"Everyone knows what a city is, except the experts:" Western Perspectives on Urbanization in Nigeria, 1950-1990

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Abstract

Between 1950 and 1990, Lagos, Nigeria, was more than a city undergoing rapid urban change. It became a canvas onto which Western observers projected their anxieties, expectations, and ideological investments. From colonial ethnographers to Cold War-era development experts and international journalists, outside commentators often portrayed Lagos as emblematic of Africa's broader developmental struggles. Urban growth was rarely seen on its own terms; instead, it was filtered through Eurocentric lenses that equated modernity with Western norms, and deviation from those norms with dysfunction. Early anthropological and geographical accounts cast Lagos as culturally and spatially deficient, invoking tropes of primitivism and underdevelopment. These frameworks lingered well into the postcolonial period, where modernization theory and development studies dominated academic and policy circles. At the 1965 Airlie Conference, for instance, Western scholars debated Africa's urban future using abstract, universalist models that frequently ignored local contexts and reinforced neocolonial logics. By the 1970s and 1980s, as Lagos underwent a dramatic oil-driven expansion, journalistic portrayals framed the city in the language of failure, marked by corruption, chaos, and stalled progress, often shaped by the Cold War and global economic interests. What emerges is not simply a record of external observation, but a pattern of narrative control. Representations of Lagos helped shape policy frameworks, international perceptions, and enduring myths about African urbanism. Drawing on Edward Said's *Orientalism* and employing discourse analysis, this thesis argues that Western portrayals of Lagos operated as ideological instruments. They legitimized external authority while marginalizing African agency in defining what urban modernity could mean. In re-examining these portrayals, the study exposes the deeper power

structures behind how cities like Lagos have been (mis)imagined within global development discourse.

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Completing this research has been a collaborative effort, and I am indebted to those who contributed along the way.

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To all who contributed to this work in ways both big and small, thank you!

Dedication

I dedicate this project to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

Western Perspectives on Urbanization in Lagos: Historical Analysis, Theoretical Framework and Historiography

Western scholarship, media, and policymakers have long framed Lagos, Nigeria's economic hub and Africa's most populous city, through narratives that oscillate between admiration for its rapid growth and skepticism about its governance and urban development. These narratives, formed in the context of colonial and post-colonial power dynamics, often reflect broader epistemological assumptions about African modernity, development, and urban order which prioritize Western notions of progress. This study critically examines how Western scholars, policymakers, and media outlets have framed Lagos's transformation from a colonial outpost to a megacity, often emphasizing chaos, mismanagement, and dysfunction while overlooking the structural legacies of colonialism and global economic forces.

Lagos's urban expansion is one of the most striking examples of how colonial influence shaped African cities. Unlike some Nigerian cities created entirely by European colonial authorities, Lagos's origins trace back to the Awori, a Yoruba subgroup that first settled on the mainland before relocating to Lagos Island due to security concerns. Throughout the nineteenth century, Lagos remained a small and compact settlement, covering less than two square miles, with a modest population.[1] However, the city's early urban structure shaped by Indigenous socio-political arrangements, gradually changed as the British intervened in Lagos affairs. From 1861, colonial urban policies introduced new governance structures, sanitation regulations, and transportation networks that expanded Lagos beyond its original confines. However, these

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[1] Ayodeji Olukoju, *Infrastructure Development and Urban Facilities in Lagos, 1861-2000* (Ibadan: IFRA-Nigeria, Institut français de recherche en Afrique, 2003), 9. https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ifra.814

projects primarily served British economic interests, reinforcing colonial control rather than addressing the needs of Indigenous Lagosians.[2]

One of the most significant drivers of Lagos's expansion under British rule was the development of transportation infrastructure, particularly the railway which began construction in December 1895.[3] The railway linked Lagos to the hinterland, facilitating the movement of goods, labour, and colonial administration. British authorities framed these projects as modernizing efforts, yet they were primarily designed to extract resources and consolidate imperial rule.[4] As Lagos's economy became further integrated into global trade networks, its population swelled, with migrants arriving in search of economic opportunities.

By 1950, Lagos's municipal population stood at 230,256, but within just thirteen years, it surged to over 650,000 as both natural increase and in-migration fueled urban growth.[5] This growth overwhelmed the existing administrative structures, as neighbouring rural districts, which had previously managed predominantly agrarian communities, suddenly found themselves unable to provide essential urban amenities such as roads, water supply, and sanitation. As Lagos continued to absorb surrounding settlements, it transformed into a sprawling metropolis, outpacing its municipal boundaries and creating stark contrasts between its planned urban core and the emerging informal peripheries.[6] This historical trajectory is key to understanding later Western critiques of Lagos's urbanization—critiques that often failed to acknowledge the

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[2] Margaret Peil, *Lagos: The City is the People* (Massachusetts: G.K Hall & Co, 1991), 5.
[3] Wale Oyemakinde, "The Railway Workers and Modernization in Colonial Nigeria," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 10, no. 1 (1979): 114.
[4] Olukoju, *Infrastructure Development and Urban Facilities in Lagos,* 15; Akin L. Mabogunje, *Urbanization in Nigeria* (London: University of London Press Ltd, 1968), 143-144, Akin L. Mabogunje, "Urban Planning and the Post-Colonial State in Africa: A Research Overview," *African Studies Review* 33, no 2 (1990): 137-138.
[5] Mabogunje, *Urbanization in Nigeria,* 267.
[6] Olukoju, *Infrastructure Development and Urban Facilities in Lagos,* 15.

structural legacy of colonial expansion in shaping the city's spatial and infrastructural challenges.

Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, Lagos continued to expand at an unprecedented rate. The removal of colonial restrictions on migration, coupled with the city's economic opportunities, spurred rapid rural-urban migration. However, the colonial urban framework was ill-equipped to support this influx. Infrastructure, housing, and governance structures, originally designed to serve colonial interests, became increasingly strained under the weight of a growing population.

The oil boom of the 1970s fueled rapid industrialization and commercial growth. Industrialization played a crucial role in Lagos's urban transformation during the post-independence era. The rapid expansion of industrial zones led to a shift in land use patterns, with industrial areas growing from 446 hectares in 1962 to 1,155 hectares by 1974. This was accompanied by the rise of new industrial estates in suburban locations such as Ojota and Isolo, driven by the need for larger spaces with modern infrastructure.[7] However, this economic expansion was accompanied by significant infrastructural and governance challenges. The city's physical growth coincided with increasing urban dysfunction, prompting discussions about the feasibility of Lagos continuing as Nigeria's capital. By 1975, a federal committee concluded that Lagos was unsuitable to serve both as a federal and state capital due to mounting urban pressures, leading to the decision to relocate the capital to Abuja.[8]

The increasing difficulty in governance and urban planning also led to the replacement of the colonial-era Lagos Executive Development Board (LEDB) by the Lagos State Development

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[7] J. C. Nwafor, "Physical Environment, Decision-making and Land Use Development in Metropolitan Lagos," *GeoJournal* 12, no. 4 (June 1986): 439.

[8] Basil J. Ebong, "Urban Growth and Housing Problems in Nigeria: A Case Study of Lagos," *African Urban Studies* no. 4 (Spring 1979): 78

and Property Corporation (LSDPC) in 1972, to address the worsening housing shortages.[9]

Lagos's urban problems continued to exacerbate. Vast sums of oil revenue that could have been invested in housing, healthcare, and public utilities were instead misappropriated or transferred to offshore accounts, often with the complicity of Western financial institutions.[10] As industries faced severe infrastructural deficiencies such as electricity and water services, there was industrial decline in the mid-1970's combined with deteriorating real incomes and surging unemployment, which contributed to the emergence of vast slum settlements in areas such as Ajegunle, Mushin, and Somolu—neighbourhoods originally envisioned as housing for industrial workers but which became some of Lagos's most overcrowded districts.[11]

Lagos's planners could not keep up with its rapid growth. The 1980 Lagos master plan, an ambitious attempt to regulate urban development, projected that the city's population would surpass 13 million by the early 21st century.[12] However, by the 1980s, economic decline, military rule, and shifting policy priorities led to the effective abandonment of integrated urban planning, replacing long-term strategies with short-term crisis management approaches.[13] This resulted in the emergence of a "self-service city" where both the wealthy and the poor resorted to private means for water, electricity, and security.[14]

Lagos has undergone rapid transformation, growing from a traditional core settlement of 3.8km² in 1881 to 271km² by 1981 and to a massive metropolis of over 1,183km² by 2004.[15] Recent studies published between 2003 and 2013 indicate that Lagos's conurbation has extended

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[9] Peil, *Lagos,* 170

[10] Matthew Gandy, "Planning, Anti-planning and the Infrastructure Crisis Facing Metropolitan Lagos," *Urban Studies* 43, no. 2 (February 2006): 389.

[11] Gandy, "Planning, Anti-planning and the Infrastructure Crisis," 381.

[12] Gandy, 382.

[13] Gandy, 382

[14] Gandy, 383

[15] Taofiki Salau, Taibat Lawanson, and Omoayena Odumbaku, "Amoebic Urbanization in Nigerian Cities (The Case of Lagos and Ota)," *International Journal of Architecture and Urban Development* 3, no. 4 (Autumn 2013): 19.

along the southwest end of Ojo-Badagry Expressway, along the Lekki-Epe corridor in the southeast, along Ikorodu corridor in the northeast, Alimosho-Igando-Iba-Lasu corridor in the northwest and the Lagos-Ibadan axis towards the north of the metropolis.[16] The city's "amoebic" development has spilled over into suburban areas and even neighbouring Ogun State.[17] This growth has had far-reaching effects on the city's structure, land use, population density, infrastructure, housing, traffic, and transportation. It also deepened socio-economic inequalities, concentrating wealth among elites while most Lagosians struggled with rising costs and inadequate services. These challenges, combined with the ongoing expansion of informal settlements, reinforced Western narratives depicting Lagos as a city in perpetual crisis, often failing to account for the structural factors rooted in colonial urban policies and global economic inequalities.

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[16] Salau et al, "Amoebic Urbanization in Nigerian Cities," 20; Olukoju, *Infrastructure Development and Urban Facilities in Lagos*, 16; Gandy, "Planning, Anti-planning and the Infrastructure," 372

[17] Salau et al, "Amoebic Urbanization in Nigerian Cities," 20.

Lagos Population Growth

Sources: Akin L. Mabogunje, *Urbanization in Nigeria* (London: University of London Press Ltd, 1968), Margaret Peil, *Lagos: The City is the People* (Massachusetts: G.K Hall & Co, 1991), Ayodeji Olukoju, *Infrastructure Development and Urban Facilities in Lagos, 1861-2000*. (Ibadan: I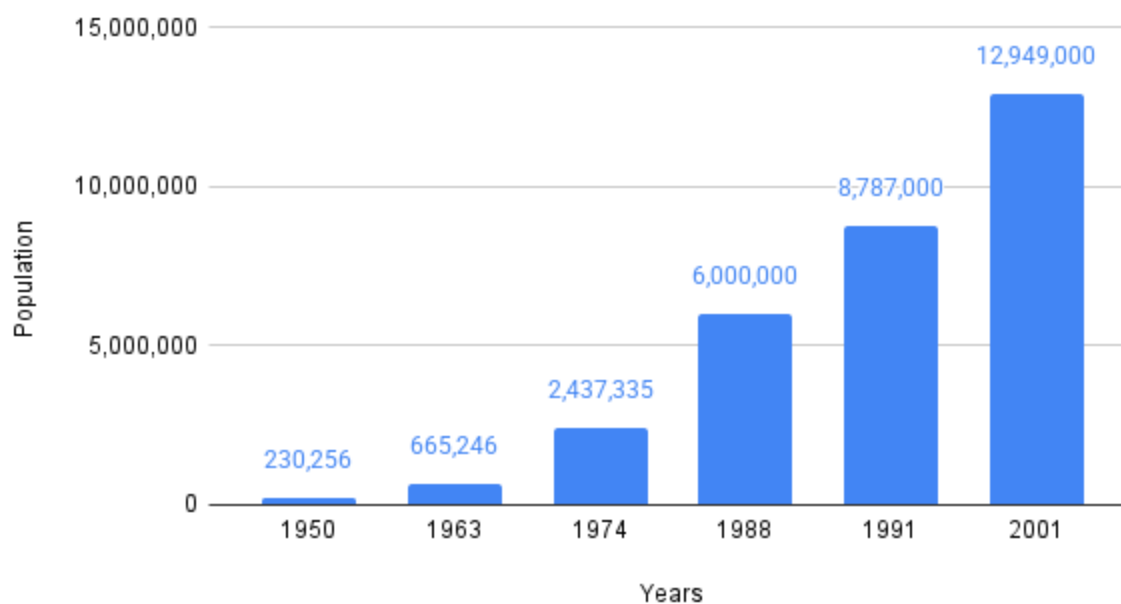FRA-Nigeria, Institut français de recherche en Afrique, 2003), Taofiki Salau, Taibat Lawanson, and Omoayena Odumbaku, "Amoebic Urbanization in Nigerian Cities (The Case of Lagos and Ota)," *International Journal of Architecture and Urban Development* 3, no. 4 (Autumn 2013)
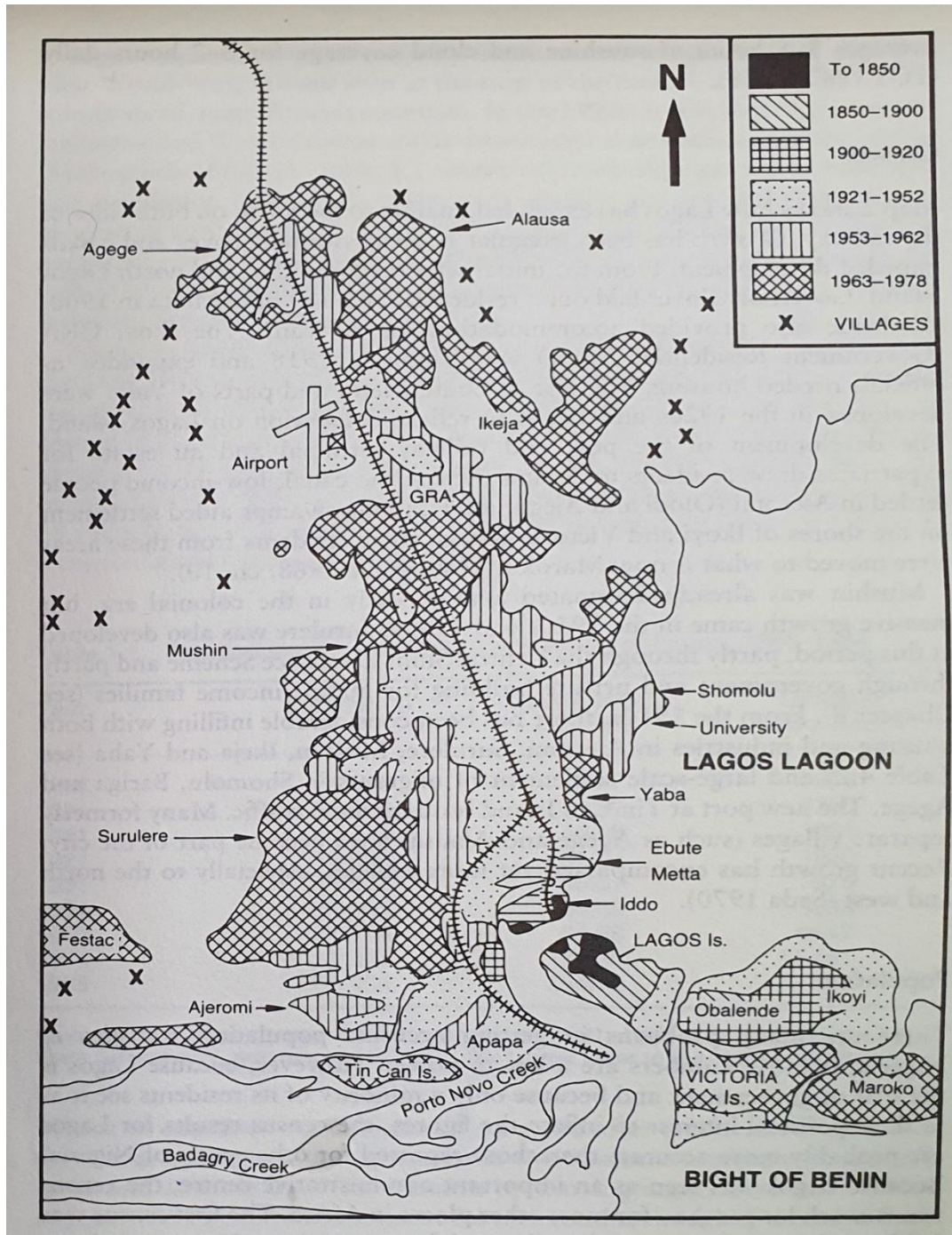
Growth of Metropolitan Lagos

Source: Margaret Peil, *Lagos*, 17.

Map of Metropolitan Lagos, 2000

Source: Olukoju, *Infrastructure Development and Urban Facilities in Lagos*, **16**

Accordingly, this thesis makes several contributions to the existing scholarship on African urbanization, Orientalism, and development discourse. It provides a focused, historically grounded analysis of how Lagos became entangled in overlapping regimes of Western knowledge production, drawing connections between colonial anthropology, postcolonial modernization theory, and Cold War-era journalism. My contribution lies in bringing into dialogue this diverse range of sources that are rarely examined together, and showing how they converged around shared assumptions about Africa's urban future. While there is a growing body of literature on the representation of Africa in Western thought, few studies trace how urbanization *specifically* becomes the site through which these anxieties and ideologies are articulated. By centering Lagos, this study offers a microhistorical yet globally resonant account of how cities become entangled in epistemological projects not of their own making.

This project also deploys Edward Said's *Orientalism* beyond its original Middle Eastern focus, applying its core insights to African urban studies and development literature. It extends Said's framework to examine how African cities, particularly Lagos, were subjected to forms of knowledge production that operated under the guise of objectivity but were deeply ideological in nature. By placing scholarly and media texts side by side, the thesis shows how academic and popular narratives reinforced each other, sustaining a coherent image of the "disordered African city" across institutional boundaries.

Historiography

Edward Said's *Orientalism* [1978] provides the central theoretical framework for this study, offering a lens through which to examine Western perspectives on urbanization in Lagos. His work serves as a compelling blueprint illuminating the assumptions and biases that shaped these narratives during the late colonial and post-colonial periods in Nigeria. At its core, Said's concept of Orientalism is inseparable from racial ideologies. Imperial knowledge production was predicated on the assumption of Western racial superiority, a logic that dehumanized the colonized and framed African societies as primitive, chaotic, or stalled in development. Said's critique of the West's construction of the Orient as an inferior "Other" parallels how Western scholars and media outlets have historically depicted Lagos.[18] As Said argues, "My contention is that orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient's difference with its weakness".[19] In Nigeria, a similar perspective led to stereotypical expressions by Western critics who doubted the ability of Lagosians to govern themselves. In this context, the Western perspectives on Lagos urbanization during colonial rule often omitted or downplayed the role of colonial governance in the city's transformation. Also their representation of Lagos in the post-colonial period often failed to adequately address the role of colonial structures in shaping the city's development and challenges, instead relying on reductive categories and generalizations that justified Western interventions or distanced themselves from the lived realities of Lagosians.

