ABUJA

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Wale Adebanwi

To establish a city is to recreate the world and reproduce society. (Monnet 1996)

Capital cities are supposed to make statements. They often represent the best face of their countries, in both symbolic and concrete terms. Nevertheless, some capital cities, in some ways, beg questions. As sites where complex processes are articulated, some capital cities may also constitute a process of disarticulation and contestation of the very idea that they are meant to represent. Capital cities, thus, can be as much about what is affirmed as what is contested.

The Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja, Nigeria's capital city, which succeeded Lagos, the former capital, begs questions. From the long-drawn-out struggle to replace Lagos as capital in the colonial period to the actual search for a new capital city in the postcolonial era and from the establishment of a new political capital to the federal government's formal move to Abuja, the idea of a new capital city for Nigeria has always been rooted in the ethno-regional, religious, social, political and economic dynamics and crises which largely define the country.

Therefore, the decision to establish a new capital city for Nigeria and the character of the city that came out of this can be fully understood in the context of the many visions, ethno-regional ambitions and national challenges that predisposed the ruling elite to shift the capital. The primary, publicly articulated reason was the need to create a 'centre of unity'. Even this primary reason, in its official context, was a sufficient reflection of the challenges of nation building in its negative and positive senses. When 'virgin land' was acquired in 1976 in the geographical centre of Nigeria to build a new FCT, Abuja, it was proclaimed that all the problems of Lagos, which had been the capital of amalgamated Nigeria since 1914, would not be transferred to the new capital. And although not all the problems and disadvantages encountered in Lagos were reproduced in the new capital immediately, Abuja did eventually replicate old problems and create new ones, which counteracted the reasons for the ruling elite's resolve to change Nigeria's capital.

Scholars have noted that 'new [capital] cities reflect the challenge on the creation, organization, extension and consolidation of control'. Being a 'site of everyday practice', the capital city is capable of providing 'valuable insights into the linkages of macroprocesses with the texture and fabric of human existence' (Low 1996: 384). In this sense, the capital city, particularly in the African social formation, can be understood as a space where the manifestations of cultural and sociopolitical contestations within a polity become intensified (Low 1996: 384).

In the context of such contestations, Abuja was constructed as a national, collective,

unifying space, first to overpower and subsume the indigenous people who lived in the area that was acquired for the building of the new capital city, and then to overwhelm the profoundly heterogeneous ethno-regional and religious identities and ties integral to the very constitution of Nigeria. There was, therefore, a moral dimension to the idea of the 'centre of unity', in that Abuja represented not only an attempt to transcend the multifaceted cultural (ethnic and religious) identities in Nigeria, but also an attempt to capture a national essence to which all were implored to subscribe.

This chapter reconsiders within a historical context the challenges of nation building that produced and nurtured the idea of Abuja and examines the challenges that Abuja eventually posed to the efforts at nation building in Nigeria. In this context, Abuja as the FCT, the putative 'centre of unity' and 'no-man's-land' is captured as an oxymoron, in that the city makes statements, yet begs questions.[1] As *The Guardian* (Lagos) puts it, Abuja is 'a bundle of contradictions [with an] ironic and paradoxical persona'.[2]

Postcolonial Africa has been largely represented as a problem – or, at best, a challenge – both internally and externally. Nowhere is this problem of state formation and nation building in Africa more visible than in the city, particularly the capital city. The rest of the country is often a reflection of the problem represented in and posed by the capital city. Therefore, studies of capital cities in Africa, meagre as they have been, are often pathways to understanding the larger, complex socio-economic and political crises that plague many of the African states. On the other hand, capital cities in Africa also reflect the few successful, and mostly ongoing, attempts at confronting the challenges faced by the state through the political will that manifests itself in bureaucratic rationality. Shortly after the independence of many African states in the 1960s, the importance of the capital city in the development of the beleaguered continent was quickly identified by scholars and practitioners alike (see, for instance, Hamdan 1964).

In the early postcolonial years, the challenge was how the political capital in Africa would fit the responsibilities, challenges and new obligations imposed on it by independence. Although not many of the African capital cities acquitted themselves well, the capital city in Africa has witnessed important transformations. In many cases in the post-independence era, they became oases of power, privilege[3] and pleasure, which eventually degenerated into bloodily contested spaces of power, as civil strife, violent protests and military coups overtook democratic governments and turned African capitals into zones of tanks and guns. Thus, from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, capital cities in much of Africa under military, or civil autocratic, rule became not expressions of national will, but centres of oppression and tyranny.

For the most part, in terms of geographical location, the African capital city is 'undoubtedly...excessively marginal...within the political framework, so much so that we can safely say that Africa was (is) the continent of eccentric capitals' (Hamdan 1964: 245). This is because few capitals in the continent are centrally located. In many cases, their locations were dictated by the norms of European penetration and colonial political/economic interests (Potts 1985: 182). Another critical problem was that peripheral capitals often acquired regional rather than truly national character

(Hamdan 1964: 245; Potts 1985: 182). This way, the political capital became 'the subject of protest and contention instead of being a factor of harmony and integration between the regions of the state' (Hamdan 1964: 245; Potts 1985: 182), particularly in ethnically heterogeneous and plural states.

Many of the states have made no attempt to remedy these problems or limitations, for many reasons, including the incapacity of the national economy to accommodate the building of a new capital; the character, location and ethnic composition of the ruling elite in relation to the inherited capital; the nature and interests of the leader of the country, etc. Some, however, have taken bold steps to address the problems. In general, Potts (1985) noted two positive reasons for the establishment of new capitals. The first is the importance of a more central position for the capital city and the provision of a new focus for national pride, as in the case of Abuja, Nigeria (Moore 1982; Olusola 1993; Salau 1977) and Gaborone, Botswana (Best 1970). Potts argued that in these two cases 'specific attention was also paid to the question of promoting ethnic accord by choosing a "neutral" site' (Potts 1985: 183). Theoretically, '[a] more central and neutral location for the capital…allows for more effective administration; it may also help to legitimize the government by allaying the regional jealousies and feelings of neglect engendered in areas of the country outside the "core" area of the old capital' (Potts 1985: 183). The second reason noted by Potts is what may constitute a 'convenient rhetorical justification for an expensive project'. In other words, the creation of new capitals is a means of enhancing the regional spread of 'development'. This could be an excuse because, indeed, in Africa '[t]he functional structure of some new capitals has little potential to fulfil such a role effectively, reflecting a lack of true commitment or the inability to implement policies that might promote such role' (Potts 1985: 183).

