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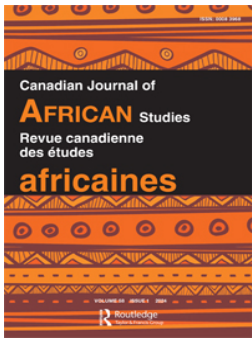
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The co-constitution of city-time, materials and youth life in urban Lagos

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the co-constitutive intersections of time, youth and materials to explain change in postcolonial city life. The focus here is not so much on how each of the concepts individually makes postcolonial cityness, but on how the relationships that are built between and among them translate into the dynamism that we see in postcolonial cities. Focussing on a site on the edge of a thriving city, in this case Ibeju Lekki in Lagos, Nigeria, the article shows the subtle but consequential ways in which major infrastructural investments like the multibillion-dollar Dangote Refinery can affect social life. It also shows how the framing of actors, such as youth, shapes the way infrastructural projects are themselves emplaced within cities. It draws on ethnographic and documentary material from fieldwork between 2020 and 2023 and a collection of Lekki real estate marketing posters to make its point.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article utilise les intersections co-constitutives du temps, de la jeunesse et du matériau pour expliquer les changements dans la vie urbaine postcoloniale. L'accent n'est pas tellement mis ici sur la manière dont chacun des concepts, pris en compte individuellement, façonne l'urbanité postcoloniale, mais plutôt sur la manière dont les relations qui se construisent entre et parmi ces concepts se traduisent par le dynamisme que nous observons dans les villes postcoloniales. En se concentrant sur des sites localisés à la périphérie de villes prospères, en l'occurrence Ibeju Lekki à Lagos, au Nigéria, l'article montre comment des investissements structurels majeurs tels que la raffinerie Dangote, d'une valeur de plusieurs milliards de dollars, peuvent affecter la vie sociale de manière subtile mais conséquente. Il montre aussi comment le cadrage des acteurs, tels que les jeunes, façonne la manière dont les projets d'infrastructure sont eux-mêmes implantés dans certaines villes. Il s'appuie sur du matériel ethnographique et documentaire issu d'un travail de terrain réalisé entre 2020 et 2023, et d'une collection d'affiches de marketing immobilier de Lekki pour faire valoir son point de vue.

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Introduction

Not much is known about what major infrastructural projects mean for social life in African cities. With the analytical gaze trained on the environmental (Dipeolu and Ibem 2022), economic (Deyas and Woldeamanuel 2020) and (geo)political (Alves 2013) implications of these projects, one often wonders whether the geographies of everyday social life are not equally being delineated and governed by these massive markers of governmentality and sovereign power. This paper highlights the place of large infrastructural investments in the imagination of postcolonial cities, and the important ways in which they both affect and are affected by key forces such as time and marginalised youth actors. I ask: What sorts of relationships exist between city-time and youth life, or between youth time and cityness? How do materials (or things) create, inhabit or displace time within the city, and how do youth engage with these processes? How/why do all these things happen in spaces of imagination and/or spaces of the real?

These questions can be answered by exploring how the three concepts of time, youth and materials co-constitute one another within cityscapes. By focussing on their interaction as productive forces in their individual right, I explain the mechanics of city dynamism and the disciplinary logics that underpin them. I also show how the various unstable relationships that bind *timescapes* to *cityscapes* are related to one another, and how categories like youth inhabit these spaces. I treat time as the core concept around which life revolves, and as something central to the complex universe of dreams, materials and politics that I seek to describe. I then apply an analysis of youth life and city materialities to show how these concepts unsettle each other, and how together they tell us much about the making of the city and about the way it is imagined and disciplined. Based on insights from my research into major new investments in the extractive industry – in this case oil refining in Lagos, one of the world's most dynamic cities – I show the city transforming both itself and the lives of its inhabitants, and demonstrate the place of intangible forces like time in ordering this transformative process.

The paper is divided into five sections, the first of which is this introduction. In the next section, I provide a brief description of the context, with a focus on the Lekki Peninsula and the Dangote Refinery. I also discuss the methodological approach taken in the paper. In the section that follows, I make a case for why my three preferred concepts – time, youth, and materials – are appropriate entry points for theorising city life in the post-colony. I discuss the value of each as a tool for thinking about the city, focussing particularly on how each shapes or is shaped by city(ness). In the fourth section I begin a conceptual conversation about how materials, forms and imaginative lives interact within the context of the city. The section theorises co-constitutive relations as practice and as imagination. Here I explore ideas about how time, as a metaphor, constructs understandings of the modern, and how this is inscribed on the skin of the city by its material infrastructures. I also highlight the new forms of youth politics that emerge from these processes and the constitutive impacts these new forms of youth are having on city geographies, materials and temporal framings. Overall, I explain how time, youth and materials interact within the postcolonial city, and draw extensively on insights from fieldwork in Lagos to show how the conceptual ideas work in practice. The concluding section sets out how these conceptual framings may be applied more

widely to city life and highlights what they tell us about how to think through the complex relationships that bind youth, resources, the city and time.

Reading infrastructural Lagos: context and method

To many observers and residents, Lagos often feels like it is bursting at the seams with energy, opportunities and problems. Lekki, a peninsula on the south-eastern fringes of the city, is perhaps one of the best symbols of that dynamism. This area has seen a major investment boom in the last decade, the flagship of which is Dangote's US\$25 billion refinery which started operations in late 2023. The refinery promises to transform Nigeria's notoriously opaque refined petroleum distribution system (Iwilade 2013), conserve much-needed foreign exchange, and create thousands of high-paying skilled jobs. Yet the very investments that have transformed the area from a rural backwater of Lagos to its prime investment destination are clearly importing the familiar problems of a high cost of living, crime and chaos from the mainland.

