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## ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT ON CEMETERY GOVERNANCE IN SOKOTO METROPOLIS, NIGERIA

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### Abstract

This study examines the planning, location, and management of cemeteries in Sokoto metropolis, Nigeria, assessing their compliance with global standards. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates primary data from field inventories and key informant interviews (KIIs) with secondary data from literature, media, and prior studies. The sampling frame encompassed all 34 active cemeteries in the study area. Findings reveal significant deficiencies in infrastructure and management across all cemeteries. Only 14 cemeteries (39%) provided water facilities (wells or boreholes), while 84% (28 of 34) were partially or fully fenced with gates; the remaining two, serving Christian and military communities, remained unfenced. Critical inadequacies included lighting (29% lacked electricity) and parking space, with only one cemetery (2%) in Sabuwar Kurfi offering designated parking. Key challenges identified were insufficient funding, overcrowding, inadequate security, and lack of essential amenities. The study underscores the urgent need for political will, sustained financial investment, and improved security measures to address these systemic issues. Prioritizing these interventions could enhance cemetery infrastructure, align practices with global standards, and ensure sustainable management of burial grounds in Sokoto metropolis.

**Keywords:** Assessment, Cemeteries, Development, Management, Sokoto Metropolis

### 1. Introduction

Every religion places significant importance on burial grounds and the conditions of graveyard visitation (Davies, 2017). The cemetery, often referred to as the "silent valley" (Etlin, 1984), serves as a resting place for all individuals, regardless of their social status—from the poor to the rich and the weak to the powerful (Laqueur, 2015). Ultimately, everyone is buried in a simple piece of cloth, a practice rooted in Islamic tradition that symbolizes humility and spiritual purification (Qur'an, 76:1–2; Sahih Muslim, n.d.). This universal practice underscores the transient nature of human existence and fosters reflection on materialism and mortality (Laqueur, 2015).

Before the advent of Islam, many religious rites were closely associated with graves

and the veneration of ancestors. The graves of esteemed prophets and saintly figures in Judaism and Christianity have become shrines where worship practices, such as prayer, sacrifice, and pilgrimage, are commonly conducted (Abubakar, 2021).

In northern Nigeria, cities like Kano, Katsina, and Sokoto State are currently grappling with rapid urban growth, which significantly impacts cemetery planning. As urbanization accelerates, populations increase, leading to a heightened demand for burial spaces. Traditional burial sites may no longer suffice to accommodate this growing population. In Sokoto, as in much of Nigeria, Islamic traditions and cultural practices guide burial rites. However, rapid urban growth can strain these traditions, particularly when there is insufficient land allocated for burials within the city. This

situation often drives people to seek burial space in outlying areas that may be less accessible or inadequately developed.

In Hausa land, families generally prefer to be interred with their loved ones, regardless of the burial method. Consequently, families often reserve burial spaces in advance (pre-need) to ensure their deceased relatives are buried together. Many followers of various sects express the desire to be buried in proximity to the resting places of their leaders or scholars to receive blessings known as "*Tabaruki*". For instance, a significant area has been set aside behind the *Hubbare* burial ground due to high demand for graves near the tomb of *Danfodio*. Prominent elderly individuals are now reserving land for their future burial in the backyard of *Hubbare* (Abdullahi, 2015). Another cemetery in the Helele area, associated with the *Tijjaniya* sect in Sokoto metropolis, is in high demand due to the presence of renowned clerics, such as Sheikh Abdullahi Wasali, the father of Sheikh *Alfazazi*, known for

miracles (*Karama*). Many visitors, particularly from rural areas, bring food items as offerings for blessings upon the graves of their saints.

Sokoto metropolis has experienced rapid urban growth, necessitating the establishment of cemeteries in newly developed areas. As the population grows, so does the inevitability of death, highlighting the need for adequate cemetery provision as a crucial aspect of social infrastructure. From reconnaissance surveys, it has been observed that most cemeteries are located on the outskirts of the city and often in underdeveloped areas. Alarming, there is no statistical data available regarding the daily or yearly number of burials in Sokoto State. Conducting a study on this subject is essential to provide the necessary baseline data for planners to better allocate and manage land use for cemeteries.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Evolution of Cemetery Landscape

The placement of burial sites has changed significantly over time, primarily influenced by the characteristics, types, settlement patterns, and cultural beliefs of people in different geographical locations. Habila (2017) attempted to classify the evolution of cemeteries into four categories based on size (the number of burials per cemetery) and age (the period during which the cemetery was actively used), focusing on temporal changes in the placement of cemeteries in Chicago, USA. According to Habila (2017), the four classifications outlined below can describe most cemeteries, although there are some exceptions where the classification does not perfectly

- i. Undifferentiated Plots (1800-1860) (20 graves and below): This category is the most challenging to identify due to its age and the spatial

distribution of graves. It may include the resting places of soldiers, travellers, riverboat crews, and others. In undifferentiated cemeteries, the primary locational factor was the site where death commonly occurred, often along early transportation routes.

