most of them did not share the board's enthusiasm. When work began in 1956, police were sent in to protect the labourers who began the demolition. Daily Service, June 29, 1956) The police were sent in partly due to the anticipated fear of the attacks on the workers by those indigenes whose houses were acquired by the colonial government. The commencement of the project subsided the violence; however, Lagosians, especially those whose houses were forcefully acquired by government and their sympathizers uniformly continued to express opposition to the slum clearance and redevelopment project. (Daily Times, June 29, 1956) In this connection, Lagosians especially those that were directly affected and their sympathizers stood their ground and opposed the demolition of their old-style residence located in their traditional settlement of central Lagos where they felt they were comfortable with their kith and kin.

In the defence of their land and houses situated on them, Lagosians were determined and continued the struggle during the period under review, so much so that they adopted the use of violence attacks on government officials involved the project and the workers. According to a report of Daily Service newspaper "stones, bottles, and sticks were thrown at the police, who in retaliation, used their batons to beat up a number of people...many were also arrested." (LEDB, 1967) The same day, Daily Times reported one man as saying "this is my father's house, and only my dead body can be removed from this place." (Baker, 1974)

As a way to placate the grievances and alleviate the suffering of displaced persons, the LEDB, identified affected individuals by settling them in a re-housing estate at Surulere, some 5 miles away, until they could repurchase their land. The LEDB also provided a fund of £200, 000 to compensate individuals who endured unusual financial hardship owing to loss of trade or rents as a consequence of the scheme. (Baker, 1974)

Although, the project of re-planning of the area affected by the LEDB and repurchase of the land for building by their original owners was well intentioned at the beginning, however, unanticipated problems resulted in unjust land distribution, which was felt most deeply by the indigenous community. The first difficulty that faced the project execution after the slum clearance was the inability of the original landowners to repurchase their property. The displaced persons had to pay 20 per cent more for their land than the amount they had received in compensation, and they needed additional funds to modernize their houses. Most indigenes as expressed by Baker could not raise the necessary money. (Baker 1974) According to her:

Even the compensation price could not always be collected once it had been distributed among all the members of the lineage, as required by tradition. The money was either spent before it could be reinvested, or the family could not come to an agreement about repurchasing the property. (Baker 1974)

In addition, it was impossible after widening the streets and creating open spaces to redistribute plots to all the claimants; of the original 7 acres, only 43 were available for reallocation. (Baker 1974) To increase the supply, the LEDB began to carve up plots into irregular strips with a frontage of 25-30 feet and a depth of 80-100 feet. (Baker 1974) This solution of course, defeated one of the purposes of slum clearance, for it made inevitable the same old pattern of narrow, congested construction. It also further dampened the

hopes of the indigenes that they might profit from the scheme; the purpose of investing more money in a smaller plot confirmed their belief that the project was neither well planned nor well executed.

Four years after the commencement of the project, £ 1, 368, 690 had been paid in compensation, £90,000 had been awarded for hardship cases, and 6,000 people had been moved but no headway had been made in redevelopment. (Baker, 1974) Faced with growing dissent from the indigenes, the LEDB decided in 1958 to launch a supplementary scheme to reclaim at a cost of £750,000 a low lying, swampy area between Ikoyi and Lagos Island known as Southwest Ikoyi. (Baker 1974) This was equally done to further make available fairly decent and affordable housing for the ever growing population of Lagos. However, the above were the achievements of the colonial administration and its agency charged with the provision of housing in Lagos during the colonial period.

Conclusion

This paper examines critically the colonial government's efforts towards the provision of housing to Lagosians. It submits that Lagos, which was initially a small settlement, became an urban centre during the colonial period, such that by 1950 it had acquired all characteristics or features of a full blown urban centre. As should be expected, many opportunities in the city of Lagos attracted migrants from different parts of what is now modern Nigeria. One of the effects of the migration and settlements of people in Lagos during the period was housing. The colonial authorities did not fold their arms in the face of housing challenge, in fact, the various colonial administrators made efforts towards the provision of housing to Lagos residents. The colonial administration first attempt towards housing provision was in 1918, with the establishment of the Ikoyi GRA, which was strictly meant to house the Europeans. Thus, the Ikoyi GRA was purely a policy of segregation along racial line, which was meant to separate Africans from the Europeans. The Outbreak of the bubonic plague, which ravaged the city from 1924 to 1930 and its destructive nature prompted the colonial government to embark on slum clearance and swamp reclamation and housing provisions. The Lagos Executive Development Board (LEDB) was formed and charged with the responsibilities of planning urban Lagos, slum clearance, swamp reclamation, and the building of houses for public use. Some of the housing achievements of the LEDB include –the Yaba Housing Scheme, Victoria Island, Apapa and Ikoyi extensions, Surulere Estate and Re-housing Scheme and Ilupeju. The LEDB, from the year it was founded to 1958, achieved some feats in slum clearance, swamp reclamations and the construction of houses for public use. It was during the period under review that those other areas of Lagos such as Yaba, Ebute-Metta, Apapa, and Surulere were planned and built for public use. However, the slum clearance and re-housing have been considered as failures in many respects: first, the re-housing project constituted too radical a break in the social and economic life of the people as families were separated and petty traders deprived employment; second, it was too much to expect the impoverished indigenes to be able to afford the construction of the expected fabulous homes in the redeveloped land. This made many of the displaced persons to sell their rights in Central Lagos and even leased out their new accommodation, while they moved into the new shanty areas of Mushin or Shomolu.

In spite of the above, housing problem continue to hunt the city of Lagos even as successive governments especially from independence made effort to provide houses for the ever-growing population of the city.

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