Expansion in Lekki is a culmination of decades of imagining the area as a site in which Lagos can realise its ambition of becoming a megacity – a sort of future place of dreams in which the state, cultural elite and capital can will expansion, modernity and accumulation into being. Writing about the evolution of Lekki between 1950 and 1981, Sanni and Boge (2020, 428) note that the formation of the Association of Society of Eti-Osa Development Council (ASEDEC) in 1968 by local Lekki elites was driven by a dream to replicate the rapid transformation they had observed in mainland Lagos. Within the structures of the state government, Lekki, alongside other peripheral parts of Lagos State, like Ikorodu, had the potential to help redistribute the growing population and thus ease pressure on housing, infrastructure and social services. In the 20-year Lagos State Regional Plan launched in the early 1980s, there was a deliberate effort by the state to create new towns, and in so doing to urbanise the sparsely populated parts of the city (Lagos State Regional Plan 1980–2000 1981, 1–3). While the infrastructural dreams of the 1980s were largely driven by the government, by the early 2000s, a definitive shift towards private investment and ownership of the urbanisation agenda had emerged. The creation of the Lekki Free Zone (LFZ) in 2006 was the culmination of this clear shift towards public-private partnership models. The LFZ was conceived as a “blue-green, eco-friendly environment” which proposed to cover 60,000 hectares stretching from Victoria Island in the west to Refuge Island and some parts of Lekki Town in the east. The intent behind the blue-green concept was primarily to create a comprehensive new town with important public facilities and infrastructures (LFZ 2023). The LFZ included plans for a new international airport, a new port and residential developments targeting the upper middle class and elite. Prior to the creation of the LFZ in 2006, the state had funded the construction of the Lekki-Epe Expressway, which opened up the area. It is clear from this ambitious state-driven agenda that Lekki was always going to become a major investment destination in Lagos.

The flagship investment in the area is the US\$25 billion Dangote Refinery. It is an integrated oil refinery owned by the Dangote Group and has the capacity to process 650,000 bpd of crude oil. It is the largest single-train oil refinery in the world (Business Day 2023). It was built on nearly 3000 hectares of land within the LFZ, fulfilling a major dream of those who conceived the Lekki area as a site for the modernisation and, ultimately, prosperity of the megacity that Lagos has become. In conversations with people in the area, it is

apparent that there is a significant general anticipation that major investments such as the refinery will ultimately transform the peninsula into a wealthy industrial and residential hub. These dreams are, however, tempered by underlining grievances about whether due compensation had been given to those whose lands were expropriated for the so-called Lagos dream, and whether indigenes were getting the full benefits they could/should from the changes around them (Figure 1).

I now turn to my methodological approach. The key goal was to understand how the co-constitutive relations that link time, youth and materials transform the city. “Co-constitutive relations,” in this regard, refers to a relationship in which key features constantly re-make one another, in the process creating a transformation that is uncertain and fragile. By focussing on how key features re-make each other and how that process of re-constitution is central to how the city understands and navigates its social universe, a notion of the co-constitutive allows us to better deal with the reality of contingency, ad hocness, and the lack of a stable form (whether material or social) that underpins modern post-colonial cities. I shall flesh out this concept in the following sections.

The main data sources were detailed, intermittent ethnographies over the three-year period between 2020 and 2023. These ethnographies, some collected with the help of research assistants, focussed on following the everyday lives of a diverse group of ordinary people living in the Lekki area. By speaking with tens of youth within the Lekki corridor, and around Lagos more widely, I explore how the time of oil is being represented, being inhabited and being mapped onto youth aspirations. These observations were supplemented by elite and civil service interviews, and documentary archives, with a focus on government-led programmes on the development of the LFZ and the Lekki area more generally. Here, I sought to understand the way the larger state-driven conversation about a megacity (Lagos State Government 2012, 2013; Olajide and Lawanson 2022) is influencing the aspirational spaces that youth occupy. I also conducted interviews with real estate marketers and collected hundreds of marketing posters, videos and advertising campaigns focussed on the booming real estate sector of the area. These various sources have allowed me to explore social change across Lagos, and to link it to the emplacement of major infrastructural projects like the Dangote Refinery.



Figure 1. Map of Lekki showing Dangote Refinery and key infrastructural landmarks. Source: Frank-vEck -, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=119425345>.

The Lekki Peninsula is especially useful as an analytical space because the patterns being described can be observed in real time, as that part of Lagos is still unfixed and unfinished in a profoundly relevant way. This is why one way to really see the foundations of social life in a city is perhaps in its peripheries like Lekki. These are places that are *of* the city but in ways that do not necessarily fit the corporeal and environmental densities that we have come to recognise and expect in postcolonial urban centres like Lagos. Many of my interlocutors, for instance, recognised the *being of but outside* nature of Lekki, and one described it thus:

This Ibeju Lekki is *somehow* [unusual], we are close to everywhere because they all come here to buy land and enjoy, but we are still far! do you not see the distance? How long did it take you to get here? And all the *pako* houses [shacks]? Do we look like Lagos to you? With the refinery and the port and things, we are tomorrow Lagos [i.e. Lagos of tomorrow], not today. (Abbey interview 2022)

Lekki is in many ways simultaneously a part of what we know as Lagos while also seeming to sit outside of it. Traditionally, Lagos as a social, economic and political space has been made up of the densely populated Mainland and the more sparsely populated and more affluent Island. These two parts of Lagos are connected by bridges and waterways, with the distance magnified by the difficulty of mobility between them, in the everyday sense as well as in the economic sense (Shtanov 2017). Lekki, alongside Ikorodu, Badagry and Epe, is one of the only parts of Lagos where open land remains available for major expansion. Lekki is, however, particularly privileged given its proximity to the affluent Island region. As a consequence, it has received significant attention and investment over the last two decades, thus developing a very upper middle class feel in its own right. Yet Lekki is itself a peninsula of extremes, as there are parts of it that retain a very early rural feel, socially, economically and spatially. As a site for tracing imaginative futures of cityness, Lekki offers immense opportunities for social circulation for youth and consequently for researchers seeking to unravel how these imaginative spaces are incubated and displaced.