However, it is important not only to stress the *positive* reasons rendered for the creation of new capitals, but also to consider the specific reasons offered in specific contexts, rather than merely establishing global or continental patterns. As the case of the movement of Malawi's capital from Zomba in the south to Lilongwe in the central region in 1965 shows, the bureaucratic and rational political justifications for the movement of capitals do not always suffice (Potts 1985: 188). This chapter relates the case of Abuja to the general disappointment that has been experienced in the few cases of capital relocation in Africa by examining how the new capital fits the ambitious goals that necessitated the choice and building of a new capital.

What are the links and tensions that exist between capital cities and national unity in the African postcolony? How do capital cities express, represent or misrepresent national unity in Africa? The author's approach to these questions is through social relations, symbols and political economy using the example of Abuja, Nigeria's 17-year-old capital city. Against the tradition of constructing an unproblematic link between national identity and capital city, Abuja is exemplified to highlight the problems in this relationship. The author seeks to interrogate the assumptions of such links and lay them bare within the dynamics of inter-ethnic, inter-faith, socio-economic and political rivalries, dialogues and clashes in Nigeria.

From Lagos to Abuja: 'No-man's-land' and the spatial logic of power

The status of Lagos as federal capital and the implications of this for ethno-regional politics and the struggle for hegemony among the three major ethno-linguistic groups in Nigeria – the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba – were for many decades of central importance in the overall nation-building process (Adebanwi 2004). The formal annexing of the city by the British on 30 July 1861 marked the beginning of an era that led to the creation of a new territory of Nigeria. The Northern and Southern (British) Protectorates were amalgamated in 1914 to form a single colony of Nigeria, with Frederick Lugard, the former head of the Northern Protectorate, as the Governor General. Lugard had favoured Kaduna, the capital of the Northern Protectorate, as the capital of the amalgamated Nigeria (Hamdan 1964: 247). The southern coastal – and more advanced – city of Lagos was favoured by the Office of the Colonies in London. However, barely five years after the amalgamation into a new country, agitations began for a new capital. The agitators included northern elements and sympathetic colonial officers, who described Lagos as 'the nerve-centre of agitations and grave of official reputations'. Many of these people called for shifting the capital to 'an uninhabited spot in Kaduna, 570 miles away from Lagos', somewhere behind Lokoja. The recommended location is roughly around Abuja, the present FCT. At one stage, the rumour was rife in Lagos that the Governor General, then Sir Hugh Clifford, had ordered the removal of the 'administrative headquarters', as Lagos was then called, to 'the high plateau immediately behind Lokoja known as Mount Patte, situated in the *very centre* of the Protectorate'.

Sir Clifford had to tour the whole country, in the light of these rumours and agitations, and then addressed the colonial Nigerian Council in Lagos on the subject. On 29 December 1919, Clifford stated:

> After giving this question the most careful consideration, I have arrived at the conclusion that, at any rate, for a great many years to come, the only possible place at which the principal seat of Government can be located is Lagos.[4]

The reasons for the retention of the city of Lagos, which a nationalist politician saw as containing 'the genius of the country', were not only social and economic, however. Clifford argued further that any government ought to be domiciled near wherever there were the greatest and most effective articulation of public dissent and critical appraisal – as evident in Lagos (Adebanwi 2004: 27). Argued Clifford:

> This is a function which [we] can hardly hope to fulfil unless the principal operations of the Government are carried on in the *midst of the most active life and thought of the country*, whence it is able to maintain the closest touch with every section of the community, and where *its activities are exposed to the closest scrutiny and criticism*. Such things, I contend, are aids to good government with which no administration can safely afford to dispense...(I)f the seat of Government be situated in some position

of *comparable isolation*, it must inevitably tend to become *increasingly bureaucratic*, and *automatically deprive itself of the assistance in the framing of its measures which articulate public opinion* of those whose affairs are its charge can alone efficiently supply.[5] (emphasis added)

Consequently, the Governor General concluded that the idea of moving the capital from Lagos was 'definitely abandoned', and he expressed hope that it would not be revived for decades. But the rationale and purpose behind the agitation for a change in the political capital of Nigeria were not informed by the reasons offered by Clifford for the desirability of the retention of Lagos as capital city. Therefore, as the tempo of nationalist activities and agitations increased in the 1940s and 1950s, with their attendant ethno-regional plots and manoeuvres, the battle for Lagos again raised the issue of, and need for, a change in the location of the capital city.

The three major ethno-regional groups (the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba) were represented, broadly, by the three major political parties that emerged in the period of limited self-rule – the Northern People's Congress (NPC) (Hausa-Fulani North), the National Congress of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) (Igbo East)[6] and the Action Group (AG) (Yoruba West). The battle for hegemony and/or accommodation waged by the elites of these three groups against one another dictated the tone and tenor of every major national issue in this period. The direction of politics and governance in Nigeria since this pre-independence era has been largely dictated and determined by complex ethnic, ethno-regional and religious dynamics and formations.

However, the NPC did not initially participate in the controversy over Lagos, particularly because the matter first revolved around the issue of the 'ownership' of Lagos. The NCNC argued through its mouthpiece, the *West African Pilot*, that the Yoruba metropolis, which had attracted a myriad of ethnic groups over the decades, particularly the Igbo, was not a 'Yoruba city'. The *Daily Service*, the mouthpiece of the AG countered that Lagos was an *authentic* Yoruba city.