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[18] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 206.
Said points out the division of races into advanced and backward, or European-Aryan and Oriental-African. This highlights the idea of the Other found in Orientalist perception which also extends to other non-European parts of the world like Africa.
[19] Said, *Orientalism*, 204.

While Edward Said's *Orientalism* provides a critical framework for understanding Western knowledge production about the Islamic "Orient," its application to the West African context requires careful consideration. The challenges of using Orientalism in this context include the focus on Islam and the distinct lens of "primitive" and "non-primitive" used in African discourse. Furthermore, the spatial limitations of Said's work, the danger of oversimplifying African cultures and the overemphasis on binary oppositions (East versus West, Orient versus Occident) must be acknowledged. Nevertheless, Orientalism's critique of Western knowledge production and representation and the impact on marginalized cultures remains relevant to understanding the complex dynamics of Western representations of Lagos.

Having acknowledged both the limitations and enduring relevance of Said's *Orientalism,* it is essential to move beyond its constraints and consider other critical works. Nearly a decade after *Orientalism*, V. Y. Mudimbe published *The Invention of Africa* [1988], a groundbreaking critique that specifically probes the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of African representations. Mudimbe interrogates how Africa was conceptually "invented," and explores the collaborative roles of missionaries and anthropologists whose claim to authority rested on their proximity to, and supposed knowledge of, the "natives."[20] Importantly, by further highlighting how African intellectuals of the 1950s and 1960s independence movement actively challenged colonial episteme, Mudimbe uncovers the pushback, a major shift in historiography, that sought to position colonialism as a mere "parenthesis" in the broader African experience.[21]

Edward Said's later work, *Culture and Imperialism* [1993] can be seen as an extension and refinement of his earlier ideas in *Orientalism*. By broadening his focus to encompass the

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[20] V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 47, 66.
[21] Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa,* 78.

global dynamics of imperialism and culture, Said addressed some of the limitations of his earlier work, which was primarily focused on the Middle Eastern context. This expansion is particularly relevant when considering the African context, where the dynamics of imperialism and culture have played out differently. As Said notes in *Culture and Imperialism*, the discourse surrounding Africa is marked by a distinct set of tropes, including the primitive-civilized binary.[22] This highlights the need to adapt and refine *Orientalism's* concepts to better capture the specific historical and cultural contexts of Africa. By acknowledging these differences and limitations, Said's *Culture and Imperialism* provides a more nuanced and comprehensive framework for understanding the complex relationships between culture, imperialism, and resistance in various contexts, including Africa. By applying Said's insights in both books, this study critically examines how Western discourse has framed Lagos as a city of disorder, dysfunction, and mismanagement, reinforcing colonial-era biases even in post-colonial narratives.

While Said's works help to examine these biases, Peil's study on Lagos offers a more nuanced perspective in the context of Lagos, Nigeria, unlike most of her colleagues. Margaret Peil's *Lagos: The City is the People* [1991] provides a foundational perspective on the city's development, emphasizing the role of its diverse inhabitants in shaping its urban landscape. Unlike many studies by Western academics that focus primarily on governance failures, Peil situates Lagos as a dynamic urban center shaped by Indigenous, colonial, and post-colonial influences. She highlights the city's historical trajectory, from a small fishing settlement to an international commercial hub, driven by migration, trade, and local agency.[23] Peil also challenges the assumption that Lagos's urban struggles are solely due to mismanagement, pointing instead

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[22] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 29.
[23] Peil, *Lagos*, 1.

to factors such as rapid population growth, land tenure complexities, and infrastructural constraints that have historically shaped the city.[24]

One of Peil's most significant contributions is her discussion of housing and land use. She traces how colonial policies disrupted Indigenous land tenure systems, complicating property rights and urban planning in ways that persist in post-independence Lagos.[25] She acknowledges the challenges of overcrowding, poor sanitation, and limited public housing but refrains from the alarmist tone often found in Western analyses. Instead, she presents Lagos as a city that has continuously adapted despite these pressures, with residents developing informal housing solutions and leveraging local networks to navigate urban constraints.[26] This perspective offers a necessary counterbalance to more reductionist views of Lagos as a city in perpetual crisis.

Another author who provides a rich study on Lagos urbanization was Pauline H. Baker who published *Urbanization and Political Change: The Politics of Lagos, 1917-1967* [1974]. Although Baker's book is introduced here as part of the historiographical context, it also serves as a primary source given its publication date within the timeframe of this study. Further analysis of Baker's work will come in Chapter 3 where its relevance to the research topic will be further explored. Baker analyzes Lagos's growth by categorizing its urbanization into three distinct phases: early history, incipient urbanization, and modern city, also referred to as modern urbanization.[27] While her study offers valuable insights into the city's development, it is also influenced by modernization theory, a prevailing framework in Western scholarship in the post-

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[24] Peil, 5-6.
[25] Peil 163.
[26] Peil, 150-151.
[27] Pauline Baker, *Urbanization and Political Change: The Politics of Lagos, 1917-1967* (Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974).

independence period that often measured African urbanization against Eurocentric standards. Baker describes Lagos as a city of contradictions, where modernity coexists with deeply rooted traditions, prosperity is built upon widespread poverty, and cosmopolitanism masks strong provincial group identities.[28] This characterization reflects the broader tendency in Western discourse to view African cities as hybrid spaces struggling to reconcile tradition and modernity, rather than recognizing them as evolving urban centers shaped by historical and structural forces.

Baker's work also introduces an important discussion on the biases present in Western urban studies. She critiques early scholarship that neglected African cities, noting that researchers often focused on rural areas, treating cities as aberrations or extensions of tribal societies.[29] However, despite this acknowledgment, Baker's own analysis remains partially shaped by modernization theory, as she links urbanization to political and economic progress in ways that align with Western developmental models.[30] By framing Lagos as a test case for modernization and democracy, Baker's work exemplifies how Western perspectives often measure African cities against Eurocentric developmental models rather than analyzing them on their own terms. Although groundbreaking in its time and still serving as a valuable resource for studying urbanization in Lagos, Baker's book exemplifies the constraints of 1970's scholarship on African development, urbanization and cities, which often relied on frameworks that perpetuated Orientalist perspectives—a critique that informs the present research.

The historiography of Lagos's urbanization is deeply intertwined with broader Western narratives on African development. Scholars have approached Lagos's rapid expansion through varying lenses, often influenced by dominant intellectual paradigms of their time. Ali Mazrui's

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[28] Baker, *Urbanization and Political Change, x.*
[29] Baker, 1.
[30] Baker, 3

"The Reinvention of Africa: Edward Said, V.Y Mudimbe, and Beyond" [2005] critiques the ways in which Africa has been conceptually framed within Western discourse, drawing parallels with Edward Said's argument in *Orientalism*. Mazrui also critiques how Western epistemology positioned Africa as a passive recipient of European influence rather than an active agent in shaping its own development. He suggests that European cartography, colonial administration, and racial ideologies "Africanized" Africa in a way that continues to shape global perceptions.[31] These ideas resonate with Said's concept of latent Orientalism, in which long-standing stereotypes about non-Western societies become embedded in academic, political, and media discourses, persisting even as overt colonial rule ends. He notes that both Said and V. Y. Mudimbe highlight how the West has historically perceived non-Western societies through reductive categories, portraying the Orient and Africa as exotic, intellectually stagnant, and politically incapable.[32] This conceptualization has had profound implications for how African urbanization, including Lagos's transformation, has been analyzed by Western scholars.

Stefan Andreasson's "Orientalism and African Development Studies: The 'Reductive Repetition' Motif in Theories of African Underdevelopment," [2005] further develops this critique, highlighting the persistent tendency in Western scholarship to reproduce the same explanatory frameworks for African development across both colonial and post-colonial periods. He argues that while rhetoric may change, the fundamental assumptions about African cities as sites of dysfunction and underdevelopment remain intact.[33] This notion of reductive repetition is particularly relevant when examining Western perspectives on Lagos, as scholars and media

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[31] Ali A. Mazrui, "The Re-Invention of Africa: Edward Said, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Beyond," *Research in African Literatures* 36, no. 3 (2005): 75.

[32] Mazrui, "The Re-Invention of Africa: Edward Said, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Beyond," 69.

[33] Stefan Andreasson, "Orientalism and African Development Studies: The 'Reductive Repetition' Motif in Theories of African Underdevelopment," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 6 (2005): 973.

outlets have often emphasized chaos, mismanagement, and urban crisis without sufficiently acknowledging the structural legacies of colonialism.

Dane Kennedy's *The Last Blank Spaces: Exploring Africa and Australia* [2013] builds on Said's critique of imperial knowledge production, examining how European explorers imposed Western knowledge systems on Africa, dismissing Indigenous perspectives. Kennedy shows how mapping and exploration narratives justified European intervention. For the European expansionist powers, "the absence of any cartographic survey" equated "the absence of any valid claim by the Indigenous people and polities to the territories they inhabited."[34] While Kennedy's work in *The Last Blank Spaces* explored the dynamism of imperialism across two continents—Africa and Australia, his later book published after a decade would narrow the author's focus to Africa, even highlighting the complexities of British and French explorations in West Africa.

Dane Kennedy's *Mungo Park's Ghost: The Haunted Hubris of British Explorers in Nineteenth-Century Africa* [2024] challenges the Romanticized narratives of European exploration in West Africa. Kennedy reveals that these expeditions were driven by imperial ambitions, economic interests, and the transatlantic slave trade, rather than purely scientific or heroic pursuits. By highlighting the roles played by African kingdoms and communities, "whether they cooperated with explorers or obstructed their ambition," Kennedy emphasizes African agency in resisting and facilitating European incursions, countering the conventional image of Africa as a passive landscape awaiting discovery.[35]

Despite the shift in geographical focus, both books by Kennedy share common themes on imperial ambitions as well as cultural and historical contexts of British drive in Africa and other

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[34] Dane Kennedy, *The Last Blank Spaces: Exploring Africa and Australia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 10.
[35] Dane Kennedy, *Mungo Park's Ghost: The Haunted Hubris of British Explorers in Nineteenth-Century Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 174.

parts of the world. However, the second book remains a more specific focus that allows a delving into the nuances of European exploration and its lasting impact on Africa. Both books' emphasis on Indigenous agency aligns with Edward Said's argument in *Culture and Imperialism* and Ali Mazrui's perspectives in *Reinventing Africa*, both of which highlight the active role of Indigenous populations in shaping their own histories in the face of imperial dominance. Kennedy's critique of exploration narratives also aligns with Edward Said's argument that Western narratives serve imperial interests by suppressing or amplifying certain perspectives. The European (especially British) narrative, which framed African societies as primitive and dysfunctional, carried over into twentieth-century Western scholarly and media representations of Lagos, where urban challenges were often attributed to African governance failures rather than colonial legacies. Ultimately, Kennedy's works provide a crucial historical context for understanding how Western perceptions of Africa evolved from exploration narratives to colonial policies and postcolonial urban critiques.

The imperial desire to explore, map and control the space called Africa did not end with geographic discoveries. As Kennedy's works indicated, British expeditions embedded in imperial ambitions shaped how Africa was perceived and governed. Beyond mapping the continent, colonial administrators increasingly turned to scientific expertise to justify and refine their rule. Helen Tilley's *Africa as a Living Laboratory* [2011] extends this discussion by demonstrating how Africa became a vast testing ground for scientific research. Colonial officials, faced with the complexities of governance, often framed Africa as an administrative challenge that could be resolved through new scientific knowledge, thereby leading to an increasing collaboration between science and empire. As Tilley categorically stated, "those statesmen and scientists most interested in deepening connections between empire and expertise were

responsible for characterizing Africa as a *living laboratory*."[36] However, their collaborative effort was not simply about solving African challenges but about reinforcing colonial authority through knowledge production. This scientific approach to governance set the stage for the postwar modernization paradigm.

David C. Engerman and Corinna R. Unger's argument in "Introduction: Towards a Global History of Modernization" [2009] parallels Tilley's analysis of Africa as a living laboratory. Exploring the nature of modernization theory as a subversive tool under the guise of economic development and geopolitical strategy, Engerman and Unger argue that modernization theory extended the colonial view of Africa as a space for intervention. Additionally, modernization programs, according to Engerman and Unger were "playing fields for academics eager to try out their theoretical models in practice."[37] The vicious cycle, where decolonized regions are forced to serve as a social scientific laboratory while being scapegoated for any failures that ensued from their experiments' effect, reflects the subordination of Africa to a testing ground for Western ideas, whether in science, governance, or development.

While Engerman and Unger present modernization as a global framework, Frederick Cooper critically examines its application in Africa. Cooper's "Development, Modernization, and the Social Sciences in the Era of Decolonization: The Examples of British and French Africa" [2004] critiques modernization theory as a simplistic, linear framework that reduces Africa to a static, backward entity in need of Western intervention. The portrayal of Africa as "the epitome of tradition and backwardness"[38] reinforces Orientalist paternalism, legitimizing the

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[36] Helen Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 23.

[37] David C. Engerman and Corinna R. Unger, "Introduction: Towards a Global History of Modernization," *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 3 (JUNE 2009): 376.

[38] Frederick Cooper, "Development, Modernization, and the Social Sciences in the Era of Decolonization: The Examples of British and French Africa," *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines* 10 (2004): 25

notion that Western expertise is essential for guiding African societies toward progress. This reductive rhetoric not only obscures the complexities of African development but also perpetuates the idea that Africa resists change, further justifying external control.

The assumptions embedded in modernization theory did not go unchallenged. Scholarly works like Paulin Hountondji's "Knowledge of Africa, Knowledge by Africans: Two Perspectives on African Studies" [2009] critiqued Western-dominated African studies, arguing that knowledge about Africa was too often produced externally, reinforcing Eurocentric frameworks. The study of Africa has long been shaped by external perspectives, often privileging Western epistemologies over Indigenous African intellectual traditions. Thus, Hountondji's advocacy for "an autonomous, self-reliant process of knowledge production and capitalization"[39] stems from his critique of the Western worldview with its notoriety for claiming knowledge of the subject.

Building on Hountondji's critique, Maria Grosz-Ngaté "Knowledge and Power: Perspectives on the Production and Decolonization of African/ist Knowledges" [2020] emphasizes the need for epistemic decolonization. She highlights three core issues through her article. The first was how the history of African Studies, particularly in the United States, has been tied to geopolitical and institutional interests that often positioned Africa as an object of study rather than an intellectual contributor.[40] The second was how African intellectuals, artists, and historians have worked to reclaim agency over the production of knowledge, challenging dominant narratives that have shaped African studies for decades. The third was that the decolonization of African Studies remains a dialectical process that requires both theoretical and

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[39] Paulin J. Hountondji, "Knowledge of Africa, Knowledge by Africans: Two Perspectives on African Studies." *RCCS Annual Review* 1 (2009): 128. https://doi.org/10.4000/rccsar.174.
[40] Maria Grosz-Ngaté, "Knowledge and Power: Perspectives on the Production and Decolonization of African/ist Knowledges," *African Studies Review* 63, no. 4 (2020): 690.

institutional transformation.[41] Her call echoes earlier intellectual efforts by scholars like Mudimbe and Hountondji, both of whom she references in the article, to construct an autonomous African knowledge tradition—one that not only responds to Western interpretations but actively redefines Africa's intellectual landscape from within.

These efforts to reclaim and redefine African intellectual agency are part of a broader historiographical shift that has unfolded across several decades but gathered renewed momentum in the post-2000 era. Scholars such as David C. Engerman, Corinna R. Unger, Helen Tilley, and Maria Grosz-Ngaté have interrogated the frameworks of modernization theory, colonial science, and African knowledge production, revealing how deeply embedded assumptions about African "backwardness" were institutionalized in both academic and policy-making circles. Alongside these critical scholarly interventions, public-facing and literary works have also challenged enduring stereotypes. Binyavanga Wainaina's *How to Write About Africa* [2005] exemplifies this through sharp satire, exposing how Western representations of Africa remain trapped in clichés of poverty, violence, and primitivism. Monica Popescu's *At Penpoint* [2020] complements this critique by examining how African writers navigated and resisted Cold War-era ideological pressures, asserting alternative narratives of modernity and cultural autonomy. Together, these works underscore the persistence of imperial discourse well into the postcolonial period and the variety of forms — academic, literary, and journalistic — through which African voices have worked to subvert it. They show that the post-independence moment did not dismantle imperial narratives but rather reframed them, especially during the Cold War, through the prisms of strategic interest, developmental hierarchies, and persistent racialized tropes.

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[41] Grosz-Ngaté, "Knowledge and Power," 705.

The historiographical debates on African knowledge production, modernization, and colonial science reveal how Western narratives shaped perceptions of African societies. In Lagos, Western scholars writing during the late colonial period played a significant role in shaping global perceptions of Lagos's urbanization. Reports from newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Sunday Times*, and *The Washington Post* have frequently depicted Lagos as a city in perpetual crisis, plagued by traffic congestion, environmental degradation, and governance inefficiencies. The oil boom of the 1970s and subsequent economic downturns in the 1980s further reinforced this image, as Western media focused on corruption, infrastructural decay, and the struggles of an expanding urban population. While these reports often highlighted real challenges, they tended to present them as intrinsic to African governance rather than as products of historical and structural economic forces, including colonial urban policies and global financial pressures.

A critical examination of Western perspectives on Lagos reveals a pattern of reductive repetition—where narratives of dysfunction, mismanagement, and crisis are reproduced without adequately addressing the historical context of urbanization. By applying Edward Said's framework of *Orientalism*, this study interrogates how Western knowledge production has framed Lagos as an urban anomaly rather than as a city shaped by specific socio-political and economic forces. A more nuanced approach necessitates recognizing how colonial infrastructure, global capital flows, and local agency have jointly contributed to Lagos's evolving urban landscape. In doing so, this study critiques the dominant Western discourse on Lagos's urbanization, highlighting its limitations and paving way for future research that further foregrounds Indigenous perspectives on Lagos's past, present, and future.