Analytical entry points into the city: time, youth, materials

What do time, youth and materials offer as effective tools for reading the postcolonial city? I shall start with time. Larkin (2018) makes clear that infrastructure aggregates the city – as something that represents its forms of being, of moving, of stability and of nothingness. The city is also an economic, technological and social ensemble (Myers 2011; Simone 2013) that obeys the dominant globalised as well as localised laws of extraction and distribution. These laws are often temporally specific, with forms, norms, imaginations and power relations continually pushing against each other and transforming the city as well as those who experience it in meaningful ways. But how are all these features of the city organised? How are they produced? One good answer to this is time, because few things in the city produce and aggregate life more evidently than it does. To be clear, city-time, as used here, refers to the pace of everyday life as well as to the systems of discipline that regulate that pace. It is a central currency of power which is deployed to impose (in)visibility on residents, to (de)construct subjects and/or citizens, and to define insiders and outsiders. This deployment of time by governing powers is a direct consequence of, and made possible by, the city's relative economic intensity and

corporeal density. The density of bodies and economics within the city means that the state's disciplinary powers can often coalesce around the disciplining of their productive pace. Time is thus visible everywhere in the city and can be represented by the little bits of temporal realities which are curated and measured in bus/train schedules, in waits on bus queues or in traffic, in expiry dates on identity documents or perhaps simply in retirement plans. To understand a city, therefore, one needs to understand how it manages and disciplines time.¹

Sesan (interview 2021), a small-scale farmer in Ibeju, a part of Lekki in Lagos, who also works as a labourer for a small-scale company, explained city-time quite poignantly. He was asked what he thought of the pace at which Lekki was changing, and he answered simply: *"igba o to lo bi orere*. This is a Yoruba saying that literally means time isn't a linear thing. The full saying is *igba o to lo bi orere, aye o to'lo bi opa ibon, aye nlo a n to*." This translates as "Time is not linear, neither does life move straight like a gun barrel. Life moves, we simply follow it." "Following life," as the saying suggests somewhat resignedly, is actually an art that speaks to the complex social tactics through which city people impose themselves on the urban context. Another interlocutor, Adama (interview 2021), who owns a makeshift restaurant somewhere along the Lekki-Epe Expressway, talked about planning her day and the various figures of authority she needs to deal with, evade or otherwise confront. According to her:

Who does not know those KAI taskforce? They come on Wednesdays, so I only cook small that day and I never stay in one place for long. Because they can just seize someone's market and eat in their 419 truck! We have WhatsApp group on this road, anybody that sees them will post, and straight! I don [have] disappear[ed]. That's how to have sense in this Lagos. You must wise pass [be wiser than] them. Even my sister on the other side of the road, she has cleaning work on Wednesday to avoid KAI *wahala* [trouble]. They also don't come early morning, because you know those civil servants? Lazy people! ... 5am! I am up and doing my work. That's the hustle and we must complete it.

She was explaining how she significantly reduces the risk of losing her wares to the Lagos State Environmental Protection Agency (LASEPA)'s Kick Against Indiscipline (KAI) taskforce, who tend to confiscate goods from street hawkers in a bid to enforce laws against hawking. Wednesdays are marked as a time of heightened risk and everyday life is adjusted accordingly, in direct response to state discipline of space and its appropriation of a specific time to do that. The tools of evasion, such as solidarity organising via WhatsApp and operating in shifting locations, are interesting, but perhaps more so for our purpose here is the intimate knowledge of the time in which state discipline seeks to assert itself and the organisational cultures that shape that timing – cue lazy early mornings and Wednesdays.

Even in its most basic form, for instance with time as a solar unit (Povelli 2019; West-Pavlov 2013), it is easy to see how the city is transformed and paced by its regular twelve-hour changes. When day turns to night, the city transforms profoundly – spaces find new uses, notions of belonging shift, and the power of the state diminishes or is at least contested more vigorously. In Lagos, it is common to find that neighbourhood roads narrow at night because a market has sprung up, complete with makeshift stalls and portable LED lamps, or to see illegal police checkpoints emerge in dark alleys where policemen extort unsuspecting city people. All these tend to disappear by midnight when fresh powers – sundry criminals, vigilantes and the odd drunk reveller – claim control of the streets. What

is clear is that these shifts are responding to cues from time which instructs on who now owns what spaces. These cues do not necessarily respect familiar and more durable dictates, for instance of economic ownership, around which space is often ordered during the day. When night falls, the logic of ownership shifts in profoundly relevant ways, and so do the state–citizen encounter and the complex intersections of legitimacy and control that govern the city.