From the battle over the ownership of Lagos, the NCNC and AG, and by that token, the Igbo and the Yoruba and their mouthpieces, the *West African Pilot* and *Daily Service*, moved to the battle over the administrative separation of Lagos, as the federal capital city, from the Western Region of Nigeria, which was eventually controlled by the AG. When the independent status of Lagos was removed in the early 1950s through the reform of the Lagos City Council, the city became part of the Western Region, which led to the upstaging of the NCNC, and Igbo, mayor of the city by the AG. At this point, the *Pilot* argued,[7] 'If Lagos is still assumed to be the capital of Nigeria, surely in all its phases, institutions must exist to act as unifying media so that the centric force created will be Nigerian, neither entirely Yoruba, nor Igbo, nor Hausa. It is in this light that the proposed Lagos Town Council reforms must again be examined.' The *Pilot* argued further that 'this Atlantic City[,] a truly worthy capital of Nigeria' must be made to 'serve as a *unifying force*' (emphasis added). Pursued the *Pilot* in the same editorial:

If *we* succeed in making Lagos Nigeria's capital, where all tribes of the nation can live without feeling themselves ostracised, where the

government system of the city will not be biased in *nature* but based on *progressive formula*, if *we* can indeed make Lagos a sort of London, or New York, where all citizens from all parts can commingle and inhabit without animosity, then surely *we* would have succeeded in *cementing the Nigerian ideal*. (emphasis added)

Lagos was critical for both parties and both ethno-regional groups for a number of economic, social and political reasons, hence the battle to control it. The Western Region needed to add Lagos to bolster its size, population, influence and economic resources. Also, because the NCNC was more popular in the city, the AG could control the city indirectly only if it were incorporated into the region. For the NCNC, Lagos was similarly important. The party controlled the city and was able to use the control to protect the rising Igbo population in the city, which strongly desired that Lagos be a 'no-man's-land' as the national capital (Adebanwi 2004: 40).

The *Service*, the mouthpiece of the AG and the Yoruba, was happy with the dual status of Lagos, both as capital city and as part of the Western Region, dismissing the 'NCNC rascals' who had dominated the city council since 1952. On its part, the *Pilot* argued: 'The only solution lies in the creation of a new capital unfettered by regional legislations [because, given the merger of Lagos with the West] Nigeria remains without a capital.' In this context, the *Service* asked that Nigeria's political capital be moved elsewhere, so that Western Nigeria could continue to enjoy the incorporation of Lagos into the region. Even though the West and its leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, would later oppose the shifting of the capital to Abuja, their mouthpiece, the *Service*, argued in the 1950s for the relocation of the capital. Stated the *Service*:

> The people of the Western Region are not compelling the whole country to make Lagos their capital. But, at least, it is the duty of the Governor to make it clear that the *only alternative to the present situation of Lagos* is for the people of Nigeria to buy a piece of land and establish on it a *federal capital independent of the three regions*. (Adebanwi 2004: 42, emphasis added)

However, during the Constitutional Conference in 1953 in London, the NCNC and the NPC supported an independent status for Lagos, which angered the AG. The city was subsequently separated as the federal capital city from the Western Region. Another significant event that would determine whether Lagos remained the political capital of Nigeria occurred later the same year. After a vigorous and bitter debate in the federal parliament, the motion by a ranking member of the AG that Nigeria be granted independence by the year 1956 was opposed by the NPC (northern) leaders. The northerners were booed in Lagos and at every railway station in Western Nigeria as they journeyed back north. They were not spared until they crossed over to the Northern Region. For the aristocratic leadership of the Northern Region, particularly their leader, Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sarduana of the powerful Sokoto Caliphate, the experience with the 'southern rabble' was an expression of absolute lack of respect for northern leaders by southerners. The actual motion for independence and the insults traded against northern leaders over their position on the matter even provoked agitation for secession of the region from the rest of the federation. After having

been persuaded against separation from the rest of Nigeria by the British, some have argued that the experience indicated to the northern leaders that Lagos was not a place where they would like to continue to do business with the rest of Nigeria.

However, given the pluralism of Nigeria and the complex nature of its national politics, the issue of the political capital of Nigeria was not raised again officially until 1975, when the military regime, headed by a northerner, General Murtala Ramat Muhammed, constituted a panel to advise the regime on the creation of a new capital city for Nigeria, with suggestions to the panel that already indicated preference for the centre of Nigeria. Given that the Northern Region, which had since been broken into states, accounted for more than half of the land space, it was obvious to many that the political centre of Nigeria would lie in the old northern region. Also, given the nature and character of ethno-regional rivalries, for the other two major ethno-linguistic groups – the Hausa-Fulani and the Igbo – this was acceptable. However, even though a Yoruba judge headed the panel that eventually chose and recommended Abuja as the proposed FCT, most Yoruba, and Lagosians in general, were not particularly happy that the political capital of Nigeria was to be taken to 'the north'. Many in this category saw the reasons offered for moving the capital as post hoc rationalisations by the core Hausa-Fulani power elite. Since the initial move came from the north, and given the history of the struggle over Lagos, ethno-regional motives could not be ignored. Such attempts, according to Schatz (2004: 120), 'to undermine [the] rival [ethnic] patronage network and bolster one's own' have been suggested for the relocations of other capital cities. One example is Lilongwe in Banda's Malawi, which was near the president's birthplace and where his ethnic group, the Chewa, were concentrated. Thus, in the case of Malawi, the capital's relocation was used partly to 'consolidate power against rival ethnic groups' (Schatz 2004: 120). Inevitably, the Chewa had the opportunity to staff the new administration (Schatz 2004: 120). Another example is Ivory Coast, where President Houphouet-Boigny moved the capital from Abidjan to Yanoussoukro, his birthplace. In both cases, Schatz argues that 'the move shored up the president's power base in the face of perceived opposition' (Schatz 2004: 120).

Given the demonstrated incapacity of the national political elite to mobilise the people and Nigeria's abundant resources towards achieving national development – despite the perpetual rhetoric of 'development' – some would see the move to Abuja more as the triumph of ethno-regional manoeuvres than a rational attempt at fostering national unity and even development. The worsening of inter-ethnic and inter-faith relationships, no less accentuated by the federal government in Abuja, is evidence that this view cannot be dismissed. However, while Lagos was, at the political level, an ethno-regional challenge to the dominant ruling elite, admittedly, at the social level, it was an urban, or metropolitan, mess in dire need of rebuilding. Indeed, there were plenty of tenable political, economic and social reasons that could be – and were – given for Lagos to cease being the political capital of Nigeria.

