THE ROLE OF CHURCHES IN THE URBANIZATION OF LOKOJA, KOGI STATE, NIGERIA, 1991-2020

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ABSTRACT
Between 1991 and 2020, Lokoja underwent rapid urbanization, accompanied by the notable emergence and proliferation of churches. Despite this significant transformation, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the complex relationship between religious expansion and urban development in the city. This paper addresses the problem of understanding how the growth of churches has influenced Lokoja's demographic patterns, socio-cultural dynamics, and infrastructural landscape during this period. Using historical methods, the study draws on both primary sources including interviews, field observations, and secondary sources such as academic literature and government reports. The findings reveal that the establishment of churches in Lokoja not only mirrored population growth and migration trends but also actively shaped them by attracting new residents and fostering community networks. Churches contributed to socio-cultural change by providing social services, promoting new values, and facilitating integration among diverse groups. Furthermore, the proliferation of churches stimulated infrastructural development, particularly in emerging neighbourhoods, but also contributed to challenges such as urban sprawl and pressure on public utilities. The study therefore concludes that, religious expansion and urban development in Lokoja are deeply intertwined. The growth of churches has been both a driver and a reflection of the city's transformation into a prominent centre of religious and urban activity in Nigeria.

Introduction

Lokoja, situated at the strategic confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers, underwent significant transformations during the 1990s, particularly following the creation of Kogi State in 1991. Among the most notable changes was the rapid proliferation of churches, which played a crucial role in shaping both the city's physical landscape and its social fabric. Christian missions in Lokoja have historically been instrumental not only in religious propagation but also in the promotion of western education, thereby fostering societal transformation. As noted by Okwoli, the zeal of Christian missionaries to extend western education alongside their evangelistic efforts brought profound changes wherever they operated. This was especially evident in Lokoja, where the establishment of the first primary school in what is now northern Nigeria marked a significant milestone in the region's educational development.[1] A key figure in this educational mission was Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who emphasized literacy and education as vital tools for empowerment and social uplift. Crowther's advocacy led to the founding of schools that integrated Christian teachings with basic education, significantly contributing to the development of the local population. According to P.E. Okwoli, the Holy Trinity Church in Lokoja stands as the cradle of education for the northern region of Nigeria, with the Holy Trinity School originally constructed by Bishop Crowther within the church compound serving as a foundational institution.[2]

Following the creation of Kogi State in 1991, many churches in Lokoja continued this legacy by establishing educational institutions within their premises. For instance, the Living Faith Church founded the Kingdom Heritage Model Schools (KHMS) to enhance access to Western education in the city.

This paper examines the nexus between church growth and urban development in Lokoja from 1991 to 2020. It analyzes the factors that spurred the proliferation of churches during this period and assesses their impact on the city's demographic, socio-cultural, and infrastructural evolution.

Land and People of Lokoja

Lokoja, an ancient town of profound historical significance in Nigeria, has long served as a focal point throughout the country's pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras. A.D. Ali conceptualizes Lokoja with a dual meaning: firstly, as a geographical area encompassing the peoples within Lokoja Local Government Area, and secondly, as the cosmopolitan town itself.[3] Long before European contact, early human populations inhabited the Lokoja area, leaving a rich legacy through diverse cultural practices and activities. These early settlers were drawn to the region because of its strategic location at the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers, which served as a major waterway system during the pre-colonial period. According to Terngu, this confluence created a fertile and resource-rich environment that supported a variety of communities.[4]

Prior to European arrival, the area now known as Lokoja was home to several ethnic groups, primarily settled around Mount Patti and the banks of the Niger River. A.D. Ali identifies these groups as the Oworo, Bassa-Nge, Nupe, and Hausa peoples.[5] Due to early interactions with Fulani jihadists, many of these groups were predominantly Muslim.[6] Furthermore, A.R. Mohammed notes that the stationing of the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) in Lokoja then the first capital of the Northern Nigerian Protectorate also facilitated the spread of Islam, as the troops were largely Muslim.[7] Mohammed further highlights that the 1904 Lokoja council reflected the prominence of Islam in the area, with the colonial administration recognizing Muslim interests by appointing two Muslim leaders as ex-officio members. However, historical records indicate a lack of formal representation for Christian interests at that time.[8]

