

Everyday Religious Encounter and Inter-Faith Relations in Lagos: The Affirmative Case of FESTAC Town Community

Raheem Oluwafunminiyi and Giwa Tajudeen Olalekan

Corresponding email: creativitysells@gmail.com

Abstract

Across the world today, subjects dealing with inter-religious relations continue to elicit scholarly debates. A reason for this is linked to the often intense rivalries or tensions among disparate religious groups over, for instance, the (re)affirmation of religious boundaries or the right to use the hijab in secular or missionary schools within a contentious spatiality. While these have more or less spurred serious confrontations in several communities in Nigeria, instances abound where religious encounters assume affirmative manifestations elsewhere. FESTAC-Town, one of the popular post-independence urban settlements in Lagos, with a large mix of Muslims and Christians, readily satisfy this latter position. Since her founding in 1977, religious interactions in this part of Lagos is not only fluid but manifests a high level of tolerance. Some of the underlying factors responsible for this include the elitist makeup of the town, absence of indigene-settler rights, urbanisation, existence of conflict resolution mechanisms etc. Using extensive oral and secondary sources, this study examines everyday religious encounters in FESTAC community. It also identifies the nature of Muslim-Christians coexistence and the factors facilitating the peaceful conduct of these relations. The study reveals that inter-faith harmony is a fundamental component that reinforces the town's desire for good neighbourliness.

Keywords: FESTAC-Town, religious life, elitism, inter-faith coexistence, tension, Lagos

Introduction

On September 11, 2001, the United States was attacked allegedly by Al-Qaeda. Since then, several Islamist groups have emerged across the world, coordinating attacks against specific targets. London, for instance, was recently attacked by ISIS/ISIL who claimed responsibility.¹ Other world capitals and cities such as Paris, Mosul, Tehran, Germany, Borno etc., have also seen terrorist attacks linked to these Islamic groups. Scholars have argued that Islamist or ‘terror’ groups often find inspiration or justification for these attacks from parts of the Qur’an and other Islamic sanctions which tend to spur global terrorism.² Though not exclusive to ‘Islamists’, there are several cases too of Christian extremist groups who carry out terror attacks across the world.³ The intensification of these attacks across the world has further heightened the fragile tensions between Muslims and Christians. Reported cases of acid attacks against Muslims in the United Kingdom⁴ and surge in anti-Muslim hate crimes in Europe, America and even in parts of Africa readily illustrate these tensions.⁵ In spite of these, there are societies where adherents of different religions co-exist peacefully. For example in Ghana, a nation whose culture has been altered by the growing influence of Christianity and Islam, significant numbers of Muslims and Christians live in proximity to each other.⁶ In South Africa too, the country’s liberal post-Apartheid Constitution has enabled a diverse Muslim minority to pursue religiously distinctive rights.⁷ Many communities in Nigeria also manifest cordial relationships between adherents of different religions, including residents of FESTAC-Town, the focus of this study.

¹ ISIL Claims Responsibility for London Attack, *Aljazeera*, 05 June 2017.

² Amritha Venkatraman, Religious Basis for Islamic Terrorism: The Quran and its Interpretations, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 30, Issue 3, 2007, pp. 229-248.

³ See, for instance, Douglas Pratt, Religion and Terrorism: Christian Fundamentalism and Extremism, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 22, Issue 3, 2010, pp. 438-456

⁴ Josh Halliday, Letters Threatening Acid Attacks Sent to Muslims in Bradford, *The Guardian* (UK), 29 August 2017.

⁵ Vikram Dodd and Sarah Marsh, Anti-Muslim Hate Crimes Increased Fivefold since London Bridge Attacks, *The Guardian*, 07 June 2017.

⁶ **B. Meyer, “Praise the Lord”: Popular Cinema and Pentecostalite Style in Ghana’s New Public Sphere, *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2004, pp. 92-110.**

⁷ **G. Vahed and S. Jeppie, ‘Multiple communities: Muslims in post-apartheid South Africa’, *State of the Nation. South Africa 2004-2005*, ed. J. Daniel, R. Southall, and J. Lutchman (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2004), 252-254.**

FESTAC-Town is a federal housing estate located along the Badagry Expressway in Lagos State. The name is an acronym for the second World African Festival of Arts and Culture held in 1977 in Lagos. FESTAC-Town is also referred to as FESTAC Village. It was originally designed to host the participants of World Festival of Black Arts. The town is one of the biggest housing schemes the federal government has embarked on in the history of housing schemes in Nigeria.⁸ While the study shall explain later and deeply the foundation of this sprawling community in the heart of Lagos, it is pertinent to state that everyday religious encounters in the town appear to be inherently tolerant. The two Abrahamic faiths – Islam and Christianity have lived side by side without major religious conflict. While disagreements exist which is usually normal in a society of diverse groups of people and even people with similar ethnic makeup, these are rarely noticeable within the realms of religion in the town. What makes FESTAC-Town, therefore, different or unique from areas such as Ikorodu, for instance, where religious encounters take on perilous turns? One underlying factor is linked to the elitist nature of the town which has deepened religious tolerance since its founding in the late 1970s. Though the town has long lost its status as a sprawling urban centre in Lagos, it still maintains its strong attitude to religious tolerance as will be interrogated subsequently.

This study will look at everyday interactions between Muslims and Christians since 1977 and how these interactions influence the promotion of tolerance and peaceful co-existence among residents. As a town with a diverse ethnic makeup, this study shall identify areas of differences which could have resulted in conflict or tensions and their implication on religious harmony while emphasising on the need for religious co-existence as a pre-requisite for the deepening of peace in FESTAC, Lagos and Nigeria as a whole.

