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# Actor Network, Conflict and the Commodification of Planning: Role of Traditional Food Markets in Shaping the Built Environment of Akure Metropolis, Nigeria

Oluseyi Timothy Odeyale, Kayode Fagbemi,  
Kehinde Olalekan, Olufemi Adetunji

## Abstract

This article examines the processes of transformation of the architecture and spatial character of a Nigerian city, in the planning and delivery of a sustainable built environment. It examines the inter-dependency or relationship between the traditional market space and the city which is constantly being challenged, adapted and simultaneously undermined by the city's rapid growth and modernisation. The process of change towards modernisation led to the demolition of existing traditional market structures to give way to 'modern' ones without any reference to the ritualistic or cultural significance of these markets or the interests of market users. Using methodological tools provided by combination of Actor Network theory (ANT) and interpretive anthropology in gaining insight into how various actants in the built marketplace, live and interact together to shape the city. This article traces historical changes in the surrounding urban-scape of the market, in particular the location of developments, many originating from the colonial period, of adjacent or nearby civic/commercial buildings and educational institutions and their impact on the life of the city and market over time. Findings suggest that the meanings attached to the market and its built environment has not only changed on several levels from the symbolic, sacred, religious use to commercial and mundane one, but also has taken on new spatial forms due to the activities of the various actors which is predicated on their worldview. The article concludes that theoretical and cultural interpretation impacts the physical marketplace, its form, character and spatiality; this must itself be understood as an agent or actant in the struggle, in as much as it both enables and constrains human activities.

Keywords: *anthropology, actor network theory, built environment, modernity, tradition, urban space, traditional foodmarket*

## Introduction

In 2005, the Government of Ondo state in south western Nigeria decided to build new market centres in each main town of the sixteen municipal state districts, starting with the state capital in Akure<sup>1</sup>. This was presented as part of the Government's drive towards 'modernization'. It led to the demolition of existing market structures without any reference to the ritualistic or cultural significance of these markets or the interests of market users. Akure's central market, popularly called Oja Oba or King's Market, was a prime example of this situation. It is the city's main market, and one the great majority of local people use and want to keep. Those in power who commissioned these new 'modern' markets and the professionals, who designed them, have done

so with the intention that they would replace the existing traditional market centre. The politicians and the professionals generally saw the old market structure as an 'eyesore' properly destined for demolition. They built other smaller neighbourhood markets, and outskirt markets with the intention of moving market sellers to these new locations. However, the market sellers refused to relocate and now the new markets are not being used by the city's inhabitants. One recent consequence of this is that the government was forced to convert what was originally intended as a new food market on the outskirts of the city to an automobile market, for traders in vehicles and motor parts.

It is clear from events that the original intention of those in power to replace Akure's main traditional marketplace with a 'modern' alternative was confounded by the aspirations of the inhabitants of Akure, market sellers and users. The question then arises as to why this happened? Why did the politicians and professionals challenge the form and character of Akure's traditional market in the first place, and why did local people and market sellers who use the traditional market reject the idea of the 'modern' market and refuse to relocate? While these events (see table 1) may at first appear to be a consequence of quite straightforward practical problems of location or of a simple lack of consultation, in fact they were an outcome of *complex undercurrents, conflicts and negotiations* when two worlds collided, that of tradition and of modernity. This represent on one hand, the world views of the elite and the political class that desired to modernise the state capital through urban clearance and redesign of the spatial character of Akure city. And on the other the views of those that hold the traditional market as sacred and culturally significant.

The result was a development that did not make sense for anyone neither the politicians, the professionals, the market sellers nor the city's inhabitants in general. This research offers an in-depth inquiry to uncover the underlying basis for this outcome, the interests of the actors involved in the process of commodification of urban space, negotiations and struggles that took place over Akure's marketplace, both 'traditional' and 'modern'.