According to A.D. Ali, the native town of Lokoja is divided into quarters named after the original settlers of each area. The town itself is characterized by low-lying structures nestled between the River Niger to the east and Mount Patti to the west. This geographical positioning limits expansion, confining growth primarily to linear progression northward or southward along the river.[9]

As the administrative centre of British colonial governance for the Northern Nigerian Protectorate, Lokoja became a pivotal site for implementing colonial policies and integrating northern Nigeria into the global economy. Its designation as the British administrative headquarters led to the development of what Ali terms "European Lokoja," beginning at the Panda River bridge also known as the "Cantonment Bridge" due to its proximity to the military cantonment and barracks of the former West African Frontier Force (WAFF).[10]

In addition to the military installations, the colonial administration established several key infrastructures that continue to define Lokoja's urban landscape. These include a petroleum depot, the British Cotton Growers Association Ginneries, the General Hospital, and Preparanda Field. The latter, built in 1875 by the Church Missionary Society (CMS), was originally a two-storey building intended as a training institution. Named "Institute Causa Preparandi" (Institute for Preparation), it became colloquially known as "Preparanda," reflecting its mission to prepare students for further education.[11]

Factors Contributing to Church Proliferation in Lokoja and Nigeria

Church proliferation refers to the process by which new Christian churches are established, distinct from church development, which involves the creation of new services, worship centres, or fresh expressions that remain integrated within an existing congregation. For a local church to be considered "planted," it must eventually develop an independent existence, functioning autonomously from its parent body, even if it continues to maintain denominational ties or remains part of a network.[12]

In an interview, the Most Revd Emmanuel A.S. Egbunu, Bishop of Lokoja in the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Diocese), emphasized that church proliferation is not a new phenomenon but has been present since the earliest days of church history. Lokoja's unique history as a polyglot city attracted many who sought the Christian faith. According to Egbunu, the earliest form of Christianity in Lokoja and northern Nigeria was introduced by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) around 1857, during one of their expeditions led by Bishop Ajayi Crowther. He described the CMS brand of Christianity as "intellectual Christianity," where participation required literacy, one had to read a book to pray or sing thus excluding the illiterate population. Egbunu further explained that new expressions of Christianity, such as the Aladura revival in southwest Nigeria led by Joseph Ayo Babalola (himself a former Anglican), introduced practices like visions, healing, and miracles reminiscent of Old Testament prophets. These practices provided alternatives to the established CMS Christianity. Babalola and his contemporaries faced significant persecution from the Anglican Church for their divergence from established doctrines, particularly their emphasis on healing, visions, and deliverance services, which were unfamiliar to the CMS tradition. Christians from Lokoja would travel on foot for days to attend these miracle and prophetic services in Yoruba land, particularly in Ikare and Ekiti. Upon returning, some maintained dual membership, attending CMS services on one day and participating in prayer houses or churches such as the Apostolic Church and the Cherubim and Seraphim on another, seeking miracles and prophecy. This dynamic laid the foundation for church proliferation in Lokoja.[13]

Christian missionaries, especially Nigerian clergy, have long held the conviction that the most effective way to evangelize is by planting new churches. They believe that every group or community should have at least one church. Rev. Abutu Maha, Senior Pastor of Faithview Church Lokoja, asserts that the church is the world's only hope, which motivates clergy to establish missionary-minded, transformational churches in every available space within the community.[14] Similarly, Dr. O. Onabanjo of House of Praise Christian Centre contends that it is preferable to have churches on every street than to see shrines and sacrifices throughout society. This perspective reflects the mindset of the average Nigerian pastor regarding church proliferation. For example, the creation of Kogi State in 1991, with Lokoja as its capital, provided opportunities for numerous religious centres to emerge, many of which have since evolved into fully-fledged churches and denominations. As new residents arrived in Lokoja following the state's creation, many found that the existing Anglican and Catholic churches, the latter arriving 18 years after the former, could not meet all their spiritual needs. Consequently, they established their own churches. Indigenous churches such as Chapel of Freedom (founded by Bishop John Igbenu), Knowledge of the Truth Ministry (Joshua Omada), Revival House Church (Dr. Alidu

Abraham), and Eagle Kingdom Church (Bishop Bamidele Abraham), among others, were established.[15]