Religious Formations and Activities in FESTAC-Town

To understand the developments of religious activities in FESTAC-Town, it is important to draw attention, albeit briefly, to the establishment of the housing estate once referred to as FESTAC Village or Festival Town but commonly called FESTAC-Town today. FESTAC, a metropolitan town in Lagos, is located 10 kilometres west of Lagos Island, along Lagos-Badagry Express Way, which forms the town's southern boundary. The canal that

⁸ Cited in Doxiadis Lagos: Festac 1977 – The Black Arts Festival Town, <http://www.funnelme.wordpress.com/2011/03/05/doxiadis-->-lagos-festac-1977/>. Accessed on 15 October 2017.

receives its stormy water, which is now part of the Lagos Lagoon, forms the boundary between the town and the Amuwo-Odofin housing scheme of the Lagos State Development and Property Corporation (LSDPC) on the eastern side. On the west, the town shares a common boundary with the Lagos Trade Fair Complex which for many years was the venue of the Lagos International Trade Fair.⁹ The northern boundary is approximately 2,500 metres from Badagry road. It occupies an approximate land area of 1770 hectares (4,425 acres). The town comprises of two phases which are Phases 1 and 2. Phase 1 was selected for this study, as this is the phase where all the government-built (public) houses are situated.¹⁰

FESTAC-Town is predominantly occupied by diverse groups of people who adhere strictly to the two monotheistic faiths – Christianity and Islam. Following the conclusion of FESTAC 77, a ballot was held strictly for government workers and bureaucrats at the Festival. Those who had succeeded at the ballot and thereafter allotted houses in the town began to move in. In its early phase, religion was somewhat difficult to practice in the town due to challenges identifying members with same religious beliefs and creed but over time, residents began to identify and organize themselves, leading to modes of religious observances.

There is often a belief that participants of the Festival instituted their religion in the new town. This perception seems erroneous given the related views among several respondents who moved into the town in 1977 and in the early 1980s. For instance, an early resident of the community observed that as at the time he and others moved into the town in 1977, participants of FESTAC 77 did not leave behind traces of any religion until later when each resident became conscious of the need to practice his/her faith collectively.¹¹ Of course, Muslims, for example, could not afford to observe their Friday *Jumah* prayers individually, given its rule in Islam that it must be observed in congregation. The Christians, on the other hand, needed to also hold a Christmas and New Year eve prayer sessions collectively. One major factor worthy of mention which made the development of religion in FESTAC somewhat difficult was the non-inclusion of religious spaces in the original plan of the area. As a result, by the time residents moved in, there were no converging spaces readily available to carry out their religious activities.

⁹ O.A. Adeleye and A.E. Anofojie, Housing Quality in Festac Town, Lagos State, Nigeria, *Ife Research Publication in Geography*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2011, p. 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹¹ Interview with Mr Rahman Momoh, Senior Citizen, 1st Avenue, **201 Road**, FESTAC-Town. 03 September 2017.

As more residents settled and further identification carried out, they began to organize one another into groups for religious devotion and prayers. To be sure, one of the first Christian groups to be formed was the orthodox Catholic Church. The catholic congregation in the town was formed by residents who began their devotion at its current location beside the town's post office and opposite 22 Road. After worshipping there for a while, the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) set up by the government to administer the town on its behalf, prevented them from worshipping there. They, then, moved the worship centre to an open space along 22 Road where the MRS fuel station on the same is located. After series of consultations and requests for approval of space by the FHA, the Catholics were granted a space along 22 road on which they could build a religious centre and continue with their religious activities.¹² The Holy Family Catholic Church was built on that portion of land allocated to them by the FHA and commissioned in 1978 under late Monsignor Michael Omisesan. The Catholics over the years have succeeded in acquiring more lands in different parts of FESTAC-Town to build their religious centres. Among these are the Catholic Church of Visitation at 21 Road and the Catholic Church at 23/402 road opposite V Close.¹³

The Anglican Church was another early religious movement that started in the town precisely in June 1977 in the house of a church member. After several attempts at securing a space to build a worship centre, the FHA approved some plots around 21 Road where the church remain till date. The Anglican succeeded in getting the FHA to approve another portion of land for them at 41 Road beside the Amuwo Odofin Local Government Area Secretariat where the All Saints Anglican Church is built.¹⁴ The Apostolic Church congregation similarly gathered in 1977 to begin worship in their new community. They, nevertheless, faced the same challenge all other religious group faced which led them to worship in the house of one pastor, J.A Fayinto till 1985.¹⁵ The congregation moved to an open space on 23 Road where the current Mobil fuel station is situated. Typically, the FHA prevented them from observing their worship there and so, the congregation was forced to move to 5thAvenue open space where the current primary school stands. The congregation continued to switch locations till the FHA approved a permanent site for them in 1992 at 7th

¹² Interview with Mrs Christiana Osamor, Laity Officer, Catholic Church premises. 13 September 2017.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Interview with Rev. Canon Oluwafemi Omidiji, Rev. of the Anglican Church, FESTAC, Anglican Church premises. 05 October 2017.

¹⁵ Interview with Overseer Emmanuel Aluko, CAN President, Amuwo-Odofin branch, The Apostolic Church, 7th Avenue, FESTAC-Town. 14 October 2017.

avenue where the Church is situated.¹⁶ The Apostolic Church has also acquired different land spaces where smaller churches have been cited in the community.

For the Muslims, the growth and development of Islam in the community was simply a herculean task. Unlike their Christian counterparts who were already established religious groups and who came into the community through residents to acquire space for religious worship, the case was somewhat different for Muslims in FESTAC-Town. According to Alhaja S.K Yakub, a senior citizen and resident of the town, there was a problem of identification of Muslims which made it difficult for them to organize themselves immediately and begin serious religious activities.¹⁷ However, the opportunity came in 1977 during the Ramadan fast which brought Muslims in different parts of the community together, since the *Tarawih* (night prayer) had to be observed as a congregational prayer. Although pockets of open spaces were made use by Muslims for this period, no official centre of worship was available. To get this done, an association which they named the Festival Town Muslim Community (FTMC) was formed in 1978.¹⁸ The group's main aim was to see to the development, growth and spread of Islam in the community. The different prayer congregations in the town made up this body and served as a collective platform in securing approval for the construction of religious spaces from the FHA within the different communities in the town. Before approval was sought and granted, the Muslims continued to use the open spaces available to carry out their religious activities such as regular five daily prayers and Friday congregational prayers. Noticeably, other established Muslim bodies had also written the FHA for approval of spaces to build their own religious centres. Muslim groups like Ansar-ud-Deen, Zumratul Islamiyyah and Ahmadiyyah, independent of the FTMC but affiliated with it, also pushed towards acquiring spaces for their respective religious centres.¹⁹

