The spiritual highway: religious world making in megacity Lagos (Nigeria)

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While roads have often been studied from an infrastructural and functional perspective, or as the embodiment of civil engineering, the colonial experience, emergent capitalism, and more recently technopolitics (e.g. Dalakoglou 2012, Larkin 2013, Dalakoglou and Harvey 2014), this photo essay focuses on a less explored aspect of roads, namely their spiritual use. Religion plays an important role in the lives of road users in Nigeria’s former capital Lagos – often described in terms of an “apocalyptic megacity” overwhelmed by cars (Koolhaas 2001) – where road signs have been replaced by religious billboards and where prayer is the means to avert the dangers of the road (Figure 1).

Together with the Nigerian photographer Akintunde Akinleye, I hit the road to map how the busiest road in Nigeria – the Lagos–Ibadan Expressway – has produced new forms of religiosity and how these have inscribed themselves in urban space (Figure 2).

This 120-kilometer route that connects Nigeria’s first and third largest cities arouses both fear and fascination throughout the country. It was opened in 1978 at the peak of the oil boom, a period known as “paradise on wheels”. The road now carries around 250,000 vehicles per day. Due to increased traffic, in combination with poor maintenance, from the 1990s decline set in. Resulting from the fact that it has become one of the most accident-prone highways in Nigeria, a popular label for the Lagos–Ibadan Expressway is “Highway of Death” (Figure 3).

Death on the road is a near-daily event; car wrecks and corpses on the tarmac are common sights. Rumours abound that the dead are the victims of the “Kings of the Road” (armed robbers) and ritual murder; these “urban myths” are sutured with others about abductions from taxis and buses, trade in body parts, spirits and other predatory evil powers. According to Smith (2007), these road rumours represent the criminalization of the political economy and the changing nature of inequality in the maintenance of political power in Nigeria, of which the Expressway is seen as a symptom.

While it has failed as the artery linking the north and south of Nigeria, the Lagos–Ibadan Expressway has succeeded as a stage for the performance of public religiosity, earning it the moniker the “Spiritual Highway.” Since the late 1980s, more than twenty revivalist Christian and Muslim movements have constructed massive prayer camps along the Expressway. Two factors are responsible for this “drive in” religion (Figure 4).

First, the late 1980s were a historic moment for Nigeria, marked by the implementation of tructural adjustment programs and neo-liberal reforms. These developments resulted in the privatization of the Nigerian state and deregulation of the market. The gradual withdrawal of the state from the economy generated a new public sphere evolving around private enterprises, including religious organizations. Today, religious organizations account for some fifty percent of all social service provision in Nigeria (Obadare 2007: 144). In addition to organizing spectacular religious events, prayer camps run their...
own schools, universities, health centers, and companies offering business ventures and employment (Figures 5 and 6).

A second reason for the religious revival along the Lagos–Ibadan Expressway is that land is scarce in the urban centers of Lagos and Ibadan. Land is more affordable along the Expressway, composed largely of uncultivated rain forest, and this is why Christian and Muslim movements in search of prayer camps to accommodate their tens of thousands of worshippers have bought land here, converting nature space into sacred space (Figure 7).

Visiting prayer camps as a means of solving problems related to health and wealth is practiced on a grand scale in Nigeria and beyond, characterizing the Pentecostal upsurge that started in the 1970s. Muslims reacted to the Pentecostalization of Nigerian society by establishing their own prayer camps (Figure 8).

Nigerian Muslims fear that Pentecostalism with its lively worship, flashy health and wealth gospel, extensive use of modern media, and opening up of leadership positions to young people will lure their children away from Islam. In an attempt to curb anxiety about the exodus of youth, the Nasr Allah al-Fatih Society of Nigeria (NASFAT) – Nigeria’s biggest Muslim organization – refashioned itself in such a way that it addresses the needs and interests of Muslim youngsters (Figure 9).

The Christian and Muslim prayer camps are composed of factory-like prayer halls, stretching the size of several football fields, offering facilities such as restaurants, shopping malls, banks, cyber cafés, hotels, and beauty parlors, to the extent
that they have grown into “prayer cities” incorporating within them urban and religious worlds. These prayer cities stand in marked contrast with Lagos as “Sin City,” characterized by corruption, staggering levels of criminality, violence, and “419” or fraud (Ukah 2013: 182–5). Given that the prayer cities provide all kinds of services that are lacking in Lagos, ranging from electricity to a clean and secure environment to redemption, it can be argued that religion has grown into a world-making force in Nigeria (Figures 10 and 11).