The first was the dual role of Lagos as both a state and federal capital, which at that time produced conflicts between the state and federal governments. Indeed, the Lagos State Government in its memorandum to the committee on the location of the federal

capital, stated some of the flashpoints (Olusola 1993: 20). The flashpoints were induced by the fact that before the creation of Lagos State in May 1967, Lagos Municipality was administered by the Federal Ministry of Lagos Affairs, while the City of Lagos was administered by the Lagos City Council. Also, the metropolitan areas (the old Colony Province) of Mushin, Ikorodu, Ikeja, Badagry, etc. were administered at a point by the Western Regional Government. After Lagos State was created, the Lagos Island still served the dual role of federal and state capital, with occasional problems over jurisdiction on different matters, including tax and land. Although these problems could be constitutionally and amicably resolved, given the incompetent and chaotic nature of public administration in Nigeria, the problems lingered.

Another point raised for the unsuitability of Lagos as the federal capital was inadequacy of land space, added to the limitations imposed by the Lagos terrain, with its lagoons and creeks. Even though some suggested land reclamation and the expansion of the city towards adjacent areas (including Ogun State) so as to create a new capital city, the arguments were rejected in favour of a more central city. Others offered the view that Lagos, being a coastal city, was more vulnerable to external attacks, a point rejected by critics, who argued that in the age of long-range missiles, no location of a capital city would put it out of range of easy attacks by enemies. Other reasons offered for the relocation of the capital city included Lagos's inadequate infrastructure, overpopulation, the ethnic pattern (with the dominant Yoruba population) and the high cost of living (Olusola 1993: 19–28).

However, critics of the proposed relocation of the capital city argued that aside from the ethnic pattern of Lagos, which had changed considerably over the years, even though the inhabitants of the city remained predominantly the Yoruba, most of the other reasons offered for the relocation of the capital could have been confronted and resolved by a more efficient, effective and creative ruling elite and government. For such critics, the relocation of the capital to the centre of the country, even if it were to solve some of the problems, would recreate the old problems and create new ones in the future, given the unresolved fundamental contradictions in the very constitution of Nigeria and the nature and character of its ruling elite. It was evident, however, that the need to move the capital to the 'centre' of Nigeria had been established by the dominant elite, and the process for achieving this was only a matter of time. It was interesting, therefore, that the new capital was more or less the same location that was proposed in the early 1920s by those agitating for capital relocation.

Abuja: The ironic 'centre of unity'

For here we build for/eternity/edifices, to stand the test/of time/And express in robust structures/The size, majesty, and vision/that is Nigeria. (Walter Ofonagoro, March 1997)

...Go to Abuja, millions dey roll and vanish forever in a capital hole. (Unlimited Liability Company, 1983)

Ordinarily, a certain form of bureaucratic rationality, informed by political, economic and social conditions and reality, determines decisions to relocate political capitals. It is in this sense that most capital cities make statements. As Linge (1961: 468) argues,

a federation, in particular 'seems to need a centre, often removed from existing commercial and industrial concentration, that is devoted largely to housing the federal administration and its associated machinery'. Indeed, Abuja, like Washington D.C., Brasilia and Canberra, was ostensibly 'created from the scratch as a political act of faith' with its 'roots...implanted deep in the facts of political geography' (Linge 1961: 468). These facts, in the Nigerian case, reveal the challenges posed to the national elite, who faced acute state and nation-building dilemmas, and the kinds of responses adopted by the factions of the elite (Schatz 2004: 112). Even though capital relocation is not one of the most frequent or common modes of statecraft or ethno-regional politics, this 'expensive and risk-ridden step' is nevertheless sometimes taken by particular elites (Schatz 2004: 13).

Shortly after the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), General Yakubu Gowon, the military head of state, stated at the convocation ceremony of the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria – the top-class university in the north of Nigeria, where the cream of the northern elite were trained – that there was the need to find a solution to the problems of Lagos as the country's capital. He, therefore, challenged people to come up with alternative proposals. By this time, it was evident that the dominant elite were already resolved on changing Nigeria's political capital.

When the largely inept and misdirected Gowon regime was overthrown in a coup, the task fell to General Murtala Muhammed's regime to carry out the proposed rethinking of Nigeria's capital city. In his inaugural speech, Muhammed spoke about the crisis facing Lagos and affirmed that his regime would confront the issues. In August 1975, he set up a panel headed by Justice Akinola Aguda, a high-court judge, to examine the desirability of the retention of Lagos or the relocation of the capital city.

Members of the committee included Dr Tai Solarin, educationist and social reformer, Colonel (Monsignor) Pedro Martins of the Nigerian army, Alhaji Muhammed Musa Ismail, a businessman, Chief Owen Fiebai, a Jos-based lawyer, Dr Ajato Gandonu, a researcher with the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, and Professor O.K. Ogan, a medical doctor. The secretary of the committee was Chief E.E. Nsefik, a deputy permanent secretary in the Federal Civil Service.

The committee's tasks were to examine the dual role of Lagos as a federal and state capital and advise on the desirability or otherwise of Lagos retaining that role. In the event of the committee finding that Lagos was unsuitable for such a role, the committee was to recommend which of the two governments (federal or state) should move to a new capital; and in the event of the committee finding that the federal capital should move out of Lagos, it was to recommend suitable alternative locations, taking into account the need for easy accessibility to and from every part of the federation. The committee was to submit its recommendations to the federal military government not later than 31 December 1975.

The terms of reference already indicated that the military regime's preference was a new capital, with pointers to which new site would be favoured. The committee toured the whole of Nigeria – and relevant cities worldwide – and came to the

conclusion that Lagos was no longer suitable as the federal capital. Rather than simply naming an alternative site, the committee considered certain criteria to suggest alternative sites.