- ii. Small Family Plot (1860-1880) (21 to 100 graves): This classification refers to small family plots located on individual farms. These cemeteries are scattered, but their locations share similarities, typically found at higher local elevations. While they are generally well-maintained, many are overgrown with underbrush and may be inaccessible by road.
- iii. Rural Activity Focus (1880-1900) (100-500 graves): This type of cemetery evolved around a hub of

rural activity, such as a church, road junction, or school. Frequently, the original reasons for the cemetery's location have since diminished. Many cemeteries associated with schools and churches no longer exist. Rural burial activity began alongside individual plots, yet, unlike small family plots, most rural burials take place in cemeteries. This category includes the majority of rural cemeteries, which typically have between 101 and 500 graves and are still in use

- iv. Population Centre Cemetery (1900-1950) (500 graves or more): This category encompasses the largest

## 2.2 Cemetery and Urbanization

A burial ground, cemetery, or graveyard is an essential part of any urban community. Urban planning must consider where the deceased will be interred, which is just as important as designing residences for the living. Two major issues arise in this consideration: the relocation and preservation of old cemeteries and the creation of new ones. Urban development projects can be adversely affected by conflicts related to cemetery relocation. Unmarked cemeteries are more likely to be disturbed by construction activities in new urban areas because they are not identified as burial grounds. However, many cemeteries have historical significance, and concerns about their relocation can hinder city planning and development. There is growing attention toward restoring and maintaining historic cemeteries, especially as previously unknown graves are discovered due to increasing urban development encroaching on rural areas (Dlugożuma, 2022). Families, local communities, and even associations dedicated to gravestone studies and cemetery preservation have a vested interest in maintaining both historical and ordinary family graveyards.

cemeteries, typically found at the edges of villages and towns. While some are situated next to churches or schools, they are more closely associated with population clusters rather than the influence of local religious or educational institutions. Cemeteries near larger villages and towns experienced rapid growth after 1900, whereas rural activity in cemeteries expanded at a slower pace. This trend has continued and accelerated into the present day. Today, cemeteries in population centres account for approximately 80 per cent of total burials in urban areas.

## 2.3 Planning for Cemeteries

Cemeteries represent a land use that serves society, regardless of whether the population is urban, rural, or a mix of both. The planning process focuses on typical spatial planning matters that should be considered when formulating plans to guide development. The context includes the development of cemeteries and crematoriums in both inner and outer urban core areas. Unfortunately, these planning guidelines were neglected in cemetery planning and location in Hausa land (Lambu, 2014; Celia, 2022).

The question of the need for new cemeteries often arises when a proponent applies for municipal land use approval. Spatial planning typically focuses on population projections to determine the amount of land required within communities to accommodate future growth. Bennet (2015) argues that these projections influence the development of spatial planning policy for Official Plans related to traditional land-use categories (such as residential, commercial, industrial/employment, social, institutional, conservation, open space and parks, and transportation). These policies are intended to articulate the municipal vision and guide future development and growth within the region or municipality.

In northern Nigeria, Islamic burial practices are deeply rooted in religious beliefs and local customs, influenced by both Islamic traditions and regional cultural norms. The burial process is generally straightforward, emphasizing respect, purity, and humility in the face of death. These practices provide a sense of closure that aligns with the broader Islamic belief in the afterlife and the importance of properly treating the

deceased. In some instances, local communities in Hausa land utilize traditional methods to identify deceased individuals, especially when formal identification records are lacking, as some religious beliefs might reject such methods. These identification methods can include recognizing specific items of clothing, jewelry, or marks on the tomb or body.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach to collect relevant data. The sources of data for this study include researcher-constructed sources (primary) and documented sources (secondary). The primary sources consist of inventory, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and in-depth interviews, which will yield qualitative data. The sampling frame for the

respondents includes all thirty-four (34) active members of cemetery security for the KII participants. The in-depth interview group comprises three (3) official members from the sultanate council, representatives from religious affairs, and one community member.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 Categories of Cemeteries in Sokoto Metropolis