The point being made is that solar time makes darkness or daylight, and these in turn shape everything from how we use spaces to who is allowed to circulate. Anyone who has had to hurry home before gated neighbourhoods shut themselves off from the world, hurry to work before Human Resources clocks absences, or wait until mid-day before heading towards the business district as a tactic to avoid rush hour traffic would probably be at home in the city of Lagos and would of course appreciate the power that time wields over the city and its residents. In a way, those like Simone (2014), who have written about precarious lives and the strategies of improvisation with which people seek to navigate them, give a nod to the absence of the settled form, of a time of/in flux in which economic conditions as well as social lives are constantly shifting. In order to cope with this unsettled form, movement in the form of improvisation is at the core of city life, and is further evidence of the way time shapes urban contexts. Overall, it seems to me that for its ability to discipline (or be a tool for the discipline of) the city, time offers us a useful analytical entry point for making sense of this most complex of human settlements.

How about youth? Why is youth useful for mapping city life? There is little doubt that the postcolonial city is a potent space for the culturing as well as disciplining of youth (ness). In the production of the youth category, the city is a place in which imagination collides with possibility, but also where the dreams that this collision calls into being are constantly, and perhaps inevitably, shattered. This heady mix of opportunity, imagination and disappointment is what Nigel Thrift (2021, ix) called “an amalgam containing both hope and despair,” what Appel, Anand, Gupta, and Appel (2018, 3) described as a “tension between aspiration and failure,” and what Simone and Pieterse (2017) called “paradoxes of the urban” where the city “becomes a venue for all kinds of countervailing tendencies.” This tension between opportunity and disappointment is a hallmark of a neoliberal moment that produces inevitable social pressures for which youth is apparently well primed, but hardly well prepared. Lauren Berlant (2011) described this as “cruel optimism” – that is, the idea that even though the good life is always within reach, it is only just so, and the very promise of the system is only possible if disappointment is met in sufficient regularity by a sufficiently large number of people. This implies that the postcolonial city, for all its promise, is in fact by necessity a universe of disappointment, all the more so for categories like youth.

Yet, to be youth, dreams and dreaming are central framing tools through which the self is made. It is therefore difficult to identify a person as youth if they have been rendered unable to imagine that, somehow, in spite of the difficult truth about this neoliberal moment of shrinking opportunities, they will be singled out for success. The same applies to the person who is not interested in making that singling out happen. In previous fieldwork in Nigeria’s oil city of Port Harcourt, one of my interlocutors asked me, “How can you call yourself youth when you just sit down there and do nothing? How can you be youth if you don’t believe?” (Bozi interview 2014). These questions underline the sense of a need to act to produce success, but also suggest that success inevitably

flows from that process of acting – that process by which youth is a verb (Iwilade 2019). By attaching themselves to a dream of success that seems patently unattainable for most, youth unwittingly participate in the reproduction of the inequalities of the postcolonial city, and in the perpetuation of symbols of that inequality that large projects like the Dangote Refinery represent.

The social place of the dream is also dependent in part on the material place in which dreaming happens. This relationship, between dreams and places, is relevant for how we can read youth life within the postcolonial city, and how we can understand the temporal logics that inevitably frame it. For instance, the promise of youth appears inextricably connected not just to the modern promise of the material city itself, but also to the possibilities both youth and the city co-locate and co-create within each other. Contemporary youthness is therefore hardly possible without co-locating it in the city or in the imaginations that the urban evinces. I concede, of course, that there are multiple youth cultures that develop within and through rural social and economic universes (Kobusingye 2020) and for which rurality is central to meaning making. I do not intend here to deny that; rather, I argue that even within those contexts, the city looms in the imagination as a place of dreams or as the threat against which to defend a moral universe. The city, or the idea of modernity that it represents, is therefore never really absent, as the very notion of youth as a category is dependent in part on the idea of becoming *of* the city. The city thus is a metaphor for becoming successful or of becoming modern.

Perhaps one interesting illustration of this looming presence of the city within the rural youth imagination is provided by Nigeria's ubiquitous film industry, the so-called *Nollywood*. For *Nollywood*, the city is perennially the place that validates the youthful spirit of adventure, ambition and dream. It is sometimes named, but in many cases the protagonist just goes to "the city," underlining its deployment as a tool by which the filmmakers evoke a place of dreams. Of course, the flipside of cityness – that is, its representation of a creeping decadence against which the pristine moral universe of the rural requires defence – is also evident within *Nollywood*.² My point, though, is that the city is something that is always present in the imagination of youth, and that the image of the city captures, in profound ways, the dreams and aspirations of young people irrespective of where they are.

Finally, if we know why youth is important to how to read a city, what about why oil (or materials more generally) can also be a useful tool to help us understand how the postcolonial city is made? Writing about urban reform in nineteenth-century London, Broich (2013) noted how the citywide piping of water led to expansions of city governance and the powers to extract, distribute and allocate resources in pursuit of that governance. In short, Broich (2013) argues that disciplining of the city can be linked directly to the need to tame a resource. Similar examples can be found around the world, but perhaps in starker forms in the new urban worlds that are currently being created in postcolonial states. Keith Beavon's (2004) work, for instance, highlights the centrality of gold mining in the evolution of Johannesburg. A similar argument was made by Harrison and Zack (2012), who linked anxieties about the city directly to the unstable fortunes of gold mining. Beavon (2004) and Harrison and Zack (2012) also point, in varying degrees, to how labour formations, economic structures and ultimately racial governance all evolved directly from the particular kinds of incentives offered by the mining of a

globalised resource such as gold in Johannesburg. What analyses of city-making materials such as these indicate is that while we may tease out important ways in which social life is structured by the intangibles of cityness – for instance, its dreams, frustrations, aspirations and imaginations – its hard materialities also have a profound impact on what a city is and how those who live their lives within it inevitably experience it. It is in this vein that I use a multi-billion dollar investment in oil refining as an entry point into understanding the remaking of Lagos, and how this is happening in the shadow of the material's tragic social currency within the Nigerian imagination.³