Akinleye’s photographs present a visual account of two of the largest prayer cities along the Lagos–Ibadan Expressway. On the Christian side there is Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) Prayer City. MFM was founded by Dr. Daniel Olukoya, holder of a PhD in Molecular Genetics from the University of Reading (UK), who inaugurated his own prayer group at the lab where he worked. In 1989 the prayer group transformed into a deliverance ministry, providing its increasing number of followers with a “do-it-yourself gospel” to deliver them from the manifold occult powers that thwarted their well-being and success. The core of this “do-it-yourself gospel” is the violent, aggressive prayers that serve as “spiritual insecticide” against Satan and other malevolent forces. MFM’s deliverance method explains its enormous demographic spread, accounting for over 500 branches worldwide (see also Butticci 2013; Figure 12).

Copying MFM, the Nasr Allah al-Fatih Society of Nigeria – which translates as “There is no help except from Allah” society and is abbreviated to NASFAT – was
founded by a group of young Yoruba professionals who were concerned about the lack of religious awareness among higher-class young people in Lagos in 1995. Targeting Muslim youth, its leadership fashioned NASFAT as a revivalist Muslim movement aspiring to achieve “conformity with modernity.” The movement offers, in consonance with neo-liberal consumer capitalism, management courses taking the Prophet Muhammad as exemplar businessman, and a dating service for single Muslim women called “Dating the Halal Way.” This method had success: in less than a decade NASFAT has grown into the largest Islamic movement in Nigeria. Drawing upon the example of MFM’s Prayer City, where 500,000 worshippers at a time can be hosted, NASFAT’s prayer camp – stretching to 100 acres of land along the Expressway – is being projected as a model city for Muslims (Figure 13).

MFM’s and NASFAT’s prayer cities contrast sharply; whereas MFM is characterized by a demonological theology aimed at exorcism, NASFAT presents itself as a pietist movement that “projects the beauty of Islam.” Nevertheless, the two prayer cities also have much in common. For instance, copying from Pentecostalism, NASFAT refers to its prayer meetings as “crusades.” These crusades take place on Sunday morning, the timing of which coincides with that of Pentecostal services. Similar to Pentecostal crusades, NASFAT’s crusades begin with “praise worship,” that is, praise of God and the invocation of blessings on the Prophet. Similar to the hymn book in Pentecostal churches, NASFAT uses a prayer book for
its praise worship (Figures 14 and 15). As in Pentecostal crusades, NASFAT’s prayer meetings conclude with prayer requests, testimonies, and the collection of “thanksgiving” (Figures 16 and 17). In addition to the weekly crusades, another similarity with Pentecostal churches are the bi-monthly “night vigils,” that is, all-night prayer meetings attracting tens of thousands of worshippers, including Christians.

The prayer in both prayer cities includes a whole range of sounds, gestures, artifacts and devices, including religious scriptures, sound systems, prayer beads, bells, anointment oil, and holy water, which mediate God’s power and are employed to reach a state of what MFM calls “deliverance,” or “spiritual upliftment” in NASFAT’s terminology. Again, these sensorial practices and material objects suggest similarities between MFM and NASFAT (Figures 18 and 19).

The photographs visualize the specific ways in which the spiritual and the physical are related in MFM’s and NASFAT’s prayer camps. Contrasting the common equation of religion with “belief” as an interior state (Asad 1993), MFM and NASFAT do not consider faith an inner, spiritual affair, but interpret it in a far more outward, bodily sense. Worshippers walk around while praying, moving their bodies; arms are waved and fists clenched. The whole time there is a great cacophony of sounds in the prayer camps as worshippers pray aloud (Figures 20 and 21).

In MFM theology, the body is the site where struggle with the demonic takes place, and the Holy Spirit is perceived as a force that fights evil powers by...
FIG 9
Drawing on the example of Pentecostal churches, NASFAT makes use of new communication technologies to broadcast its programs and to reach members in the diaspora (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).

FIG 10
MFM’s auditorium is a factory-like prayer hall (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).

FIG 11
MFM Prayer City (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).

