This Sea Shall Be Uprooted

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I

On the silk expanse of the waters
Gleaming sparkles of wrinkled greys,
Burdens of stilts and wraps and roofs
We acquire the nudity of nature.

AS YOU DRIVE DOWN THE THIRD MAINLAND BRIDGE into the shrivelled Lagos Island area, you are introduced to the sight of hundreds of stilt homes squatting on water like an illusion come alive. This is how many are welcomed to Makoko, a community whose urbanity is apart from the other areas of Nigeria’s largest metropolis. It is a very noticeable contrast to affluent areas like Victoria Island, Ikoyi and Ajah, where land is worth millions of naira.

A view from the bridge is of the sun’s artistry, cascading over the lagoon, as it sets in its golden allure of rays splashing about to highlight fishermen throwing their nets into the lagoon. This is in the background of floating lumber pushed by bare-chested men, who do not seem concerned with the canoes slipping past. The scenery is unforgettable and has inspired many artists to create, and were it not for the publicised images of Makoko, one would go away with a masked image: a romanticised landscape.

Makoko is a shanty town, perhaps one of the oldest shanties existing in one of the choicest areas of Lagos. Inhabitants can be traced back over 200 years to the early 18th century. Today the area is home to about 85,000 people, although recent census counts are said to be of questionable accuracy. The Baale (local chief) will tell you that more than 400,000 people of different ethnic groups, and from places such as Benin, Togo and the Niger-Delta, live in Makoko.

Years without government intervention have made Makoko ignominious to some and everyday to others: new and old wooden homes receive electricity from spider webs of wires supported by thin bamboo poles or sticks; family canoes on brown waters – some flattened from usage, and some resembling drifting planks – are tied to the wooden homes; women row past in canoes filled with provisions, stop to chat with mates, or fishermen setting out into the deeper waters of the lagoon; screaming and laughing children, sparsely clothed or not at all, splash water on themselves. People will glance at someone with a camera,
but other times they are oblivious – engrossed in their insulated lives. It is in the course of mundane living that some inhabitants have been instrumental in rescuing people who fall from the Third Mainland Bridge when accidents happen. Adolphus Opara, a photographer with whom I would later work on a Makoko project, has been invited several times by the Baale, to take photographs (as a photo-journalist) of such incidents. The Nigerian authorities are still fumbling with the lack of infrastructure and the equipment required for such rescue missions would need the intervention of Julius Berger Nigeria Plc, or the deep swimmer/fishermen who are inhabitants of Makoko.

_Dreams brought us here and we arrived_  
_With no enthusiasm for things stirring_  
_– Currents, currencies – concurrently drift us_  
_Into adamance, but we learnt before to be._

Over the years, visitors to the locality have increased and the people living in Makoko are now used to being subjected to the scrutiny of different lenses. Many of them were born here, so are amused at the fascination with their lives, while others are angry because in the past there have been those who have used the plight of the inhabitants to obtain all manner of funding from foreign donors, little of which is seen by the community itself.

At first visit, the sightseer is consumed with understanding the people’s unique lifestyle, something which also interests NGOs, television stations and artists. The interest of successive governments, however, is usually revived only when some media attention is focused on the area. Of all past governments in Lagos, that of Governor Raji Fashola has been the most threatening to the community. The governor was elected on a campaign to return Lagos to its old glory. By this, he meant reinventing Lagos, which was becoming infamous for landscapes of garbage, heaped so high that it was easy to mistake it for mountains waiting for climbers. The Public Relations for the Mega City project was launched, and many slums, seen as pollution problems, became focal points. Even notoriously dirty areas like Oshodi, which had seemed impossible for previous governments to clear of debris, were spruced up. It was only a little time before Makoko became a target for demolition. An intervention would come, but not as expected.

1. An established Construction Company in Nigeria  
2. Located in northeast of Lagos State, Nigeria
As always, morning always walks in;
Hidden in the folds of the seas,
Its shadow has a broken neck
For the lagoon slices it in two
As paddles allay fears and calms.

THE CREATION OF THE THIRD MAINLAND BRIDGE during the regime of Nigeria’s former dictator head-of-state, General Ibrahim Babangida in 1990, was meant to link the Lagos Island to the mainland, a purpose it is presently serving. I like to see it as something more: a metaphor for the social stratification of Nigerian society. This was reiterated when I conversed with a friend from work and he expressed, without much thought, how air on the Island (the dub given to Lagos Island) is quite different from that on the mainland: “You no dey feel say everywhere dey cool as you climb Third Mainland Bridge?” he said. Of course, the air here is cooler because of the water, and not because some of the most ridiculously expensive estates in Nigeria are found in this part of town.

