

# Global Urban History

---

## Imagine Lagos: Mapping a Pre-Colonial West African City

Posted on [28. March 2017](#).

By [Ademide Adelusi-Adeluyi](#), University of California, Riverside

Africa's cities are now among the fastest growing in the world. But how well are their pre-colonial origins understood? Recent research on Lagos's past reveals a thriving, indigenous yet cosmopolitan urban community, one which lasted through cycles of civil strife and peace, being bombarded and rebuilt, all prior to British annexation in 1861. Clear patterns emerge when we reimagine Lagos as it existed between 1845 and 1851, that is, the six years between the *Ogun Olomiro* (the Salt-Water War) and the British bombardment of Lagos Island.

Three themes frame the debates around pre-colonial urbanism in nineteenth-century West Africa: the use and interpretation of sources, the conceptual (and historical) boundaries of ethnicity as an explanatory factor, and the impact of the transatlantic slave trade and European colonialism on the growth and decline of port cities on the Atlantic coast. In plotting nineteenth-century Lagos, responses to these questions require an interdisciplinary framework, preferably one that relies on both narrative and visual cues.



Representation of colonial Lagos, ca. 1885. "Lagos looking West from Church Tower," from the National Archives UK, CO, 1069/78.

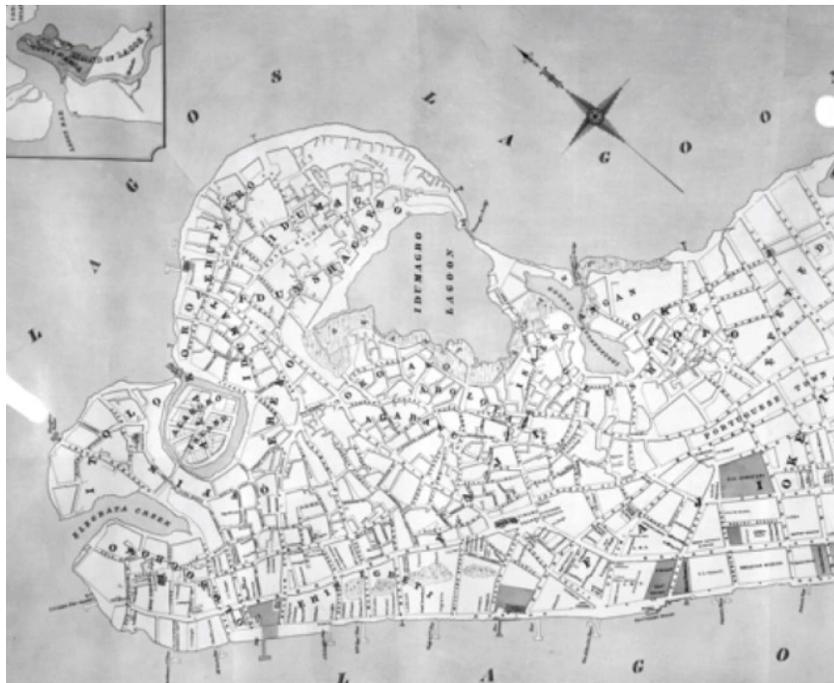
The "Salt-Water War" of July and August 1845 is remembered as the event that crystallized the divide between the descendants of Ologun Kutere, the fifth ruler of Lagos. This civil war between his son Akitoye and his grandson Kosokò ended with the partial destruction of the city, and the introduction of the last regime that was economically and politically dependent on the profits of the transatlantic slave trade. After three weeks of fighting, when Akitoye and his men found themselves without supplies, surrounded by Kosokò's men and forced to drink from the salty, brackish lagoon that surrounded Lagos, they knew then that their city was lost. On August 12, 1845, they fled in their



Extract from Fr. Borghero's 1865 map, "Carte de la Cote des Esclaves." The text along the paths read "path between Porto Novo and Allada, forbidden to whites."  
This is one of many instances where "native informants" become visible as collaborators in the making of these maps.