Table 1: Government's Urban Redevelopment Plan and Market Space Development Timeline in Akure from 1996 – 2012

Year	Urban Redevelopment and Market Projects
1996	Proposed relocation of old central market by Military Governor Anthony Onyearugbulem
1997	New market built in the outskirt near Shagari. Relocated but trader refused to move
2000	Destruction by fire of some segment of the old King's market (Oja Oba).
2005	Agagu civilian government commissioned its rebuilding into an ultra modern market through a consortium named Sunshine International Venture Limited (a joint venture of Spring Bank plc and the Ondo State government and Akure South local government.
2010	Proposals for new neighbourhood markets to replace old markets in Akure and Ondo State by the Mimiko government

2011	Building of new neighbourhood markets in Akure (namely Caring Heart Neighbourhood markets at Isinkan and NEPA junction – a short distance from the main market.
2012	Architectural and development proposal by Mimiko Administration to replace the ‘new’ main market built by Agagu government in 2005

Source: Researcher’s Fieldwork

### Background and Literature

Many studies have examined the urbanisation process<sup>2</sup> in Sub Saharan Africa without any reference to the role played by foodmarkets and food related activities in shaping cities and regions in Africa and the conflicts that ensued in the bid for modernisation. Recent studies tend to focus on operational aspects of foodmarkets in Africa and failed to consider the sociocultural context historical and anthropological angle and to its role in shaping sustainable urban landscape<sup>3</sup>. Also, studies found in the literature on foodmarkets in relation to urban spatial patterns and developments are mainly on the developed countries<sup>4</sup> and few on developing countries’ transformation of its architecture in relation to the contributing roles of the transformation of foodmarkets<sup>5</sup>. However, when asking questions about the urbanization of Sub-Saharan Africa in general, authors have not given much thought to the role played by food production and consumption activities happening in and around urban markets. While authors’ interests regarding other social, political, economic or cultural drivers of urban change are undoubtedly well placed; there has been a general failure to specifically address the ubiquitous presence of food-related activities in the urbanization of Africa. In many cases, authors make no mention or draw no links to food or food markets whatsoever in their explanations. This is a pointer to significant absence in debates about urban change in African cities, as the story of food is inextricably intertwined with the urbanization of African society.<sup>5</sup> This story equally has social, economic and political aspects, as well as a cultural and metaphysical dimension. By considering the transformation of food-markets, it presents the reader with a picture of the transformation of Akure from a small settlement to a large metropolis. It investigates the internal conflicts and tensions that arose between the traditional market structure, the desire to modernize these markets and the processes of negotiation that ensued among actants as they pursued their interests. We argue that the interest of various actors in the foodmarket network influences their decision as they negotiate the process of change between tradition and modernity.

This paper rather questions the established approach to the study of the built environment that focuses on the description of physical aspects of its development. It embraces the notion of unravelling the cultural, social and anthropological meaning of the urbanity and contributory factors that led to societal transformations within the urban space usage or arrangement that is often misunderstood, ignored or altogether forgotten. We argue that in order to achieve a holistic sustainable built environment for the future of cities and urban centres (especially in the developing countries), there is the need to understand the backgrounds of ‘soft issues’ or predisposing ideas. These soft issues or predisposing ideas constantly engage the notions of the production of urban space and contested space, which can be actively seen, in the activities and role of food. This underlying and unseen phenomenon needs reconsidering because of its wider

implications for society's holistic development.<sup>6</sup> Social structures do not exist on their own howbeit they exist based on a "network of heterogeneous arrangements;"<sup>7</sup> such "heterogeneous glue"<sup>8</sup> that binds together society. However, to entirely describe social changes, a range of issues must be given consideration; economic, political, and technological.<sup>9</sup> John Law described interrelationship between technical and social issues; by making the following assertion "what appear to be social is partly technical, what is usually technical is partly social. In practice, nothing is purely technical and nothing is purely social".<sup>10</sup> There are three overlapping aspects to the study of sociotechnical change; first, the character or essence of knowledge (addressing the problem of epistemology). Secondly, character of the society (addressing the problem of heterogeneity) and thirdly the character of distribution (problem of spread or diffusion) among the classes of actors that shapes it.<sup>11</sup>