By 1978, communities had established different temporary mosques. For instance, Community 1B mosque popularly known as 24 Road area mosque; had begun to observe their religious activities at some open spaces in 24 Road. Community 1C Quranic mosque was also operating temporarily in 1979, while Community III area mosque had a temporary site for religious activities. By 1981, the FHA had approved a permanent site at 5th Avenue,

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Interview with Alhaja Yakub Samota, senior citizen, 5th Avenue residence, FESTAC-Town. 28 October 2017.

¹⁸ Commemorative Brochure of the Turbaning Ceremony of Festival Town Muslim Community (Central Body), FESTAC-Town, Lagos. 22 December 2001, p. 20.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

A1 Close for Zumaratul Islamiyyah to build a permanent mosque. Approval was also given to build a central mosque for FTMC at 22 Road, G Close. In 1985, the FHA approved three spaces for the FTMC to build residential mosque at 7th Avenue, S Close and 321 Road, 21 by 111 Road, both of which were later developed by the FTMC central body and residents into mosques and Islamic centres.²⁰ In 1989, the FHA approved some plots of land for Ansar-ud-Deen society along 24/72 Road for the construction of a religious centre while several Arabic schools (Ile kewu) were present in the community, as almost every avenue had a mosque and Arabic centre. The Ansar-ud-Deen further acquired some plots of land at 3rd Avenue along the town's Buffer Zone for the purpose of observing *Eid* prayers. From this period onwards, different mosques and religious societies sprang up which increased the popularity of Islam in the town. The town today boasts of more than 25 mosques and numerous Muslim associations.²¹

Since full residency of FESTAC-Town from 1977, religious activities have been on the increase. While access to location for permanent religious spaces was difficult at first, religious activities and practices were in no way hindered by the administrative authorities. Interestingly, the rise in religious activities since 1977 has not led to any eruption of violence as the religious groups go about their activity without hindrance. It is why the community today boasts of over 100 religious spaces.

Religious Encounters in FESTAC-Town: Nature, Type and Case Studies

By the 1980s, it was evident that FESTAC-Town had become a centre of religious encounters between Muslims and Christians only. Traditional forms of worship were of course, also at this period at its lowest ebb and essentially practiced haphazardly outside the town.²² Indeed, anyone who had some affinity with traditional beliefs in the area was most likely to be viewed differently. Hence, non-Muslims and Christians practiced their belief in secret and often moved outside the town to perform such religious obligation. Residents attended their respective churches and mosques without rancour and in fact, the few schools that dotted the town were owned by Christians who were members of the Catholic Church. Those who were not Catholics but Christians of the Anglican and Methodist beliefs also had schools attended by Catholics and Muslims. Members of the African Churches too enrolled

²⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

²¹ Ibid., p. 23.

²² Interview with Mr. Jola Ogunlusi, immediate past President, Festival Town Residents Association at his FESTAC-Town residence. 05 May 2017.

their wards in either secular or faith-based schools until the Muslim community also decided to build their own school to serve the interests of their wards. Despite these, there were largely peaceful religious encounters in the town and has largely remained so till date.

While this may be peculiar elsewhere or non-existent, as the case may be, our interest lies in three distinct divisions which shall be our focus for this study. An encounter as it appears is the meeting of two groups for various reasons. These encounters may occur between two or more rival groups or among several supporters or benefactors for a common goal. Encounters could be positive or negative depending on the circumstances of their meeting. Since this study deals strictly with religious encounters, we tend to assume that this comes in various forms. It could occur between two distinct religious identities such as the Catholics and Protestants or Tijaniyah and Quadiriyah based on differences in ideology, doctrine or dogma or two contending forces within the same religious institution such as the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria and The Muslim Congress. Beyond religious institutions, religious encounters could also extend to communities where members of particular religious groups engage their respective communities in religious dialogue to forestall crisis or disapproving acts that leads to not only religious tension but communal unrest. Instances of communal rifts abound, perhaps, as a result of access to religious spaces or inconveniences borne out of religious practices within a specific community. The consequences of these different encounters are what interest us. Do they lead to long-term crisis? When they do, how are they resolved? What constitutes mainly a positive or negative religious encounter and why are some encounters cordial and others hostile? These are some of the questions we intend to resolve in relation to religious encounters in our study area.

Spiritual Encounters

The focus here centres mainly on two key terms – evangelism and conversion. What do we meant here? First, we must take note that the terms are peculiar but not exclusive to Christianity. As it appears, not all Christian denominations express the two terms in their dogmatic beliefs. For instance, the Aladura Churches do not engage in door-to-door evangelism or conversion. These practices are linked to mainly the Jehovah Witnesses and Deeper Life Church. In recent times, evangelism and conversion have witnessed drastic changes. In time past, these were done on inter-personal levels and through open-air crusades. Today, televangelism has become a more penetrating method of evangelism and conversion.

The social media is also not left out where nominal Muslims and Christians have been easily drawn to the Church.

Evangelism viewed conventionally is another form of religious encounter since it involves individuals or groups who move about to preach the gospel not only to people of their belief but those of other beliefs also. And as it were, without evangelism, there cannot be conversion. As pointed out earlier, evangelism is not exclusive to Christians. In actual fact, to spread the gospel, to propagate the religious message and engage in missionary endeavours are not only central to religious growth itself but also the responsibility of both Muslim and Christian adherents. Islam in its formative years, for instance, began with *jihad*, an obligation often responsible for the spread across the world. While Islamic evangelism may have receded or perhaps, taken more modern forms,²³ Christian evangelism continues to grow in diverse ways.

