

"Shock City": Lagos, Nigeria



Kate Adikiwe lives in the suburban district of Olaleye, Lagos, once a small village whose residents grew herbs, fruits, and vegetables, fished, trapped, made palm wine, and processed palm oil. The village grew rapidly

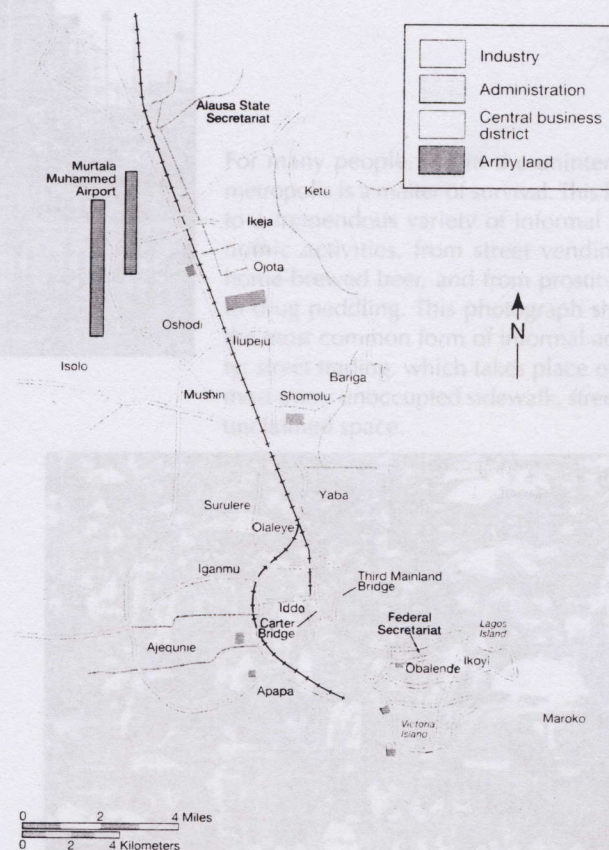
when a railway line was constructed through it and as Lagos grew outwards after independence. In the mid-1960s Olaleye had about 2,500 residents; today there are about 25,000. Within its small site of some 35 hectares (86 acres) is an enormous range of economic activities—a large market, beer parlors, nightclubs, brothels, a makeshift cinema, tailors, shoemakers, blacksmiths, tinkers, watch repairers, knife sharpeners, mechanics, battery chargers, and itinerant barbers and beauticians. Many of the women produce and sell a great variety of cooked foodstuffs, while many of the men work outside the district in factories or offices.

Kate is one of six children. Her father is a clerical worker in one of the city's department stores. Her mother is a seamstress, working from the house. The house itself contains 12 families, each having a single room and sharing the one kitchen, toilet, and bathroom in the building. One of Kate's jobs is to draw water from the nearby well each morning before school. The water is stored in plastic buckets in the living room until needed. After school Kate has to complete her homework and help her mother prepare food for the family. Most of the cooking is done on kerosene stoves in the passageway. After the meal, Kate and her older sister help their mother with sewing. They do not expect to be able to get jobs after school, so they are learning to become seamstresses.

Lagos, like most metropolises in the world's periphery, grew relatively slowly until quite recently. The combination of the demographic transition, political independence, and an economic boom stimulated by the discovery of oil reserves in southeastern Nigeria triggered an explosive growth in population. Because of its difficult site on sand spits and lagoons, this growth has resulted in an irregular sprawl and, in the central area, a density of population higher than that of Manhattan Island in New York.



The cityscape on Lagos Island reflects both residential congestion and the postcolonial development of the city as a peripheral metropolis with important corporate functions.



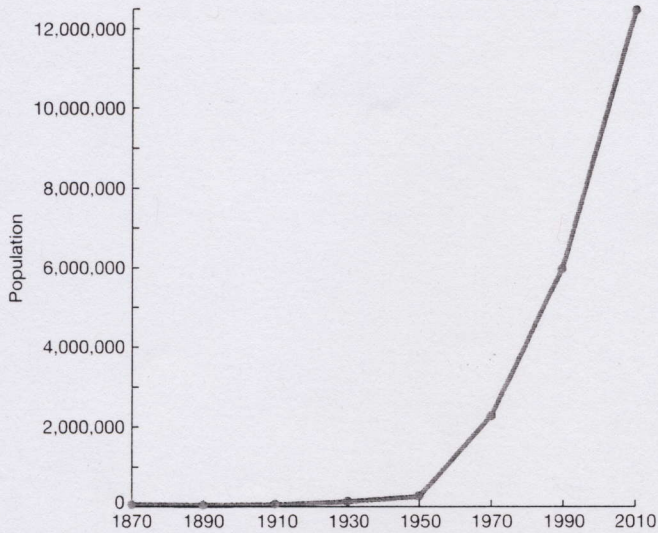
Lagos developed from an initial settlement at Iddo and on the northern shore of Lagos Island. Ikoyi, on Lagos Island, was laid out in 1918 as a government residential estate to house colonial officials. Most of the city's growth, however, has been unplanned and irregular, with swamps, coves, and canals impeding efficient development.

(After M. Peil, *Lagos*. London: Belhaven Press, 1991, p. 23.)

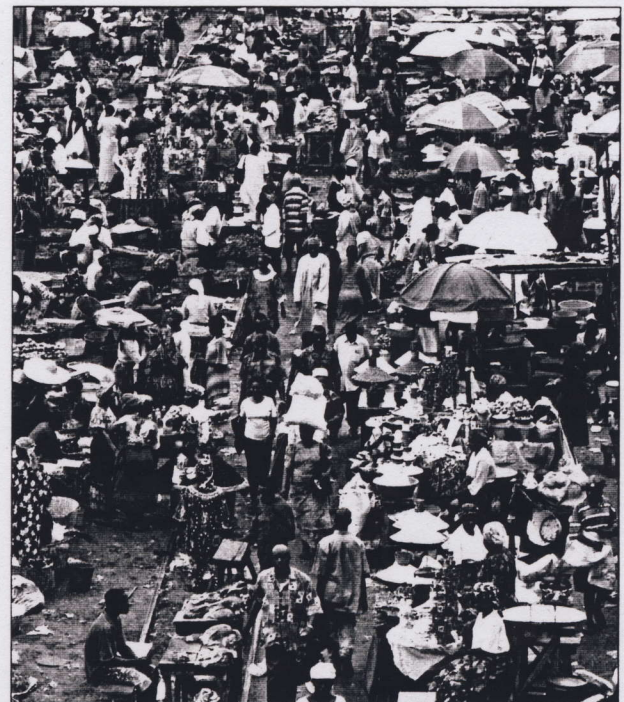


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For many people, life in the unintended metropolis is a matter of survival. This leads to a tremendous variety of informal economic activities, from street vending to home-brewed beer, and from prostitution to drug peddling. This photograph shows the most common form of informal activity: street trading, which takes place on almost every unoccupied sidewalk, street, or unclaimed space.



Population growth has far outstripped the city's capacity to deal with the daily movement of people, a problem that is worsened because the central city is trapped on an island site, with limited access by road bridges.



Overwhelmed by an unprecedented rate of urbanization, an economy that cannot provide regularly paid employment for a significant proportion of its residents, and a municipal government that has neither the financial resources nor the personnel to deal with the problems, Lagos has become emblematic of the problems of overurbanization. Shanty housing is a direct consequence of widespread poverty; open sewers are a consequence of limited or nonexistent municipal resources.