A total of 44 cemeteries were identified from the inventory of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, categorized as either active or dormant. Among these, 34 cemeteries are classified as active, representing 77% of the total, while the remaining 10 cemeteries, which constitute 23%, are dormant and no longer in use as they are filled. These cemeteries are divided into four groups: General cemeteries, Special cemeteries, Christian cemeteries, and Mixed cemeteries. General cemeteries are locations where deceased individuals of any sect are interred without regard for specific religious preferences. Special cemeteries

are designated for families, accommodating one or more members, often located in the backyard of a home, or for individuals from a specific sect. The *Hubbare* extended cemetery is specifically reserved for royal family members. Christian cemeteries, of which there are only two in this study area, are exclusively for Christians. The Koko Road Christian cemetery, established in 1901, is the second oldest and continues to be used due to the infrequency of burials by Christians. It is a tradition for many Christians to return their deceased relatives to their home areas in the northern part of the country for burial. The last category is a mixed cemetery located within an army barrack, where both Muslim and non-Muslim army personnel and their families are interred.

#### 4.2 Nature and Location of Cemeteries in Sokoto Metropolis

The key informant interviews conducted for this research indicate that most cemeteries—60%—are poorly located, while 40% are situated in areas suitable for graveyards. Most of these cemeteries lack proper access roads and have suboptimal

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soil quality for burials. A reconnaissance survey revealed that many cemeteries are positioned in sloped areas, making them prone to flooding each year. Notable examples of these cemeteries include Gidan Sanda, Old *Tudun Wada*, *Sabuwari Kurfi*, *Girafshi*, *Bakin Gulbi*, *Gumburawa*, and various Christian cemeteries. The study



found that in the cemeteries located on steep slopes, particularly during the rainy season, the remains of the deceased are exposed due to holes created by rainfall and running water each year. It was observed that the local communities are responsible for refilling and maintaining these cemeteries. However, in 2024, the state

government allocated funds for the provision of drainage systems in *Sabuwar Kurfi* Cemetery, which is the largest cemetery in the study area. This marked the first time the state government addressed this issue, following its establishment in 2022.

### 4.3 Inventory of Basic Facilities Available in the Cemetery

An inventory of the facilities available in cemeteries has been conducted for this study. When planning and establishing a cemetery, it is essential to consider the basic facilities needed to create a dignified and respectful environment for both the deceased and their loved ones. By incorporating these facilities, cemeteries can promote sustainability and environmental stewardship. Below are the standard basic facilities and their availability in the cemeteries

The global standard for the number of graves per hectare in cemeteries can vary based on factors such as local regulations, cultural practices, and available space. However, general estimates can be made based on typical cemetery designs and international best practices. On average, the number of graves per hectare is estimated to be between 2,000 to 3,000. This estimate assumes that graves are spaced appropriately for accessibility and planning requirements. In Sokoto cemeteries, no standard spacing has been maintained, resulting in graves being too

**Table 1: Basic Facilities Available in the Cemetery**

Facilities	Available (Count)	Available (%)	Non-Available (Count)	Non-Available (%)
<b>A. Essential Facilities</b>				
Burial plots	39	89	5	11
Access roads and pathways	44	100	0	0
Parking Area	18	40	26	60
Toilets and sanitation facilities	0	0	44	100
Water provision	14	39	30	68
Fence and gate	44	100	0	0
Light and Security personnel	31	70	13	29
Sand and mud	34	77	10	23
Dry grasses	20	45	24	54
Wood and sticks	39	89	5	11
<b>B. Memorialization and Commemoration</b>				
Headstones and grave markers	3	6	41	94
Memorial gardens	0	0	44	100
Cremation gardens	0	0	44	100
Drainage	2	4	42	96

Facilities	Available (Count)	Available (%)	Non-Available (Count)	Non- Available (%)
<b>C. Maintenance and Administration</b>				
Management office	0	0	44	100
Maintenance facilities	0	0	44	100
Waste management	0	0	44	100
<b>D. Environmental Consideration</b>				
Landscaping and tree planting	0	0	44	100
Sustainable practices	0	0	44	100
Wildlife conservation	0	0	44	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2024

Table 1 illustrates the basic facilities available in cemeteries in Sokoto. Among the essential amenities, toilets, sanitation equipment, drainage systems, gardens, management offices, access roads, and lighting were found to be unavailable in these cemeteries. On the other hand, pathways, dry grasses, burial plots, sand, and mud were commonly available across most locations. Only 14 cemeteries (39%) had water provisions, which included wells and boreholes. A total of 42 cemeteries (84%) were fenced with gates, while the remaining two, which serve as burial grounds for Christians and military personnel, were identified as open spaces.