It is essential to explore issues within the context of Christian evangelism in FESTAC-Town. We must, nonetheless, mention that Muslim evangelism is almost absent in the town. The reason(s) for this are not too clear yet, it is possible that given the town has a very strong Muslim community with over 12 *ratibi* (area) mosques scattered around to cater for the spiritual needs of Muslims, evangelism may likely not be needed. Evidences of Muslim evangelism occur once in a while but these are done by the Tablig movement which are non-residents of the town. Popular for their itinerant lifestyle, they arrive in the town for few days in selected mosques to engage in *da'wah* with Muslims resident around the mosque area. This form of evangelism is different from the Christian practice because while the former targets only Muslims within a specific area, the latter focuses on both Muslims and Christians across boundaries.

Since the ultimate aim of every religion is to proselytize, convert and draw more people to its faith, what forms of encounters have been received in trying to achieve this? In FESTAC-Town, have evangelisers overstepped bounds in their attempt to convert people? Have there been reasons for tensions or conflict? Indeed, spiritual encounters in the town have often assumed different meanings unlike elsewhere. The practices of the different denominations have followed tolerant reception and also bridged peaceful reactions. A major

²³ **See, for instance, Ahmed Deedat and the Form of Islamic Evangelism**

reason for this could be traced to the early foundations of the town where residents saw themselves as one community and so, issue as religious differences was of little concern to many. The town was built in such a way that communalism was germane to peaceful coexistence and one could see this from the absence of access gates or security walls. There was free flow of movement and access to any part of the town was made very easy. By the time religious institutions were set up, it further cemented the bond of communalism. Residents from the different communities in the town met either during Friday congregational prayers or Sunday service and from there appointed into one committee or the other within these religious bodies. The creation of the resident association too created avenues for life-long friendships which hitherto would not have been possible or would have reduced the level of interactions within the town. Though things have drastically changed since the 2000s, following the heavy population presence in the town, spiritual encounters remain cordial.

As part of the evangelisation process, some Christian denominations such as the Jehovah Witness embark on door-to-door preaching on Sundays. Though it is assumed that many Christians would have gone to Church during this period, a widely held belief is that this form of evangelism is often targeted at Muslims. This is not likely to be true since a handful of Christians for various reasons also stay at home on Sundays. In the event of meeting these ‘nominal’ Christians or Muslims most especially, what sort of encounters occur? Muslim residents interviewed in the course of this study observed that though they view the Christian evangelists actions as invasion of their quiet privacy, they either politely decline their approach or patiently welcome them. Those who show receptiveness, however, contend that they relate with the evangelists outside rather than inside their homes. This, they argue, has more to do with security reasons than anything.

Another case of spiritual encounter is the early ‘morning cry’ which once again is carried out by Christians. Unlike the door-to-door evangelism which is linked to a specific Christian denomination, this is pursued by those who see it as a personal duty to share God’s words or members of a newly opened Pentecostal denomination who wish to share the good news and inform or invite residents to some of the Church’s programmes. Also, pastors of new Churches who perhaps, intend to draw new members or converts also engage in this early morning ritual. This often takes place between 5:30 am and 7:00 am. Interestingly, to ensure all messages reach a wider audience, megaphones are judiciously used. Incidentally, while this practice is often frowned at on a personal level, many wake up to start the day

unperturbed, since this serves as an avenue to wake up on time for work or provides the avid listener with a morning dose of spiritual ‘uplift’. In effect, whether these categories of evangelism have led to monumental conversions on both sides of the religious divide, we are not certain. Nevertheless, the fact that they have continued even on a large scale suggests that spiritual encounters in FESTAC-Town has been strongly receptive and illustrates the increased level of toleration of religious difference among residents. In contrast to some other experiences,²⁴ spiritual encounters in the town has relatively been cordial, mature and above all, amiable.

Noise Disturbance

Noise is a common feature of life everywhere. Aside the fact that it is hazardous to the health, noise is also disastrous to the environment. In Nigeria, noise remains a highly problematic issue. Since there are little or no control measures to regulate noise, it often manifests indiscriminately either at social, political or religious gatherings. And even when laws are passed to tame this environmental pollutant, citizens quickly flout them. Research indicates that exposure to noise levels of about 150 decibel for close to 6 hours is most likely to cause deafness. Despite the human threat, noise is usually taken for granted by many.

Among the common defaulters of the noise pollution law are religious bodies. They are renowned for series of daily religious activities or programmes where very loudspeakers are used. Many churches, for instance, have very expensive music equipment used by members of the choir to worship while the Muslims make use of very powerful loudspeakers to call adherents to their five daily prayers and to usher in the prayer proper. Beyond the confines of the religious institutions, individuals too, particularly Christians, evangelise mainly very early in the morning, using megaphones to project their message clearly. Similarly, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the tempo of worship increases and as such, activities among Muslims outside and inside the mosque requires the use of speakers. For instance, during what Muslim *sahur*, there are several calls to wake adherents up to pray and eat while series of glorifications (*asalatu*) are similarly made. This usually starts between 3am and 7am and continues once the fast has been broken from 7pm, depending on the weather condition.

²⁴ Adelani Adepegba, How Female Redeemed Preacher was killed during Morning Evangelism, *Punch*, 10 July 2016.

Instances also abound during the day, in the later part of the afternoon and evening where series of daily Ramadan lectures are held in open spaces. Here, loud speakers are usually mounted to properly convey these lectures to those who are near and far. More often than not, both Muslims and Christians hold weekly or monthly vigils and as it were, despite the darkness and peace of the night, adherents could be heard worshipping aloud with little concern for residents' privacy. In the midst of these somewhat disturbing scenarios, what has been the response(s) of residents to these disturbances? Also, what sort of encounters has been engendered in trying to either accommodate these noises or express indifference to them?