### Research Design

This article presents a research that actively uses the traditional food market as a vehicle for understanding the processes of development within the rapidly changing urban structure of Nigeria, with specific focus on the city of Akure. The choice of Akure, in Southwest Nigeria, for this study is based on the following reasons: 1) it is a typical example of a Sub-Saharan African city that has experienced rapid urbanization in the past 50 years; 2) It has grown from a medium sized agrarian town to a major metropolis, and 3) it has experienced socio-cultural transformations and developments through the influence of colonisation, neo-colonisation and more recently the effects of globalization. This research seeks to understand the reasons why the conflict between tradition and modernity in the context of the Akure marketplace is a particular problem and its impact on the sustainability of the city. As already discussed, there are definite limitations in the way that analyses of urban change in Africa have been dealt with in existing literature, particularly when it comes to the relationship between food and cities. It equally seeks to link the historical background to the contemporary scene. An examination of Akure's food markets offers a prism through which to view wider processes of change in an African city and the effect of decisions made by the policy makers in the evolution and planning of the built environment. The research examines the conflict or tension between tradition and modernity as change takes place in the traditional foodmarket built environment and the negotiations amongst the market users with different interests and choices. The study was driven by the following research question: are decisions being made about the way the market is organised by one powerful segment of the population, whose lifestyles are becoming increasingly westernised, marginalising another whose lives are more embedded in tradition?

To answer the questions above, this research pays greater attention to the use of qualitative data sets derived from interviews, historical documents, topographical charts (maps) and survey methods. Using methodological tools provided by combination of Actor Network theory (ANT) and interpretive anthropology in gaining insight into how various actants in the built marketplace, live and interact together to shape the city. Hence, this inquiry fills a clear gap in knowledge regarding the role played by food markets and food-related activities in the evolution of the urban context of a contemporary African city. It addresses the lack of understanding of how foodmarkets in the historical past has contributed to the formation of the present urban landscape and how it may well shape its future. The study involves the linking of the anthropological findings with Actor Network Theory (ANT), by using survey design and case studies (participant observation) of the urban space and food markets in Akure, Nigeria in order to explore and understand the different negotiations within and between different stakeholder groups (actors and actants).

Actors are the human elements in the network, while actants are non-human elements in the network. These people-oriented field studies were conducted in three stages: firstly, the use of small-scale pilot study within a group of market users in Akure, to see the initial reaction and views of the actors. Secondly, a large-scale survey (with the support of field assistants)<sup>12</sup> was carried out to collect and analyse interview responses from different stakeholder groups (the market sellers, the government officials, the professionals/urban designers and the market shop owners). Visits were made to the ministry of public works and environment, ministry of tourism, ministry of agriculture and Akure South local government office in Akure. During the field researches, interviews and discussions were carried out with government officials and environmental managers. Also, secondary data on demographic records (census figures), the use of available base map of the study area and records from the environmental managers were sourced from the various institutions, ministries and establishments.

One of the ways to look at the social relationships in the food-market and the city is to consider them as a form of network interrelationship. Drawing largely from the 'snow ball method' in the Actor Network theory (ANT), which enables a close investigation of players and actants involved in the developments within the socio-political configuration of the food market structure in Akure. Actor network theory is a tool to enable a description of the co-evolution of socio-technical context and content. The theory claims that innovations take place within networks of actors. The "global network" consists of sets of relations between an actor and its neighbours and relations between the neighbours.<sup>13</sup> ANT can be defined as a unique approach to social theory that present a way of "thoroughly exploring the relational ties within a network."<sup>14</sup> Network has to do with the associations formed or created by actors as "they (actors) define and distribute roles, and mobilize or invent others to play these roles."<sup>15</sup> ANT is based on the assumption that "actors are not simply shaped by the network in which they are located"; they in turn influence the actor with which they interacted.<sup>16</sup> Hence, people and society are basically a composition of heterogeneous networks derived from confused overlaps.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Historical Context*