#### 4.4 Status of Security Personal

In Sokoto metropolis, there are various categories of cemetery attendants, including those at public cemeteries, UDUS, Army Barracks, and Christian cemeteries. The researchers noted that cemetery attendants in many areas receive their compensation from contributions made by the relatives of the deceased, as well as from community members. These attendants typically receive regular allowances from their employers and local community members. Additionally, some cemetery attendants obtain stipends or

Additionally, 29% of cemeteries lacked lighting, and only one cemetery (2%) in *Sabuwar Kurfi* was officially established with a parking space. The study found that due to flooding in graveyards, only two newly established cemeteries were equipped with security lighting and drainage systems to prevent the collapse of graves in the area. No cemeteries were found to have memorial gardens, cremation facilities, management offices, landscaping, or sustainable practices. Interviews revealed that the lack of these facilities was largely attributed to the religious and cultural factors prevalent in the society.

allowances from local governments, the Sultanate Council, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. For Christian cemeteries in Sokoto, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), which represents all Christian denominations in the country, pays the salaries of the attendants responsible for managing these sites. This indicates that in most cemeteries in Sokoto, there are no full-time employed attendants; instead, the individuals working there are engaged on a part-time basis and receive monthly allowances ranging from 3,000 to 10,000 Naira.

#### 4.5 Challenges confronting Cemeteries in Sokoto metropolis

The research revealed that all the cemeteries in the study area do not meet the required global standards for cemetery conditions and management. The common challenges identified are outlined below

1. **Cultural and Religious Sensitivities:** Burial practices are closely tied to the religious beliefs and perspectives of the Hausa people. Muslims in this community strictly adhere to the norms and values of their faith. Unfortunately, in many parts of the world, the *Hausawa* have been labelled as Islamic extremists.
2. **Security Concerns:** Cemeteries in the metropolis lack adequate security measures, including proper lighting and strict surveillance. The research found that cemetery attendants earn less than five thousand naira per month. There are reports of individuals entering cemeteries at night to steal parts of deceased bodies. One attendant noted during an interview, *"We are doing this job for the sake of good. We spend the whole day here working, and our daily income comes from the relatives of the deceased. We are trying our best to*

*stop irregularities, especially during the night.*

3. **Overcrowding:** All the cemeteries visited were overcrowded, leading to the reuse of graves and the desecration of existing burials. Rapid urban growth has resulted in a shortage of land for the adequate expansion of these cemeteries.
4. **Poor Maintenance and Management:** The cemeteries lack necessary policies and regulations, management offices, record-keeping systems, drainage facilities, toilet facilities, water supply, and proper pathways. Many of these cemeteries are situated on steep slopes and receive inadequate attention from both the public and government officials.
5. **Insufficient Funding:** Cemeteries in Sokoto often receive inadequate funding and oversight from the responsible bodies. Interviews indicate that 90% of these cemeteries were established by community members. In 2019, the Sokoto State Government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, established the *Sabuwar Kurfi* Cemeteries. For the past one hundred years, all cemeteries have been managed by the Sultanate Council and *Jama'atul Nasrul Islam*.

#### 5. Conclusion

After reviewing the findings, it has been concluded that there are forty-four (44) major cemeteries located throughout the metropolis, exhibiting a clustered distribution pattern. It was observed that none of these cemeteries meet global standards for location and management. Each cemetery lacks essential facilities, and major challenges such as security issues, inadequate water supply, overcrowding, and insufficient funding

hinder their development in Sokoto City. Furthermore, the poor management of these cemeteries has not been addressed by either the public or relevant authorities, leading to anticipated environmental impacts in the future. These impacts include the deterioration of groundwater quality, soil degradation, and the potential consequences of flooding.



## 6. Recommendations

These challenges can be effectively addressed with strong political will from the government, along with appropriate financing and management. A specific budget should be allocated to cemeteries under the Ministry of Religious Affairs to upgrade infrastructure, including perimeter fencing, drainage systems, and boreholes in all cemeteries. Many governments do not recognize cemeteries as vital social infrastructure, which should include roads, health services, water supply, drainage, adequate funding, and electricity. To enhance security, measures should be

implemented, such as installing solar lighting and hiring trained security personnel through public-private partnerships. Additionally, the tourism potential has been overlooked, even though it offers a significant opportunity for revenue generation. For instance, the Hubbare cemetery in Sokoto metropolis attracts visitors from around the world, generating substantial income. By addressing these issues comprehensively, we can improve cemetery conditions, enhance their management, and generate revenue for the state government.

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