Alhaji Aliu Lawal Jiya, the Maiyaki of Lokoja, concurs that the creation of Kogi State attracted many churches to the area. He also notes that the prevailing peace in Lokoja drew people from the troubled northeast, further contributing to church proliferation. According to him, the indigenous people of Lokoja are notably tolerant and do not discriminate in allocating land to newcomers, unlike other parts of Kogi State. This openness and peaceful atmosphere have facilitated the establishment of even more churches.[16]

Another major factor driving church proliferation in Lokoja and across Nigeria is the high level of unemployment. Each year, numerous graduates emerge from higher institutions, yet the job market fails to provide sufficient opportunities to absorb these growing numbers of unemployed youths. According to Ogunbade, some of these graduates seek alternative livelihoods by enrolling in six-month courses at various Bible colleges nationwide. After completing such programs, they often establish churches without receiving any formal calling, assuming the role of general overseers and gradually building their ministries.[17] once established as general overseers, they frequently found their own Bible schools, thereby creating further opportunities for other young graduates within their church communities.

In Lokoja, many church founders claim divine calling into ministry. Examples of such Bible schools include the Word of Faith Bible Institute (WOFBI) of Living Faith Church, the Dunamis School of Ministry (DUSOM) of Dunamis International Gospel Centre, and the Faithview Bible Institute (FBI) of Faithview Church all established to train members in biblical theology. Graduates from these institutions have become numerous church founders and overseers within Lokoja. In addition, some individuals, facing challenges in their jobs or businesses, have turned to church planting as a means to alleviate economic hardship. Bishop Olurumolu Martins of the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja supports the economic explanation for church planting, citing real-life examples. He recounted how Bishop Bamidele Abraham of Eagle Kingdom Church, Lokoja, was once dismissed from the Kogi State Education Board before founding his own church and ordaining himself as bishop. Similarly, Bishop (Dr.) John Egbenu, formerly a practicing medical doctor, left his profession to establish his own church. Olurumolu suggests that while Egbenu's decision may reflect a genuine divine calling, economic factors remain significant motivators.[18]

Beyond unemployment, the desire for material wealth is another key driver behind church proliferation in Lokoja. Many church founders view establishing churches as the fastest route to amassing wealth. In an interview, Andrew noted that some churches refer to their congregants as "customers," engaging in various strategies to attract and retain members. This competitive environment leads pastors to vie aggressively for congregants, often accusing one another in the process.[19] The larger the congregation, the greater the income from offerings and tithes, which in turn enriches the overseers.

However, this quest for wealth has sometimes led to unethical practices. On June 20, 2012, as reported by Vanguard newspaper, Bishop Bamidele Abraham of Eagle Kingdom Church and other pastors were arrested by the Kogi State Police Command for impersonating bishops, pastors, and prophets during a revival program. During the event, Pastor Chuks, an expert in money-raising ventures, arrived with a team that included individuals who pretend to be mermaids, deaf and mute persons, and others feigning life-threatening illnesses to elicit sympathy from the congregation. One of the chief suspects, Pastor Chuks, defended these actions as "pure professionalism," arguing that every profession has its survival tactics like police, lawyers, and journalists and that what he did was simply business and survival instinct.[20]

Such staged performances are common among many new churches emerging daily in Lokoja and Nigeria at large. These churches are often characterized by rapid, scripted miracles and a variety of attention-grabbing programs designed to attract followers and sustain their ministries financially. While these practices tarnish the reputation of many new churches, it is important to acknowledge that not all church founders engage in such activities many are genuinely called into ministry.

Nigeria is widely recognized for having the largest number of churches per capita in the world, a fact categorically asserted by Ogidi.[21] Fayomi similarly described Nigeria as "a fertile soil for the growth of independent churches."[22] The development of indigenous Nigerian churches, which began in the 20th century, intensified significantly in Lokoja following the creation of Kogi State in 1991. Since then, there has been a remarkable upsurge of churches on nearly every corner of Lokoja town. This proliferation is largely attributed to the creation of the new state, which attracted people from diverse backgrounds seeking jobs, business opportunities, and more. Emmanuel Tobi observes that church expansion in present-day Nigeria is exceptionally high.[23]

Over the past thirty-two years, numerous churches have emerged throughout Lokoja, with hardly any major street lacking one or two churches. As noted earlier, within a stretch of less than five hundred meters, one can find three to four churches. For example, between Ganaja junction and Government House junction, there are at least four different denominations: the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Deeper Life Bible Church, Apostolic Faith Church, and University Baptist Church all located within a distance of less than one kilometer.