But what kind of city was Lagos, and how can we reconstruct a past that pays equal attention to change over both time and space? Questions about the shape of the city's history seem to underscore the assumptions that these spaces were generally unplanned, unremarkable, and perhaps worst of all, not beautiful; in fact, some questioned whether it was a city at all. In Lagos, local urbanism had a more persuasive political than visual quality. In other words, local ideas of spatial organization were mostly concerned with reflecting political authority, in the ways that the markets, open spaces, and residential quarters were arranged around the king's palace.

Europeans often saw the narrow, sandy, winding roads in the densely populated space as challenging their sanitary and spatial norms and ideals. Metaphors in the oral records rarely recorded specific spatial data, leaving the colonial maps of the city as the most generative source for visual cues. By the middle of the nineteenth century, several maps of the West African coast, and of Lagos and adjacent territories had been generated by various sources, be they missions for European institutions and governments, explorers, as well as missionaries of various denominations. The focus on Lagos came after the proliferation of views of cities on the West African coastline, including Ouidah, Badagry, Cotonou, Palma, and Lekki. The views on the maps shifted as British influence moved inwards, and maps of Lagos Island or Eko as it is known locally began to flourish.



The western half of W.T.G. Lawson's "Plan of the Town of Lagos" (1885).

The maps share many characteristics and are striking for not only what they show, but also what they casually and constantly omit. They share a visual language that foregrounds the Cartesian qualities of geometrically planned space. However, there are significant absences and blank spaces that represent the indigenous settlement, as the maps often lack a visual metaphor for what is local. Very often, there are references to the inhabited parts of Lagos, and most frequently these are fringes of the island where Europeans worked and lived. There is an emphasis on the "natural" environment that demonstrates the attention to detail in their composition, proving that the omission of "native space" is deliberate.

The process of analyzing these historical maps yields a variety of results. First, geo-referencing and layering the maps suggests the basic contours of the original residential quarters: Iga, Olowogbowo, Oṣfin, Ereko and Faji. Contradictions emerge between what has survived in oral and cartographic traditions, so for instance, the remembered continuity in traditional institutions is challenged in the visual record. The maps also highlight the clustering of people, and flexibility of women’s mobility in ways that markets anchor and intertwine in the city. There is a troubling aspect to urban slavery, where the location of the barracoons and slave ports only cements that social distance between the free and the enslaved.

By looking at representations of Lagos—in myths, in maps, and in memories—the significance of space, in terms of politics, culture and power emerges clearly. The importance of understanding the logics of the city’s sites, and in turn its location on the island, and as part of a regional ring of cities and villages, underscores its place in understanding the politics of the region. The risks in representing the city in multiple ways, whether as a “slave town,” a gateway to and from the interior, or as the last bastion of the transatlantic trade, demonstrates what was at stake for the men and women who tried to make Lagos their home, during perhaps its most turbulent period. Lagos was still burning when Akitoye was reinstated as *oba*, or king, of Lagos by his British and Eḡba allies on January 1st, 1852.

[Ademide Adelusi-Adeluyi](#) holds a PhD in History from NYU and is Assistant Professor of History at the University of California, Riverside. Currently, she is an Andrew Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at Rice University’s Humanities Research Center, where she is part of the 2016-17 Rice Seminar: [Chronotopic Imaginaries: The City in Signs, Signals, and Scripts](#). She is also at work on a book manuscript on the spatial history of nineteenth-century Lagos. Her new maps of Lagos will be featured in two forthcoming projects: “Historical Notes on ‘New’ Lagos,” and in “The Constant City: A Cartographic Database of Pre-colonial Lagos.” You can contact her at [ademide@ucr.edu](mailto:ademide@ucr.edu).

---

Share this post



2 bloggers like this.

This entry was posted in [Article](#) and tagged [Africa](#), [Colonialism](#), [Empire](#), [Mapping](#), [Slavery](#), [Spatial History](#), [Trade](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

## One Response to *Imagine Lagos: Mapping a Pre-Colonial West African City*

Pingback: [This Week's Top Picks in Imperial & Global History – Imperial & Global Forum](#)