Methods and Primary Sources:

This study uses discourse analysis to investigate how Western scholars and media have portrayed Lagos's urbanization from colonial times to the late twentieth-century. This approach, informed by Edward Said, allows for a critical examination of how knowledge about Lagos has been constructed and disseminated through Western academic and journalistic discourses. By analyzing scholarly works and media representations, this study identifies recurring themes, gaps, and rhetorical strategies that reveal the ideological biases underlying Western perspectives on Lagos, shedding light on how African urbanization has been framed and understood. Primarily, this study relies on Western scholarly works produced between the 1950s and 1970s, proceedings from the Airlie Conference of 1965, and Western media reports from newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Sunday Times*, and *The Washington Post*. This study applies purposive and thematic sampling to select sources most relevant to the research. Rather than surveying every available article or publication on Lagos during this period, the study focused on texts that significantly shaped or reflected Western narratives about African urbanization, particularly those that gained academic or policy traction. The Airlie Conference was chosen for its unique positioning as a high-level intellectual gathering where modernization theory was applied to Africa, offering a concentrated lens on mid-century development thinking. The timeframe of 1950 to 1990 was selected to span three critical phases: late colonial urban discourse, the immediate post-independence development era, and the oil-driven urban boom following the Nigerian Civil War. This range allows for an analysis of continuity and change in how Lagos was framed across shifting geopolitical and intellectual contexts.

Chapter Structure:

The first chapter examines the foundational discourses on Lagos produced during the late colonial period. It analyzes the works of anthropologists and other scholars who shaped the narrative on Lagos just before independence. The second chapter examines Lagos's post-independence urban expansion and how Western academic and policy discussions, particularly at the 1965 Airlie House Conference, framed African urbanization. The chapter critically engages with discussions from the Airlie Conference, where scholars such as Daniel Lerner and Horace Miner debated modernization and the ability of African cities to develop along Western lines. The third chapter analyzes how Western media and scholarly discourse framed Lagos during the oil boom of the 1970s and subsequent economic downturn of the 1980s and 1990s. In addition to the journalistic articles, the chapter revisits Pauline Baker's book, *Urbanization and Political Change* [1974], which I had earlier included in the historiography section.

Western perspectives on Lagos's urbanization, shaped by colonial policies, modernization theory, and Orientalist scholarly and media narratives, dominated the discourses on the city. These perspectives often downplayed the structural legacies of colonial rule, instead portraying Lagos's urban challenges as products of internal mismanagement and disorder. As this study critically engages with these narratives, it further argues that Western scholarship and media contributed to a reductive and decontextualized perception of Lagos's development. The subsequent chapters will further explore how these perspectives continue to shape contemporary understandings of Lagos's urbanization.

Chapter One

Western Representation of Urbanization in Nigeria Up to 1960

Western scholars shaped broader perspectives on African urbanization up to 1960, producing analyses that, while not focused on Lagos specifically, influenced how cities like Lagos were understood within colonial and postcolonial discourse. Leveraging ethnographic research methods to capture the complexities of Indigenous African culture within the colonial framework, they aimed "to gain knowledge of untouched African life as it existed before colonial contact" and also investigated African cities as instruments for measuring social change.[42] Their approach to the study of African societies juxtaposed the urban community against a rural backdrop, reducing the former to "the stepchild of African studies, receiving cursory treatment and second-hand attention through theoretical constructions that did not fit."[43] The following analysis interrogates the underlying assumptions within Western urban studies and their implications for understanding cities like Lagos within colonial and postcolonial frameworks. One of the most prominent expressions of the scholarly engagement with urbanization in African cities was anthropology which adopts cultural lenses in the study of African societies. Anthropologists trained in Western institutions shaped the understanding of African cities during the colonial and early post-colonial periods within the context of cultural relativity—an approach that often aligned with the broader colonial knowledge production that framed African urbanization as a phenomenon in contrast with European urban experiences.

This chapter critically examines the works of scholars (anthropologists and other social scientists) who wrote about Nigerian urbanization up to 1960. Although predating Edward Said's work *Orientalism,* the scholarly works examined here in this chapter will be critically evaluated

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[42] Baker, *Urbanization and Political Change*, 2.
[43] Baker, 2.

through the lens of Said's influential idea. Edward Said's *Orientalism* provides a useful framework for interrogating the authors' representations, assessing their methodologies, assumptions, and biases. While these scholars provided valuable empirical data and firsthand observations, their works were also shaped by disciplinary blind spots and the ideological environment in which they operated. By reassessing these scholarly works through a critical lens informed by Said's *Orientalism*, this chapter reveals the extent to which the scholars' perspectives challenged or collectively reinforced a Western discourse that shaped the understanding of urbanization in Nigeria during the late colonial period.

Specifically, this chapter delves into two distinct groups of Western scholarship on African urbanization. The first, represented by scholars like William Bascom and Kenneth Little, sought to challenge the dominant narratives of their era. Their work marked an effort to move beyond reductive portrayals of African cities and societies. However, despite their valuable contributions, these scholars remained influenced by the intellectual and cultural assumptions of their time, which sometimes constrained their critiques and left certain colonial ideologies intact. In contrast, the second tradition, exemplified by figures such as Keith M. Buchanan, John C. Pugh and Hugh Smythe, adhered strictly to conventional frameworks. These scholars reinforced the prevalent perception that African urban settings were inherently unstable, chaotic, and ill-suited to modernity. Their works epitomize the persistence of Orientalist stereotypes and the enduring influence of imperialist ideology in mid-twentieth-century social science.

Prevailing Western Theories about African Urbanization

Before the work of scholars like William Bascom and Kenneth Little introduced more nuanced studies of African urbanism, dominant Western views perceived African cities as unnatural and detrimental rather than progressive. From this perspective, urbanization was seen

as a consequence of colonial influence, leading to the breakdown of traditional structures, values, and social cohesion. Western theorists often claimed that Africans were inherently unsuited for urban life, linking cities with issues such as detribalization, poverty, crime, prostitution, and political instability. Urban Africans were frequently depicted as existing in a state of tension, caught between two incompatible worlds: the traditional (or "primitive") and the modern.

Anthropologist Godfrey Wilson articulated many of these views in his analysis of Northern Rhodesia (modern-day Zambia). He classified the society into two worlds: the "primitive" and the "modern" generations. Divided by European contact, the former was characterized by "old tribal forms," while the latter would be marked by a "process of rapid adjustment to the conditions of world community." According to Wilson, post-European contact disrupted traditional religious, economic, and social systems by introducing impersonal relationships. He argued that urban Africans, became drawn into the "impersonal circle of world economy."[44] Marriage becomes "legally, economically, morally and conventionally" revolutionized.[45] Wilson predicted that traditional religious practices, such as ancestor worship and magic, would inevitably collapse under the influence of Christianity, Islam, or other modern ideologies, suggesting an unavoidable shift toward Western moral systems. Altogether, these indicate a breakdown of traditional structures.

Wilson's focus on beer as a source of urban disorder, reflects the broader paternalistic and racist view that Africans required constant supervision, even in their leisure. He writes, "Owing to the correlation between beer-drinking and crimes of violence in town the authorities

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[44] Godfrey Wilson, *An Essay on the Economics of Detribalization in Norther Rhodesia Part 1*, The Rhodes-Livingstone Papers Number 5 (Rhodesia: The Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, 1941), 53.
[45] Godfrey Wilson, *An Essay on the Economics of Detribalization in Norther Rhodesia Part 2*, The Rhodes-Livingstone Papers Number 5 (Rhodesia: The Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, 1942), 39.

supply a mild brew and do not trust the Africans to drink even this by themselves."[46] Such narratives of disorder, rooted in primitivist and Orientalist assumptions, justified paternalistic control and fed the idea that urban spaces became sites of crime, chaos, violence, prostitution, poverty, and instability.

Lucy Mair's *An African People in the Twentieth Century* reflects a similarly paternalistic view. She argues that African societies have "so far produced few, if any, sociologists," and therefore, the "demands made by Africans, however intelligent, however highly educated, cannot be taken as decisive in determining the lines along which African development should go."[47] Her emphasis on "the problem of adjustment"[48] and the "disorganization" produced when "a primitive culture" is "suddenly confronted with a more complex civilization"[49] perpetuate the notion about African societies as fundamentally incapable of adjusting to the complexities of Western civilization. Mair echoes the belief of most of her contemporaries when she proffered "the science of Social Anthropology" is essential for understanding "primitive" culture and solving problems of colonial policy.

Anthropology itself, though often presented as a tool for understanding and protecting Indigenous cultures, was steeped in assumptions about African primitivism. One of the major criticisms against anthropologists remains their positioning of Africa at a static stage of development. Despite the claims by the discipline's advocates that anthropology served to mitigate abuses of power and foster cross-cultural understanding, skeptics argue that it was primarily invested in preserving African societies as static "museum specimens." Also, while proponents viewed anthropology as a safeguard against exploitative interventions, promoting

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[46] Wilson, *An Essay on the Economics of Detribalization in Norther Rhodesia Part 2*, 31-34
[47] Lucy P. Mair, *An African People in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Russel and Russel Inc., 1934), 288.
[48] Mair, *An African People*, 7
[49] Mair, *An African People*, 2.

sympathy over contempt in policymaking, critics contend that its methodologies and assumptions ultimately reinforced resistance to social change, casting African communities as subjects to be studied rather than active participants in modernity.[50] Accordingly, Helen Tilley and Peter Gutkind observed that African Indigenous scholars did not consider anthropologists favourably for fear that they "might import the approaches and the "lingo" of North American sociology.[51] Melford Spiro also noted the cultural *otherization* which some anthropologists apply to their study.[52] These issues reflect the foundational assumptions and representation of Africa as an archaic space, trapped in an earlier stage of human development. If figures like Malinowski ranked societies within a hierarchy that placed Africans at the lower levels of civilization, it therefore meant that Africans in their "simple minds" and "simple cultures" are incapable of self-government, modernity, and even urbanism. Thus skilled anthropologists were required to help colonial administrations avoid the tendency of political officers to "misunderstand" and "mishandle native institutions".[53] The anthropological tradition, with its primitivist assumptions rooted in European frameworks of cultural categorization, positioned non-Western societies as deviating from Western notions of progress.

This cultural milieu also shaped the conceptual definitions of cities. In his influential essay "Urbanism as a Way of Life" (1938), Louis Wirth defined cities as large, dense, permanent and socially heterogeneous—a definition which Bascom critiques for denying the urbanization of non-Western societies such as the Yoruba. Similarly, Horace Miner, in his 1953 work on the city of Timbuktoo applied a narrow perspective on that society, thereby asserting the lack of

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[50] Helen Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870-1950*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 264.

[51] Tilley, 289-290; Peter C. W. Gutkind, "African Urban Studies: Past Accomplishments, Future Trends and Needs," *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 2 no 1 (1968): 63.

[52] Melford E. Spiro, "Cultural Relativism and the Future of Anthropology," *Cultural Anthropology* 1, no 3, (Aug., 1986): 262

[53] Tilley, 262, 289.

characteristics similar to cities of the West. This intellectual atmosphere sets the stage for understanding the significance of Bascom's intervention. Both Bascom and Little emerged as early challengers of these reductionist theories. However, as the next section shows, their work shaped by the authors' cultural backgrounds got somehow entangled in the very discourses they sought to revise.

William Bascom and the Question of Yoruba Urbanism

William Bascom, an American anthropologist earned his PhD in anthropology at Northwestern University in 1939. He conducted extensive research on Yoruba culture and society, producing influential works that explored folklore, social structures, and urbanization. His research interests centered around African culture and he engaged in ethnographic research in Yoruba cultural heritage. Bascom's extensive fieldwork in West Africa as an anthropologist, and his passionate research on the different aspects of the Yoruba culture are evidenced in some of his publications which included: *The Sociological Role of the Yoruba Cult-Group* (1944)*, "Urbanization Among the Yoruba" (1955), "Urbanism as a Traditional African Pattern" (1959), "Some Aspects of Yoruba Urbanism" (1962), "The Urban African and His World" (1963), *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria* (1969)*, Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa* (1969)*, African Art in Cultural Perspective: An Introduction* (1973) and *Sixteen Cowries: Yoruba Divination from Africa to the New World* (1980) among others.

Bascom made a compelling case in his 1955 work, *Urbanization Among the Yoruba*, that urbanism in Yoruba society existed before European contact and was not only a result of the development of ports, colonial administrative centers, or industrialization.[54] In his 1959 article titled *Urbanism as a Traditional African Pattern*, he reaffirmed this viewpoint by making it clear

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[54] William Bascom, "Urbanization Among the Yoruba," *American Journal of Sociology* 60, no. 5 (1955): 448.

that urbanization needs to be acknowledged as an indigenous African phenomenon rather than a product of Western influence.[55] In both works, Bascom argued that it is baseless to use the historical concept of Western urbanization to determine or explain urbanization in non-Western societies such as in Yorubaland. Some of the issues which Bascom rejected were the use of social heterogeneity to define a city or an urban center, and the assertion that competition and formal control mechanisms replace kinship bonds and neighbourliness.[56] By distinguishing between industrial and non-industrial cities, he dispelled the belief that African urbanization should depend on industrialization. When he demonstrated that the Yoruba operated an economically complex system based on craft specialization, trade, and agricultural networks, he opposed the imposition of western pattern of urbanization across other societies.

Bascom's work marked a departure from the colonial-era tradition that strategically denied African social achievements, a practice rooted in what Said describes as the West's construction of the *Other* as timeless and static. As Akin Mabogunje stated, before World War II, colonial narratives framed Africa as lacking urban complexity, reinforcing a primitivist discourse that justified European dominance. However, Bascom, alongside other postwar scholars, disrupted this Orientalist framing by demonstrating that African urbanization, particularly among the Yoruba, predated colonial rule.[57] His critique of Western urban theories, such as Wirth's urbanism and Miner's folk-urban continuum, exposed their Eurocentric biases and their failure to account for Africa's distinct urban histories. Mabogunje's text showed that Bascom was part of the broader intellectual shift that sought to prove that Sub-Saharan Africa had indigenous urban achievements, independent of Western influence. By asserting African agency in urban

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[55] William Bascom, "Urbanism as a Traditional African Pattern," *The Sociological Review* 7, no 1 (1959): 34.
[56] Bascom, "Urbanization Among the Yoruba." 453. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2772532; Bascom, "Urbanism as a Traditional African Pattern," 29-43.
[57] Mabogunje, "Urban Planning and the Post-Colonial State in Africa," 125.

development, Bascom's scholarship challenged the epistemological authority that had long positioned Africa as a site of belated modernity.

In his other article published few years later, he extends his argument, challenging the propensity to adopt a Eurocentric perspective about the urban African. He disputes notions of "detribalization," contending that despite their adaptation to urban life, Africans in urban environments retain close ties to their ancestral homes, familial networks, and cultural customs.[58] By referencing Ellen Hellman's work on urban Africans in "Rooiyard", which argues that the process of detribalization has been exaggerated Bascom highlights how Western observers frequently exaggerate how African social institutions have collapsed, neglecting to recognize the adaptability and durability of African societies.[59] It is clear that Bascom does not agree with the view by his colleagues that kinship ties and cultural practices are lost as a result of urbanization. Although, he also looks at how some of the voluntary societies in the cities have been influenced by European education and urbanization, he explains that they show both adaptation to new urban conditions and continuity with African traditions.[60] In his objective analyses of Yoruba urbanism, of the postulations that characterized Louis Wirth's "Urbanism as a Way of Life," Bascom's critique focuses on the oversimplification of urban Africans' experiences by Western writers, who often fail to recognize the complexity of cultural retention amidst urbanization. Also, Bascom's emphasis on Yoruba cities as having long-standing economic, political, and social complexity that did not conform to Western evolutionary models of urbanization contrasts sharply with Miner's reductive description of Timbuktoo as a "primitive city."[61]

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[58] William Bascom, "The Urban African and His World," Cahiers d'Études Africaines 4, no 14 (1963): 163.
[59] Bascom, "The Urban African," 167-169.
[60] Bascom, "The Urban African," 169-179.
[61] Bascom, The Urban African, 170.

Bascom's review of Horace Miner's study on Timbuktoo[62] and Wirth's rigid model of urbanization indicates that he diverged from the dominant perspectives of his contemporaries who often denied the existence of Indigenous urbanization in Africa. He challenged the Western perspectives which often imposed rigid classifications that failed to capture the realities of African urbanization. Bascom challenged the idea that cities must fit neatly into the Western simplistic, stereotypical epistemology and representation of the other. He emphasized instead that indigenous African urbanism requires analytical tools grounded in its own social and historical contexts. He demonstrates that early anthropological frameworks struggled to account for African urban complexity—an issue rooted in an Orientalist discourse that fail to look beyond Western models and contexts. Despite Bascom's contributions, his work remained limited by the anthropological tradition in which he was trained.

While he attacked some elements of the Orientalist framework during the time, he left untouched the colonial policies and political economy that underpinned the crisis of African urbanism. He did not extend his critique to the structural roots of urban disorder. While he challenged the prevailing Western ideologies that African urbanization was a European imposition and that it led to the breakdown of traditional African structures, he did not show how colonial policies, rather than breakdown of traditional structures, led to the crime and instability observed in African urban centers in the 1950s. Although he attacked the idea that urban Africans were detribalized, he did not attack the assumption that they turned to crime and violence due to detribalization. Thus, he did not investigate how colonial policies—such as land expropriation, racial segregation, and infrastructural development for extractive purposes—altered the trajectory of the cities he studied. Margaret Peil's study on Lagos demonstrates that

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[62] Bascom also reviewed Miner's text separately. See William Bascom, review of *The Primitive City of Timbuctoo* by Horace Miner, The Scientific Monthly 78, no 5, May, 1954 https://www.jstor.org/stable/21502

colonial authorities introduced legal frameworks that disrupted indigenous land tenure systems, converting communal land into private property and prioritizing European administrative and commercial interests over local needs.[63] Colonial authorities introduced governance structures that redefined urban administration, yet Bascom did not analyze how these interventions impacted Yoruba cities. Akin Mabogunje's observation that British colonial governors in Lagos prioritized productive investment over the well-being of the urban population underscores a critical aspect of colonial urbanism that Bascom largely overlooked. Racial segregation was a major element of urban planning in Nigeria and most of Africa.[64] By prioritizing infrastructure for economic and administrative needs such as ports, railways, and more, while neglecting housing, sanitation, and public services for the Indigenous population, British colonial rule entrenched spatial and social segregation, worsening urban poverty and resource inequality. Thus, Bascom's omission of these details is striking given that his research was conducted in a colonial context, where British control over Nigeria's Lagos and other urban centers had already imposed significant changes.

Bascom's reluctance to directly critique colonial rule can be understood within the context of his academic training and the disciplinary constraints of anthropology at the time. As Simon Ottenberg notes, Melville Herskovits, under whom Bascom trained, urged his students to navigate British colonial Africa cautiously, mindful of the tensions between American cultural anthropology and British social anthropology.[65] This emphasis on careful positioning may have

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[63] Peil, *Lagos: The City is the People*, 163.
[64] Mabogunje, "Urban Planning," 137-138.
[65] Simon Ottenberg, *American Anthropology in Africa and Afro-America: The Early Days of Northwestern's Program of African Studies*, Program of African Studies Working Papers Number 16 (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University, 2009) 37-38.

shaped Bascom's approach, leading him to focus on Yoruba urbanization without explicitly confronting the colonial forces reshaping these cities.