The process of shaping a city refer to as urbanization, may be due to two principal factors, firstly, the historical processes<sup>18</sup> which incorporates the attitudes of the people, their beliefs (culture), their generosity and hospitality in accepting strangers. For example the magnanimity showed by past Deji's (king of Akure) in accepting Lisa and Aro Chiefs in 1710 AD, all summed up to be part of their heritage. Secondly, the political process<sup>19</sup> as seen in the migration of people from the rural areas to Akure being the seat of the state government. The growth of Akure (see figure 1) to a prominent medium-city cannot be described strictly with the word "planned". The growth of Akure is more spontaneous and cumulative in nature over several centuries and more rapidly in the last fifty years.<sup>20</sup> Urban centres generally are the hub of commercial activities in the urban system and they are variously referred to as the heart of the city. Louis Kahn referred to it on "as the cathedral of the city". That is, the activities of the city revolves around the core area, also refers to as the downtown area, the city centre, or the Central Business District (CBD). Most African cities, exhibit such characteristic of growing out of a city centre. Examples of such African cities are Cairo, Johannesburg, Accra, Ibadan, Nairobi Maiduguri, Kano, and Kaduna. Such centre of the city will have the concentration of banks, offices, shopping complexes, post offices, markets and all such like activities. The city core, mostly in Yoruba urban centres marks the beginning or source of development of the city with its traditions well illustrated.

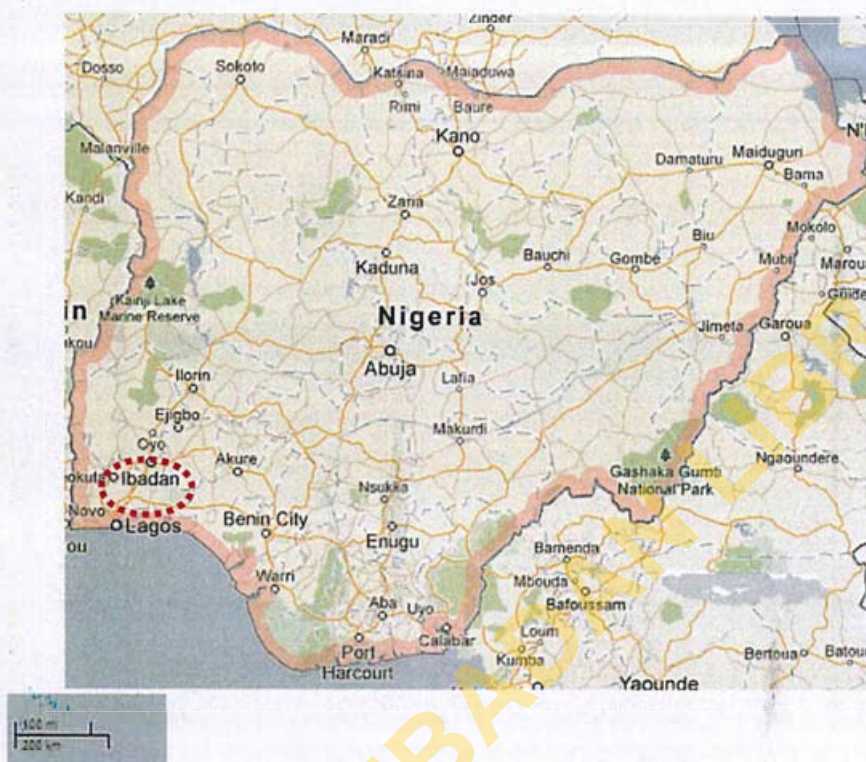


Figure 1: Map showing the location of Akure, in relation to other cities in Nigeria. Source: Google Maps (2013), Available at: [https://maps.google.co.uk/maps?hl=en&q=nigeria&biw=702&bih=917&bav=on.2,or.r\\_gc.r\\_pw.r\\_qf.&um=1&ie=UTF-8&sa=N&tab=wl](https://maps.google.co.uk/maps?hl=en&q=nigeria&biw=702&bih=917&bav=on.2,or.r_gc.r_pw.r_qf.&um=1&ie=UTF-8&sa=N&tab=wl), accessed January 2013