Co-constitutive relations in the making of the city: material, form and imagination

“to imagine is to present in your mind's eye something that is absent. It is a conjuring act – a form of magic – in which new images are revealed to the person who imagines.” (Dobraszczyk 2019, 9)

The notion of co-constitutive relations in the context in which I am deploying it here rests on a simple premise. That is: to understand a city, and to predict how it might evolve, it is more helpful to focus on how its core features co-make each other, rather than on what those features may create when acting as individual components of cityness. The city is therefore not just the sum of its parts, but something more – the fusion of its parts. This focus on how individual urban features interact, or how they fuse, necessarily leads us to ask: What happens to each feature during the process of fusion? Do they remain the same? Does youth stay the same when it fuses with city materialities? Do city materials stay the same? If they do not, what determines the extent of impact each has on the other? What does this ultimately produce? And how settled is this product? Does time adapt to those who inhabit it? Or is it something that only makes but is never made?

To capture the modern imagination, to produce a dynamic city, or simply one that is alive, it is not enough for infrastructure to stamp modernity on the landscape, or indeed, according to Kern (1983), to signal the lack thereof. It also needs to facilitate the social circulation of bodies and to do so with enough intensity and scope as to generate new idioms of life, new languages of meaning making and new expressions of being. Brian Larkin (2018, 7) calls this the taking on of “form” in which “technological ensembles,” as infrastructures inevitably become, both produce a relation between technology and humans and become a thing in and of themselves.

What is being suggested here is two-fold; first, the physical presence of the city and the materials that make it only become a relevant “form” in the context of their production of social life, meaning and imagination. The Dangote Refinery is therefore not just a repository of steel, oil and microchips, but also one of dreams, anxieties, inequalities and power. Second, and perhaps more relevant to my argument here, is that one cannot exist without the other, and therefore whatever the dream or anxiety would be is directly related to how the material is deployed and emplaced. Does the Refinery, for instance, sit on lands appropriated without adequate compensation? Does it threaten to despoil the environment? Or does it stand as a monument of aesthetic beauty? Does it close itself off from society or does it become a part of it in a true sense? Or, perhaps, does it manage to both close itself off but also be a part of society?

Drawing inspiration from Dobraszczuk (2019), quoted at the beginning of this section, I believe that a helpful way to start a discussion of how co-constitutive imaginaries are constructed is to note that the city does not just exist as a physical reality, but that it is also something imagined, and something lived. To grasp city-time and how it makes or is made by social actors and physical materials, therefore, one needs to think beyond the tangible ordering of life, looking also to the unformed and slippery realm of the imagination and to the unwritten governing idioms that discipline it. Writing about how architecture imagines future cities, Paul Dobraszczuk (2019, 9–10) noted that

once a city becomes so large and complex that it exceeds one's ability to comprehend it in a single mental image, then the imagination has to take over – to fill in the gaps in our mental perception of the vast urban environment.

Dobraszczuk's (2019) point suggests that cities are complex places that can often only be fully apprehended in the imagination. In its permissiveness, the imagination is a space where time is profoundly unsettled, where the lines between reality and fiction are blurred, and where anything is both possible and impossible. These dreams of cityness that the imagination incubates all emerge in the context of city materialities and are curated by the opportunities and challenges they present. By conceptualising co-constitutive relations as they present in the imagination of city people, it is possible to see, for instance, how understandings of time construct city-materials (for instance, as modern "in-time" monuments or future goods), and how they in turn change youth-life in lasting ways. In this regard, it is the imagination of modernity – that is, of what is imagined as modern – rather than the fact or otherwise of the modern, that endows city materials with the power to embody popular aspirations.

To draw on the case of Lekki, it is clear that one of the most profound constitutive impacts of the Dangote Refinery is its presence as a modern monument to capital and a symbol of and for dreams. All of my interlocutors over the three plus years of work around the area constantly made reference to that monolith of concrete and steel, not in its physical sense but in what it means for how they think about their own lives and their place in this rapidly growing city. One key reason for this is the iconic and near mythical image of Aliko Dangote as Africa's richest man and as someone whose touch is effectively that of Midas. One interlocutor said, "that place belongs to Dangote, of course it will work. He's not NNPC, you know?" (Ikechukwu interview 2021). He was referring to the notoriously underutilised state-owned refineries run by the Nigeria National Petroleum Company (NNPC) and highlighting a belief in the efficiency of private sector investments, especially by a much-admired figure like Dangote. In this regard, it seems to me that the refinery complex represents a city on the hill, something to which Lekki residents (and the thousands of real estate investors that now flock to the area) can affix their dreams and anxieties and inevitably order their everyday lives around.