Pathy's critique of ethnocentric studies further illuminates this tendency. He argues that much of anthropological research, rather than exposing colonial exploitation, masked the underlying imperial structures by framing cultural change as a natural process of "enculturation." Bascom's work, though detailed in its analysis of Yoruba social organization, largely sidesteps the colonial disruptions that transformed land tenure, economic systems, and governance in Nigeria. His academic detachment, while allowing for objective ethnographic study, also aligns with what Pathy describes as the "veneer of academic professionalism" that obscured the political dimensions of colonialism and imperialism.[66]

Tilley's analysis of anthropologists' institutional affiliations provides another key explanation. Most anthropologists in British Africa were not directly employed by the colonial government but operated within academic institutions such as the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures IIALC (1926).[67] While this gave them some independence, it also placed them in a precarious position: producing research that was too critical of colonial policies could jeopardize their standing in both academic and colonial circles. Bascom, like many of his contemporaries, may have chosen to prioritize scholarly acceptance over political confrontation, thereby sidestepping overt critiques of colonial rule in his studies.

Taken together, these factors: Herskovits' cautious approach, the disciplinary tendency to obscure imperial power, and the institutional pressures on anthropologists, help explain why Bascom's work does not fully engage with the colonial realities shaping Yoruba urbanization. Thus, while Bascom's counterargument against Orientalist perspectives on urbanization in

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[66] Pathy, 625.
[67] Tilley, 265, 282.

Nigeria and Africa remains powerful, his scholarship was also constrained by the anthropological paradigms of his time. His contributions to urban anthropology were significant, but his avoidance of colonial critique reflects the broader limitations of the discipline during that period. Thus, Bascom's contributions must be understood as both a significant challenge to Western narratives and a product of his academic milieu, which often steered clear of overt political critique.

Kenneth Little's Perspective on West African Cities: Urban Adaptation and Agency

Whereas William Bascom rejected the notion that urbanization led to a breakdown of kinship and cultural ties, Kenneth Little reframed the discourse entirely by introducing the concept of 'super-tribalization' to explain how urban Africans restructured their social affiliations in response to colonial modernity.[68] Unlike many of his contemporaries who saw urbanization as a disruptive force dissolving traditional institutions, Little argued that African migrants did not abandon their tribal identities but instead adapted them to new urban environments. He described this process as **super-tribalization**, where urban migrants maintained their ethnic affiliations but restructured them into broader, more flexible networks that extended beyond their original tribal boundaries. These new urban identities were reinforced through voluntary associations, which provided social, economic, and political support, allowing migrants to navigate urban life while preserving elements of their traditional culture. This process was not merely a response to colonial policies but an active reconfiguration of social and economic networks, driven by Africans themselves. His analysis, therefore, moves away from the rigid acculturation model and instead emphasizes adaptation—a nuanced perspective that acknowledges both continuity and transformation.

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[68] Kenneth Little, "The Role of Voluntary Associations in West African Urbanization," *American Anthropologist* 59, no. 4, (1957): 592 URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/666096

Writing around the same time as Bascom, the Liverpool-born anthropologist developed his argument through two key articles, both of which sought to challenge prevailing theories of urbanization in West Africa. The first article "The Role of Voluntary Associations in West African Urbanization" examined voluntary associations as key social structures in urban adaptation. His follow-up article titled "West African Urbanization as a Social Process" expanded this analysis by examining urbanization as a social process in West Africa, shifting away from the cultural reductionism that characterized much of the scholarship on African cities at the time. Using the two articles, Little contributed to scholarship that challenged the prevailing narratives of African urbanization.

In Little's study of voluntary associations, rather than viewing urbanization in West Africa in terms of cultural erosion, he thought it "better to conceive it as a process of adaptation to new circumstances and conditions."[69] Little does not aim to dismiss cultural contacts as his words here evidenced: "Cultural contacts still go on, but between westernized Africans and other Africans, as well as between Westerners and Africans; so that the changes occurring are no different in kind from those within a single society." [70] Instead, he challenges the prevailing anthropological approach that framed African societies as passive recipients of Western influence—mere 'museum specimens,' as Tilley highlights in her discussion on anthropologists and their skeptics.[71] Little demonstrates that African urban migrants were not passive recipients of colonial influence but active participants in reshaping urban life through voluntary associations and super-tribalization. Little categorized voluntary associations into four types—

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[69] Little, "The Role of Voluntary Associations," 580.
[70] Little, "The Role of Voluntary Associations," 580.
[71] Tilley, 264

Tribal Unions, Friendly Societies, Occupational Associations, and Entertainment and Recreational Associations, all of which underscore local agency in African urban adaptation.

To further highlight local agency, Little draws attention to the roles of Western-educated Africans, such as the Creoles from Sierra Leone who spread new ideas through evangelism and trade, Lagos market women who monopolize sales and young migrants driven by the pursuit of education, career opportunities, or adventure.[72] Additionally, by emphasizing that "Europeans, Lebanese and educated Africans as well as tribal Africans have all played a part" in the city's development, and that "they all contribute culturally to its way of life,"[73] Little resists binary narratives that depict urbanization as purely a colonial imposition. Instead, he frames urbanization in West Africa as a layered process where various actors, both external and internal, have shaped the city's structure. This aligns with his broader argument that urbanization in West Africa is more about *restructuring* than disintegration or breakdown. Little's emphasis on Indigenous agency parallels the work of African scholars like Wale Oyemakinde, as both demonstrate how Africans actively negotiated their urban conditions, often through collective associations.[74] Little's discussion of concubinage as a form of social navigation reinforces Little's challenge to detribalization, highlighting Indigenous agency.

Despite Kenneth Little's contribution, certain aspects of his framing remain problematic, particularly his tendency to view African urbanization through a Western developmentalist lens. Although he broke away from the prevailing Orientalist narrative that framed urbanization in terms of cultural breakdown, he did not entirely escape the cultural bias of the colonial-era

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[72] Little, "The Role of Voluntary Associations," 579.

[73] Kenneth Little, "West African Urbanization as a Social Process," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 1, Cahier 3 (1960): 99-100. URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/4390766

[74] See Wale Oyemakinde, "The Railway Workers and Modernization in Colonial Nigeria," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 10, no. 1 (1979): 119.

scholarship. While he offered a more nuanced account of African urbanization by highlighting super-tribalization, adaptation and Indigenous agency, he nonetheless retained certain cultural assumptions common among Western scholars of his time. For instance, his claim that African urbanization was probably more dynamic but less advanced than its European counterpart reveals the persistence of a Eurocentric framework that implicitly positioned Western cities as the benchmark of progress.[75] Though Little challenged the view that Africa urbanization inevitably led to social breakdown, his characterization of West African urbanism as less advanced compared to its Western counterpart suggests a hierarchical comparison rooted in evolutionary models of development. As Ali Mazrui observed, the tendency to depict African societies as inherently inferior mirrors the logic of male chauvinism, sexism, racism and Orientalist mindsets.[76] Little's description of African urbanization implicitly reflects this bias, framing cultural difference through a lens of deficiency, rather than diversity, tied to the tradition of cultural superiority. Thus, even in his efforts to show African agency, Little remained partially, albeit unconsciously, tethered to comparative paradigms that ranked civilizations according to Western-defined standards of advancement.

Keith M. Buchanan and John C. Pugh's Standards: Comparative Bias in Urban Analysis

As mid-twentieth-century British geographers working in colonial Nigeria, Keith M. Buchanan and John C. Pugh contributed to a wider body of Western scholarship that framed African urbanism through the lens of deficiency and deviation. Rather than viewing African urbanization on its own terms or interrogating how colonial rule shaped urban form and infrastructure, they projected Eurocentric standards as universal benchmarks. This approach,

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[75] Little, "The Role of Voluntary Associations," 592.
[76] Mazrui, "The Re-Invention of Africa: Edward Said, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Beyond," 69.

reinforced the idea that African cities were not yet modern and certainly not urban by Western definition.

In their collaborative book, *Land and People in Nigeria*, Buchanan and Pugh assert that Nigerian towns "lack the basic services and functions which constitute the criteria of an urban area in the West," and that their populations are "often dominantly agricultural, working in the surrounding countryside during part at least of the year."[77] This framing reduces Nigerian urbanism to a deviation from Western standards and implicitly defines modernity through British urban criteria. Rather than acknowledging the specificity of African urban experiences or examining the colonial forces that shaped urban development, Buchanan and Pugh reassert a hierarchical view of development that is characteristic of Orientalist paradigms. Also, they suggest that "real" cities must be detached from agricultural activity and equipped with so-called "basic services"—criteria that do not even universally apply to Western cities. In fact, cities in the West long predated the development of modern services. Their critique reveals the persistence of Orientalist and primitivist assumptions within mid-century Western academia. Like Orientalist scholars who represented non-Western societies as static, chaotic, and inferior to the dynamic West, Buchanan and Pugh fix Nigerian cities in a frame of lack and inadequacy. Their comparison ignores the specific historical trajectories of Nigerian cities and fails to ask whether colonial policies themselves created infrastructural deficits in African towns. Moreover, their critique selectively highlights supposed deficiencies in Nigerian cities while remaining silent on the severe urban struggles faced by London, the imperial metropole itself.

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[77] K. M. Buchanan and J. C. Pugh, *Land and People in Nigeria: The Human Geography of Nigeria and its Environmental Background* (Warwick Square, London: University of London Press Ltd, 1955), 63.

As Jim Clifford documented in his book, *West Ham and the River Lea*, London's suburban expansion in the late 19th and early 20th centuries created severe environmental and infrastructural challenges. According to Clifford, "ineffective sewage infrastructure compounded the environmental transformation brought by suburban development and created an unhealthy landscape for people, plants, and animals."[78] The deplorable conditions of the network of water pipes, sewers, canals, and natural rivers exposed the West Ham local authority's lack of effective regulations and resources. By 1928, reports in the *British Medical Journal* revealed that 260 million gallons of sewage effluent were discharged into the River Thames daily, overwhelming the London's waste disposal infrastructure and contributing to a persistent public health problem.[79] The city faced chronic water shortages, with its East London water system failing to meet demand by 1898, leading to months of supply limitations.[80] The 1928 Thames flood further exposed London's inability to regulate its waterways, resulting in devastating losses in Westminster and West Ham.[81] Despite these major urban dysfunctions, Buchanan and Pugh remain silent on the imperial metropole's own struggles while emphasizing supposed inadequacies in Nigerian cities, reinforcing an Orientalist hierarchy. British Historian H. J. Dyos, in "The Slums of Victorian London," documented how British urban poverty remained deeply under-examined in academic and policy circles. Dyos noted that scholars often avoided the study of slums, regarding them as unworthy of systematic investigation.[82] The archival neglect of London's urban underclass reveals a selective visibility—Western scholars emphasized African

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[78] Jim Clifford, *West Ham and the River Lea: A Social and Environmental History of London's Industrialized Marshland, 1839–1914* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017), 54

[79] "London Sewage and The River Thames," *The British Medical Journal* 1, no 3511 (1928): 676, URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/25328566.

[80] Clifford, *West Ham and the River Lea,* 74.

[81] Clifford, *West Ham and the River Lea,* 145

[82] H. J. Dyos, "The Slums of Victorian London," *Victorian Studies* 11, no 1 (1967): 36, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3825891.

deficiencies while minimizing their own societies' struggles with infrastructure, pollution, hygiene, and urban inequality.

Clifford's reflections on the River Lea and the urban margins of West Ham further underscore the prevalence of urban inequality in Greater London. The lowlands and spaces around the industrial floodplain districts were marked by industrial decay, environmental toxicity, and infrastructural neglect.[83] Unfortunately, according to Dyos, "the annals of the urban poor are buried deeper than those of the rural poor and the London poor perhaps deepest of all."[84] He highlights how certain issues are deemed "unfit for continuous art" leading researchers to overlook them. As a result, administrative accounts often outnumber sociological accounts, limiting a more comprehensive understanding of urban conditions.[85] Oftentimes, it was individuals with moralistic and religious views who brought attention to the physical and social decay of London's streets and buildings. To them, London slums portrayed evil, gloom or forces fighting against the Church and civilization.[86] These were not exceptions but part of London's urban fabric—spaces far removed from the sanitized vision Buchanan and Pugh used as a benchmark for Nigerian cities. Yet these same authors, while deeply familiar with British spatial inequalities, chose to emphasize the supposed absence of urban functionality in Nigeria without applying the same analytical scrutiny to their homeland.

By selectively foregrounding urban difficulties in Nigeria while ignoring London's own crises, Buchanan and Pugh construct an artificial hierarchy in which African cities appear

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[83] Clifford, *West Ham and the River Lea,* 7-8
[84] Dyos, "The Slums," 6.
[85] Dyos, "The Slums," 6-7.
[86] Dyos, "The Slums," 13. We see examples of such views in Bridget Mary Waters, "From Slum Dwellings to Council Housing Estates," *Blackfriars* 37, no. 431 (1956): 58-67. URL:https://www.jstor.org/stable/43813277, Smith, T. Roger, "House Drainage." *The Times*, September 24, 1884, 8. The Times Digital Archive, gale.com/apps/doc/CS134661944/TTDA?u=usaskmain&sid=bookmark-TTDA. Accessed 31 May 2023, F. G. P. "Dwellings of the London Poor." *The Times*, April 27, 1874, 12. The Times Digital Archive, gale.com/apps/doc/CS202027675/TTDA?u=usaskmain&sid=bookmark-TTDA. Accessed 31 May 2023.

inherently inadequate. This selective representation suggests more than academic oversight. it reveals how colonial knowledge production filtered African realities through Eurocentric standards. Rather than interrogating the colonial roots of spatial inequality in Nigeria, such as the prioritization of infrastructure for extraction and export, they reinforced a narrative of African deficiency. As Margaret Peil has shown in her study of Lagos, colonial urban planning emphasized segregation, invested minimally in Indigenous housing and sanitation, and contributed to overcrowding and infrastructural deterioration.[87]

Thus, while Buchanan and Pugh offered detailed geographical data, their interpretation was shaped by a colonial gaze that obscured the role of empire in shaping the very urban deficits they described. Their scholarship exemplifies what Stefan Andreasson said about "Reductive repetition" becoming "an effective tool with which to conflate the many heterogeneous characteristics of African societies into a core set of deficiencies."[88] By critiquing Buchanan and Pugh's comment through the lenses of Said, Dyos, Peil, Clifford, and Andreasson, we can better understand how Western scholars deployed comparative bias to naturalize colonial urban hierarchies, even while their own cities grappled with similar, if not worse, conditions. In this context, Buchanan and Pugh's contribution becomes less a neutral assessment of urban development and more a mirror reflecting the broader ideological assumptions of colonial academia—assumptions that privileged the West as the model of urban order while rendering African urbanism illegible except as deviation or deficiency.

Urbanization or Disorder? Hugh Smythe's Paternalistic View of African Cities

Hugh H. Smythe, an American anthropologist and sociologist, contributed to Western scholarship on African urbanization during the mid-20th century. His fieldwork in Nigeria

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[87] Peil, Lagos, 163-164

[88] Andreasson, "Orientalism and African Development Studies," 972.

between 1957 and 1958 provided firsthand exposure to the complexities of African urbanization, shaping much of his later scholarship. Through his time in Nigerian cities, he observed patterns of migration, evolving infrastructures, and the social tensions that accompanied urban expansion. These experiences directly influenced his published works, including "Social Change in Africa," "Social Stratification in Nigeria," "Nigeria's "Marginal Men," and "Urbanization in Nigeria."[89] Through these works, he explored colonial transformations and industrialization's impact on African cities.

Smythe's research aligns with broader Western academic trends of the period, reflecting the era's dominant perspectives on modernization and development. His work, supported by Ford Foundation funding, followed a trajectory common among scholars influenced by think kind of Western institutional backing.[90] These scholars most times present urban growth as driven largely by European industrial forces while minimizing precolonial African urban traditions. While his studies contributed valuable documentation on Nigeria's urban transition, his framing remained rooted in Orientalist assumptions, where African cities were assessed primarily through their alignment with Western models rather than their own historical trajectories.

McClure et al. summarized the critiques of Arnove who challenged the idea that philanthropic foundations such as the Ford Foundation are purely benevolent actors. Arnove had argued that these philanthropic foundations such as the "big three" foundations: The Ford,

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[89] See Hugh H. Smythe, "Social Change in Africa," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 19, no. 2 (1960); Hugh H. Smythe, "Social Stratification in Nigeria," *Social Forces* 37, no. 2 (Dec., 1958); H. H. Smythe, "Nigeria's "Marginal Men," *The Phylon Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1958); Hugh H. Smythe, "Urbanization in Nigeria," *Anthropological Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (Jul., 1960).

[90] Hugh H. Smythe acknowledges Ford Foundation funding for his research in multiple articles, including *Urbanization in Nigeria, Social Change in Africa*, and others. See Hugh H. Smythe, "Urbanization in Nigeria," *Anthropological Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1960); Hugh H. Smythe, "Social Change in Africa," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 19, no. 2 (1960)

Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations, play a significant role in shaping academic narratives in ways that reinforce existing power structures.[91] Rather than simply supporting intellectual inquiry, these foundations have historically influenced research to align with capitalist interests, often legitimizing the systems they claim to study. According to critiques, foundation-backed research tends to reproduce social class inequalities rather than disrupt them, shaping educational policies to align with dominant economic interests.[92] Smythe's Ford-funded work fits within this broader critique, reflecting Western developmental narratives that prioritize industrial expansion while minimizing indigenous urban traditions.

Smythe positions Nigerian cities in contrast to Western urban models, highlighting their infrastructural gaps rather than engaging with their historical urban development. He writes:

> The Nigerian city, then, is not typically a self-contained unit whose attention has turned inward. It does not provide in kind and degree many of the services and facilities associated with western cities: a sewage system, street lighting, municipal power plants and water supply, paved streets and sidewalks, parks and playgrounds, police and fire protection, public health inspection and supervision, hospitals, libraries, and schools. A city as large as Akure (38,853 in 1952) may be without electricity; Benin (53,753) without street lights; Kano (130,173) with no public library.[93]

While Smythe acknowledges the infrastructure challenges in Nigerian cities, his approach subtly suggests that they fall short of true urbanization by Western standards. Instead of recognizing that these cities operated within their own unique socio-economic systems, his framework

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[91] Kevin R. McClure, Leah Frierson, Adam W. Hall, Kara L. Ostlund, "Philanthropic Giving by Foundations to Higher Education Institutions: A State-Level Social Network Analysis," *Philanthropy & Education* 1, no 1, (Fall 2017): 5-6

[92] McClure et al. (2017) discuss Arnove's critique of philanthropic foundations and their role in maintaining capitalist structures. Since I did not review Arnove's original work, my discussion is based on McClure's summary rather than a direct reading of Arnove's works published in 1980 and 2017.