It is important to state that all parts of Lagos State is home to thousands of religious institutions, FESTAC-Town inclusive. What this means within the context of our study area is that each close or road in the town has one form of religious denomination or the other. Both smaller denominations and the larger one headquartered either at the outskirts or within the town, serve the daily and periodic spiritual needs of residents. This is common within the Christianity fold. In the same town, there exist a very formidable Muslim community which has grown in leaps and bounds in the last three and half decades. The Muslims have a central mosque which coordinates or oversees all Muslim interests in the town. To avoid over centralisation, there exist in each community in the town an area mosque which caters for the spiritual needs of Muslims within that area. Similarly, older Muslim societies such as the Ansar-ud-Deen, Zumratul Islamiyah, Tablig movement etc., relate well and are viewed as part of the growing Muslim community in FESTAC-Town.

Incidentally, in the process of construction FESTAC-Town, religious buildings or spaces were not included as part of the building plan of the town. Any of the spaces across the town were simply left for the purpose of social gatherings or as playgrounds. However, by the time residents began to think of constructing religious buildings, a good number of these empty spaces became quick targets for zealous religionists. To be sure, the playground on 3rd Avenue, 321 Road, G Close and 5th Avenue, X Close, were quickly acquired by the Muslim community. Today, Ifelodun Area Mosques and the Celestial Church of Christ (C.C.C) are located on both Closes, respectively. It is pertinent to state further that the town was strictly meant as a residential area while commercial activities were catered for through the construction of complexes in specific proximities. Planners had thought without such provision, the town may find itself saturated with mini-shops and makeshift sheds and as a

consequence, threaten not only the make-up of the town but also its serene environment and security. Whether the lack of inclusion of spaces for religious institutions was a deliberate policy, we are not certain; however, this would later lead to untoward consequences. Not only were some of these open grounds bought by major religious groups, they quickly began to witness construction of very large and beautiful religious monuments and as membership grew, so did newer denominations emerge. To cater for their collective spiritual needs, these open spaces were no longer available and so, many resorted to residential buildings which earlier on were used by new residents but abandoned for larger open spaces. Unlike in the past where these residential buildings served only as a temporary site of religious observances, many homes today across the communities that make up FESTAC-Town now have permanent mosques and churches where adherents within that spatiality worship. What this, therefore, means is that religious worship in FESTAC has become more residential than non-residential.

In relation to noise disturbances, what this tells us is that the frequency of noise would appear higher than it was earlier if worship were held farther from residential areas. It must be noted that over 95 percent, if not all religious buildings in FESTAC town are either within a residential area or opposite it. Based on the several religious practices, these should certainly call for serious tension or outright conflict. As we shall interrogate subsequently, noise disturbances have often led to series of unpleasant encounters though residents quickly find common grounds to deflate any form of tension that may arise from such encounters.

Use of Public Spaces

For an area spread over 1,770 hectares of land area, there is no doubt that FESTAC-Town is bestowed with large spaces. For example, from 201 Road to 208 Road, large spaces could be seen. These spaces were once used for Christmas eve celebrations, weddings and birthday parties. Few were once converted to play grounds for kids while others similarly used as football pitches for boys or as track and field for schools. Today, over 95 per cent of these spaces have either been sold to private establishments or rented for commercial purposes. The few ones are used for all kinds of events and profits generated paid to government and in few cases, private accounts.

Since religion occupies the daily lives of the average citizen, there is usually the urge to express this in spectacular ways. Churches and mosques have come up with several

religious programmes to address the religious needs of its members. When these programmes seem to be elaborate or intend to reach a very large audience, the church or mosque may not be appropriate for such and so, open spaces becomes the primary target. A good number of the open spaces in FESTAC-Town have been appropriated or bought outright by Muslim and Christian groups. However, at the time of the construction of these religious monuments in the open spaces, consideration was not given to very large members. Hence, many of the old religious buildings which sprang up from the 1980s and 1990s were small but with wide spaces within them. These spaces were mostly used during harvests or Quranic graduation. However, during the period of hosting a convention, crusades, vigil or other similarly attractive Christian programmes, public spaces are used to accommodate large population. For the Muslims, most of their programmes are held within the confines of the mosque except during the Eid-el-Fitr and Eid-el-Kabir festival. The FHA open ground along 402 Road has been the regular public space provided for such religious observances.

In the process of using some of these public spaces, what were the forms of encounters met? Interviews conducted with officials of the FHA and some of the Muslim and Christian groups who use the pen ground testify that there has not been any form of negative encounter in the process of using the space. Since any group which intends to use the space must indicate and duly register with the administrating body before the space is given out, dates are double-checked while permission is quickly declined if there appears to be a clash. For example, all registrations are declined and unofficial activities such as football matches or morning exercises are cancelled once it is known that Muslims would use the ground officially for the Eid prayers.

Aside the FHA ground, there are also other similarly open spaces that are freely used by anyone, most especially residents with no obligation to pay or permission to use. In this case, have there been any forms of encounters among residents towards religious programmes? Interviews in three different locations with senior citizens show little evidence of tensions or outright conflict. Remarkably, while not many people are averse to the use of public spaces in FESTAC-Town for religious activities, they are rather concerned with the indiscriminate noise which emanates through such programmes. Incidentally, this peculiar problem has been well managed by concerned stakeholders which illustrates how religious encounters are negotiated in bridging communal relations and peaceful co-existence.