Another reason cited by church founders for the proliferation of churches in Lokoja and beyond is the claim of divine calling based on possessing certain spiritual gifts. Emmanuel Tobi Adegorolu and colleagues describe this phenomenon as a "claim of talents."[24] Individuals who discover they have gifts such as healing or deliverance often interpret these as a divine mandate to start their own churches, thereby contributing to the growing number of congregations. Ven (Dr.) Godwin M. Kadiri, supervisory priest of Emmanuel Anglican Church, Lokoja, supports this view, stating that divine calling is a key reason behind the formation of many new churches. He emphasizes that everyone's encounter with God is personal, and there is no objective measure to judge the authenticity of such calls; the Bible itself instructs believers not to judge.[24] Bishop Olurumolu echoes this sentiment, asserting that only God knows who is truly called. He further explains that the Catholic Church does not oppose church proliferation as long as the churches confess Jesus Christ as Lord and personal Savior.[25]

Occasionally, internal conflicts within churches also lead to splits and the formation of new congregations. Such disagreements often arise from financial mismanagement or disputes over appointments, especially among senior pastors and ministers, leading to church disintegration.

Moreover, the gullibility of many individuals, especially those seeking prophecy and prayer, fuels the proliferation of churches in Lokoja. People increasingly rely on "prophets" to intercede for them, often paying these individuals to fast or pray on their behalf. This complacency has been a key factor motivating young men to enter ministry as a means of escaping economic hardship. Emmanuel Tobi and colleagues observe that the church has become one of the fastest-growing businesses in Nigeria, with many entering ministry primarily to enrich themselves.[26]

Bishop Emmanuel A.S. Egbunu argues that the church's core mandate of evangelism has significantly contributed to the proliferation of churches in Lokoja. Many ministers, through evangelism and preaching, have established new churches in areas they deem fertile for the gospel. As they travel from place to place, they continue to plant churches, thereby increasing their numbers. For example, the Redeemed Christian Church of God has a core mandate to plant a church within every five-minute walk across all streets. Similarly, the Deeper Life Church is committed to spreading the gospel of salvation to all parts of the world. This evangelistic zeal has substantially increased the establishment of churches in all nooks and crannies where their ministries are not yet present.[27]

The vastness and population growth of Lokoja also contribute to church proliferation. As the capital of Kogi State and a historic town with a diverse population, Lokoja has expanded significantly, increasing demand for places of worship. Aliu Lawal attributes this trend to urban growth and migration, as people move to Lokoja for economic, educational, and political reasons, bringing their religious affiliations and establishing new churches.[28]

Ethnic diversity is another key factor. Lokoja, a melting pot of ethnic groups including the Igala, Ebira, Nupe, Yoruba, and Hausa, hosts churches that cater to the linguistic and cultural

needs of these communities. Different ethnic groups often prefer worship styles and leadership that reflect their traditions, leading to the establishment of multiple church branches. Bishop Egbunu notes that ethnic identity often outweighs even Christian unity; during his tenure as chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Kogi State chapter, he observed that Christians might vote for a Muslim from their tribe rather than a Christian from another tribe, as ethnic affiliation provides a sense of belonging and security. This ethnic factor is evident across denominations, including the Anglican and Catholic churches, as well as the Celestial Church of Christ. For example, the Anglican Cathedral in Lokoja, once non-ethnic, is now predominantly a Nupe church—a shift Egbunu attributes to decolonialization and ethnic sentiments influencing church affiliation.[29]

Many churches in Lokoja have a dominant ethnic membership. Several ethnic groups have founded their own churches rather than joining foreign-established denominations. Examples include the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), popular among Yoruba Christians, and the United Evangelical Church (originally Qua Iboe Church), widely accepted among some southern ethnic groups. Independent Pentecostal churches founded by Igala, Ebira, and other ethnic pastors also address specific cultural and spiritual needs. The desire for language-specific worship and culturally familiar practices remains a major driver of church proliferation in Lokoja. As long as ethnic identity remains central to religious experience, new churches will continue to emerge to serve these communities.