These included:
- Centrality, which was already mentioned in the terms of reference by the military regime, given that Lagos was 'geographically peripheral' and Nigerians 'in some parts of the country...express[ed] very strong feelings as regards their sense of remoteness from, and neglect by, the Federal Government'. Hence, 'any location which was too far removed from the centre of the country' was ruled out (Olusola 1993: 36).
- Health and climate. Given that 'some parts of the country are naturally more pleasant for the majority of Nigerians to live in relative comfort', the committee came to the conclusion that an 'equable' site which was 'neither too hot, nor too cold, neither too dry, nor too wet' would be acceptable (Olusola 1993: 38).
- Land availability and its uses. The committee recommended that no less than 8 000 square kilometres should be designated as the FCT for immediate and future uses of the new capital.
- Water supply. The proximity to water in sufficient quantity and quality was considered.
- Accessibility. The location of the capital 'where population centres are fairly distributed in all directions of the compass...and reduce the problems of inequality of distance to the capital' was also considered (Olusola 1993: 38).
- Security. It was agreed that the location chosen should not be 'easily destroyed by a foreign enemy or in a civil war', including 'local political disturbances and riots...and threats to Nigerian unity' (Olusola 1993: 40–41).
- Existence of building materials locally.
- Low population density (Olusola 1993: 40–41).

Other criteria included power resources, drainage, soil, physical planning convenience and ethnic accord. Although the committee said the latter should not be overemphasised, it was sufficient, the committee insisted, that the new capital should 'for political convenience...generate internal peace so as to establish a unifying nationalist image for both internal and external consumption'.

In the context of these criteria, the area favoured by the committee fell roughly within the present FCT (Olusola 1993: 45).

The committee also charged the federal military government to take its final decision in the light of the following factors. Firstly, that a majority of the memoranda submitted to it favoured a new capital city. Secondly, that care should be taken not to create a 'life-less' city like Brasilia, which would be empty at weekends. Instead, the new capital should be a 'symbol of unity', given that it will be 'created on a virgin land where every Nigerian could feel assured that he [sic] had an equal opportunity and right...without any fear of domination'. Thirdly, that the cost factor should be considered, given the state of the economy, even though the creation of a new capital should not be delayed (Olusola 1993: 45–47).

On 3 February 1976, Muhammed made a broadcast to the nation and announced the decision to relocate the federal capital. Two days later, Decree No. 6, 1976 (Federal Capital Act) was enacted, and thus a new capital city was born in the lands of Niger, Plateau and Kwara States. A Federal Capital Development Authority was created to supervise the preparation of a comprehensive master plan for Abuja and the building of the new capital. The new FCT occupied 8 000 square kilometres of land, about two and half times the size of Lagos.

Contrary to the idea of a 'no-man's-land', which had been touted during the creation of the new capital city, the history of Abuja – whose name derives from the old Abuja, renamed Suleja – revolved around the old Abuja Emirate. This was formed around 1825, in part as a result of the Fulani Jihad. The area was populated by a few ethnic groups, including the Habe (Hausa), Gwari, Koro, Gade and Ganagana people. There were also the Gwandara, Bassa and Fulani. However, the aborigines (the Gwari, Gade, Gwandara, etc.) and the settlers (Hausa, Fulani, etc.) were to be fully resettled in adjoining areas of the FCT and compensated in order to make the city a true 'no-man's-land'. However, as usual with official plans in Nigeria, this was done in a haphazard way and many of the original inhabitants were never resettled or compensated. Some of those who were resettled moved back to their lands.[8]

In the campaigns that heralded the Second Republic (1979–1983), political leaders expressed their different positions on the question of Abuja. Indeed, the issue of Abuja became a major political debate (Salau 1977: 13). Some stated that the movement of the capital would be a priority; others that it would not be. Alhaji Shehu Shagari, the presidential candidate of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), who eventually became president, said that his government would ensure speedy implementation of the Abuja master plan, whereas Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the candidate of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), stated that if elected, he would not spend a penny on the Abuja project (Salau 1977: 13). Analysts saw the positions of both party leaders as expressions of the attitude of the dominant ('conservative') power elite of the north (NPN/Shagari) and the opposition ('progressive') power elite of the west of Nigeria (UPN/Awolowo). Whereas the northern leaders were committed to moving the capital away from the Yoruba south-west, the elite of the Yoruba south-west saw the Abuja project as an ill-conceived, wasteful attempt by the Hausa-Fulani elite to further consolidate their hold on power.

When Shagari eventually took up office, his government made huge allocations for the development of the new capital territory. Indeed, his first visit outside Lagos was to Abuja to ascertain the level of work completed. As a result of the gross ineptitude and rabid corruption of the Shagari era, the Abuja project became a cesspit of corruption, prompting Nigeria's famous writer and later Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, and his musical team, the Unlimited Liability Company, in a lyrical response to the corruption that marked the Second Republic, to sing 'Go to Abuja, millions dey roll, and vanish forever in a capital hole.' (Go to Abuja, millions are flocking, and vanish forever in a capital hole.) Shagari was committed to ensuring that the seat of government moved while he was in power. He commenced the

gradual movement of the federal government to Abuja in 1982 with the relocation of the Ministries of Defence, National Planning, Finance, Justice, Internal Affairs and Federal Capital Territory. Every organ of the federal government was scheduled to move to Abuja by 1987 at the latest. However, Shagari was overthrown in a coup in December 1983 while holidaying in the presidential villa in Abuja, even though the seat of government was still in Lagos. This delayed the relocation.

Nevertheless, while Shagari was in power, major steps were taken to ensure the realisation of 'the national objective of making sure that the population of Abuja [was] truly federal in character, thus satisfying the desire of all Nigerians to live and work together in peace and harmony within the new Federal Capital' (Olusola 1993: 110). Land was allocated on the basis of certain criteria, the issue of the promotion of national unity and integration being the primary one. Other criteria included ensuring that the population was federal in character and had the capacity and ability to build or develop the allocated land on a first come, first served basis.