The history and culture of Akure (see figure 1) is closely linked to that of its kin and kith in other parts of Yoruba land.<sup>21</sup> All Yoruba lay claim to a progenitor called Oduduwa, which gave it the essentials of its culture. The Yoruba has existed in “City-like”<sup>22</sup> settlements before the advent of the European to Africa; with highly organized social systems of sophisticated culture and a strong kingship institution fully established.<sup>23</sup> The Yoruba enjoy high rating in terms of anthropological interest value; as early as 11th century.<sup>24</sup> Testimonies to this are artistic works and artifacts of astounding finesse and excellence were found in archaeological context in Ile-Ife and other part of Yoruba land. Akure developed from the conglomeration of small villages. The town’s history can be traced back to centuries past, circa 15th and 16th century. What we have now as Akure started as a small settlement of a great hunter called Asodeboyede. Akure was fortunate to have been situated on a plain land which gave it, a natural edge over relatively large towns, during the colonial era. At the advent of the colonial masters, they found it easier to plant their administrative base at the plain land of Akure as the headquarters of Ondo province in 1920.

### Analysis and Findings

From the field survey that was carried out in Akure, it is evident that persistence of traditions accounts for some of the hidden issues, that impact on the development and growth of the city, which are visible in the market and its activities. In the words of Clifford Geertz “the interpretive study of culture represents an attempt to come to terms with the diversity of the ways human

beings construct their lives in the act of leading them.”<sup>25</sup> The Yoruba mythology described life on earth as analogous to the market. Life itself can be seen in the light of parallels drawn from songs, ‘chants’, proverbs, allegories and oral traditions on market activities,<sup>26</sup> which can be inferred from the following two examples.