Being the commercial hub of the city, Victoria Island is the headquarters of many banks and transnational companies in the city. Hence, traffic is usually hectic. Ikoyi and Banana Island, among others, are highly sought after residential areas, and the rent for a luxury three-bedroom flat in Ikoyi is in the region of US$65,000-$75,000 per annum. The going rate for land alone is as much as N400 million. All these areas are part of the Third Mainland and the social dichotomisation that places Makoko on the border line.

Since the conception of the Lagos Atlantic City, the lifespan of coastal areas appear to be in the hands of investors and their imaginations. The latter project, which was conceived in 2003, is meant to be a solution to the flooding that engulfed Lagos and carted away properties and life. The fear of many Makoko residents is that it is the impending success of the Atlantic City project that is giving government and estate investors ideas for the regeneration of Makoko, in the event the land on which it sits is reclaimed.

The intervention that Makoko always wanted was not one that would lead to displacement. This was apparent in a controversial 2010 BBC documentary, “Welcome to Lagos”, which caught the attention of the government and had it fuming over the poor and biased image of the city that it portrayed. The documentary was described by Wole Soyinka as this “colonialist idea of the noble savage”, and some Nigerians argued it was simply a reminder of the boxed imagery of the black African: “Hey! The monkey speakst!” However, in this case, it was, “Hey! They have zeal too.” There were others, however, who saw it as depicting a reality of the times and something that government should attend to. The exposure of the impoverished life of the Makoko people – who had received little or no government intervention since its inception – was quite different from any they had received in the past. They became the subject of many discussions abroad and at home about Makoko – a place where until recently there was no school, until efforts by a returnee inhabitant to start one. Previously, those who yearned for education attended the school situated some distance away on reclaimed land, which was usually flooded during rainy seasons. Also, the benefits of visits from missionaries and foreigners earned Makoko schools like the Children’s Christian Academy, which is said to have been donated by a couple who came to the water-city some years back.
The debate is still on, and it has encouraged newer efforts from architects such as Kunle Adeyemi, who developed the Floating School using local materials, as part of a project entitled Lagos Water Communities Project. He explains that regenerated buildings would be “catering for issues like the urban flood risks, flexible and multi-use facility for the larger community need ecologically/environmentally friendly and responsible in energy use/building systems.”

In an article on this project, published in the Guardian UK, Jan Thomas Hiemstra, the deputy country director for the UN Development Programme, raised a fundamental question ignored by even the Lagos state government, with its many land reclamation projects: “The big question is what will Lagos look like in 50 years’ time? Will we have a city that integrates water into its design, or will we have a city that tries to keep water out at any cost?”

The relevance of regeneration, reimagining and redevelopment have generated further debate because 48 months after the BBC documentary, on 12 July, 2012 the Governor Fashola issued a 72-hour quit notice to the inhabitants of Makoko – an action that echoed a similar incident that occurred in 1990, under the rule of the military governor of Lagos state, Col. Raji Rasaki. At the time, more than 300,000 inhabitants were displaced and rendered homeless. The promise of resettlement was never met. Instead, the land has become home to many affluent Nigerians. Two decades later, almost to the date, and the residents of Makoko were again over the barrel, accused of “occupying and developing shanties and unwholesome structures on the water front without authority, thereby constituting environmental nuisance, security risks, impediments to economic and gainful utilization of the water front(sic) such as navigation, entertainment, recreation etc.” The inconsiderate reasoning of the letter notwithstanding, the debate on socio-cultural perspectives, historical settlement and issues of political economy of the area, might seem insignificant in the light of a 1972 decree that grants all coastal land to government.

The gist here comes back to intent: it is the proximity of Makoko to its affluent neighbours that has influenced prospective investors to encourage government to displace the inhabitants from the area. Hypothetically, with the rich needing more lands and Lagos getting even more congested, Makoko is is viewed as a monkey wearing a million-dollar diamond – a monumental commercial waste. This view raises even more debate, especially considering that the community of Makoko is a resourceful one, which contributes significantly to the economy of Lagos through viable industries in fishing, sand mining, agriculture, and lumber – most of which have existed for many years – and which generate millions of naira daily. But the government of Fashola is not alone in its zeal to deal with Makoko; a comment on a Youtube video, propagating the continued existence of the city got this response from a certain “getintouchwithfrank”:

“This is a very ignorant message. Venice was not allowed to grow like a tree without “manicure”. The demolition will give way for development.... That is what we need, development to enhance people’s living standards and also create avenues for economic growth. Imagine the new Makoko as condos, restaurants, gyms, office towers, bars on the lake, a running path for pedestrians and cyclists, it would not only be beautiful, it would also create jobs that we are desperately in need for!”