Not much was achieved under the regime of General Muhammadu Buhari (1984–1985). However, when General Ibrahim Babangida seized power in August 1985, his regime, which became one of the most corrupt and profligate in Nigeria's history, allocated huge sums to the development of the FCT. The regime became even more committed to developing the FCT and formally moving the capital from Lagos when it survived a bloody coup on 22 April 1990. The coup, led by middle-level army officers of Middle Belt and southern extraction, spoke volumes about the fundamental crisis of Nigerian nationhood. In the abortive coup speech, Major Gideon Orkar announced the excision of all core northern states from Nigeria 'on behalf of the patriotic and well-meaning peoples of the Middle Belt and the southern parts of this country' because, according to the coup plotters, Nigeria's history was replete 'with numerous and uncontrollable instances of callous and insensitive dominatory [sic] repressive intrigues by those who think it is their birthright to dominate till eternity the political and economic privileges of this great country to the exclusion of the people of the Middle Belt and the south'.[9] The coup shocked General Babangida, who thought he had a firm grip on the armed forces and an able intelligence network. The manner in which the coup plotters were able to penetrate the Dodan Barracks, where the president lived – which necessitated Babangida's hurried escape – forced Babangida to hurry the process of the movement of the capital and to expand the initial concept and plan of the presidential villa in Abuja. The villa, which initially comprised mainly the presidential lodge, incorporated Akinola Aguda House.[10] Babangida had it redesigned as a fortress and constructed a more elaborate presidential villa which was rumoured to have 'myriads of underground, bomb-proof bunkers and tunnels...an impregnable fortress from where [the head of state] can successfully defend [his] government against ambitious soldiers'.[11] *TELL* magazine described it as 'a castle of dreams. By its sheer mammoth size, this monstrous beauty is a feat of modern engineering and architecture.'[12] Newspapers reported that the military president gave Julius Berger, the ubiquitous German construction company, a blank cheque to make Abuja ready as soon as possible for the capital to move.

Less than two years after the abortive coup, on 12 December 1991, Babangida moved Nigeria's capital officially to Abuja, the beautiful new city designed as a 'showpiece' for Africa. Babangida, like members of the core elite, realised that it was easier for the capital to be moved under a military regime than under a democratic government, which would require obtaining democratic consensus and the approval of parliament. Therefore, Babangida committed his successors to a fait accompli.[13]

In its early years, Abuja's city centre had (and still has) some of the best road networks in Africa, unlike most Nigerian cities. It had running, piped water; electricity was constant; and its digital telephone system worked.[14] When General Sani Abacha took over in November 1993, he stayed in Lagos for the first few months. This led to agitations by core northern leaders to the effect that Abacha, also a core northerner, should move to Abuja so that there would be no risk of the capital returning to Lagos. This, for many, was also an indication that the core northern elements did not see Abuja so much as a 'centre of unity', but as a capital located within 'their' old region. It turned out that Abacha only stayed in Lagos to consolidate his control of the armed forces, stem the tide of opposition to his hijack of power and 'cleanse' Babangida's Aso Rock Villa, both in security and spiritual terms. He later moved to Abuja.

Capital excess: A 'parasitic city' as a mirror of the national crisis

Although there are serious limitations to the bipolarity of the theoretical, heuristic model which argues that cities are either 'parasitic' or 'generative' (Spodek 1975), the idea of a city as a parasite is partly useful for understanding the role that Abuja has played in Nigeria, particularly in terms of the critical issue of national unity – which ostensibly informed the building of the new political capital. Even in a specific analysis, the functioning of a capital city has to be put in a national and international context.

In general, Abuja as the political capital seems to have followed the same principle of gigantic consumption without production that feeds and sustains the core of the Nigerian national elite. Indeed, as *TELL* magazine argued, 'despite the idyllic conception of Abuja as model city, the contradictions in Nigerian society are already settling there'.[15] Apart from the rabid corruption that surrounded Abuja's construction and continued expansion, the violations of the master plan and countless other problems, given that the main function of Abuja is political administration, the type of federal administration that the country has experienced in Abuja cannot be said to make the cost of its construction worthwhile. Indeed, as a symbolic 'centre of unity', Abuja has not been a success, and as a practical 'centre of unity', it has largely failed. As the construction of the new political capital progressed, controversies and debate over the 'northernisation' of Abuja, in symbolic and material terms, were raised as evidence of the fact that Abuja was far from being a centre of unity.

First, for a capital that was designed to be a 'neutral' ground for all Nigerians, critics in the south have raised many objections not only to the way in which Abuja has been 'northernised' and treated as part of the north of Nigeria, but also to the concomitant 'Islamisation' of the capital city. Shortly before Babangida

moved to Abuja, a magazine published a major story in which the designs of some public constructions in the city, including bus stops, were alleged to be Islamic in architectural style. Muslim northerners countered that the architecture was 'eastern', and not 'Islamic', as evident in the former Soviet Union (see Figures 6.1 to 6.3). Later, critics were particularly irked by the dome on the National Assembly, which they said resembled the dome of a mosque.

Furthermore, for a 'centre of unity', the traditional rulers of the original inhabitants have either continued their reign in the capital city or constructed newer centres of power. And given that the original settlers were predominantly Muslims, these traditional rulers are Muslim rulers too, as in the Hausa-Fulani north of Nigeria. The Abuja Emirate that existed before the FCT was created was sustained and expanded. Such places as Sarkin Garki (in the Garki District) and Ona of Abaji are occupied by Muslim northerners. The administrators of the FCT seem to have turned a blind eye to this headship of districts by Muslim traditional rulers, thus affirming their traditional claim over the areas that are supposed to be 'no-man's-land'. Indeed, by the time General Babangida moved to Abuja in 1991, Sharia courts were already springing up in the territory alongside traditional institutions. Indeed, often in matters related to the north and Islam, there are constant references in the media to the 19 states of the north and FCT, Abuja.