[93] Smythe, Urbanization in Nigeria, 144.

implies a deficiency—an absence of what he considers essential urban services. As Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch critiques, colonial scholars often conflated urbanization with Westernization, assuming that African cities could only become truly urban once they mirrored European models. She argues that this perspective stems from a misguided belief that modernization was synonymous with colonial urban planning.[94] Smythe's perspective also overlooks the realities of colonial urban planning, where administrative and commercial areas were prioritized while African residential neighborhoods were systematically marginalized, reinforcing patterns of urban exclusion rather than fostering equitable development.

Smythe recognizes that African cities are not a recent phenomenon, pointing to historical centers like Thebes, Memphis and Timbuktu as evidence of long-standing urban traditions. Yet, despite this acknowledgment, he continues to frame colonial-era urbanization as an entirely new chapter, one defined by European industrial expansion rather than the organic evolution of African cities. His perspective suggests that modern urban growth in Africa was a direct result of colonial influence rather than an adaptation of pre-existing social and economic structures. This framing reinforces a common Western scholarly tendency to view African urbanization through the lens of European models, rather than recognizing its deep-rooted indigenous origins.

Smythe's language makes it clear that he sees modernization in Africa as something driven entirely by Western intervention. His description of rural Africans looking skyward at planes and exclaiming 'magic bird' reinforces a long-standing colonial stereotype that paints Africans as awestruck spectators rather than people actively shaping their own technological realities.[95] This kind of framing ignores the fact that African societies had long engaged with

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[94] Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "The Process of Urbanization in Africa (From the Origins to the Beginning of Independence)," *African Studies Review* 34, no 1 (Apr., 1991): 9-10. https://www.jstor.org/stable/524256

[95] Smythe, "Social Change," 203.

innovation, trade, and infrastructure development on their own terms. Similarly, his phrasing about 'modern hospitals to cure the ills of the African' suggests a reductive and paternalistic view of health and medical progress.[96] By presenting Western medicine as a remedy for Africa's supposed deficiencies, Smythe erases the complex indigenous healing systems and medical traditions that existed long before colonial intervention. His perspective mirrors the rhetoric often used by colonial administrators, who framed their expansion not as a form of control, but as a mission to *'civilize'* and uplift.

Smythe's depiction of the modern African as materialistic, criminal, or delinquent reflects a deeper hypocrisy and reductive representation. His framing suggests while modernization offers technological progress, it simultaneously introduces crime and moral decline.[97] His analysis overlooks the era's exploitative realities of colonial infrastructure projects, which were never purely altruistic but rather strategic tools for imperial economic control. Railways, harbors, hospitals, and communication systems were built to strengthen the colonial economy, not to benefit African societies. More recent studies show that wartime economic policies further impoverished Nigerians, leaving returning soldiers struggling to find work, fueling urban frustrations and nationalist movements.[98] In response, colonial administrators framed African cities within a rigid binary narrative—a thriving colonial city versus primitive rusticity, substantial African residencies standing in contrast to squalid slums. This allowed them to dismiss African critiques as greedy distortions of government efforts, rather than legitimate grievances over social and economic neglect.[99] But discontent continued to

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[96] Smythe, "Social Change," 203.
[97] Smythe, "Social Change," 202-203.
[98] Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 143.
[99] Gandy, "Planning, Anti-planning and the Infrastructure Crises," 376.

build, culminating in the general strike of 1945, an event that underscored widespread frustrations with colonial rule.

Scholars like Bascom and Little, in contrast to Little's perspective, offer a more nuanced perspective on African urbanization. Bascom's research highlights precolonial African city planning, illustrating that African urban centers had long thrived without Western intervention. Little's work on voluntary associations further illustrates how urban Africans actively adapted to change, organizing themselves to resist economic instability rather than simply succumbing to vice. Their scholarship shifts the focus away from Western intervention as a necessity and toward African agency as central to urban transformation.

Throughout the twentieth century, Western scholars played a key role in shaping broader perspectives on African urbanization, producing studies that, whether explicitly or implicitly, influenced colonial and postcolonial understandings of cities like Lagos. While some scholars, like Bascom and Little, attempted to challenge dominant narratives, their works remained constrained by the broader intellectual and ideological climate of their time. Others, including Buchanan, Pugh, and Smythe, reinforced longstanding Orientalist stereotypes, portraying African urban centers as unstable, chaotic, and ill-suited to modernity. These scholars often measured African cities against European urban models, failing to account for the ways indigenous systems had long sustained complex urban networks.

Rather than viewing African cities through the limited lens of colonial transformation, a more nuanced approach must acknowledge their rich histories, the resilience of their people, and the ways they have evolved through local ingenuity and

adaptation. Precolonial cities like Timbuktu, Kano, and Ibadan thrived as trade hubs, centers of governance, and spaces of intellectual exchange, challenging the notion that African urbanization was merely a response to European intervention. Their legacies reveal that Africa's urban evolution was not an imposed phenomenon but a dynamic process shaped by both external shifts and internal agency.

This shift in perspective moves beyond outdated colonial narratives, recognizing African cities as vibrant spaces shaped not by Western intervention alone, but by the communities who inhabit them, innovate within them, and build their futures upon them. The people of Lagos and other African cities, rather than being passive recipients of modernization, have actively engaged in shaping their cities, negotiating change, and reimagining urban environments to suit their evolving needs. As African cities continue to expand and adapt, the need for scholarship that prioritizes African agency, historical depth, and local perspectives becomes even more urgent. Only by embracing this broader, more accurate, nuanced, contextual and human-centered understanding can we move beyond simplistic Western frameworks and appreciate the richness and complexity of Africa's urban story.

Chapter Two

Western Perspectives on Urbanization in Lagos after 1960: Development, Modernization, and the Airlie Paradigm

The era of African independence was spectacular in that it witnessed a pivotal shift in how Western scholars engaged with urbanization on the continent. As new nations like Nigeria emerged from colonial rule, Western academics and policy advisors increasingly turned to development studies, and especially modernization theory, to interpret these transitions. Modernization theory offered a linear, Eurocentric model that imagined all societies progressing from "traditional" to "modern" through industrialization, urban growth, and the adoption of Western-style institutions. While highly attractive to many African elites seeking nation-building strategies, foreign investment, and global legitimacy, this framework also reinforced external dependencies and deepened class inequalities.[100]

This chapter explores how such development thinking, particularly as shaped by American economists, sociologists, and urban theorists, influenced Western representations of post-independence urbanization in Lagos. While Chapter One focused largely on anthropologists whose work framed African urbanism through the lens of culture and tradition during the colonial era, this chapter turns to postcolonial representations shaped by modernization and development paradigms. Despite disciplinary differences, many of these later scholars, working in economics, sociology, and policy studies, continued to carry the baggage of Orientalist assumptions. The "Other" was still defined in terms of lack and belatedness, but now through economic, demographic, and institutional metrics.

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[100] Daniel Immerwahr, "The Politics of Architecture and Urbanism in Postcolonial Lagos, 1960-1986," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 19, no. 2 (Dec., 2007): 171; Frederick Cooper, "Development, Modernization, and the Social Sciences in the Era of Decolonization: The Examples of British and French Africa," *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines* 10, (2004): 22.

In line with the overarching aim of this study, this chapter investigates how Lagos, as both symbol and site of African urban transformation, was interpreted through foreign paradigms that shaped, and at times constrained its developmental trajectory. Drawing from Edward Said's *Orientalism*, this chapter shows how modernization theory reframed older Orientalist logics in technocratic language, often portraying African cities as deficient or transitional spaces.

The 1965 Airlie Conference on Methods and Objectives of Urban Research in Africa serves as a focal point for this analysis. Similar conferences had taken place in Abidjan (1954),[101] Kampala (1959), and Edinburgh (1963),[102] but the Airlie Conference stood out for two reasons: its notably higher participation by American researchers, and its explicit interdisciplinary commitment to understanding African cities through the conceptual lens of modernization.[103] Although these scholars came from diverse fields—anthropology, economics, sociology, and geography—many approached urban Africa through a shared framework that assumed a teleological path toward Western-style development. This marked a departure from earlier anthropological primitivism, yet many of the same assumptions remained intact.[104] Rather than treating African urbanism on its own terms, the Airlie participants largely viewed African cities as laboratories for testing development theories shaped by colonial governance, Cold War rivalry, and the aspirations of newly independent African states.[105]

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[101] Horace Miner, preface to *The City in Modern Africa,* ed. Horace Miner (United Kingdom: London, Pall Mall Press, 1967), ix.

[102] The seminar held at the Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh was themed 'Urbanisation in African Social Change,' and drew representatives from across the globe. See Kenneth Little, "Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 1, no. 2 (Jun., 1963), 239-240 https://www.jstor.org/stable/159034

[103] Horace Miner, "The City and Modernization: An Introduction," in *The City in Modern Africa,* ed. Horace Miner (United Kingdom: London, Pall Mall Press, 1967), 2.

[104] Mabogunje, "Urban Planning and the Post-Colonial State in Africa," 121–203,; Cooper, "Development, Modernization, and the Social Sciences in the Era of Decolonization," 10.

[105] Larry Grubbs, "Bringing "The Gospel of Modernization" to Nigeria: American Nation Builders and Development Planning in the 1960s," *Peace & Change* 31, no. 3, (July 2006): 284; David C. Engerman and Corinna R. Unger, "Introduction: Towards a Global History of Modernization," *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 3, (June 2009): 382.

To understand the assumptions guiding the Airlie Conference scholars, it is necessary to briefly outline the intellectual foundations of modernization theory and its close cousin, development theory. Emerging after World War II and gaining traction during the Cold War, modernization theory proposed that all societies pass through universal stages of growth, culminating in the political and economic structures of Western industrial democracies. In this framework, "tradition" would inevitably give way to "modernity" through urbanization, industrialization, and market-led development.

American economist Walt Rostow, a central figure in this paradigm, famously outlined a linear path of economic "stages" culminating in "self-sustaining growth." As David Engerman and Corinna Unger explain, Rostow "promoted economic modernization as the cure to all ills in the newly named Third World," arguing that with enough Western capital and expertise, any nation could follow the U.S. model. This vision was not only universal but profoundly interventionist, rooted in the belief that American-led transformation would uplift the global South into the liberal capitalist order.[106] Larry Grubbs highlights how modernization theorists expected economic change to trigger a psychological and cultural shift, fostering citizens who were entrepreneurial, rational, and individualistic. These "modern" individuals would then sustain economic growth and political stability. More than an economic doctrine, modernization became a Cold War mission to "remake the world in America's image."[107] Yet, as Arthur Jay Klinghoffer observes, this vision was neither analytically precise nor politically neutral. Though often portrayed as unilinear and irreversible, modernization theory oversimplified historical complexity and encouraged scholars to fit societies into rigid developmental stages. Klinghoffer

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[106] Engerman and Corinna R. Unger, "Introduction: Towards a Global History of Modernization," 175.
[107] Grubbs, "Bringing "The Gospel of Modernization" to Nigeria," 285

warns against imagining modernization as a finite process, stressing instead that its trajectory is "temporally relative" and inherently open-ended.[108]

What unified many of these perspectives was the assumption that modernization was not only desirable but necessary for Africa's postcolonial future. Whether articulated through economic growth, urban planning, or social reform, modernization theory became the dominant framework for interpreting African development. While figures like Daniel Lerner embraced its universalist logic, others such as Peter Marris and Joseph Spengler began to question its limits, exposing growing tensions within the developmental consensus.

This chapter analyzes how Airlie scholars engaged African urbanization, revealing a spectrum of positions. Some, like Daniel Lerner, advanced prescriptive models grounded in Cold War ideology. Others, like Joseph Spengler and Peter Marris, offered more nuanced assessments, questioning the universal applicability of Western models and emphasizing context-sensitive planning. Horace Miner, in particular, called for an adaptive and interdisciplinary approach to understanding urban change. These scholars collectively expose the ideological tensions at the heart of postcolonial development discourse: between externally imposed frameworks and local realities, between modernization theory and the historical experiences of African cities.

This chapter argues that while the Airlie Conference brought interdisciplinary attention to African urbanization, many of its participants approached the subject through the lens of modernization theory, importing Euro-American models of economic development that failed to account for Africa's unique historical, political, and spatial realities. By analyzing the positions of individual scholars along a spectrum, from uncritical modernization advocates to more

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[108] Arthur Jay Klinghoffer, "Modernisation and Political Development in Africa," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 11, no. 1 (Mar., 1973): 3-6.

context-sensitive analysts, this chapter reveals how Orientalist assumptions persisted in mid-century development thought, albeit reframed in economic and technocratic language.

Daniel Lerner: Modernization as a Universal Economic Pathway

Daniel Lerner, Ford Professor of Sociology and International Communications at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), stood at the high-modernist end of the development spectrum at the 1965 Airlie Conference. As one of the most uncompromising proponents of modernization theory, Lerner approached African urbanization through a rigid, technocratic lens shaped by Cold War developmental logic. His framework offered a universal trajectory from "traditional" to "modern" society, anchored in industrialization, urban expansion, and the internalization of Western institutional norms. Rather than attending to the historical or spatial particularities of African societies, Lerner treated modernization as a deterministic process that all new states had effectively "opted into," whether or not they fully understood its consequences.[109]

Lerner defined modernization as "the social process of which development is the economic component," asserting that truly modern societies would achieve "self-sustaining growth over the long run" both economically and institutionally.[110] He insisted that modernization involved far more than increased output: it demanded the integration of human resources into an infrastructure of skills and values that would operate autonomously, without perpetual external support. This logic paralleled the broader postwar development consensus, reflected in models such as Walt Rostow's "stages of growth" and echoed in the policy advice of

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[109] Daniel Lerner, "Comparative Analysis of Processes of Modernization" in *The City in Modern Africa*, ed. Horace Miner (United Kingdom: London, Pall Mall Press, 1967), 22.
[110] Lerner, "Comparative Analysis of Processes of Modernization," 21.

American economists like Arnold Rivkin and Wolfgang Stolper, who helped shape Nigeria's First National Development Plan.[111]

Despite acknowledging that modernization was not desirable or feasible for all societies, Lerner argued that newly independent states had already committed themselves to it and were now bound to its demands which they neither fully grasped nor could afford to ignore.[112] This framing exposed the coercive logic at the heart of Cold War modernization theory: once a society embarked on the path to development, deviation was treated not as a rational alternative but as a failure of comprehension or will. This ideological rigidity positioned Africa not as an equal partner in defining modernity, but as a site of tutelage, where Western experts could guide institutional transformation through technical assistance and economic planning. This was particularly relevant to postcolonial nations like Nigeria, where American economists shaped the National Development Plan (1962–68) while ignoring local economic complexities and informal economies.

Lerner's recommendation that African societies "plan and ponder, try and test" modernization strategies may initially sound cautious and context-sensitive.[113] However, this seemingly open-ended guidance was undercut by his description of Africa as "the most favoured development area in the world"—a claim rooted in Cold War optimism that imagined the continent as a blank slate for testing Western economic models. This vision ignored the structural legacies of colonialism, the complexities of informal economies, and the deep cultural continuities that shaped African urban life. For Lerner, the African city was less a lived space

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[111] See Grubbs, "Bringing "The Gospel of Modernization" to Nigeria," 284-286.
[112] Lerner, "Comparative Analysis," 22.
[113] Lerner, "Comparative Analysis," 38.

than a site for experimentation—a place where Euro-American theories could be tested and refined.

While Lerner presented modernization as a neutral framework, its application in Nigeria reveals deeper political entanglements. Nigerian elites, eager to assert postcolonial sovereignty and attract foreign capital, embraced Western development models as a means of demonstrating progress. Yet this voluntary adoption did not ensure autonomy. As Grubbs shows, the work of Rivkin and Stolper turned Nigeria into a "laboratory" for Cold War development experiments, where modernization theory became the blueprint for national planning.[114] The result was a deeply uneven development process that concentrated power in the hands of urban elites while neglecting rural livelihoods and reinforcing foreign dependencies. By 1967, the First Republic had collapsed into civil war, and as Grubbs observes, "the chronic external debt crisis, corruption, and neocolonial trade dependence mock the ideals, pretensions, and dreams of American and African nation builders alike."[115]

Among the Airlie scholars, Lerner represents the high-modernist pole—an advocate of a linear, prescriptive model of economic and social change. He exemplifies what Frederick Cooper described as the modernization theorists' belief in "the direct path from tradition to modernity"—a prescriptive framework that reduced political and historical complexities to a single, linear trajectory of economic growth.[116] His work contrasts sharply with more context-sensitive figures at the conference, such as Joseph Spengler, Peter Marris, and Horace Miner, who recognized that development had to be negotiated within complex local and historical constraints. In this sense, Lerner's vision of modernization reinforced Orientalist assumptions: it cast African societies as

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[114] Grubbs, "The Gospel of Modernization," 299.
[115] Grubbs, "The Gospel of Modernization," 299.
[116] Cooper, "Development, Modernization, and the Social Sciences in the Era of Decolonization," 31.

belated, transitional, and incomplete, always striving toward an external standard defined by Euro-American precedent.

While Lerner advocated a highly prescriptive vision of modernization rooted in Cold War economic logic, Joseph Spengler brought a more measured and empirical approach to African urbanization. Drawing on his background in economics and demography, Spengler questioned the applicability of universal models like optimum city size and the rank-size rule to African contexts. His analysis opened space for understanding African urban challenges as historically and spatially contingent, marking a shift from rigid *developmentalism* toward a more grounded, policy-sensitive critique.