Yet, in the wake of Governor’s Fashola’s proposal for a New Lagos, which is anticipated in the many animated videos posted on Youtube, one wonders if there is ever a city that exists without character. Robotising the city would deny Lagos of its uniqueness, as any urban structural planning should take into account the cultural and historical lifestyle of the people.
Although its shoreline habitation is unique, it is important to note that Makoko is not the only modern-day stilt community in West Africa. There is Ganvie, on Lake Nokoué, near Cotonou, in Benin. It has been around for more than 800 years and has a population of only 20,000. The place caters for tourists in its on-water hotels and entertainment centres where visitors can mingle with the inhabitants of the community. Outside Africa, is the famous Palafitos Quarters in Castro, Chile, which is known for its beautifully painted palafitos (as its stilt houses are called). Many of its stilt houses remain a tourist attraction and are largely preserved in the Gamboa district, in a bay called Fiordo de Castro. The vision is that Makoko should become a place, an administrative district, where people can live and relocate to if they desire.

Lagos in its entirety has suffered much from poor governance in the past, and it has suffered as much from some of the accusations it levels on Makoko, such as flooding. Flooding has plagued the city, swallowing even its high-brow areas, such as Victoria Island, which was labelled “most expensive slum” at one time, because of its poor drainage facilities. Climate change, which is a problem across the world, has also impacted upon Lagos – with its densely populated areas and infamous rainy seasons that expose how inadequate its government’s plans are for ensuring the public safety. How ironic that the ultimate sacrifice is therefore to make homeless a community of more than 100,000 that has existed for over 200 years. Kunle Adeyemi, in an interview with Design Pages, said that perhaps the solution to the flooding might actually be in Makoko. This is a statement that is corroborated by Janthomas Hiemstra: “The future of Lagos has to incorporate [water-based] communities; you cannot just think them away.”
After today we shall berth, in a row
Unlike other days our boats floating in semblance
We will haul desires to shores,
Perhaps come back with everywhere on our minds
With power in our loins, we’ll find repose in luck.

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE MAKOKO ENVIRONMENT, and its distinct lifestyle, has made it a place of inspiration for many artists and media practitioners. Evidently, changes come to a place based on commitment. The problems in Makoko are a result of negligence and while it is impossible to disprove the theories of impoverishment, one cannot rule out the fact that this is something that cuts across many areas in Lagos. So when the BBC documentary was shot, it only increased the awareness of a place that had already received attention in the paintings, photographs and writings of many artists, mostly for the ambience which its diversity promotes.

As a child, I followed my father to the National Museum, and we would observe together the old Lagos (Lagos Island areas specifically). The Lagos I was born in is different from my father’s Lagos, and is now more different for those younger than I am. My father’s Lagos was located in the busy cosmopolitan images of Lagos Island – what my father remembers as the main city. The now celebrated areas, such as Lekki and Ajah, were rural areas where people went to fish and farm. The quiet and romantic spots reminiscent of his time and memory are now surrounded by noisy open markets. However, there’s a common, consensus between us – the city expanded and many of these places either gave way to newer structures or were expanded to take in the newer social dynamics. My point? When Makoko is destroyed, and the pictures of its shanties find their way to the museum, will I be telling the stories of a place that was abandoned for being itself, and destroyed without being offered hope to reinvent itself?

My first introduction to Makoko was a mini-documentary on NTA Newsline many years ago. I was a child, and the focus was on those who went to work on the island from this locale. There was not much talk about the state of the place, or any government intervention, for that matter. Fast forward: 2011. I met with Adolphus Opara to collaborate on a photography and poetry project on the area. He was already running a project with Sola Otori, so the documentation they had of the place was a good foreground for me. It offered a new dimension to understanding Makoko and what it stands for: the people and their tradition and that cultural environment, all of which are so easily ignored in today’s Africa of meeting economic development and demands of global relevance. I learnt from this experience that, unlike other slums in Lagos, Makoko is not simply the result of rural migrants finding solace in a constellation of hovel, but also a rural area that has had the dynamics and duties of a city forced upon it, without regard to the very infrastructures that should make it one. Even governance is through a local chief, who is responsible for the well-being of the people.