Again, the fact that only Muslim northerners have been made ministers of the FCT has also raised concerns. Apart from the democratic issues raised over the refusal to allow for the election of a mayor of the city,[16] others have asked why only a section of the country has monopolised the headship of the Ministry for the FCT, with wide-ranging implications for the character of the city and for land distribution. In relation to this, it is clear that given the dominance of Muslim northerners in the highest decision-making organs of governments over the years, little thought was originally given to the multicultural and multi-faith status of Abuja. To give two examples, a 'national' mosque was designed in the original plan of the city and the construction began under President Shehu Shagari, even though it was said that it was not being fully constructed with public funds. The Christians, under the auspices of the vocal Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), had to mobilise public opinion on this before a Christian equivalent, a church called the 'national' Ecumenical Centre, was planned and built. The government gave the CAN a grant to build the church, as it had done for the Muslims. However, the Ecumenical Centre was completed much later than the mosque – in fact, it was only fully completed under a Christian president.[17] Also, within the presidential villa, a small mosque was constructed for the use of the head of state and his staff. Christians inferred from this that a non-Muslim – and a southerner in general – could not be expected to lead Nigeria. This sentiment was not totally misplaced, given the nature of the leadership debate in Nigeria since before independence. It was only when President Olusegun Obasanjo, a Christian, took office in 1999 that a chapel was constructed in the villa.

Another sore point is that the original inhabitants of the FCT contend that Abuja ought to have a proper status. Given the attempt at ensuring 'federal character' and inclusivity in terms of ethnicity, many public positions are expected to reflect these.

However, because Abuja is not a state, this is not provided for. Therefore, as Major General A.B. Mamman, one of the original inhabitants, said, 'Abuja is underprivileged' (Mamman interview) because the Abuja 'indigenes' – or those who now or in the future would claim Abuja as their home – would be allocated no positions in public office, public-sector jobs or (quota-based) university admissions, which are done on the basis of state origin. Despite the huge financial commitment of the federal government to Abuja every year, Mamman insisted that this arrangement was not fair. This is particularly so because, for anyone to win the presidential elections, the constitutionally stipulated percentage of votes that must be won in two-thirds of the states of the federation leaves the FCT out of the equation because it is not a state.[18]

The indigenes have also faced the challenge of attempts to impose an Emir on the FCT, particularly by the Hausa-Fulani. With the proliferation of traditional rulers in the towns and areas that make up the FCT (which goes against the vision of the founders of the new capital), there have been attempts to have a central traditional authority for the whole city – an Emir of Abuja, in effect. In 1995, the Emir of Karshi, who was also the president of the traditional rulers in the Abuja Emirate, tried to mobilise his supporters so that he could be pronounced the Emir of Abuja, but this was resisted. He was later murdered, allegedly over land matters. An FCT Ministry official told a newspaper in 1996 that 'the appointment of an Emir of Abuja would violate the spirit of Abuja. He would not just be a traditional but [a] spiritual head of Abuja. As an (Islamic) head, what would happen to Christians...[in his domain]?'[19]

Indeed, in the mid-1990s, the attempt to appoint a Sarkin Hausawa (head of the Hausa community) in Abuja was resisted by indigenous groups who saw this as an underhand way of appointing a Hausa-Fulani emir for Abuja. General Mamman said in 1996 that '[t]here will be Sarkin Hausawa of the FCT. There will be no centralized traditional authority. The issue does not arise'.[20] Emirs and chiefs have emerged consistently in the 'centre of unity'. Therefore, whether the issue arose or not, the very existence of traditional authorities in the towns, areas and districts of Abuja identified with 'indigenous' groups and particular religious lines, are ostensibly a violation of the spirit of Abuja and the vision of the city's founders. However, this phenomenon has become accepted, as the FCT minister, through his governing powers, appoints and removes the traditional rulers and makes allocations to them as he pleases.

Some of the socio-economic motives for relocating the capital have also failed in Abuja. Metropolitan Abuja (which comprises the city centre, Apo districts, Garki and Wuse) has equalled Lagos Island in terms of congestion, both vehicular and human, while satellite towns (such as Gwagwalade, Kubwa, Bwari, Lugbe, Nyanya, Karu, Karchi and Jukwuyi) are in an appalling state of squalor, poverty and misery. The way in which the Abuja master plan became distorted – not totally unexpectedly, given the nature of the Nigerian ruling elite – resulted in 'exponential population growth, proliferation of overcrowded slums, heavy traffic jams along major roads, inadequate infrastructure and social services as well as [an] astronomical rise in violent criminality'.[21] Even though some still warn that 'Abuja should not be allowed to become another Lagos',[22] others argue that the 'Lagosification' of Abuja is already complete.[23] The problem of slums and illegal structures all over the city became so

acute that a minister of the FCT, Malam Nasir El-Rufai, embarked on a massive, though unpopular, destruction of illegal structures and evictions of illegal squatters. Between 2003 and 2007, 800 000 people were forcefully evicted. *Thisday* newspaper, in an editorial, once captured the misery suffered by huge numbers of people in the FCT by describing a proposed grandiose project by the federal government in Abuja as 'the search for splendour amid excruciating mass poverty'.[24]

Conclusion

There is a school of thought in urban anthropology that emphasises a representational approach to the study of cities, according to which it has become important to focus on how the city can be an 'ideological [or political] tract' (Low 1996: 386) – with urban studies paying attention to the discursive realm of cities. As is the case with Abuja, which is presented as a 'centre of unity', what the city as an 'ideological tract' announces is as critical as what it (seeks to) hide or suppress. Although bureaucratically rational reasons are publicly given for capital relocations – be they political, economic, social, ecological, etc. – in many cases, the selfish, ethnic or ethno-regional reasons that underlie such relocations are often not publicly stated, or at any rate, they do not constitute official reasons for capital relocation.

However, as this chapter has tried to show, official accounts are only partial explanations for capital relocation. Indeed, on a general level, as Potts (1985) has pointed out, the claim that capital relocation generates economic growth and improves administrative efficiency, although plausible, has not been borne out in actual practice. In the Nigerian case, it is clear that the relocation of the capital has not engendered national unity, or strengthened the efficiency and effectiveness of the federal government or increased the administrative proximity of the central administration to all the parts of the federation. With violent inter-faith and inter-ethnic clashes increasing in the aftermath of the relocation and worsening economic conditions, added to a totally criminalised political space where election rigging has become the rule rather than the exception, the capital relocation has only enhanced elite bargaining and increased the gap between a stupendously rich, comfortable, tiny national elite and the larger population, who continue to wallow in misery, from the suburbs of the FCT to the other parts of the federation.