Joseph Spengler on the Development Spectrum: Economistic Caution within a Western Framework

Joseph Spengler's contributions at the Airlie Conference showcased an intricate intersection of economic analysis and urban policy, shaping his nuanced perspective on African urbanization. Dividing his presentation into four parts, he emphasized the role of deliberate policy interventions to mitigate urban challenges in Africa. His argument resonates deeply with Peter Marris' later critique of slum clearance policies in Lagos. Spengler's call for policy-driven solutions reflected both an awareness of the unique socio-economic dynamics of newly independent African states and a cautious critique of Western urban theories, such as Optimum City Size and Rank-Size Theory. He argued that these frameworks, often derived from *stochastic* processes and Western models, failed to account for the intricate colonial, geographical, and socio-political histories of African urbanization. His observation that "it is possible...that [the rank-size rule] does not necessarily operate so universally…" underscores a recognition of the

deviations and exceptions inherent in African urban development.[117] Spengler highlighted the tendency for African cities, particularly port cities like Lagos, to dominate over secondary towns—a phenomenon often described as "urban hypertrophy." He observed that this condition was sustained by the excessive growth of capital and port cities without parallel industrial development, producing an uneven islandic pattern of economic activity.[118]

However, Spengler's framework, despite its caution, still mirrors critiques found in the work of J. Barry Riddell. Riddell argues that comparisons between African urbanization and the historical trajectories of industrialized nations assume "universality" in urban transformation patterns while ignoring the fundamental differences in processes.[119] Processes unique to Africa, such as the "Africanization" of administrative systems, shifts from circular to permanent migration, and the socio-cultural impacts of independence, challenge the validity of comparisons that equate African cities to European urban centers of the past.[120] This critique aligns with the analysis of Edward W. Soja and Richard J. Tobin, who observe that most regional and spatial development theories, like broader development economics, have been derived from structural-functionalist concepts that assume a condition of dynamic equilibrium in social and spatial systems.[121] They argue that much of modern geographical research has been concerned with uncovering "order and regularity" in settlement patterns, city growth, industrial location, and communication structures, reflecting a bias toward stability and predictability.[122] As Soja and Tobin emphasize, regional development theory largely extends equilibrium models from

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[117] Joseph J Spengler, "Africa and The Theory of Optimum City Size" in Miner, *The City in Modern Africa*, 63.
[118] Spengler, "Africa and The Theory of Optimum City Size," 61.
[119] J. Barry Riddell, "Is Continuing Urbanization Possible in West Africa?" *African Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (Apr., 1980): 71.
[120] Riddell, "Is Continuing Urbanization Possible," 70-71.
[121] Edward W. Soja and Richard J. Tobin, "The Geography of Modernization: Paths, Patterns and Processes of Spatial Change in Developing Countries," in *Third World Urbanization*, ed. Janet Abu-Lughod and Robert Hay (New York: Methuen, Inc, 1986), 157.
[122] Soja and Tobin, "The Geography of Modernization," 155

economics into spatial analysis, treating deviations from presumed norms as problems to be corrected rather than historically contingent realities.[123] Spengler's cautious reliance on Western models of optimum city size and urban distribution risks falling into this structural-functionalist trap, even as he shows more sensitivity than rigid modernization theorists like Lerner. His approach suggests an attempt to balance economic pragmatism with historical realities, but ultimately remains constrained by assumptions of ordered progression and external benchmarks.

Spengler's analysis implicitly acknowledged the core-periphery dynamics later described by Riddell, where dominant urban centers drew resources away from rural peripheries, deepening socio-economic disparities. This "internal colonialism," perpetuated by colonial and postcolonial planning, reinforced the primacy of cities like Lagos at the expense of rural development.[124] Spengler's recognition of these imbalances highlights his more pragmatic approach compared to Lerner's universal modernization optimism, but his solutions still leaned heavily toward policy adjustments without fully questioning the deeper colonial structures that shaped urban inequalities. Stefan Andreasson's critique of neocolonial frameworks within development discourse reinforces this point by showing how many postcolonial interventions continue to recycle reductive understandings of African societies rather than fundamentally rethinking the foundations of development theory itself.[125]

While critical of simplistic Western models, Spengler demonstrated appreciable optimism regarding Africa's capacity to address urban challenges through policy. For instance, he advocated for the modernization of agriculture as a foundation for sustainable urbanization, suggesting that rural stabilization could alleviate pressures on capital cities. His argument

[123] Soja and Tobin, "The Geography of Modernization, 159.
[124] Riddell, "Is Continuing Urbanization Possible," 72.
[125] Andreasson, "Orientalism and African Development Studies," 983.

resonates with Riddell's analysis of "exploding cities in unexploding economies," where rapid urban migration outpaces economic growth, exacerbating underemployment, informality, and infrastructure collapse.[126] Importantly, Spengler's call for policy-driven approaches finds support in Akin Mabogunje's later work on African urbanization. Mabogunje emphasized that while colonial legacies constrained spatial organization, proactive, context-specific urban policies could create more balanced and sustainable urban systems.[127] However, Mabogunje also warns, as Spengler does not fully, that addressing Africa's urban challenges requires confronting the deep-seated economic and political structures inherited from colonial rule, not simply applying technocratic fixes.[128] Moreover, scholars like James Ferguson caution against the depoliticization of development through technical planning narratives, a tendency that partially persists in Spengler's framework. While Spengler advocates deliberate action, he risks framing urban crises as primarily administrative rather than deeply political and historical phenomena.[129]

If modernization theorists are placed on a spectrum from rigid determinism to adaptive pragmatism, Spengler occupies a critical middle ground. Unlike Daniel Lerner, he avoids presenting modernization as inevitable or self-justifying. Yet, by anchoring his analysis to Western urban theories and historical benchmarks, he stops short of fully embracing the endogenous trajectories of African cities. His pragmatic emphasis on policy aligns him closer to more context-aware figures like Peter Marris, but his lingering reliance on Western comparative models tempers his contextual sensitivity.

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[126] Riddel, "Is Continuing Urbanization Possible," 69.
[127] Mabogunje, "Urban Planning," 122-123.
[128] Mabogunje, "Urban Planning," 123.
[129] Frederick Cooper, review of *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development', Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho,* by James Ferguson, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16, No. 4 (Dec., 1990): 771-774.

Spengler's framework offers valuable insights into the policy dimensions of African urbanization, but his cautionary approach remains tied to modernization's universalist assumptions. As scholars like Mabogunje, Andreasson, and Ferguson show, addressing Africa's urban challenges requires a more profound decolonization of development thought—one that recognizes the unique historical trajectories of African cities rather than measuring them against external benchmarks. In this sense, Spengler's work serves both as an early warning against uncritical application of Western models and as a reminder of the limits of development theory when it fails to fully engage with postcolonial realities. While Joseph Spengler offered a cautious critique of applying rigid economic models to African urbanization, Peter Marris approached the challenges from a more sociological angle, focusing on the social costs of Western-inspired urban policies and the tensions between external models and local realities.

Peter Marris: A Sociologist's Perspective on Urban Policies in Africa

Peter Marris' contribution to the study of African urbanization remains a vital critique of Western-oriented urban policies and their socio-economic impacts. His Airlie chapter presentation titled "Slum Clearance and Family Life in Lagos and Motives and Methods: Reflections on a Study in Lagos," serves as compelling examples of how top-down interventions shaped African cities during the postcolonial era. Through the lens of Orientalist critique, Marris' insights expose the tensions between imported models of modernization and the lived realities of postcolonial urban societies.

Marris' observations underscore how colonial urban planning shaped the socio-spatial fabric of Lagos. His critique of slum clearance policies must be viewed through the Orientalist framework, which reveals how these policies maintained colonial spatial hierarchies, prioritizing European neighborhoods while marginalizing the African majority. Clearing the slums treated

African urban areas as sites of disorder, necessitating Western intervention to impose structure and modernity, and framed urban planning in Lagos as a civilizing mission. This dynamic aligns with Akin Mabogunje's critique that colonial urban policies created anti-developmental spatial structures, emphasizing resource extraction over equitable urban growth.[130] Marris' work highlights the enduring impact of these structures, as colonial segregation gave way to class-based inequalities in postcolonial Lagos—a phenomenon also noted by both Daniel Immerwahr and Matthew Gandy.[131]

Marris' study of slum clearance policies in Lagos exemplifies the Orientalist logic of top-down governance, where policies imposed from above often ignored the socio-economic realities of local communities. The study shows the disruption of livelihoods, the marginalization of grassroots agency and the framing urban poverty as a moral deficit. Marris documented how slum clearance displaced traders, craftsmen, and families whose economic survival depended on localized trust networks. The clearance policies reflected a broader pattern of postcolonial administrators adopting colonial-era governance tactics while sidelining the voices of those most affected by urban planning decisions. Similar to Orientalist narratives, the policies framed poverty and informal housing as failures to modernize, rather than outcomes of systemic neglect and inequality. This perspective aligns with James Ferguson's analysis of how development discourse depoliticizes socio-economic challenges, treating them as technical problems while reinforcing existing power structures.[132]

Marris critiqued the application of **Western urban planning models** to African cities, arguing that they failed to capture the unique socio-economic and historical contexts of

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[130] Mabogunje, "Urban Planning," 138, 151.
[131] Gandy, "Planning, Anti-planning and the Infrastructure," 375; Immerwahr, "The Politics of Architecture and Urbanism," 166; Mabogunje, "Urban Planning," 123.
[132] Cooper, review of *The Anti-Politics Machine*, 773.

postcolonial urbanization. His concern was less about specific spatial theories like the Theory of Optimum City Size, and more about the broader danger of imposing external frameworks onto African societies. This critique resonates with the Orientalist framework's emphasis on the imposition of external models and the idea of Africa's developmental autonomy. Western planning concepts, like those derived from Marris' earlier study of Bethnal Green, London, assumed universality, ignoring the distinct cultural and historical trajectories of African cities. Marris challenged the assumption that African cities must replicate Western urban trajectories, calling instead for context-sensitive approaches grounded in local realities.[133] This theme also appears in J. Barry Riddell's critique, where he emphasizes that urbanization policies often failed because they relied on external benchmarks that were inappropriate for African contexts.[134]

Marris' reflections reveal a deeper insight: that urban development is not simply a technical process of achieving economic growth, but a complex contest between competing motives: tradition, pride, status, and innovation.[135] In a powerful passage, Marris distinguishes between two intellectual starting points: the social anthropologist's attempt to understand African societies on their own terms, and the modernization theorist's assumption of a singular developmental pathway driven by economic growth. Citing Daniel Lerner's model directly, Marris critiques the idea that all societies naturally move toward "self-sustaining economic growth" through a single, universal process.[136] He argues that African urban societies often reinterpret their goals in ways that defy modernization orthodoxy, choosing to prioritize social cohesion, cultural restoration, or political independence over purely economic metrics. If

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[133] Peter Marris, "Motives and Methods: Reflections on a Study in Lagos," in *The City in Modern Africa,* ed. Horace Miner (United Kingdom: London, Pall Mall Press, 1967), 50-51.
[134] Riddel, "Is Continuing Urbanization Possible," 71
[135] Marris, "Motives and Methods," 51.
[136] Marris, "Motives and Methods," 51.

scholars cling rigidly to prescriptive models without adjusting to these realities, Marris warns, they risk producing analyses that are irrelevant to the actual lived experiences and aspirations of African cities.[137] This critical self-awareness strengthens Marris' position as a more adaptive and reflexive scholar within development studies, highlighting the importance of listening to the evolving values and priorities of African urban populations rather than imposing predetermined pathways of "progress."

Within the broader development spectrum discussed at the Airlie Conference, Marris occupies a position much closer to adaptive pragmatism than ideological rigidity. Unlike Daniel Lerner, he rejects the assumption of a universal path to modernization, instead emphasizing the complex, contested nature of social change. Marris demonstrates a critical sensitivity to the lingering legacies of colonialism, recognizing that urban policy must address the lived realities of African cities rather than simply following imported models. His work echoes Mabogunje's call for African urbanization studies to prioritize the internal dynamics of African cities, respecting their historical, cultural, and political specificities, which means "great sensitivity to [Africa's] emerging internal and situational complexity."[138]

Framed within the overarching Orientalist perspective, Marris' analysis acts as a pivotal critique that reveals the shortcomings of Western-focused urban planning approaches in postcolonial Africa. His work not only critiques the socio-economic costs of slum clearance in Lagos but also challenges the Orientalist logic underpinning modernization discourse. By emphasizing the need for context-based, inclusive policies, Marris advances the call for a decolonized approach to African urbanization—one that centers African agency, experience, and aspirations. While Peter Marris emphasized the dangers of imposing rigid modernization models

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[137] Marris, "Motives and Methods," 50-51.
[138] Mabogunje, "Urban Planning," 123.

onto African urban realities, another Airlie conferee, Horace Miner, advanced this critique even further by questioning the very foundations of urban theory itself. Miner pushed beyond critiques of specific policies like slum clearance to interrogate how African cities were conceptualized within academic and development discourse. His work invites a broader rethinking of modernization not just as a policy error, but as an inadequate framework for understanding the complexity of urban change in postcolonial Africa.

Horace Miner: Challenging Modernization Through an Interdisciplinary Lens

Horace Miner emerged as one of the most cautious and reflective voices at the Airlie Conference, offering a vital critique of modernization theory and its universalist assumptions. While scholars like Marris emphasized the need to adapt Western urban planning models to African realities, Horace Miner went further by questioning the very assumptions underlying modernization discourse itself. Drawing on his background in both anthropology and sociology, Miner approached African urbanization with a more cautious, interdisciplinary perspective, highlighting the paradoxes and complexities of postcolonial urban growth. His contribution at the Airlie Conference offers a vital critique of modernization as a universal framework, advocating instead for a more adaptive and context-sensitive understanding of urban change.

Miner opened his chapter by acknowledging Africa's rapid political and demographic transformations, noting that although Africa remained the least urbanized continent, its cities had become increasingly important hubs of political, economic, and cultural power. As he pointed out, the "habitat of this new elite is the city," where commerce, governance, innovation, and international engagement now converged.[139] This urban growth was not merely a replication of European models; it reflected new forms of identity, power, and social organization. Yet Miner

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[139] Miner, "The City and Modernization: An Introduction," in *The City in Modern Africa,* ed. Horace Miner, 1.

was careful to highlight the dangers of oversimplification. He warned that scholars who sought to understand African urbanization by drawing analogies with Western histories or theories risked misunderstanding the unique trajectories of African societies. In his words, "Attempts to understand today's African as a history of primitive and modern runs the risk of overlooking him as a new kind of person dealing with new kinds of problems requiring new kinds of solutions."[140] This critique resonates strongly with Edward Said's broader Orientalist framework: the danger of forcing African realities into Western-derived developmental narratives without acknowledging historical and cultural specificity.

Miner's concept of "over-urbanization" further complicates simplistic modernization assumptions. He argued that urbanization, although often seen as a prerequisite for industrialization, did not automatically lead to economic development. Instead, rapid rural-to-urban migration in African cities often resulted in unemployment, poverty, and infrastructure strain without corresponding industrial growth.[141] This insight challenges modernization theorists like Daniel Lerner, who assumed that urbanization would naturally fuel economic expansion. It also complements critiques by scholars such as J. Barry Riddell and James Ferguson, who argue that unchecked urban growth often masks deepening socio-economic inequalities rather than resolving them. In Miner's framework, the elite's political and economic dominance was disproportionately city-based, intensifying the urgency to develop urban services even when national economies remained overwhelmingly rural. His nuanced observation of the competing pressures within African cities, between political elites, impoverished migrants, and strained infrastructures, demonstrates an acute sensitivity to the unevenness of postcolonial urbanization.

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[140] Miner, "The City and Modernization," 1.
[141] Miner, "The City and Modernization," 12.

Perhaps Miner's most important contribution lies in his call for interdisciplinary approaches to urban studies. He famously remarked that "everyone knows what a city is, except the experts," emphasizing that the multifaceted nature of cities defied rigid definitions and demanded flexible frameworks.[142] Rather than imposing static economic models or equilibrium theories, Miner advocated for research that acknowledged the fluidity, complexity, and contradictions inherent in African urbanization. This aligns with Mabogunje's argument that African urbanization must be understood "on its own terms," with great sensitivity to its emerging internal structures and situational dynamics.[143] Miner thus challenged both the methodological rigidity of Western urban studies and the ideological underpinnings of modernization theory. His interdisciplinary approach anticipated later calls for "decolonizing" urban theory by moving beyond development models that treated African cities as incomplete versions of their European counterparts.

A particularly striking element of Miner's chapter is his reflection on the motives behind urban research. Like Marris, he recognized the risk of Western scholars projecting their own anxieties about modernization and governance onto African cities, framing them as problems to be solved rather than distinct socio-political entities to be understood. This critique resonates deeply with the Orientalist framework, challenging scholars to rethink the purpose and method of urban research, particularly its tendency to impose external frameworks while disregarding indigenous knowledge and agency. By emphasizing the need to reassess the starting points and motivations of urban studies, Miner called for a fundamental shift in how African cities are represented and understood. His reflections serve as a cautionary call to approach African

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[142] Miner, "The City and Modernization," 1.
[143] Mabogunje, "Urban Planning," 123.

urbanization with humility, adaptability, and a commitment to inclusivity—a process he termed controlled comparison.[144]

Compared to other Airlie scholars, Miner clearly occupies the most context-sensitive position on the development spectrum. Unlike Lerner, he rejected universalist assumptions about modernization as a linear or inevitable process. Unlike Spengler, he moved beyond economic productivity frameworks to interrogate the deeper social and political dynamics of urban change. His emphasis on complexity, adaptability, and interdisciplinary analysis marks him as a forerunner of later critiques of development discourse by postcolonial theorists such as Ferguson and Riddell. Where Marris critiqued specific urban policies like slum clearance, Miner critiqued the entire intellectual architecture that underpinned those policies. His work thus opens space for thinking about African urbanization not simply as a question of modernization but as a field of competing claims, values, and possibilities.

Miner's broader reflections in his essay further underscore his context-sensitive approach to modernization. Aware that political independence alone could not sustain the momentum of transformation, he argued that the aspirations associated with decolonization needed to be institutionalized through social mechanisms such as the "routinization of charisma" and the education of a new generation toward greater autonomy beyond tradition.[145] In contrast to development models that presumed a simple transition from colonial rule to modern nationhood, Miner recognized that modernization required profound internal social reforms—an insight that distinguished his analysis from more mechanical modernization theorists like Lerner. Moreover, Miner emphasized the importance of "controlled comparison" across societies, warning that uncritical transfers of Western hypotheses to African contexts would lead to misleading

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[144] Miner, "The City and Modernization," 17.
[145] Miner, "The City and Modernization," 14.

conclusions.[146] His advocacy for rigorous, culturally sensitive comparative methods placed him firmly in the camp of scholars urging a more careful, adaptive engagement with African urbanization, rather than reproducing Orientalist hierarchies through universalizing models.

Horace Miner's reflections at Airlie represent a significant step toward a decolonized, context-driven approach to urbanization in postcolonial Africa. His skepticism of modernization theory, his advocacy for interdisciplinary methods, and his recognition of African cities as sites of innovation and transformation, not simply as problems to be solved, remain vital correctives to dominant development narratives. By urging scholars to rethink their frameworks and motivations, Miner anticipated many of the debates that would later emerge in postcolonial urban studies, offering a critical lens through which to understand the ongoing evolution of African urbanism.

Airlie Conference scholars underscore the persistence of Orientalist assumptions within development discourse, even as some voices began to challenge the universality and inevitability of modernization theory. The Airlie Conference reflected both continuity and rupture in Western thinking about African cities. While modernization theory provided a powerful lens for interpreting postcolonial change, its universalist assumptions often masked the unique historical, political, and spatial realities of urbanization. Some scholars, like Miner and Marris, moved beyond rigid frameworks to call for more grounded, context-driven approaches. Yet, the enduring legacy of Orientalist thought persisted, shaping how urban Africa was imagined, studied, and governed in the decades after independence. Placed along a spectrum of development thought, the Airlie scholars range from Daniel Lerner's rigid advocacy of universal modernization to Horace Miner's interdisciplinary call for context-sensitive approaches. Joseph

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[146] Miner, "The City and Modernization," 17.