Cases of Encounters in FESTAC

To properly articulate or understand most or all of what has been examined earlier, it is apt to cite some examples to illustrate how residents in FESTAC-town encounter religion and ways in which these are managed. Most of the cases are quite similar and so, we shall subsume them under one analysis. Between 401 Road and 402 Road is the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and Zumratul Islamiyah Muslim society both of whom are adjacent one another. While relations have often been cordial, one source of tension often arises. The noise from the RCCG speakers usually disturbs the Zumrat mosque during prayer sessions which barely allows them to hear themselves.²⁵ In the spirit of communal and religious harmony, the latter laid a formal complain to the RCCG where all issues pertaining to noise disturbances were tabled and resolved amicably. This was similarly the case with the Baptist and Winners Churches both of which are located opposite one another.²⁶ Unlike the Zumrat, officials of the Baptist Church approached the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), FESTAC-Town branch to make formal complaints about the speakers which they accused Winners Church of deliberately placing it directly theirs. There is also the case of residents at 5th Avenue who formally laid complains to CAN about the indiscriminate noise from the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC). Since the CCC is located within the close, it was expected that residents would feel agitated, especially when vigils are held.²⁷

Beyond religious groups or institutions, there are reported cases of residents versus morning preachers. At the 5th Avenue area of the town, residents are often disturbed by the noise from the megaphones of early morning preachers. This case was resolved by CAN after formal complaints were laid. Also was the case between Ansar-ud-Deen mosque and one of the earliest Christian evangelists in FESTAC-Town. Though the evangelist moved to different spots in the town daily to preach through two large megaphones mounted on his car, the Ansar-ud-Deen accused him of deliberately preaching directly in front of the mosque. The matter was reported to CAN which quickly took swift measures to resolve the matter.²⁸

Returning to the residents once again, complains were made at the 3rd Avenue section of the town on the indiscriminate noise emanating from the speakers and generator set used

²⁵ Interview with Imam Yusuff Luqman, Zumratul mosque premises. 24 July 2017.

²⁶ Interview with Overseer Emmanuel Aluko, CAN President. 14 October 2017.

²⁷ Interview with Elder Albert, Celestial Church of Christ, Festac Branch. 14 October 2017.

²⁸ Interview with Alhaji Laguda Lateef, Ansar-ud-Deen Chairman, Festac Branch, Ansar-ud-Deen Central Mosque, FESTAC-Town. 15 October 2017.

by the Hausa mosque in the area. Surprisingly, and unlike the way such issue was resolved elsewhere, residents happily supported the mosque against its complainants. They argued that since every home had a generating set used at their discretion and without hindrance, residents had no reasons to fault the mosque for similar offense.²⁹

There has been cases of religious encounters which almost led to serious conflict but for the quick intervention of officials of Amuwo-Odofin LGA and CAN also. An instance suffices here: a Christian group during one of its awareness campaigns deliberately dropped their tracts around the Zumratu mosque. It took the swift intervention of the elders in the mosque who discussed with the leader of the evangelical team before the reckless act was firmly settled.³⁰ In the case of the LGA, it had to step in when crisis erupted between Hausa Muslims and members of the Lord Chosen Charismatic Revival Movement (LCCRM) at the popular Agboju market along the Badagry expressway.³¹ The Hausa Muslims accused the LCCRM of not only impinging on their religious privacy but also disturbing them with worship and songs each time it was time to observe their prayers at the mosque. Also, the Anglican Church at 41 Road was accused by the LGA officials of both indiscriminate parking, destruction of beautification flowers around the LGA and obstruction of walkways.³² Following this, the LGA wrote to CAN and the Anglican Church simultaneously to resolve the issue. The other Anglican branch at 21 Road also collided with the LGA over parking spaces.³³

It could be seen from the above that despite some of the religious encounters often tilted towards crisis-situations, viable mechanisms are developed to resolve them. Some of these mechanisms could either come in form of collective will among residents or through religious agencies themselves. The important role of CAN in successfully resolving almost all the religious issues in FESTAC-Town have been highlighted and remains worthy of commendation. Each time the body is called upon to intervene, it does so with due diligence.³⁴ This, therefore, explains why religious tensions are hardly heard of among the respective religious denominations and divides in the town. Remarkably, on no account has

²⁹ Interview with Alhaji Aminu Abubakar, Unity Mosque, 5th Avenue, FESTAC-Town. 16 August 2017.

³⁰ Interview with Imam Gafar Muritadol, Chief Missioner Zumratul Islamiyah Lagos State, Zumratul mosque premises. 14 October 2017.

³¹ Interview with Mr Ridwan Shoyemi, past personal assistant to the LGA Chairman on religious matters. 09 June 2017.

³² Interview with Mr Adewale Ayodele, immediate past chairman, Amuwo-Odofin LGA, University of Lagos. 10 August 2017.

³³ Interview with Rev. Canon Oluwafemi Omidiji, Rev. of the Anglican Church, 05 October 2017.

³⁴ Interview with Mr Alaba Ayodele at FTRA meeting, 712 Road. 18 July 2017.

there been a major religious case brought before the area police and even at the state level. Indeed, there are indications that all disagreements or sources of tensions are often referred to internal or elders committee within the respective denominations to resolve such issues. It is, hence, understandable why FESTAC-Town is viewed as an affirmative case of inter- and intra-faith co-existence.

Factors Responsible for Religious Tolerance in FESTAC-Town

While several factors underpin FESTAC's attitude towards religious tolerance, we shall scale the discussion to four carefully selected sub-headings for which we could situate properly our arguments.

Elitism

FESTAC-Town was founded not only as an urban settlement but deliberately constructed for specific classes of citizens in the country. One did not have to be too wealthy to become a resident. Once an interested resident was on paid government employment and on a specific grade level, he or she could partake in the ballot system. As a result, young working class and well-educated citizens made up the early residents of the town. One characteristic nature of the residents in the town was their educated status. They were urbane, cosmopolitan and detribalised. Of course, the civil war had ended about seven to eight years after FESTAC 77 and many had perhaps, slowly gotten over that brutal experience. As Lagos was the hub of social, political and economic activities, it wasn't a surprise, therefore, that many residents across the State looked towards a better life. This period was also known for the oil boom which increased the spending power of citizens. In due time, the town became a special choice location for many.