This brings to the fore the pivotal role of elite cadres in capital relocation. Even though the role of the elite in capital relocation is generally understated in the literature, some scholars have emphasised it and pointed out how a focus on this role can illuminate our understanding of the reasons for and dynamics of capital relocation, particularly in the global south.

In this context, two approaches to capital relocation have tended to dominate the literature. The first is the *authoritarian preferences argument*; the other is the *rational-technical argument*. In the first, an argument is made for 'an authoritarian ruler, who is understood to make the decision against the grain of common sense, against popular opposition, and against the advice of wiser policy makers' (Schatz 2004: 117). For instance, in line with this, Potts argues that in Malawi's case, capital

relocation was for the personal prestige of the authoritarian leader, rather than for the rational explanations offered of state and nation building. Thus, Schatz comments that '[c]learly, the personality quirks of an authoritarian ruler – often his megalomaniacal tendencies – play a role' (Schatz 2004: 117). In the Nigerian case, a measure of the evidence for this was present. The actual relocation was, in a sense, part of General Babangida's megalomaniacal wish to dominate the Nigerian sociopolitical landscape; the presidential villa he constructed for himself in Abuja testified to the grandeur of (his) power.

However, this explanation does not sufficiently emphasise the role of the ruling (dominant) elite in the postcolonial era. Although the authoritarian powers of the ruler and his quirks are critical, these are often subsumed, or tactically embedded, in the overall ethnic, religious, or ethno-regional calculations of the ruling elite groups within multi-ethnic postcolonial states. The authoritarian figure also needs his own form of legitimacy, and this can be bought or widened by linking personal ambitions to group interests, even where these are then promoted publicly as rational-technical motives. In this context, Schatz notes correctly that capital relocations are easier to achieve in a non-democratic setting. However, the authoritarian explanation has been found to be insufficient because most authoritarian regimes have not moved their capital.

The rational-technical reasons, including administrative efficiency, creating economic opportunities and government services for the hinterland, in line with the discarded ideas of modernisation theorists, have also been found to be unsatisfactory because capital relocations premised on this argument in the postcolonial age have shown extremely limited success. Schatz (2004), therefore, elaborates a 'political geographic explanation' that emphasises state and nation building. However, he does not suggest that capital relocation *solves* state- and nation-building dilemmas – as evidenced, for instance, by Nigeria.

Although this is very true in the case of Nigeria, what the present author has tried to point out in this chapter is that, even though capital relocation was attractive in Nigeria on the basis of the identified problems and the advertised prospects, the result obtained has fallen short of the desired effect. Against the backdrop of the unadvertised, 'hidden' rationale for capital relocation as it related to ethno-regional rivalries and competition, this chapter has shown the limited success achieved by capital relocation in the context of the rational-technical prospects that ostensibly recommended it. Thirty-two years after Nigeria's political capital was moved from Lagos to Abuja and 17 years after the actual relocation, Nigeria is still far from achieving the lofty goals that lay behind the capital relocation. This is even more so as the new capital now experiences many of the limitations that dictated the relocation, particularly in terms of engendering greater national unity – thus betraying the limited imagination and incompetence of the political leadership and the ruling elite. The country is less united than it was at the time of the capital relocation, as many separatist movements, either calling for a looser federation (in the language of 'autonomy') or the outright disintegration of the federal union, have emerged. It

can thus be argued that capital relocation is far too insufficient a condition for the promotion of national unity, particularly in the absence of other critical elements that help in the promotion of national identity and national identification.

Notes

1 In an essay published in a Nigerian daily, *Thisday* (Lagos), as former city editor of a newspaper in the capital city, this author took a journalistic approach to the contradictions of Abuja. See Adebanwi W, Abuja as oxymoron (*Thisday*, 27 February 1997).

2 Abuja: Thirty years as federal capital (editorial) (*The Guardian* 5 November 2006).

3 Harrison has popularly conceived big cities as 'islands of privilege'. See Harrison (1993: 145).

4 *Lagos Weekly Record*, 14 February 1920: 1.

5 *Lagos Weekly Record*, 14 February 1920: 1.

6 The NCNC was initially called the National Council for Nigeria and Cameroons, before Southern Cameroon voted to join the Cameroonian federation. It was the most national of the three parties, but eventually became associated more with the Igbo East.

7 Symbol of Nigeria (*West African Pilot*, 16 July 1952: 1).

8 The minister of the FCT, Dr Aliyu Moddibo Umar, however, argued that there should be a rethinking of the idea of resettlement, since these people were also Nigerian citizens. This would contradict the original purpose of resettlement, which was to make the city a 'no-man's-land'.

9 Gideon Orkar's coup, broadcast on Radio Nigeria, 22 April 1990.

10 This was named after the chairman of the Capital Relocation Panel.

11 See *TELL* magazine, 23 December 1991: 9.

12 Ibid.: 10.

13 Ibid.: 14.

14 Ibid.: 10. For different views on Abuja's monuments and the city in general, see http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=645923 (Accessed September 2008).

15 *TELL* magazine, 23 December 1991: 15.

16 Elections are held in the six area councils, but the head of state is the 'mayor' of the city. He then delegates his powers to the minister of the FCT.

17 The immediate-past minister of the FCT explained in an interview with the author that this was due to the denominational nature of Christianity and the doctrinal disunity of Christians, as opposed to the greater doctrinal unity among Muslims in Nigeria. Abuja, 16 September 2008.

18 Abuja is underprivileged (*Tribune on Saturday*, Ibadan, 2 March 1996).

19 Battle for Abuja (*Tribune on Saturday*, Ibadan, 2 March 1996).

20 Battle for Abuja (*Tribune on Saturday*, Ibadan, 2 March 1996).

21 *Punch*, 16 January 2008.

22 *Sunday Tribune*, Ibadan, 18 May 2008.

23 *Sunday Tribune*, 18 May 2008. See also Abuja groans under refuse heaps (*Punch*, 4 January 2008). A newspaper even reported that '[f]or Abuja, crimes have come to stay' (*Tribune*, 16 June 2006). See also Oloja M, Abuja at 16 (*The Guardian*, 13 December 2007); Abuja not different (*Vanguard*, 7 August 2008).

24 The Abuja monument (*Thisday*, Lagos, 19 September 2006).

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