Spengler and Peter Marris occupy intermediate positions, acknowledging the limitations of Western models but still constrained by their underlying assumptions. Together, they illustrate the tensions within mid-century Western engagements with African urbanization—tensions that would shape policy debates for decades to come.

Chapter Three

Framing Disorder: Cold War Narratives and the Urbanization of Lagos 1970s-1990

The late 1960s to the early 1990s marked a critical moment in Nigeria's urban, political, and economic history. As the developmental optimism of the early 1960s gave way to deepening political fractures, the discourse around African urbanization began to reflect the era's turbulence. The waning of colonial authority had not produced the stability that Western modernization theorists envisioned. Instead, the late 1960s ushered in new challenges: military coups, civil wars, and the intensifying scramble for Africa's natural resources, particularly oil, and the context of Cold War geopolitics. For Nigeria, and Lagos in particular, the civil war (1967–70), and the explosive growth of oil wealth, coincided with rapid urbanization during this era, marking a sharp shift in domestic governance and Western interest. As Lagos emerged as a focal point for postcolonial anxieties and economic ambition, Western perspectives shifted as well, from scholarly diagnoses of modernization to media-driven portrayals of chaos, corruption, disorder and dysfunction. While scholars and policymakers continued to debate Africa's developmental trajectory, media portrayals often worked in tandem with academic discourses to project dominant images of African urbanism. These narratives presented Lagos as a city on the brink, paradoxically modern and dysfunctional, cosmopolitan yet chaotic.

To analyze these portrayals, this chapter draws on Edward Said's *Orientalism*. It uses Pauline H. Baker's work as a bridge between scholarly and journalistic representations, positioning her text as both a scholarly contribution and a reflection of broader Western attitudes of the time. This chapter argues that Western representations of Lagos's urbanization between the late 1960s and early 1990s were shaped by Cold War anxieties about African instability, fears of postcolonial fragmentation, and the rising strategic importance of Nigerian oil. Rather

than viewing Lagos on its own historical and social terms, many Western accounts projected narratives of failure, chaos, and incomplete modernization onto the city, reinforcing broader Orientalist tropes of African incapacity and crisis. Ultimately, this chapter situates Western narratives about Lagos within the wider framework of Edward Said's theory of *Orientalism*, showing how familiar patterns of representing the non-West, through distortion, essentialization, and paternalistic anxiety, persisted even as the language of Cold War development and modernization replaced older colonial vocabularies. By analyzing both journalistic accounts and Pauline Baker's political science scholarship, this chapter reveals how Western discourse constructed Lagos as a cautionary symbol of postcolonial urban collapse—an image rooted in Cold War ideologies, modernization theory, and anxieties about the future of resource-rich African states.

Contextual Backdrop: Oil, War, and Western Interest

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–70) is a crucial backdrop for this chapter's analysis. The war, a violent secessionist conflict that deeply unsettled Nigeria's political order, intensified fears among Western powers that Africa's most populous country, and one of its largest oil producers, might disintegrate. In the war's aftermath, Western representations of Lagos increasingly depicted it as a precarious metropolis teetering between economic promise and political failure. As oil revenues flooded into Nigeria during the 1970s oil boom, Western commentators paradoxically portrayed Lagos as a beacon of prosperity and a dystopian symbol of Africa's postcolonial crises. They represented a chaotic city overwhelmed by rural migrants, infrastructural collapse, and political corruption. The Cold War context, with the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union all vying for influence in postcolonial Africa, shaped these

representations, embedding Lagos within global narratives of ideological struggle, resource competition, and modernity's uneven geographies.

While Western scholars like Pauline Baker approached Nigerian politics and urbanization through a technocratic and state-centered lens, the broader dynamics of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) exposed a more overt entanglement of Cold War geopolitics, resource exploitation, and foreign intervention. Although Western journalists and scholars emphasized instability, internal corruption, and military rule, they often downplayed the geopolitical calculus behind foreign involvement. Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton note that Britain and the US initially hesitated to support either side, but later, the USSR became Nigeria's primary military supplier.[147] Meanwhile, as Chibuike Uche documents, British support for 'One Nigeria' was largely motivated by a desire to protect Shell-BP's significant oil investments, a concern intentionally kept from public debate."[148] Petroleum, in particular, became a central force in shaping Nigeria's economy and determining international responses to its internal crisis. As Godfrey B. Warren has shown, oil was not a peripheral issue; it was a "threshold ingredient" in the Biafran secession and the broader military and diplomatic strategies of both the Federal Government and foreign powers.[149]

By 1967, oil exploration in Nigeria had become a high-stakes enterprise. Multinational corporations like Shell-BP, Gulf Oil, and other American firms had invested heavily in the region, attracted by the country's low-sulphur crude and its advantageous location for both European and American markets.[150] These investments not only elevated the economic value of

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[147] Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 178.
[148] Chibuike Uche, "Oil, British Interests and the Nigerian Civil War," *The Journal of African History* 49, no. 1 (2008): 134.
[149] Godfrey B. Warren, "Petroleum and the Nigerian Civil War 1967–1970," *The Fletcher Forum* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 70.
[150] Warren, "Petroleum and the Nigerian Civil War," 66.

Nigeria in Western eyes but also heightened anxieties around political instability and national fragmentation. Oil was no longer just a commodity; it was a strategic asset, and Nigeria became a battleground for influence among Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union.

Britain's approach to the conflict was shaped not by ideological commitment to unity or democracy, but by calculated economic interests. Although sympathetic to a united Nigeria, the British government initially refrained from firm commitments, wary of jeopardizing its investments while Biafra controlled the major oil fields.[151] Despite Britain maintaining a public posture of neutrality or principled opposition to secession, Uche's findings from declassified Public Records Office documents reveal a much stronger private alignment with Nigerian unity, dictated by oil interests.[152] Shell-BP was advised to continue payments to the Federal government and delay recognition of Biafra to preserve British leverage and forestall a sea blockade. As the tide of war shifted, Britain escalated its support, supplying nearly four-fifths of Nigeria's arms by 1968. Justifications for this support included "traditional" supply relationships and a desire to protect British financial interests, including the $250 million tied up in Nigerian oil installations.[153]

The Soviet Union, for its part, entered the fray partly in response to Anglo-American hesitation, providing arms to Lagos as part of its Cold War strategy to forge ties with postcolonial African states. France, though publicly supporting Biafra, hedged its bets, continuing trade with the Federal Government to preserve its $100 million in Nigerian investments.[154] Meanwhile, American oil companies expanded production during the war, with

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[151] Warren, "Petroleum and the Nigerian Civil War," 75
[152] Uche, "Oil, British Interests and the Nigerian Civil War," 112-113.
[153] Warren, 75-76.
[154] Warren, 77-79.

Gulf Oil increasing output from 57,000 to 200,000 barrels per day between 1967 and 1969.[155] American investment more than doubled during the war years, revealing a quiet but powerful alignment with the Federal Government, driven not by ideological solidarity but by petroleum security.[156]

These developments challenge the development discourse that casts Nigeria as an independent actor pursuing modernization on its terms. Instead, what emerges is a portrait of a postcolonial state ensnared in a complex web of Cold War realpolitik, where economic development, national unity, and modernization were often subordinated to external priorities. Foreign powers used the language of aid, diplomacy, and modernization to mask their deeper commitments to resource control and geopolitical advantage. In this context, Western narratives, whether journalistic or scholarly, often obscured the centrality of oil and global capital in shaping Nigerian sovereignty. The Orientalist logic persisted in subtler forms: African instability was pathologized, while foreign economic motivations remained under-examined. Just as modernization theorists in the earlier post-independence period assumed that development would follow Western models, Cold War policy and media actors assumed that resource-rich African states could be disciplined and instrumentalized through aid, arms, and selective alliances. The Nigerian Civil War, therefore, offers a revealing case where development, oil, and Cold War rivalry converged, not to elevate African agency, but to reassert external control under new postcolonial terms.

Pauline H. Baker and the Scholarly Narrative of Urban Disorder

Pauline H. Baker's *Urbanization and Political Change: The Politics of Lagos, 1917–1967* [1974] offers a foundational analysis of Lagos's urban and political transformations.

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[155] Warren, 80
[156] Warren, 80

Positioned at the intersection of political science and urban studies, Baker's work contributes not only empirical detail but also a conceptual framing that reflects the dominant Western paradigms of the Cold War era. Her study categorizes Lagos's development into phases of early, incipient, and modern urbanization, charting the shift from a colonial port town to a bustling metropolis and national capital. Yet it is precisely in this framing, with her use of modernization theory and implicit comparisons to Western urban models, that the study reveals and reproduces the Orientalist assumptions that this chapter seeks to interrogate.

In the preface to her book, Baker presents Lagos as a city besieged by urban dysfunction. She catalogues a litany of crises: housing shortages, crime, pollution, administrative inadequacy, corruption, and unemployment, all of which are said to be compounded by "uncontrolled expansion," "painfully poor social services," and an "unstable urban population."[157] While such observations reflect genuine postcolonial challenges, Baker situates Lagos within a dual comparison: on the one hand, as mirroring Western urban crises ("like many Western cities"), and on the other, as exacerbated by conditions specific to underdeveloped contexts. This comparative framing underscores her tendency to assess Lagos through a Western lens, often invoking Euro-American categories of urban success and failure.

Baker's underlying framework is shaped by modernization theory, which is evident in her repeated inquiries into whether urbanization leads to political stability, elite domination, or revolutionary change. She frames the African city as a site of uncertainty, asking whether it inherently modernizes its inhabitants or whether "traditionalism survives in the urban environment."[158] These binary questions—tradition vs. modernity, elite vs. non-elite, order vs. upheaval—reflect a Western epistemological impulse to decode African urbanism through

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[157] Baker, *Urbanization and Political Change,* viii-ix.
[158] Baker, *Urbanization and Political Change,* 3.

developmental typologies. This is not unlike what Edward Said and V. Y. Mudimbe describe as the reductive repetition or categorization of familiar tropes when the West attempts to explain non-Western societies using pre-set categories.[159] It also resonates with Stefan Andreasson's argument regarding the reductive repletion motif in theories of African underdevelopment.[160]

Baker's critique of earlier scholars who overlooked African cities is notable. She acknowledges that much of the early research in African studies neglected urban areas in favour of rural "tribal" societies, treating cities as anomalies. However, despite this self-awareness, her own methodology reflects the limitations of cross-cultural political science at the time. She admits the tools available were "primitive at best," and designs her own scheme that, while ambitious, remains tethered to the need for comparability with Western cases.[161] Her goal of achieving relevance in "comparative politics" inadvertently reinforces a Eurocentric frame by which African cities must be intelligible in Western theoretical terms to be considered valid.

Her treatment of colonial Lagos similarly reflects a modernization narrative. The onset of "incipient urbanization" is marked by colonial interventions, including the suppression of the slave trade, new economic activities, and infrastructural development such as the railway and harbor expansion.[162] In this account, urbanization is catalyzed not by indigenous agency or pre-colonial complexity, but by colonial modernization, a familiar trope in postwar development literature. This narrative aligns with Said's legitimizing discourse of empire, where colonial presence is cast as the engine of progress. Even in her sociological observations, Baker draws implicit contrasts between Lagos and cities in the West. She notes that the Lagos ghetto, unlike its American counterpart, is dominated not by lower-class migrants but by "native-born

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[159] Mazrui, "The Re-Invention of Africa: Edward Said, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Beyond," 75.
[160] Andreasson, "Orientalism and African Development Studies," 973.
[161] Baker, *Urbanization and Political Change,* 12.
[162] Baker, 21, 31-32.

inhabitants" who own land in the city center, forming a "landed lower class."[163] This inversion of the American model is presented as an anomaly, further emphasizing Lagos's departure from expected urban norms. Yet this perceived departure invites explanation only because the Western city is taken as the normative baseline and a hallmark of Orientalist thought.

In sum, while Baker's study remains a valuable and often empirically rich account of Lagos's political development, it is emblematic of the epistemological tensions in 1970s Western scholarship on Africa. Her work reflects an effort to make sense of urban Africa within the dominant frameworks of modernization and comparative politics, but in doing so, it also reinscribes Lagos into a narrative of developmental difference. As such, Baker's text serves not only as a historical source but as an artifact of Cold War-era knowledge production, one in which the African city becomes both the subject of empirical inquiry and the object of a civilizational gaze. This scholarly framing found clear resonance in journalistic coverage, particularly in U.S. newspapers like *The New York Times*, which mirrored the developmental anxieties embedded in modernization theory. The following section examines how Western journalists narrated this transformation, particularly in the aftermath of the civil war and through the oil boom of the 1970s.

Western Media Narratives of Oil-Era Urbanization in Lagos

In tandem with scholarly voices like Pauline Baker, Western newspapers portrayed urbanization in Lagos during the oil boom years as an emblem of African dysfunction. In a 1966 article written during the political transitions of the 1960s, *The New York Times* emphasized Nigeria's economic promise and its urban failures. The paper observed, Nigeria faced two problems: the first concern related to achieving a stable transition from military to civilian rule

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[163] Baker, 45

and the second issue, which the article claimed was "less obvious but possibly more important," centered on the "shocking conditions of urban workers," including unemployment, overcrowded and expensive housing, poor transportation, and inadequate sewerage and water. [164] The article described Nigeria as "blessed with a booming, buoyant economy," but warned that this potential could be undermined by continued military rule and inadequate attention to urban conditions.

Such portrayals echoed what Sarah Monsoon identified as "larger patterns of knowledge production and power, … voices—patterned narratives and metamessages—[that] commanded attention and held legitimacy in the wider American narrative, at the expense of others."[165] Western journalistic coverage of Lagos during the period under study often echoed the developmental anxieties found in scholarly works like Baker's. The portrayal of Nigeria's urban spaces as sites of both potential and failure was a recurring motif. This narrative exemplifies the conditional optimism frequently applied to postcolonial African cities, predicated on successfully emulating Western infrastructural and political norms. As *The New York Times* report above exemplified, Western media representations of Africa during this period often hinged on a binary of promise versus dysfunction, where cities like Lagos were framed as development paradoxes: brimming with potential yet teetering on the edge of failure.

Western journalistic coverage of Lagos during the post–civil war and oil boom period intensified earlier portrayals of the city as a paradox of wealth and chaos. A 1971 *New York Times* article titled *"Black Africa's Cities Teem with Youths Seeking Jobs but Finding Poverty"* encapsulates this narrative.[166] It described African cities as economic dead ends, emphasizing

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[164] Drew Middleton, "Two Big Problems Facing Nigeria: They Must Reshape Regime and Fight Urban Poverty," *The New York Times*, April 3, 1966.

[165] Sarah Monson, "Ebola as African: American Media Discourses of Panic and Otherization," *Africa Today* 63, no. (2017): 6.

[166] William Borders, "Black Africa's Cities Teem with Youths Seeking Jobs but Finding Poverty," *The New York Times,* April 30, 1971

that "there is scant industrial opportunity for the man whose education has taught him to be dissatisfied with the primitive village life." This statement reduces rural-to-urban migration to a crisis of misplaced aspiration, reproducing colonial-era assumptions that cast African modernity as either premature or mimetic. In the same article, Lagos is linked with rising crime, noting that Nigeria had begun executing robbers publicly, with the crime rate "climbing in direct proportion to unemployment." The focus on spectacle and punishment echoes what Aghogho Akpome describes as the Western media's fixation on African dysfunction, where complex socio-economic dynamics are reduced to moral failings or governance collapse. These representations frame Lagos not just as a city struggling with development, but as one inherently predisposed to failure. Akpome critiques this perspective for its "discursive strategy" and reliance on tropes of underdevelopment and "the dystopian depiction of Lagos."[167]

Approaching the mid-1970s, Lagos's urbanization was increasingly portrayed through the lens of oil-driven disorder and paradoxical prosperity. A 1973 *New York Times* article titled "In a 'Horrible City' Money Can Be Made" captured this tension vividly.[168] While noting that "American investment here totals more than $200-million," the article portrayed Lagos as a city where people in business "endure" rather than inhabit. Describing it as crowded and dysfunctional due to the influx of rural migrants, the piece reflects a common Western narrative: the idea that rapid African urbanization, especially when fueled by resource wealth, inevitably leads to infrastructural collapse. The article situates urban hardship as a product of mismanaged abundance, consistent with Orientalist tropes highlighting excess without structure.

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[167] Aghogho Akpome, "Lagos is a country: Slum, city, nation and globalization in Welcome to Lagos," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 27, no 2 (2018): 4.

[168] Thomas A. Johnson, "In a 'Horrible City' Money Can Be Made," *The New York Times* Feb. 4, 1973.

In 1975, the above view in *The New York Times* is further reinforced in a *Washington Post* article titled "Gowon's Nigeria So Rich It Hurts", which warned of a "bloat of money" clogging the country's economic "veins."[169] The metaphor not only pathologizes Nigeria's oil wealth but also suggests that modernization skipped necessary stages of development. This is a familiar motif in modernization theory that Akpome identifies as central to Western depictions of African dysfunction. Representing Nigeria's oil economy as a diseased, bloated body reflected the stereotypical Western narratives about development in Lagos and the broader Third World. By likening the economy to a body so swollen it caused pain and so congested that its vital organs were starved, the article depicted Nigeria's oil wealth as excessive, imbalanced, and ultimately harmful. Its framing suggests a paternalistic assumption that Nigeria lacked the capacity to manage its resources. For instance, commenting on conditions at Lagos harbour, it noted: "It is not surprising. The Lagos docks are simply not equipped to handle traffic which has quadrupled in the past two years, and dock workers frequently walk off the job in efforts to secure what they regard as their share of the oil riches."[170] Furthermore, the article reduced Nigeria's political complexity to "jealousies among the country's three main tribes," echoing colonial anthropological views that cast African politics as driven by irrational ethnic rivalries rather than legitimate ideological contestation. These journalistic portrayals, like the scholarly ones examined in earlier chapters, offered a consistent picture: Lagos was a city suspended between promise and breakdown, a site where modernity was imagined, but rarely achieved. Such portrayals aligned with Cold War-era media tendencies to depict postcolonial states as overwhelmed by modernity, reinforcing development theory narratives that framed Western intervention as necessary to stabilize and rationalize the management of newly acquired wealth.

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[169] Karen De Young, "Gowon's Nigeria So Rich it Hurts," *Washington Post,* June 15, 1975.
[170] De Young, "Gowon's Nigeria."