Plate 1: *Image of a junction with signages of five different churches on one street in Lokoja*

Source: Researcher's field work, 2025

Impact of Church Proliferation on Urban Development in Lokoja

The proliferation of churches in Lokoja has had significant multifaceted impacts on the city's urban landscape. Physically, churches have driven a construction boom, influencing architectural styles and spatial planning, as people are attracted to areas where their churches are located, leading to increased residency. Socially, churches serve as community centers providing social services, fostering belonging and enhancing social cohesion. Economically, church growth has created jobs in construction, hospitality, and retail, contributing to Lokoja's economic vitality.

As moral beacons, churches uphold societal values and promote sound morality based on the gospel of salvation. According to Maha, if the church shapes society's character, it can foster genuine and lasting development.[30] The growing number of churches, representing diverse denominations, has transformed religious practices and influenced social dynamics, cultural interactions, and the city's identity. This church multiplication has blended indigenous traditions with Christian rituals, preserving cultural heritage while fostering inclusivity across different cultural backgrounds.

The presence of many churches has encouraged interfaith dialogue, promoting tolerance and peaceful coexistence in Lokoja's diverse religious landscape.[31] Churches act as social hubs, offering spaces for interaction, networking, and community engagement through services, workshops, and social activities. Many churches also promote women's empowerment and leadership, challenging traditional gender roles and potentially transforming societal norms.

Churches contribute to community development through education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation. Many have established primary and secondary schools, such as Kingdom Heritage Model School (KHMS), Baptist High School, United Evangelical Church Secondary School, and Bishop Delisle College, providing employment opportunities to locals. For example, the First ECWA Church in Lokongoma offers free eye tests, medication, and glasses, while the Redeemed Christian Church of God provides monthly feeding programs open to all, including the disabled. A unique initiative is the "Jehovah's Market," where members and non-members can collect free items once a month, exemplifying the church's social responsibility to host communities.

The Redeemed Christian Church of God conducts monthly feeding programs that extend beyond its congregation to include the wider community. During festive seasons, meals are often prepared, packaged in takeaway containers, and distributed to all individuals in the vicinity, including persons with disabilities. Additionally, the church has established a unique community outreach initiative known as Jehovah's Market. This monthly event allows both church members and non-members to freely collect various items from the market, providing essential support to the host communities.

Plate 2: *Image showing Jehovah's Market of the Redeemed Christian Church of God phase II, Lokoja*



Source: Researcher's field work.

Religious Impact

The proliferation of churches in Lokoja has profoundly reshaped the city's religious landscape, fostering a diverse and dynamic environment of faith. This growth has expanded religious options for residents, allowing individuals to choose churches that align with their personal beliefs, doctrinal preferences, and spiritual practices, thus promoting inclusivity and a deeper sense of belonging within faith communities.[32]

The presence of diverse denominations has exposed believers to a wide range of theological perspectives and doctrines, encouraging intellectual exploration and spiritual growth.[33] This diversity also facilitates cultural exchange, blending indigenous customs with Christian rituals to create a unique cultural and religious syncretism that enriches Lokoja's spiritual fabric. Churches in Lokoja play a crucial role in religious education, offering opportunities for scripture study, discipleship, and equipping individuals for active faith participation. They also serve as social hubs, fostering fellowship, mutual support, and emotional connections that enhance overall well-being.[34]

Overall, the multiplication of churches has created a spiritual mosaic in Lokoja, where various worship styles from traditional liturgical practices to contemporary services—coexist, allowing individuals to engage with faith in ways that resonate with their cultural backgrounds and personal preferences. This religious pluralism not only encourages comprehensive theological exploration but also strengthens unity amid diversity, highlighting the transformative power of faith in the community.

Conclusion

The period from 1991 to 2020 marked a significant transformation in Lokoja, driven in large part by the proliferation of churches. This study has demonstrated how churches have played a pivotal role not only as centres of religious life but also as key agents shaping the city's urbanization, influencing its physical infrastructure, social cohesion, and economic activities. While church expansion has fostered community development and cultural integration, it has also introduced challenges related to urban planning, governance, and resource management. By examining the interplay between church growth and urban development, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex socio-cultural dynamics shaping Nigerian cities, offering valuable perspectives for policymakers,

urban planners, and scholars interested in the nexus of religion and urbanization.

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