The lifestyle is constant, as that is all the inhabitants know. Most visitors are amazed by the way the people appear to have accepted their “poverty” – a myopic perspective that fails to consider the fact that there is no other life known or offered to the people. One resident, Monday, once told me that there are people in the place who have never left Makoko proper – not the city of Lagos, but actually the community itself.
Now, this community struggles to cater for its own historical legacy and the influx of people who continually come into it for housing as Lagos expands. In this growth, several years of poor governance and lack of vision have brought minimal, if any, social improvement, simply because the government has failed to recognise the distinctive lifestyle of the people in the area, so the possibility of organic growth remains unfulfilled. Yet the people have cocooned themselves in the limitations of their environment, using the water they live on as their source of survival and discharge. The water, which serves as source of life, becomes also the point of disposing their waste. The result is environmental pollution that now affects the surrounding environment that once ignored them. Today, the only vision is for a 200-year-old settlement to be demolished to accommodate the creation of a new city.

The fundamental position of most people who have been against the demolition of Makoko has been about the displacement of the people in the interest of investors. This is something the government denies. In an interview with the Vanguard Newspaper, Lanre Ogunyemi, the Chairman of the House Committee on Energy, Mineral Resources and Waterfront Infrastructure, noted that:

“Lagos is virtually a megacity and because of the present situation, there is always plan to resettle certain settlements that we think are not in conformity with the expectation of the State. But, there must be better resettlement if people must move. I believe, government will not throw thousands of its people into a daylight penury and poverty without making alternative arrangements for them ... With the way Makoko is, there is no development that can take place there. What government is doing there is not total demolition of Makoko. The only contentious issue revolves around those who built their houses under power-lines. And therefore, there is need to create a safe way to safeguard the lives and properties of the people living in Makoko ... What we want there is the beautification of the waterways which is currently our topmost priority. And the point is that an aesthetic look of Makoko must improve in the interest of the image of Lagos as a megacity. We have Ajegunle slum where government is putting efforts to ensure a better atmosphere. This is not a government that empowers the rich at the detriment of the poor,”

6. Vanguard Newspaper, Metro Section: October 1, 2012
We float in the centre of an ocean
Where dreams travel on waves:
Pitiless paddles bustling for calm,
While eyes hunt for an altitude
In shanty ambitions, as homing hopefuls.

THINGS MIGHT NOT BE AS HOPELESS IN MAKOKO as government implies. Some people are thinking. The Heinrich Boll Stiftung Foundation and Dreams Arts & Design Agency (DADA), in 2012, organised “an open space workshop, aimed at the articulation and development of practical low-cost solutions for flood resilient buildings and environmental design in low income and informal settlement areas to reduce displacement and other negative effects of flooding.” It brought together “creative thinkers, development workers, architects, urban planners, representatives of relevant government agencies and representatives of communities in Lagos affected by flooding to further brainstorm and evolve ideas over a three day period.”

The proceedings of the workshop which were published in Design Pages, a magazine printed by DADA, showed that if indeed the Lagos state government is concerned about Makoko all that is needed is a proper thought process.
My analysis is that similar to other government social infrastructural interventions in Africa, the one in Makoko lacks indigenous presence. Although our colonial experience in the past has been from Europe, our technological dependency in recent times in Africa has made us dependants of Asia. As Adeyemi explained: rather than encourage the gentrification of Makoko, a “single solution that manages to look elegant just through basic problem solving” is feasible. In doing this, he and his team would be encouraging “public intervention which would give Makoko legitimacy”. The advantage of this is that government’s presence would be felt because the social infrastructures would be integrated into the people’s way of life.

That the problem of Lagos waterways would be solved once Makoko is out of the way is an illusion and one that government is in denial about. As for pollution, one can accord significance to Adeyemi’s perspective, that “Makoko is polluted not just because the residents; Makoko itself is a receptacle of the sewer system from land. It is within a drainage channel that just empties itself into the lagoon around Makoko and this adds to the waste generated in Makoko.”

In itself, the issue of pollution all over the world is usually addressed through “cultural orientation”, which is something already being propagated in other parts of the city through The Lagos Waste Management Authority, which educates on conversion to biogas or composting and recycling. Like residents on land, those living on the water can also be taught to dispose of their garbage properly. The people in Makoko want change; they are not asking to live perpetually in the decrepitude that is a life without re-invention. The truth is, it is only if Lagos reinvents Makoko in its plan for the rehabilitation of the city, that its mega-city project will be fulfilled.

The planned demolition of Makoko is now on hold after outcry from local and international organisations and individuals. The government has heeded the call, perhaps taking note of the idea that change can indeed come with a little more imagination. The departure from the root might not be total, but – as the Yoruba say when departing: until your return – a reinvention, a welcome back: home.

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Little boys struggle against the tide; learn manhood
Girls slid their hands into their thighs
Compassions for womanhood float with canoes,
The seas splash against wooden piles;
Evening passes. Dawn arrives.
Life goes. Life comes. Home.