

## BOOK REVIEW

**A. Adelusi-Adeluyi**, *Imagine Lagos: Mapping History, Place, and Politics in a Nineteenth-Century African City*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2024. \$34.95 pbk.

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*Imagine Lagos* reconstructs the early colonial history of Nigeria's major urban centre through five chapters. It spans from the 1851 naval Bombardment of Lagos, through the formal establishment of a protectorate in 1861 and then a colony in 1862, to chart the first decades of colonial occupation. In doing so, *Imagine* intervenes in a major theme in Nigerian social history: the urban historiography of nineteenth-century Lagos. Recent research foci in the early history of Lagos have included the legacies of slavery (Mann 2007), the formation of mercantile elites (Hopkins 2024), cultural discourses (Newell 2020) and gender (George 2014).<sup>1</sup> Adelusi-Adeluyi's book distinguishes itself from these by offering a convincing defence of space as a category of historical analysis. In this sense, it is perhaps closer to Duerkson's study of housing practices in Lagos, although this is a longer-term study with a distinct thematic focus, namely accommodation patterns.<sup>2</sup> *Imagine* excels in showing how a broad range of social actors in mid-century Lagos understood their cultural, political and social lives in relation to the spatial (p. 180).

To delineate the spatial history of this West African megacity, *Imagine* draws heavily on mapping. Its geographical engagement also takes a reflexive dimension, as the author narrates their own encounter with the contemporary Lagos cityscape over successive years during the late 2010s. *Imagine* makes a distinctive effort to centre non-textual sources (p. 30). It prompts the reader to visually encounter the spaces described, notably with the aid of maps incorporated into the text, and the frequent links to the online resources of [www.imaginelagos.com](http://www.imaginelagos.com). The author makes extensive use of GIS-based mapping to juxtapose different layers in the city's spatial representation over time. Earlier cartographic sources are handled critically, and, as Adelusi-Adeluyi observes, offer many shortcomings common to the colonial textual archive, including their overwhelmingly extra-African provenance, and their proximity to economic and strategic interests (p. 42). A further challenge is posed by physical

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<sup>1</sup>K. Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City: Lagos 1760–1900* (Bloomington, 2007); A. Hopkins, *Capitalism in the Colonies: African Merchants in Lagos, 1851–1931* (Princeton, 2024); S. Newell, *Histories of Dirt in West Africa: Media and Urban Life in Colonial and Postcolonial Lagos* (Durham, NC, 2020); A. George, *Making Modern Girls: A History of Girlhood, Labor, and Social Development in Colonial Lagos* (Athens, OH, 2014).

<sup>2</sup>M. Duerkson, *Waterhouses: Landscapes, Housing, and the Making of Modern Lagos* (Athens, OH, 2024).

geography because stretches of the Lagosian shoreline have moved significantly since the mid-nineteenth century (p. 79).

Through its chapters, *Imagine* weaves themes from the broader social history of the city into its account of urban space. Chapter 3 examines the transition to a 'new Eko', emerging from the 1851 British bombardment of the township (p. 110). The urban spaces charted in the book's pages frequently interrupt established metanarratives of the city's history, often in surprising ways. For example, the city's transition from a slave economy to emancipation is complicated by the variegated and profoundly unequal racialized 'freedom' that pertained in the city in the 1850s. In spatial terms, the areas of Olowogbowo and Tinubu Square bring this history into sharp relief (p. 111). In the landscape following the British bombardment, the struggle between administrator and missionary took centre stage. The suddenly vacant land became planted with breadfruit trees, and its western end marked by the growth of a new church of St Paul's (p. 119), an institution of decisive importance for the subsequent history of Lagos. Thinking about space, *Imagine* demonstrates, became intimately bound up with more familiar conflicts of the period.

*Imagine* not only focuses on the spatial. It makes legible social histories that have not been explored at length elsewhere. The book excavates the history of racial disparities in the treatment of crime and carcerality in the early city. A striking example of this is Adelusi-Adeluyi's exploration of Glover's 'Bridewell' or prison in Lagos. The location becomes a prism through which they show how claims about race were used to protect particular classes of European offender, while minimizing the opportunities for African victims of social, sexual and physical abuse to access justice (p. 158).

Although it is not a work of maritime history, *Imagine* extends its analysis to the waters of the Lagosian docks and lagoons. It shows how the urban history of Lagos occurs as much 'at sea' as on dry land. This is particularly apparent in the mysterious November 1869 wreck of the *Thomas Bazley* at the bar off Lagos. The vessel's history, explored through the pages of the *African Times*, reveals the labour inequality and racialized abuse that led the ship's crew to refuse to serve (p. 170). The Tinubu Square courthouse offered a verdict that caused public outrage and saw the jury split along racial lines (p. 170). The wreck of the *Bazley*, potentially a result of negligence or ill-will by the vessel's temporary skeleton crew, moves the urban history of Lagos decisively off dry land, and introduces what the book memorably refers to as a 'new karma wrought by the sandbar' (p. 171).

Ultimately, *Imagine* works hard to remedy the absences and gaps in the colonial archive by turning to comparative cartography, and also by centring space in its analysis. The work handles textual sources well, particularly the nascent print culture of the period. The cumulative result is that the history of urban actors such as women, children and subaltern groups receives a new prominence in the social history of Lagos on the eve of British colonization. These histories do not simply expand the archival foundation of colonial history in Lagos, but also provide new insights into the violence with which European occupation was consolidated.

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