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making them leave the body. Successful deliverance from these demonic powers is expressed in trance-like possession, during which the possessed gesticulates dramatically, swivels around, shouts, and finally falls on the floor. In a similar vein, NASFAT epitomizes the centrality of the body as a harbinger of piety. Through specific disciplinary techniques of the body, including veiling, intense individual and collective *dhikr* (remembrance of God by recalling His names), and fasting, a particular moral state is enacted. Several worshippers told me that their body transformed when they joined NASFAT, either by growing fatter or thinner, or that their skin color lightened, which they interpreted as signs that they had been “blessed by God” (Figures 22 and 23).

That worshippers conceive of faith as an embodied practice rather than an inner belief makes that prayer camps can be interpreted in terms of what Meyer (2010) calls “sensational forms.” These forms, which mobilize the senses and experiences that are located in the body and stand in contrast to rational thinking, play a central role in modulating worshippers into religious subjects. Meyer uses the notion of the sensational form to explain Pentecostalism’s worldwide appeal. As illustrated by the Danish cartoon controversy and the recent Charlie Hebdo attack, images arouse other emotions in Islam. Still, the case of NASFAT suggests that the sensational form as heuristic tool could also explain Islamic processes of meaning making and the shaping of the senses and bodies of Muslims (Figures 24 and 25).

The photographs suggest that there is a need to take the shared material culture and sensorial practices across the religious division between Pentecostal Christianity and revivalist Islam into account. Notwithstanding some recent initiatives to explore mutual influences and interactions between born-again Christians and revivalist Muslims (Larkin and Meyer 2006, Soares 2009, Peel 2011), there is a persistent tendency to study Christianity and Islam as bounded traditions. The conventional conception of religion as distinct is problematic in south-western Nigeria, a region called “Yorubaland” which is traversed by the Lagos–Ibadan Expressway. Here Christians and Muslims live side by side, the boundaries between the two not sharply demarcated (Figure 26).

Although Christianity and Islam have their own distinctive traditions in West Africa, the photographs visualize that we should focus more on how worshippers actually perform religion in daily life and how their ways of performing religion relate to each other. By focusing on performed religion, it will appear that the idiosyncratic ways in which religion is practiced are often marked by ambivalence, contradiction, and double standards rather than by neat divisions along religious boundaries. A paradox in the religious situation along the Lagos–Ibadan Expressway is thus that
FIG 13
NASFAT Prayer City (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).

FIG 14
MFM member engaging in Bible studies (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).

FIG 15
NASFAT members sharing the NASFAT Prayer Book (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).
Preaching the "doctrine of prosperity", MFM represents the material fortunes of born-again Christians as being dependent on how much they give – spiritually but especially materially – to God, who rewards them by answering their prayers (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).

The donations collected during a single NASFAT prayer meeting sometimes exceed half a million Naira (about €2,300) (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).

while Pentecostalism and revivalist Islam compete to win souls and public space, the very fact of competition has led both groups to borrow from each other to a significant extent. The merging of religious elements makes the Expressway a true crossroad. At this crossroad prayer camps act as road builders in rendering meaningful the unstable and chaotic flux of life in megacity Lagos.

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FIG 18
MFM member praying with photographs of her relatives in her hand (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).

FIG 19
NAFAT members worshipping. Similar to MFM, women form the majority in NASFAT prayer meetings (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).

FIG 20
MFM member praying over a bottle of anointing oil. The primary purpose of anointing oil is healing (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).
FIG 21
NASFAT member holding prayer beads. White and blue are the NASFAT colors (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).

FIG 22
MFM’s religious practice has a strong physical component in that born-again Christians throw their whole body into the practice (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).

FIG 23
Like Pentecostal night vigils, NASFAT vigils are an intense emotional experience for worshippers, waiting for miracles to happen in their lives (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).
FIG 24
Possessed MFM member about to fall on the ground (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).

FIG 25
NASFAT members returning home after the dawn prayer closing the night vigil (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).

FIG 26
Christian woman buying goods from a Muslim market seller (image courtesy of Akintunde Akinleye).
Despite the relocation of many government institutions to the federal capital of Abuja in 1991, Lagos – home to an estimated 20 million inhabitants – remains Nigeria’s economic hub. Despite its infrastructural deficiencies, the megalcity is growing to such extent that by 2020 it is expected to be the third largest city in the world. As such, Lagos is often taken as an archetype for the urbanization process at work in the global South; it is the “paradigm and the extreme and pathological form of the West Africa city” (Koolhaas 2001: 652).