As new groups of residents settled, the practice of good neighbourliness became paramount. Each resident who lived either in a close or flat went often visited a neighbour after which life-long friendships were ultimately developed. An early resident recalled when his parents moved into the new town, good neighbourliness was encouraged as each person saw themselves as residents of same community without any form of sentiments.³⁵ Parents and guardians didn't have to worry about the whereabouts of their wards since it was either

³⁵ Interview with Mrs Ogedegbe Amina at her residence in FESTAC-Town. 18 October 2017.

they were at the community playground or in a neighbour's house.³⁶ It was necessary to embark on a meet and greet session since virtually all residents was almost on an equal standing. It was either a neighbour was working at the government ministry, foreign multinational company, government factory, water works, railway, bank etc. Similarly, residential meetings were held for effective running or coordination of the different communities and mainly to protect the diverse interests of residents.³⁷

Though religious consciousness was noticeable, this was expressed privately. What this suggests is that, given the absence of available religious structures and spaces to engage in religious worship, everyone performed his religious obligations in his or her private homes. As explained previously, when it appeared there was a need to perform prayers or worship in congregation, garages of volunteers were used but thereafter, membership increased which soon called for acquisition of public spaces. When this was not allowed by the FHA, concerned residents mounted heavy pressure on the administrators who themselves were residents, for land spaces to build either a mosque or church. The FHA sooner yielded to residents' pressures and within few years, religious centres were built. The central mosque, for example, was completed by 1987³⁸ while the Catholics and Anglicans completed theirs before that period. The membership makeup of these religious institutions included mainly residents who knew one another. Those who were not familiar with themselves at close or street levels made acquaintances as members of one committee or the other in the mosque or church. Hence, the friendship that had been built or had developed from at residential levels became a very potent factor that influenced religious tolerance in FESTAC-Town.

It is important to point out here that Christian and Muslim residents faced the same challenges in their search for befitting land space for religious worship. They were confronted by the FHA which maintained that religious centres of worship were banned in the town.³⁹ Perhaps, out of pressure or for other unclear reasons, the ban was lifted. What this suggests is that the ban may not have been lifted if individual efforts were exerted.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Interview with Alhaji Oladele Isiaq at his residence in FESTAC-Town. 06 April 2017.

³⁸ Commemorative Brochure of the Turbaning Ceremony of Festival Town Muslim Community (Central Body), FESTAC-Town, Lagos. 22 December 2001, 20

³⁹ Interview with Bashir Alli, FHA staff. 12 August 2017.

Until recently, many of the initial mosques and churches built in FESTAC-Town were not as close to one another to warrant some tensions associated with religious bodies today. For instance, while the Catholic Church and central mosque are located on 22 Road, they are far apart. This may have been a deliberate attempt by the FHA to avoid any unwarranted confrontation. Though information gathered from Muslims and Christians did not corroborate this view, they nevertheless agree that there was no time both parties had course to complain or enter into conflict based on modes of worship or disturbances.

Urbanisation

The urban nature of FESTAC-Town is not enough reason for religious co-existence. Though the environment/community may appear serene environments yet inhabitants may not wish to tolerate each other and so, the possibility of crisis is becomes unavoidable. This is different in FESTAC-Town as residents appear to exhibit maturity in their interaction, leading to no serious recorded case of crisis.⁴⁰ It is worthy to state that not only has religious crisis been absent, communal or political crisis have not also been recorded in the community since 1977. This trend could be attributed to the strict urbane makeup of residents. An interview with a resident revealed that residents often have the belief that FESTAC-Town was one community and as such, religion was secondary to what could be used to divide the community.⁴¹

Another very important factor for the expression of peaceful inter-faith relations could be seen in the narration of a resident who claimed that by 1977 when residents began to settle in the community, many were simply equipped with the peculiarities of the other's religion.⁴² Hence, religious difference was simply seen in an advantageous manner rather than the other way round. Another factor could be linked to the way houses were allotted to winners of the ballot. The FHA allocated houses based on the results and not on ethnic or religious prejudices. Residents, therefore, found themselves in the middle of different religious and ethnic compositions.⁴³ While a resident may be Christian, his next three neighbours could be Muslims and the third and fourth houses or flats similarly occupied by Christians. In effect, no single area was populated by a particular religious or ethnic group, a factor, amongst others, which enlivened religious understanding and toleration amongst residents.

⁴⁰ Interview with Barrister Franklin Okorejior, 5th Avenue, X Close. 09 June 2017.

⁴¹ Interview with Mr Onotu Victor at his residence, 5th Avenue, B1 Close. 08 July 2017.

⁴² Interview with Mr Ogedegbe Tetoma at his residence, 7th Avenue. 09 June 2017.

⁴³ Personal observations by the researchers.

Absence of Indigene – Settler Status

What is referred to as FESTAC-Town today was before 1977 a very large piece of swampy land occupied by different groups of people. The original land owners were the Kuje people who were later joined by the Amuwo.⁴⁴ Typical of many settlements, these groups of people lived together in cordiality and would appear to engage in struggles for land spaces for either farming or fishing. Tensions could also occur as a result of the inability to pay tributes as part of age-long settlement to live on the land. Life, however, was generally peaceful. The Kuje had a vibrant traditional kingship system which held the bonds of unity in the area. These, among others, were the general state of things in this large expanse of land when the Federal Government approached the people to acquire a portion of the land for residential and administrative purposes.

As FESTAC 77 was approved, preparations began in earnest but there was serious need to find a befitting area to accommodate the retinue of guests invited across the world. Having found the largely uninhabited area later called FESTAC Village suitable, the government approached the land owners to procure a specific land area. According to Chief Otun, the local representatives represented by Knight and Frank chambers who discussed with the federal government committee or delegation agreed to cede the land to the latter for a sum.⁴⁵ He observed that the particular sum negotiated was unknown but sources claimed that the amount was not only inadequate but years later, it was discovered that those who had negotiated with the government had little understanding of what they were getting into. Also, recent court cases initiated by the original settlers claimed that the government failed to play its own part of the bargain by refusing to pay full compensation to the land owners while selling portions of land not originally allocated the government.⁴⁶

In any case, FESTAC-Town was eventually secured by the government and work began in earnest. However, an interesting aspect in the agreement was that the original owners of the land and every other settler were to permanently move out of the area. What this presupposes is that, having ceded the land to the government, the Kuje people had to evacuate to the fringes of the town where they are known to reside today. The Kuje could be

⁴⁴ Interview with Comrade Shehu Ariyo at the Alamuwo of Amuwo palace, Agboju Amuwo. 10 July 2017.