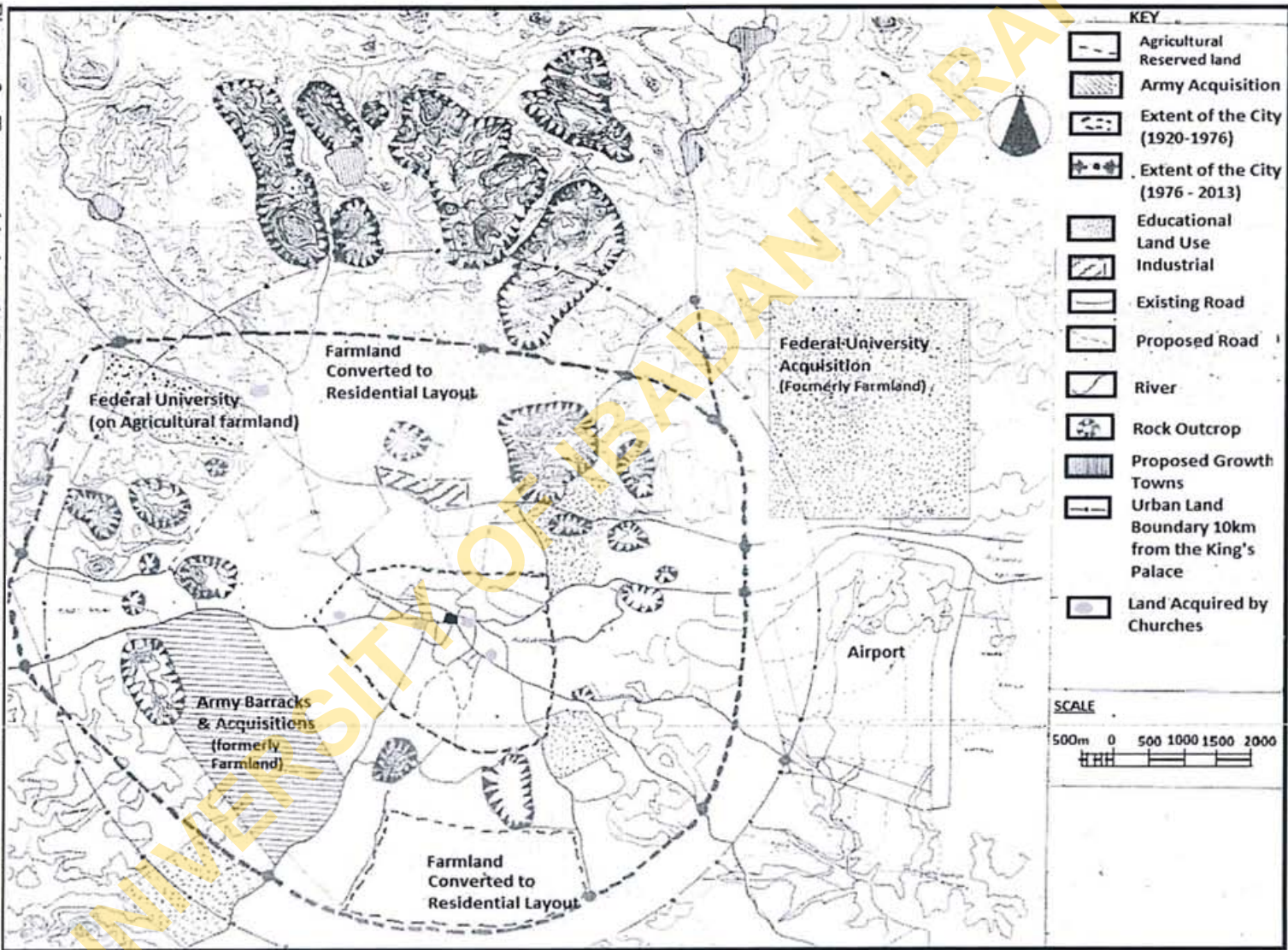
1) A ye lo ja, Orun ni le. (Translation: “Life on earth is market. Heaven is home.” Just like the trader comes to the market to trade and return home, likewise all human beings must of necessity depart this world one day and make the journey back to ‘eleda’ the creator.)

2) A gba ki wa l’ Oja, K’ Ori Omo titun wo. (Translation: “If the elders cannot be present at the market, situation goes wrong” or “the collective wisdom of the people at the market is a guarantee of a good future). In the contemporary scene in Africa, constant mediation takes place between the visible and the symbolic or persisting tradition and customs which provides the framework or bedrock for what is socially acceptable or not. The study reveal the interaction of the beliefs and practices of different cultural groups in Akure, as they relate to food and the traditional foodmarket space, influence their choices and have impact on the overall city development. For example, the Yoruba have different preferences, beliefs and rituals in relation to the production and consumption of food than the Ijaw. As earlier noted the Yoruba ethnic stock formed the dominant group in Akure. Akure, being the capital city of Ondo State in Nigeria, attracted several people from different part of the state, especially the youth; traders and civil servants that are of different ethnicity such as Ijaw and the Igbo from other section of Nigeria state.

It is equally important to note that the preferences and rituals of the middle class and elites in Akure differ from groups that might be more embedded in tradition. The following questions then arise, what does it mean to belong to the middle class? What does it signify? The middle class in Nigeria tends to share common values and interest, such as interest in education, similar taste for western/ imported goods and lifestyle. In the field study conducted in Akure during the course of this research, it is quite straightforward to distinguish the middle class, based on their level of education, their income and where they live in Akure (what part of the city).