The impact of this anchoring of dreams and anxieties to the refinery appears to be incentivising youth politics to develop in specific ways in the Lekki area. For instance, youth groups, reminiscent (if only putatively so at the moment) of prominent community advocates like the Ijaw Youth Congress in the oil rich Niger Delta, are beginning to appear in the area. These groups are being formed as neighbourhood youth organisations and are tapping into the politics and the language of "community," of "agitation" and of a

generational crisis, all of which seem to be mirroring the Niger Delta. One interlocutor described the Dangote Refinery and its general impact in these terms:

When Dangote refineries came, it really affected the community, but what I just noticed that happened is that the light [electricity] we were using that was constant for more than five years now, we are unable to use the light anymore since the refinery has been constructed. About more than 20 communities are being affected on this light issue. Including all the roads were affected due to it being spoilt [damaged], from Abijo to Epe to Ibeju-Lekki area, there are no good roads there, most of the roads have been affected by the trucks of Dangote refinery. (Akeem interview 2021)

One of the main expectations from major investments like the refinery is that they will improve infrastructure such as roads and electricity. This has not been the case in Lekki, however, as Akeem makes clear above, and is in part why resentment seethes underneath the hope. The apparent emergence of youth groups oriented directly towards the aggregation of grievance and opportunity in relation to the refinery is interesting, but perhaps more so is how it seems to be changing the social meaning of youth in the area. Prior to the major investments in Lekki, youth, according to an older, long-term resident of the area, used to mean “our children who listen” and who are “just happy to fish, farm and do the festivals” (Raimi interview 2021). These days, however, according to him, they are “only interested in talking to developers and land buyers all because of a refinery that we don’t know whether it will bring peace or turn us [in]to the Niger Delta” (Raimi interview 2021). The impact of the refinery being alluded to by Raimi is about a shift in the exercise of youth agency and an observable new appetite to challenge established idioms of behaviour and of social place. By making them into those “only interested in talking to developers,” the new imaginations of freedom and prosperity unleashed by the mere presence and promise of the Dangote Refinery transform youthhood into something that threatens rather than bolstering the authority of older residents like Raimi.

It also seems that time and its relation to social life have shifted in subtle but remarkably resilient ways since the transformation of Lekki over the last two decades. The entire governmental logic behind the creation of the so-called Lekki Corridor is the appropriation of the narrative of temporal futures in which the state wills modernity into being and unleashes the opportunities inherent in the dynamism of Lagos. In a 2013 policy document detailing its developmental plans at the time, the Lagos government declared that in its vision, “by 2025 Lagos will be Africa’s Model Megacity and Global, Economic and Financial Hub that is Safe, Secure, Functional and Productive” (Lagos State Government 2013, 1). This vision expresses a desire for the city to become something shining on a hill, and to do so in a near future that the governing elite are determined to bring into being. This state-driven narrative of a megacity that is an example to all does not often meet the lived reality of both residents and visitors (Lawanson, Salako, and Yadua 2012) yet the idea of Lagos as a thing of dream(ing) is such a powerful social device that it plays a significant role in policy as well as in the ordering of everyday life.

The Dangote Refinery, in many ways, represents a key articulation of this imagination of the megacity Lagos, and fulfils some of the most powerful dreams of policymakers and residents. These include dreams of a place attractive to investment, full of promise and opportunity. Narratives of a megacity are a metaphor for a modernity that Lagos has

come to symbolise, and that modernity is essentially about a city that is *in the present* and yet simultaneously imagined *as the future*. In discussions with civil servants across the state, it was apparent that the idea of a megacity was as much about the present as it was about the future, and also that it was as much about remorseless and real governmentalities such as taxation as it was about imaginations sometimes not tethered to reality (Olajide, Agunbiade, and Bishi 2018). Within Lekki, this idea of the megacity is affixed to real material investments such as the refinery and, as one civil servant told me, “you can see this modern Lagos emerging before your eyes, it is like the future is already here” (Alo interview 2021).

Imagining what one’s dreams are and how they might be made true requires anchoring those dreams to tangible things, whether they are within reach or not. How city materials are understood and encountered by city people is therefore directly related to what emotive sentiments city things are able to generate, how those sentiments are mobilised and how they are deployed. This idea of imagination as having a dialectical co-making relationship with reality is captured by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964, 187), who noted that

every visual something, individual as it is, functions also as a dimension, because it gives itself as the result of a dehiscence of Being. What this ultimately means is that the proper essence of the visible is to have a layer of invisibility in the strict sense, which it makes present as a certain absence.

This suggests that dreams and imagination are not nothingness, but that the very value of the physical – the real – is rooted in its place in dreams and imagination. To sell the dream of Lekki, the refinery is at the heart of imagination for government, investors and ordinary people. Studying real estate advertisements across social media and speaking with marketers, it is apparent that in order to constitute a dream of modernity and accumulation, the refinery offers a tangible hook around which the future can be ordered. Over three years, I collected hundreds of marketing posters around Lekki. In these posters, the refinery, even when it is actually many miles away is often mentioned routinely, and as being nearby, effectively signalling to potential investors that the dreams of accumulation can be affixed to this gigantic edifice of steel, oil and microchips.

Highlighting the centrality of the refinery in how people imagine the value of Lekki as a site of accumulation, one real estate marketer said to me that “the refinery is to Lekki what oil is to Qatar or gambling is to Vegas. It is the reason we are all here” (Bola interview 2022). In a marketing video for the many residential estate developments being sold to the growing middle class, the advertiser, standing in front of massive machinery and equipment being delivered to the Dangote Refinery complex, declared

imagine a man investing such a huge sum of money, billions of dollars here in Ibeju Lekki, imagine what properties around here will look like [cost] in the next few years, so my brothers and sisters, this is the best time for you to come and invest in Ibeju Lekki! (Ibitayo Properties Limited 2019)

This advert is a particularly compelling visual anchoring of dreams to the promise of the refinery and offers a good example of how the imagination can be connected to the material realities of life in the city. What is perhaps even more interesting about this advert is that it is tagged online as “Basic Knowledge about Dangote Refinery 1: It’s located in Ibeju Lekki, Lagos and shares close proximity with Lekki Free Trade Zone, Lekki.” There is almost no mention of

the actual residential developments being marketed; it seemed sufficient to simply talk about proximity to this massive monument to accumulation.