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Interview with Alhaji Akinolu Mustapha at the Alamuwo of Amuwo palace. 09 June 2017.

found along the Mile 2/Badagry Expressway and deep inside the old Ojo area. This agreement had serious future implications for the locals as they were not only barred indirectly from participating in any development of the newly acquired area but could also not own houses in the new settlement. There were also no agreements on ground rents as part of a sharing formula. It was perhaps, as a result of this that several court cases were initiated in the recent past to correct these perceived anomalies.

While these agreement had negative impact on the locals, it appeared more as a blessing in disguise for the new town and for residents as a whole. This is because, like many urban areas in Lagos which has an indigene-settler makeup, conflict often arises where boundaries of culture, tradition and religion are often drawn. What this means is that areas which are originally owned by a dominant culture and religion often tend to reassert these agencies when they are threatened by outsiders. It, therefore, explains why in areas such as Ikorodu, religious tensions tend to erupt between the traditional worshippers who are often the land owners and religious others during periodic festivals. These festivals are incidentally sanctioned by the traditional rulers of the town and by implication, have their full support. As traditional owners of the land, they tend to reassert their rights to fully practice their faith and in effect set boundaries against those who are likely to disagree with them.

This interestingly is not so in FESTAC-Town. Incidentally, by evacuating the locals away from the town and keeping them perpetually at the fringes, the town planners were able to create an elitist superstructure and obliterate cultural cum traditional barriers that could threaten its urban and elitist status. Similarly, as a strictly modern and residential area, many were not receptive to traditional beliefs even if they were strong followers of such faith. This is because at its early stages of the town's development, religion was less a priority for residents and when it did, one was either a Muslim or Christian.

Following government ownership of the land, religion was less a priority as its builders intended to the town to be urbane and ultimately satisfy the elitist aspirations of its new occupants. Hence, appropriation of religious rights by indigene-settlers did not arise, given the absence of any of such to do so. Also, the composition of the town was strictly diverse with no links to either the original land owners or other powerful local or supranational agencies. Hence, strictly modern and cosmopolitan status of residents eliminated any form of religious tensions in the town.

Conflict Resolution

From the discussions above, it would appear to ordinary minds that the town has witnessed throughout her over 35 years of existence a classic case of absolute religious peace and tranquillity. While this may not be entirely true since several cases of religious tensions in the town have evolved few times. Yet, many residents interviewed observed that despite these obvious tensions which they argue are normal, no serious conflict has manifested. In this case, Muslims and Christians have often had cause to disagree but usually on ‘trivial’ matters such as noise disturbances.

However, over the past few decades or so, there have been concerns over the upsurge in religious centres in the town. While this was not seen as a serious problem, what was of utmost concern was the need to manage inter-faith and intra-faith relations that arises from the surge in religious centres of worship. Based on this, a body was set up in 2008 by the immediate past Chairman of Amuwo-Odofin LGA, Comrade Adewale Ayodele, to adjudicate on diverse range of religious issues. Known as Peace and Security Committee, membership was made of the CAN, FESTAC-Town branch, the FTMC and officials of the Nigerian Army, Police, Navy and Civil Defence.⁴⁷ While the CAN was represented by its President, the FTMC selected its Chief Imam General as its voice at the committee.

Meetings were held at determined periods and resolutions made were shared among respective religious groups in return. While this committee has been able to continually forge religious unity in the town through its tactical interventions, there have also been interventions at institutional levels to sustain the town’s religious peace and cordial relations. For instance, the CAN has been a very potent force in finding solutions to several complaints made to it by Christian bodies or residents in the town. Issues bordering on noise are often reported to it after which amicable solutions are made. For the Muslim groups too, the Elders Council was formed as an arbiter to forestall cases of rift between or among members or between one area mosque and the others.⁴⁸ In essence, unlike other places where peace committees do not exist or even when they do, fail in their responsibilities to sustain religious harmony, FESTAC-Town has been able to build over the years strong mechanisms that

⁴⁷ Interview with Comrade Adewale Ayodele past LGA chairman of Amuwo Odofin. 10 August 2017.

⁴⁸ Personal observation by the researchers.

sustain religious peace. It favourably explains why despite some of the tensions witnessed in the town, religious encounters have always been cordial and accommodating.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that religious encounter in FESTAC town since 1977 has remained inclusive. As noted earlier, the status and positioning of early residents of the town was a very potent and determining factor in the way religion is expressed. Since religion itself did not determine who was chosen to reside in the town or which area to reside, and similarly because religious was not considered when the town was built, removed all elements of religious prejudices in the town. Indeed, the elitist and cosmopolitan nature of the town itself and residents gave way for religious co-existence and this has deepened communalism, esprit-de-corps and camaraderie across the town.

The study examined the nature of encounters in the town and contends that it is a classic case of enduring tolerance. It also specifically discusses the types of encounters using a number of events as case studies. It further went ahead to cite diverse examples of encounters in the town. It is significant to note that pockets of tensions occur every now and then and when these encounters come up either between Muslims and Christians or groups with similar beliefs, they could easily be blown up without commensurate mechanisms to douse them. Our contention, therefore, is that the makeup of FESTAC-Town right from inception is usually the first buffer against any untoward religious encounters in the town.

Though there are readily no available statistics to determine which religion has more followership, there are apparent signs that Christians make up the greater percentage of the town's religious population. This uneven representation is also responsible, albeit on a lower scale, to the lack of religious tension in FESTAC-Town. This is hinged on the fact that the Christian population are not linked to a single denomination. In actual fact, it is difficult to identify which Christian denomination in the town has large membership, since even less known churches have significant membership which helps to create a form of balance in terms of religious interactions.