Due to the distance to the main market (Oja Oba) they need to commute by car to the market for their weekly or daily shopping, leading to traffic congestion and large market patronage. Hence, there is a need of car parking near, or within, the vicinity of Oja Oba market; a situation that has led to conflict with those less privileged in the society that have no need for vehicles to access the market, since they live within a walking distance from the market. The scene in figure 3 shows the crowd that patronise the foodmarket before it was demolished. Whereas figure 4 shows the same market after rebuilt and appears to be less patronised in comparison with the former appearance in figure 3, these pictorial evidence suggest reduced acceptance of the so called ‘modern’ approach to the rebuilding of foodmarket structure and spatial configuration witnessed in Akure. In sum, the evidence presented in figure 3 and 4, show the transformation of the traditional market space by the action of the government officials which was based on their policy of modernisation. The change in appearance or transformation of the foodmarket space suggests an imposition of the worldview of the elite on the lower class who found the ‘clean’ space, quite strange from the market spatial experience they are used to all their life. By this the researcher is not trying to justify dirty market space as acceptable, the emphasis is on social cohesion and inclusion that is fostered by the seemly disordered atmosphere presented in figure 3.

Figure 2: Topographical and Geographical location of the old market, in relation to the expansion of the city over time, affected by rapid urban development and government



sequestration of land for military and education purposes. Source: Field Research and Maps from Surveyor General Office Ondo State Ministry of Lands and Environment.



Figure 3: Traditional market in Isinkan, Akure, was demolished to make way for the 'Modern' Market below. (Source: Researcher)



Figure 4: Transformation of the Old market to New One. One of the Prototype Neighbourhood Markets in Akure Built Between Nov 2010 and April 2011 by the Current Administration in Ondo State. (Source: Researcher)

Latour and Woolgar observed that “norms, the socialization processes, deviance and reward are consequences of social activity rather than its cause.”<sup>27</sup> The cause of social activity is the set of strategies adopted by investors, actors and stakeholders wanting to maximize their symbolic profit.<sup>28</sup> It is necessary to point out, since “actors are not simply shaped by the network in which they are located;”<sup>29</sup> they in turn influence the actors with whom they interact.<sup>30</sup> The question that emerges from the preceding assumptions is, how is it that actants – people, institutions, food,

buildings and places – are both shaped by, but yet help to shape the context in or with which they are recursively implicated? Also, according to Bijker and Law, neighbours do shape new actants as they enter into new *transactions* with them and they are in turn reshaped by their new circumstances.<sup>31</sup> They suggest that critical examination of history and curiosity regarding these issues may help us understand how, “our artefacts might have been different, [how] they may have worked better, [how] they might not have failed, and [how] they might have been more user and environmental friendly.”<sup>32</sup> To relate social and cultural changes to changes in artefacts like buildings or food, a range of issues must be given consideration. The study of socio-technical issues comprises three overlapping aspects: firstly, the character of knowledge, addressing the problem of epistemology;<sup>33</sup> secondly, the character of the society, addressing the problem of heterogeneity;<sup>34</sup> and thirdly, the character of distribution, the problem of spread or diffusion among the classes of actants involved.<sup>35</sup> At a more detailed level, following Bijker<sup>36</sup>, this article introduces four distinct but related steps in describing Akure’s market network: (a) identifying relevant social groups that played vital roles in shaping societal interactions in the food markets found in the core area of Akure city achieved through careful observation; (b) drawing up detailed descriptions of the identified relevant social groups; (c) making a clear distinction between various social groups, by charting boundaries, based on differing behaviours, discourses and, ultimately, interests (d) making sense of interrelated and interdependent actants, based on their impact upon each other within the network.