However, for those marginal young people living in the area, who are not yet in a position to invest in speculative land banking, the refinery occupies imagination in a different sort of way. They regularly talk to us about the possibility of finding jobs in the refinery while simultaneously complaining about lacking the skills or social networks necessary to benefit from this huge opportunity that has come to their part of the city. They also express anxieties about the impact the refinery is having on crucial road networks, the cost of accommodation and living more generally. Their understanding of the future is also in part tied to how much the refinery opens itself to the surrounding community, and to how well it opens up the entire corridor to inward investment.

I now move to ask how the city-material – that is, the Dangote refinery and the infrastructures that enplace and sustain it – is itself being constituted in these imaginative city-spaces constantly being willed into being by young people. One place to observe this is in the approaches to the Dangote refinery, which bear all the hallmarks of a city-material trying its best to thread that fine line between being *a place away from* and *a place inside of* the city, and succeeding in being neither. In this regard, two major attributes can be discerned. The first is the constant movement of vehicles and people towards this massive industrial undertaking, facilitated by wide paved roads and an apparent corporate desire for constancy in that flow. Second is the contradictory deliberate damming of that flow by the company, through the checkpoints, concrete dividers and officials that securitise the road. These two acts – of facilitation and hindering – provide a way of exploring the making of the material by social actors. Scholars like Schouten (2019) and Agbiboa (2022), for instance, have argued that checkpoints, as artefacts of power on roads, do not just impose discipline on the mobile citizen, but serve to signal the presence of state sovereignty, and the arbitrary (and violent) ways in which that sovereignty is constantly enacted in everyday lives. But why do checkpoints emerge at all? And why are some roads more likely than others to be pockmarked by these most visible markers of violent state or corporate power? The answer lies in how threats are imagined, symbolised and embodied (Figure 2).

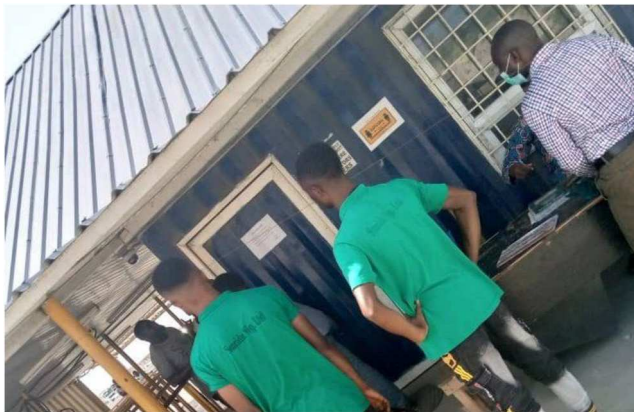


Figure 2. Dangote Refinery security checkpoint. (Source: *Premium Times* 2020).

I spoke with some contract workers at the Dangote Refinery, one of whom noted that:

Our ogas [managers] are afraid of all these bad boys. You know they can come to steal things or kidnap the expatriates? That's one reason why you see all these checkpoints. Even we the workers, they have to check us, I know one guy that was sacked, he is a welder. He still tries to come, maybe to beg or something, but he doesn't even pass [get past] the gate. So, to me, it's for outsiders and company people too. (Ahmed interview 2022)

Another talked about the company's response to protests during the Covid period, in which the company had been accused of flouting regulations and getting preferential treatment from the government. He noted that the checkpoints increased after that, because, according to him, "in their mind, these Lekki youth are trouble. They think they should be blocked from coming near so they won't be causing trouble here" (Alo interview 2022). Another argued that:

before Dangote, who cared what was going on here? How many police can anyone see on the road? But now, especially when you move towards that free trade zone and Dangote, you can't stretch your hand without touching police people. All to avoid us or what?

Another, Biodun (interview 2020), said this in response to the question of whether an increase in violent crime might account for and justify the heightened police presence:

No armed robbery! But they [the police] are just carrying [abducting] people around [on] the road! Some people did not do anything – oh! they will just be going about their business. People that may be leaving work late in the night, they will just pack them on the road and if they should reach the police station, no matter how [much they plead], they must collect money [pay a bribe] before they will release the person and that's how they do now. They [the police] are *oloriburuku* [unfortunate] people.

By imagining and framing local youth as "bad boys" against whom the company requires elaborate security protection, the refinery transforms into *something apart* in ways that do not fit its publicly declared intention to *be of* the community.⁴

It is important to note that the checkpoints that I am describing here are not simply the typical site safety infrastructure you would expect to find in major infrastructural projects such as this. What I am describing is something far more elaborate and apparently designed not as a safety feature but as a securitisation of the site. Checkpoints like those that lead towards the Dangote refinery are part of a security and surveillance architecture that emerged as a response to youth politics and circulation in the area; in essence, it is something constituted by the very presence of youthness. The securitisation of the Dangote refinery site demonstrates how city-materials are themselves constituted by the social environment and actors they encounter. By inducing shifts in the physical organisation of the refinery and its accompanying infrastructure, the perceived threat of Lekki youth highlights the subtle ways in which co-constitution occurs as a direct consequence of the interactions between physical materials of the city and social imaginaries.