While the *Washington Post's* metaphorical critique of Nigeria's oil economy emphasized systemic dysfunction, similar concerns emerged in British coverage of the 1975 cement crisis, where logistical failure and economic overreach became central to Western portrayals of Lagos's urban development. The 1975 cement crisis served as a potent symbol of this narrative, reinforcing perceptions of Lagos as an overwhelmed and unmanageable city emblematic of broader African urban failures. In his *Sunday Times* article, "Lagos Hit by £500 Million Cement Avalanche,"[171] Richard Milner chronicled the absurd scale of the crisis: Nigeria had signed 81 cement contracts, far exceeding the 10 originally planned, resulting in more than 250 ships queued outside Lagos port, with another 100 expected within a week. The situation exposed the severe infrastructural limitations of the port, which could unload only 4,000 tons per day, and revealed the consequences of hasty, oil-fueled procurement without adequate planning. Milner's follow-up article detailed Nigeria's frantic efforts to renegotiate contracts and manage the fallout.[172] The government's response, including letters to London's Midland Bank attempting to alter credit terms and the formation of a special Cement Committee highlighted both the urgency and disarray of the state's crisis management. Despite intentions to expand unloading capacity to 24,000 tons per day, the solution remained distant. Milner's tone remained critical yet factual, offering readers a picture of waste, inefficiency, and economic mismanagement in a nation awash with petrodollars.

Like the *Washington Post's* depiction of Nigeria's oil economy as a bloated and malfunctioning body, Milner's coverage subtly reinforced Western assumptions of African states as incapable of managing modern development. His reporting, while informative, also aligned with broader discursive patterns that portrayed African urbanization as chaotic and

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[171] Richard Milner, "Lagos Hit by £500 Cement Avalanche," *Sunday Times*, October 12, 1975.
[172] Richard Milner, "Nigerian Fiasco Cement All at Sea," *Sunday Times*, October 19, 1975.

unsustainable. The *Sunday Times'* framing of the cement crisis thus typifies the Western media's approach: using moments of infrastructural failure to validate stereotypes of dysfunction, even amid economic growth. In doing so, Milner's coverage contributed to a familiar and persistent narrative of Africa's development as a story of squandered potential and systemic breakdown.

By the 1980s, Western journalistic portrayals of Lagos adapted to the new economic climate triggered by the global oil glut. If the 1970s framed Lagos as chaotic yet flush with opportunity, the 1980s narrative introduced a cautionary approach. A 1981 *New York Times* article titled "Oil: Nigeria's Mixed Blessing" attributed the collapse of Nigeria's once-thriving agricultural sector to urban drift and oil addiction, noting that Nigeria was America's second-largest oil supplier and now relied on the U.S. to feed its population.[173] The critique mirrors Aaron Segal's observation that African nations were often portrayed not just as failing, but as reversing development altogether, becoming dependent rather than self-sustaining. A 1985 *Washington Post* article, "World Oil Glut Eases Squalor in Lagos", used the visual metaphor of "disappearing corpses" to suggest that Lagos's notorious dysfunction had momentarily improved, but only through authoritarian rule and economic collapse. Lagos, it claimed, was "famous for being horrible," and its miseries were listed in grim detail: flooding, power failures, water shortages, and traffic snarls, all allegedly universal and unrelenting.[174]

The dramatic metaphors and exaggerated portrayals in Western media accounts of Lagos during the 1980s and 1990s further exemplify the discursive tendencies that scholars like Schraeder and Endless have critiqued. These depictions are not isolated instances but part of a broader pattern identified by Schraeder and Endless, who argue that the Western media's

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[173] Alan Cowell, "Oil Nigeria's Mixed Blessing," New York Times, July 23rd, 1981.
[174] Blaine Harden, "World Oil Glut, Oddly, Eases Squalor in Lagos: End of Oil Boom Promises Relief to Squalor in Lagos Foreign Service," *Washington Post*, Oct 21, 1985

persistent focus on the negative aspects of African politics and society carries "subtle agenda-setting implications" that reinforce Afro-pessimism among the U.S. public and policymakers.[175] Such framing contributes to a narrative environment where African urban experiences are read primarily through lenses of failure and crisis, obscuring both the structural causes of urban challenges and the complex realities of resilience, adaptation, and innovation on the ground. In this context, the Western press functions not simply as an observer but as an active participant in shaping reductive global understandings of African cities like Lagos. Even when portraying reform, as in the 1988 *New York Times* article "Ailing Nigeria Opens Its Economy", the city is framed as unattractive to investors due to "bureaucracy, corruption, political instability and heavy indebtedness"—tropes that persisted regardless of context.[176] These depictions reinforced an image of Lagos as permanently compromised, where wealth brings neither order nor dignity. As in earlier decades, the possibility of African agency is subordinated to a narrative of inevitable breakdown and dependence, making Western cities the silent yardstick by which Lagos is found lacking.

As Western media coverage shifted into the 1980s, narratives of oil-driven urban dysfunction increasingly intersected with concerns about rural collapse. This period saw heightened emphasis on the link between oil wealth, urban migration, and agricultural decline. *Washington Post* noted that the World Bank attributed falling agrarian production to the lure of oil money, which drew labour away from rural farming communities and into cities.[177] As the oil glut of the 1980s set in, *The New York Times* reported that Nigeria's food production continued to decline even after the end of the drought, reinforcing the perception that urban growth had

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[175] Peter J. Schraeder and Brian Endless, "The media and Africa: The portrayal of Africa in "The New York Times" (1955-1995)," *A journal of Opinion* 26, no 2 (1998): 35.
[176] James Brooke, "Ailing Nigeria Opens Its Economy," *The New York Times*, Aug 15, 1988.
[177] Harden, "World Oil Glut, Oddly, Eases Squalor in Lagos"

come at the cost of rural sustainability.[178] These accounts sustained a broader narrative in which urbanization, propelled by petroleum revenues, was blamed for urban disorder and weakening Nigeria's agricultural base. Rural-urban migration was thus framed not as a sign of development or opportunity, but as a destructive force undermining productivity and deepening the country's dependence on oil.

Indigenous scholars such as S. O. Osoba, M. O. Ijere, and Akin L. Mabogunje have critiqued the reductive nature of Western media narratives, highlighting the need to situate Nigeria's urban and agricultural challenges within a deeper historical and structural context.[179] These scholars expose the biases embedded in external portrayals, which often overlook the long-term impacts of colonialism and internal policy dynamics. As Osoba argues, the colonial economy in Nigeria was fundamentally extractive, structured to serve the interests of the British metropole rather than the development needs of the colony. British authorities implemented measures to divert local manpower toward producing export-oriented agricultural and mineral commodities, despite resistance from Nigeria's predominantly agrarian population. This exploitation of peasant labour, combined with the neglect of rural development, laid a fragile foundation for Nigeria's postcolonial economy.[180]

Ijere further underscores how colonial agricultural policy entrenched economic dependency by privileging export crops over food production, undermining food security and suppressing the growth of indigenous enterprise. As he notes, the colonial government did "everything in its power to promote peasant agriculture for the export sector," a policy that had

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[178] Alan Cowell, "Africa's Urban Migration Saps Its Agrarian Strength," *The New York Times*, Sep 19, 1982
[179] See S. O. Oṣọba, "The Phenomenon of Labour Migration in The Era of British Colonial Rule: A Neglected Aspect of Nigeria's Social History," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 4, no. 4 (June 1969); M. O. Ijere, "Colonial Policy in Nigerian Agriculture and Its Implementation," *Agricultural History* 48, no. 2 (Apr., 1974); and Akin L. Mabogunje, "Urban Planning and the Post-Colonial State in Africa: A Research Overview," *African Studies Review* 33, no. 2 (Sep., 1990).
[180] Oṣọba, "The Phenomenon of Labour Migration in The Era of British Colonial Rule," 525.

long-term implications for agricultural resilience in the post-independence era.[181] Mabogunje's analysis adds an urban dimension to this critique. He argues that colonial urban planning failed to foster modern capitalist cities. Instead of serving as industrial or social transformation engines, colonial towns in Nigeria functioned primarily as administrative outposts, geared toward facilitating resource extraction. This incomplete transformation, Mabogunje contends, continues to shape the limitations of urban development today.[182]

Together, these perspectives challenge the dominant Western media framing, which often attributes Nigeria's agricultural decline and urban crises to poor governance or oil wealth alone. These media narratives obscure the deeper roots of Nigeria's development challenges by ignoring the legacies of colonialism, structural economic constraints, and the inadequacy of postcolonial policy responses. As Mabogunje reminds us, understanding African urbanization requires an approach that attends to internal dynamics, historical context, and the enduring consequences of colonial and global economic structures. The complexity of Nigeria's development trajectory cannot be reduced to a simplistic "vicious cycle" of oil, urbanization, and decline. Instead, it must be seen as the product of layered and interlocking historical forces that continue to shape the country's present.[183]

Imperial Structures, Oil, and the Production of Urban Crisis Narratives

While Western journalistic portrayals of Lagos in the 1970s and 1980s focused heavily on the imagery of urban decay, corruption, and failed modernization, such representations often obscured the deeper structural forces sustaining Nigeria's postcolonial vulnerabilities. Critics such as Bade Onimode and Frynas et al. have drawn attention to the long-standing entrenchment

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[181] Ijere, "Colonial Policy in Nigerian Agriculture," 300.
[182] Mabogunje, "Urban Planning and the Post-Colonial State in Africa," 151.
[183] Mabogunje, Urban Planning, 123.

of multinational corporations and the continued subordination of the Nigerian state to imperial economic interests, especially in the oil sector.

Onimode's article "Imperialism and Multinational Corporations" offers a forceful critique of foreign capital's role in reinforcing underdevelopment and political instability. According to the author, Nigeria's oil sector remained dominated by multinationals after independence due to a mix of capital intensity, technological monopoly, and elite collaboration with Western interests. Shell and British Petroleum, awarded an expansive concession by the British colonial government in 1937, retained a dominant position even after conceding some acreage to American firms in the 1960s. The Nigerian government, Onimode argues, exercised only "formal control" over the industry, while the real power remained with foreign capital.[184] This system was compounded by the monopoly of imperialist finance in banking and insurance, further limiting domestic industrial development and steering surplus capital away from Nigerian hands.[185] The export of economic surplus, cultural erosion, and political destabilization — including alleged foreign involvement in coups were, for Onimode, deliberate effects of imperialism, not unfortunate side-effects.

Similarly, Frynas, Beck, et al. document the "first-mover advantage" that Shell-BP enjoyed under colonial rule, noting that the British government granted them an exclusive oil concession across the entire Nigerian territory in the 1930s. By selectively retaining the most promising oil blocks in the Niger Delta when forced to reduce its acreage, Shell-BP entrenched itself as a dominant force in Nigerian oil production.[186] This strategic positioning, the authors

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[184] Bade Onimode, "Imperialism and Multinational Corporations: A Case Study of Nigeria," *Journal of Black Studies* 9, no. 2, (Dec., 1978): 210.

[185] Onimode, "Imperialism and Multinational Corporations," 211-212.

[186] Jêdrzej George Frynas et al, "Maintaining Corporate Dominance after Decolonization: The 'First Mover Advantage' of Shell-BP in Nigeria," *Review of African Political Economy* 27, no. 85 (Sep., 2000): 412.

argue, exemplifies how colonial economic policies laid the foundation for dependency, even as formal political decolonization proceeded.

These perspectives illuminate the extent to which Lagos's oil-driven urban expansion and its associated crises, must be understood in the context of international economic structures. While journalists portrayed Lagos as a site of dysfunction, this representation frequently bypassed the ongoing economic domination by foreign corporations and the imperial configurations inherited from colonial rule. In Edward Said's terms, such narratives exemplify Orientalism's "internal consistency and a highly articulated set of relationships to the dominant culture surrounding it."[187] The implication is that such logic divorces the "facts" of African failure from their global context, instead localizing blame in culture, corruption, or incapacity. By foregrounding crisis and chaos without reference to the imperial architecture of oil, these portrayals become complicit in what Onimode called "the deliberate policies of underdevelopment."[188]

In sum, Western media representations of Lagos from the late 1960s through the 1980s consistently framed the city through tropes of chaos, dysfunction, and failed modernity. From the cement crisis of the oil boom years to the dystopian metaphors of the 1980s and 1990s, journalistic narratives often portrayed Lagos as the embodiment of urban collapse: a city overwhelmed by its own growth, mismanaged by corrupt elites, and burdened by the twin legacies of oil dependence and colonial underdevelopment. Pauline Baker's *Urbanization and Political Change* provided an academic framework that paralleled and reinforced many of these themes, portraying Lagos as a city trapped between tradition and modernity, struggling to achieve political coherence amidst rapid urban growth. Her widely cited and influential work lent

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[187] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 22.
[188] Onimode. 230

scholarly weight to the same modernization lens adopted by many Western journalists, helping to solidify an image of Lagos as an archetype of the 'unmanageable African megacity.' Yet as this chapter has argued, such portrayals reflect not only the material challenges facing Lagos but also the ideological filters through which the West has long viewed African urbanization. Drawing on Edward Said's insights and the work of African scholars like Uche, Osoba, Ijere, and Mabogunje, this chapter has revealed how these narratives often lacked historical depth and overlooked the structural roots of Nigeria's development trajectory. In privileging crisis and spectacle over context and complexity, Western journalism, and its supporting academic discourse, helped entrench a discourse of Afro-pessimism that shaped both global perceptions and development policy. Ultimately, understanding Lagos's urban evolution requires moving beyond such reductive frames. It demands a deeper, more historically grounded engagement with the city's past—one that accounts for its contradictions, colonial inheritances, and persistent capacity for adaptation and survival.

Conclusion

Urban Imaginaries and the Weight of Representation: Reassessing Lagos Through Western Eyes

This study has traced the evolving discursive structure of Orientalist urban representations of Lagos from the 1950s through the early 1990s. Across different disciplines, beginning with anthropology in the late colonial period and extending into post-colonial development studies, political science, and journalism, this study traces how Western ideological framework produced a layered but persistent discourse that imagined Lagos as both aberrant and emblematic; as a city too chaotic to fit comfortably within the linear scripts of modernization, yet too important to be ignored. Through these portrayals, Western anxieties about Africa, postcolonial governance, urban modernity, and resource politics were projected on Lagos.

Early anthropological work on urban Nigeria often denied African cities historical legitimacy, casting Lagos as a space suspended between pre-modern tradition and a distorted, imposed modernity. Drawing on Edward Said's *Orientalism*, I showed how scholars (like Keith M. Buchanan, John C. Pugh and Hugh Smythe) writing about urban Africa during the mid-twentieth-century imposed static cultural templates onto African urbanism, constructing knowledge that reified Africa's "difference." These narratives reflected deeper ideological patterns: Africa was defined by its failure to approximate Western urban and social norms, rather than on its own terms.

Later in the period, modernization theorists and development experts reframed Lagos as a test case for Africa's future. Participants at the 1965 Airlie House Conference, including figures such as Daniel Lerner among others, attempted to theorize the "urban problem" of postcolonial Africa. Even those who acknowledged the uniqueness of African contexts often reverted to

universal models that measured progress through Western-defined criteria. Despite moments of reflexivity, their collective gaze remained externally anchored, reinforcing a teleology that positioned Lagos as perpetually in transition, never fully modern, always on the threshold of failure or breakthrough.

As the Cold War intensified, portrayals of Lagos became increasingly colored by geopolitical anxieties. Pauline Baker's political analysis, alongside popular journalistic accounts, cast the city as a microcosm of postcolonial instability where oil wealth, civil conflict, and institutional weakness collided. These narratives were not merely descriptive; they were structured by the logics of Orientalism and the strategic imperatives of the time. Lagos was rendered legible only through spectacle—slums, corruption, chaos—inviting a gaze that pathologized without explaining and narrated without listening.

What emerges from these case studies is a clear continuity in how Western discourse has approached Lagos. Disciplines may shift, vocabularies may evolve, but the underlying assumptions remain. African cities, and Lagos in particular, have been persistently imagined through what they lack rather than what they possess: planning instead of improvisation, order instead of adaptability, legibility instead of complexity. In this discursive architecture, the African metropolis becomes the *Other* of the rational, modern West. Lagos is not just a megacity. It is a metaphor and a mirror. To study how it has been imagined is to study how Africa itself has been understood and often (mis)understood in the global imagination. By revisiting and reinterpreting these representations, this project aims to open space for alternative readings and for narratives rooted in the lived realities of those who call Lagos home.

Looking back on this project, I recognize its value in offering not only a historically grounded analysis but also a critical intervention into how Lagos has been imagined through

overlapping regimes of Western knowledge. My intention has been to bring together sources that are rarely examined in tandem—colonial anthropology, postcolonial development theory, and Cold War journalism—and to explore the assumptions they shared about Africa's urban future. In tracing these narratives, I was struck by how consistently Lagos appeared not simply as a city in transition, but as a canvas upon which broader anxieties about modernity, governance, and African agency were projected. This realization deepened my resolve to center Lagos as both a site of urban history and a lens through which to critique global knowledge production. By applying Edward Said's framework to African urbanism, I hoped to extend his insights into new terrain, demonstrating how both scholarly and media discourses have worked in tandem to shape enduring perceptions of African cities as disordered, exceptional, and incomplete.

Perhaps most personally, this thesis is informed by my own transnational experience. Having lived in Nigeria and now spent several years in Canada, I bring to this project both an insider's familiarity and an outsider's critical distance. This dual perspective has allowed me to interrogate not just the Western representations of Lagos, but also the silences, oversimplifications, and structural forces that shape them. I have seen firsthand how Lagos is narrated abroad, often reduced to a symbol of dysfunction or informal chaos, while on the ground, its residents navigate and remake the city through resilience, improvisation, and collective agency. This thesis, then, is not just an academic intervention, but also a political and ethical one: it seeks to challenge the epistemic habits that render African urban complexity invisible or illegible to the West.

Looking Ahead: Lessons from the Present

As we look to the present, the stakes of this conversation remain high. Lagos today is a city of over twenty million people, a hub of digital innovation, creative industries, migration, and

economic experimentation. Yet it continues to be haunted by old narratives about slums, corruption, overpopulation, and mismanagement. These narratives do not emerge in a vacuum. They are part of a longer genealogy that this thesis has sought to uncover. While this study has focused primarily on Western representations of Lagos's urbanization, articulated through Western scholarly and journalistic discourses, local Nigerian scholarship that has challenged these narratives was only briefly addressed. This limitation reflects the scope constraints of an M.A. project rather than a lack of relevance. Indeed, the critical responses by African scholars such as Mabogunje, Uche, Osoba, and Ijere point to a rich field of counter-narratives that deserve fuller treatment. Future research can build on this project by more deeply exploring how African intellectuals have not only contested Western frameworks but also articulated alternative urban imaginaries rooted in local histories, agency, and knowledge systems.

Understanding this history is essential if we are to imagine more just and accurate frameworks for engaging African cities in the twenty-first century. Whether in international policy, media, or academic discourse, it is crucial to recognize how representational power shapes material outcomes, what gets funded, what gets studied and what gets ignored. Moving beyond Orientalist framings means listening more carefully to local voices, histories, and priorities. It means abandoning universal models in favor of contextual ones. It also means acknowledging that African urban futures cannot be scripted in Western terms alone.

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