*Actant Groups and Boundaries of Change*

The delineation of an ‘analytical range of study’ requires the drawing of artificial boundaries discovered in a continuous search for realities within the ‘confused overlap’ of networks and endless translation and negotiation that happens both human and non-human actants. In other words, we can say that the “settlement of an actor network is not defined *a priori*”, but emerges from the complex, open set of relations and from the characteristics of the elements that are part of the actor network.”<sup>37</sup>

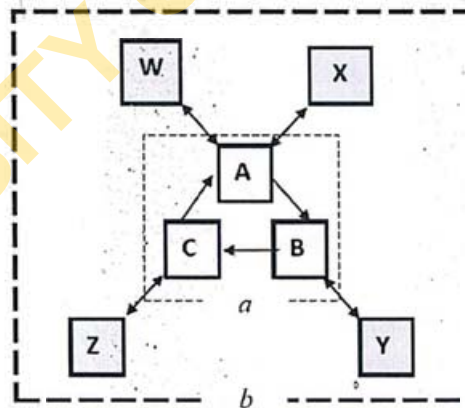


Figure 5: Analysis of the relationship between actants operating within different scales in a network. Adapted from Callon<sup>38</sup>

As pointed out earlier, there are precedents for combining ANT with anthropological perspectives in research. Hinchings<sup>39</sup> and Callon’s<sup>40</sup> approach is of particular interest to this study. Initially, to better place the analysis of the market network within a definable context,

following their approach, we have grouped actants into related networks operating within spatial and institutional settings at different scales. As depicted in figure 5, the network A-B-C is connected to the network W-X-Y-Z. 'a' stands for the boundary of the network A-B-C and 'b' for the global boundary around larger network of W-X-Y-Z. In the context of this research, A represents market traders, B – market users or buyers, C – market suppliers, all of whom operate within the spatial and institutional boundaries of market processes, while W stands for professionals & government officials, X – stands for the politicians, Y – ethnic groups and Z – non-market-specific groups and organisations in the international arena, all of whom operate within a broader overlapping network not concerned wholly or even primarily with market processes. At one level (referring to figure 5) are, (A) market traders, including market associations and leadership, (B) market users or buyers and (C) market suppliers, all of whom operate within the spatial and institutional boundaries of market processes. But this network itself exists within another, broader network not concerned wholly or even primarily with market processes. The actants within this network include (W) professionals, such as architects and planners, and policy makers such as government officials and (X) politicians, (Y) the various ethnic groupings that constitute Ondo State's and Nigeria's diverse population, and (Z) non-market-specific groups and organisations in the international arena who nevertheless bring influence to bear upon local market actants, including multilateral organisations like the UN and the WTO, the International Organization for Standardization, bilateral organisations like Department for International Development (DfiD) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and even overseas educational institutions where many professionals and officials operating at a local level would have gained their qualifications.

### Conclusion

The boundary between tradition and modernity is collapsing, becoming increasingly blurred due to the effects of globalisation and broadly western influences, particularly upon the middle classes. In this context, there is a persistent and growing idea that anything that does not pass muster as wholly 'modern' in the built environment, that does not measure up with what are understood to be western notions of beauty or efficiency, should be demolished or erased with the new. This attitude is particularly characteristic of the "powerful" in Ondo State, politicians and professionals, who are usually the winners in any conflict or negotiation. Since Akure's built markets are places filled with actants, the research suggests that socio-economic/ political interactions are 'translated' differently in the world of politicians and ordinary citizens. For instance, through the application of ANT, the analysis of data compares the role and views ascribed to food-market activities in Akure by policy makers with the view that market sellers construct themselves. The former construct market sellers as 'backward', ignorant of the workings of modern market requirements, whereas the sellers construct foodmarket activities as rooted in traditional norms, myths and loyalty based on informal associations. This article suggests that, it will be a welcome idea to integrate the notion of a 'clean' foodmarket space and structure without demolishing market buildings/ stall or changing well established and traditionally proven spatial configuration of the traditional foodmarket in favour of the 'strange' modern outlook. The policy makers and government officials should take into account of people's values, interest and goals in their analysis of sustainability and their 'modern' intervention in the built environment in the developing world to minimise conflict and foster social cohesion.

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