Conclusion

What I have done in this paper is to use the consequential establishment of the multibillion-dollar Dangote Refinery in Lekki to show how social actors like youth are changed by shifts

in the material realities of cities and how they in turn change these materials – what I call co-constitutive relations. Focussing on the space of imagination, I drew on extensive ethnographic interactions, interviews and marketing posters in the real estate sector to highlight the way temporality is inscribed on the city imagination and what the forms it inspires can tell us about how young people encounter cityness, corporate power and state authority. The Lekki example also highlights the relevance of thinking about cities as imagined spaces and the value of linking that imagination to how social life becomes and evolves.

I also noted that the intangible realm of imagination is of course not totally devoid of reality, and that it requires material forms to animate it and to give it meaning, as indicated by Merleau-Ponty (1964). These materialities do not always have to exist physically in the city in which such imagination is being incubated, and this is even more the case in the context of the increasing globalisation of a techno-deterministic notion of the modern city. It is, therefore, not surprising that the emergence of a major infrastructural project such as the Dangote Refinery can and does have profound impacts on how ordinary people relate to that global notion of a modern city and the promise it offers.

This ability of city materials to influence the time of youth relates to what Simone (2013, 243) described as infrastructure exerting “a force – not simply in the materials and energies it avails, but also the way it attracts people, draws them in, coalesces and expends their capacities.” De Boeck’s (2012) conception of infrastructure as a built form around which publics thicken, or Larkin’s (2018) notion of technological ensembles, also speaks to the idea that the built environment of a city is essentially an artefact around which sociality becomes and is negotiated. Harvey and Knox’s (2015) work on roads in Peru offers a good, concrete example of this ability of materials to constitute social life. In order to show how roads can arrange “the mundane spaces of everyday life” (2015, 8), they focus not on the finished product itself, but on the various political and economic entanglements that are inscribed into the process of constructing roads. Focussing on the process of construction and how these “thicken publics” is a useful way of highlighting the way social categories also constitute the material. For instance, the literature on African agency in large-scale Chinese infrastructure investments (Chiye-mura, Gambino, and Zajontz 2022) does more than simply highlight the nature of state power or lack thereof in these countries; it also demonstrates how the final infrastructural outcome is made by these negotiations. So, whether a road curves west towards neighbourhood A, or whether it terminates at junction B, or whether it includes solar panelled street lights or those connected to the traditional grid, or indeed whether it is a large ostentatious monument to state power, are all products of these social negotiations and reflective of the ways the material is made by the social.

Following the lead of Harvey and Knox’s (2015) focus on disaggregation, it becomes clear, as shown here, that the Dangote Refinery is not just the active site for industrial activity, but also includes – as I noted earlier – the corresponding infrastructure and economic activities that emerge to enplace and sustain it. As a result, we are able to see more tangible ways in which this city material is shaping youth life by looking beyond the active industrial site itself to the infrastructural, economic, social and governmental hooks with which it inscribes itself on the city. These hooks include, for instance, both the new and old roads that lead towards it and the social changes that they engender, or, perhaps more elegantly, the way they “thicken publics” around them. They also include new articulations of governmentality that the refinery inevitably introduces – for instance,

the security checkpoints that have sprung up to lock the city out and discipline the use of space from it towards the industrial site.

The arguments raised here also contribute to how we understand urbanisation on the peripheries of established cities. By focussing on the everyday shifts in social and political life, and the changes in the logics of spatial governance that are caused by the presence of a large infrastructural project, the paper encourages us to read the hope that new city areas represent and how they can often be anchored to major infrastructural projects, as is the case for the Dangote Refinery. By recognising the informalities inherent in the development of the city in the peripheral areas – what Simone (2014) called the “city yet to come” – we can better understand the very “ad hocness” of urbanisation and how features and actors of the city constantly subvert planning discipline.

Finally, time offers a useful way to read the actual mechanics of city discipline, and some of the examples of everyday life presented in this paper highlight that reading a city requires intimacies with how it relates to time. This process of reading and embodying time is more than simply following life; it requires an agentic awareness of the many governing logics that discipline the everyday. From avoiding city officials at specific times to knowing when to safely leave for home, everyday people continuously master city-time and, in doing so, navigate the precarity of life in the postcolonial city.

Notes

1. A number of interesting studies have explored time as a governing concept for cities. Excellent examples include Adam (2004), Feixa, Leccardi, and Nilan (2016) and Madanipour (2017).
2. A few interesting recent examples in Nollywood are: *Rising: City of Dreams* (2022), about gang violence and ethnic rivalry in Lagos, and *Monica Goes to the City* (2022), about a rural woman who moves to the city.
3. There is much already written about the tragic history of oil in Nigeria and the ways in which it has generated violence, corruption, inequality and environmental crises (Owolabi and Okwechime 2007).
4. On many public occasions such as during corporate social responsibility projects, company representatives highlight their commitment to the local host community. See for instance Thisday (2020) and Vanguard (2021).

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Interviews

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- Adama, female, 30 (est.), small-scale makeshift restaurateur, interviewed on Lekki-Epe Expressway, 2021.
- Ahmed, male, 23, contract labourer for the Dangote Refinery Complex, interviewed in 2022.
- Akeem, male, 30 (est.), Youth leader and head of Keke NAPEP Union, interviewed in 2021.

Alo, female, 40 (est.), Civil servant with the Lagos State Traffic Management Agency (LASTMA) based in Ibeju-Lekki, interviewed in 2021.

Biodun, male, 26 (est.), Barber based in Ibeju-Lekki, interviewed in 2020.

Bozi, male, cult member, interviewed in Yenagoa, October 2014.

Ikechukwu, male, 40 (est.), resident, interviewed in Abijo Town Ibeju-Lekki, 2021.

Raimi, male, 60 (est.), community leader, Ibeju-Lekki, interviewed in 2021.

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