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Investigating the Social Production of Space: The Case of the University of Benin

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the social production of space at the University of Benin (UNIBEN), Nigeria, positioning the establishment of UNIBEN within the historical, economic, political, and educational frameworks of Nigeria during the 1970s. Employing a case study research methodology, the analysis focuses on the dynamics of space at UNIBEN as a social construct. Data collected through physical observation, field studies, and archival research were analysed using Henri Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space. The findings revealed ongoing infrastructure development on UNIBEN's Ugbowo campus to meet the growing demands of academic, communal, and residential needs. The study observed that UNIBEN continues to evolve, as evidenced by the National Universities Commission's (NUC) adjustments to admission and enrolment limits. This evolution is reflected in the sustained growth of lived spaces that serve as hubs for extracurricular activities for both students and staff. The proper development of such a space is crucial for enhancing students' learning experience and psychological well-being. The study concluded that UNIBEN exemplifies an educational institution where social, political, cultural, and economic relationships converge, positioning it as a socially produced space.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The social space within an institution such as a university significantly affects the mental development of its students and the overall psychology of its staff (Siramkaya and Aydın, 2014). Multitudes of students attend universities for more than just academic knowledge; they seek to enhance their social and mental well-being (Ryan, 2011). The inadequacy of a university's social environment can adversely

impact students' academic performance and mental health. According to Ryan (2011), the lack of a supportive social structure in educational settings accounts for approximately 30% of student disengagement and failure to complete courses, underscoring the critical need for universities to establish healthy social spaces. Social space is defined as both a physical and a mental concept, integral to the production of environments that cultivate social practices (Lefebvre, 1991). The quality of this social space is not merely a reflection of physical infrastructure but is also shaped by social, cultural, political, and economic factors (Jaiyeoba and Aklanoglu, 2018; Ryan, 2011). Essentially, the characteristics of a space are actively moulded by the cultural and societal norms of its inhabitants.

Further emphasising the importance of social space, it has been noted that as space is a product of social interactions, it continually transforms through active social engagements (Nasongkhla and Sintusingha, 2013). The production of space coherently illustrates how institutions and individuals create society while being simultaneously moulded by it (Giddens, 1986). Therefore, investigating an institution's social space production, particularly a university, is crucial because it will reveal the relationships among various concepts of space within the landmass, governmental policy, and the institution's academic, communal, and residential spaces. The University of Benin (UNIBEN), one of Nigeria's leading universities, has experienced significant growth and development over the past five decades since its establishment in the 1970s. However, UNIBEN's presence in the Nigerian educational landscape is not just a result of its physical campus and buildings but also a product of various social, economic, political, and educational factors that have contributed to its role as a space for learning, research, and socialisation. Although past studies have examined some aspects of UNIBEN's history or its current status (Ajagbawa, 2023; MBBS87UNIBEN, 2023; Nweke, 2023; Nwoye, 1993), there remains a lack of knowledge about its social production of space, which is crucial to its expansion.

The literature on UNIBEN (MBBS87UNIBEN, 2023; Ajayi and Ekundayo, 2008) has focused mostly on its establishment and early years, characterised by its contribution to the rapidly increasing demand for higher education in Nigeria and its relevance to nation-building activities following independence. However, it is imperative to undertake a more in-depth study on some factors, such as the historical background of UNIBEN's establishment, and how it has defined its space. Besides, as the economy of Nigeria and the policies of the government evolve in the educational sector, it is important to examine how they affect UNIBEN's space. The political atmosphere and education system in Nigeria have also contributed greatly towards the social production of space within UNIBEN. However, there is a lack of studies on how these factors have shaped UNIBEN's social production of space. It is, therefore, imperative to explore how these factors have influenced the social space of UNIBEN.

Research has been conducted in terms of the social production of institutions and society. An article by Ryan (2011) explores how space is produced to enable the participation of young people at a university and discovers that social space influences the learning patterns of students. Peltonen (2011) points out that when a university expands, the construction and redesign of its buildings also affect students. Nasongkhla and Sintusingha (2013) examine the social production of the fast growth rate of Johor Bahru city. Ye et al. (2017) also focus on the production of space in the unevenly developing province of Jiangsu. Findings from these studies indicate that the production of space is useful in understanding the developmental patterns of an institution or society. Nonetheless, these studies were carried out in other parts of the world, and references are lacking, especially in regard to the Nigerian universities, which have been underexplored.

Therefore, this paper seeks to help fill these gaps by examining the social production of space at UNIBEN. It aims to evidence the social space of UNIBEN through its history, economic, political, and educational scenes. In this way, this paper will add to a more specific description of the intricate interactions of these factors in the formation of UNIBEN's social space. In underpinning this research, the theory of production of space by Lefebvre (1991) is employed as the theoretical/ conceptual lens, which comprises spatial practice, representation of space, and representational space. The findings can be a helpful way to understand the long-term impacts of the social production of UNIBEN and its contribution to the general educational system of Nigeria.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a case study research approach, which is designed in two stages. The first stage outlines the architectural pattern of UNIBEN, whereas the second stage involves a detailed analysis of the university using Lefebvre's (1991) theory of space production. The methodological design is similar to that of past studies, including Peltonen's (2011), which utilised such an approach to examine how space has been produced in university settings. Peltonen (2011) utilised actor-network theory and the spatial theory propounded by Lefebvre to explore the architectural spaces in the university, making sense of how they impact the people who use them.

For this study, the first stage was to explore the history of the establishment of UNIBEN, its roots and its importance to the wider picture of the development of Nigeria. The second stage involved the analysis of the spaces of UNIBEN as an educational institution, using the conceptual framework of Lefebvre on the production of space. This approach was pivotal in unravelling the underlying forces that led to the establishment of UNIBEN, which were essential in the overall understanding of its infrastructural development. Moreover, Jaiyeoba and Aklanoglu (2018) stress the necessity to study the social production of the built environment and how it connects to the social, political, and economic processes that contribute to its creation and, consequently, the impact of the created environment on the areas around it.

The data collection process of this study comprised several methods, such as physical observation, field studies and examination of archival documents. Data on the establishment of UNIBEN were analysed in the context of Nigeria's historical, economic, political, and educational situations during the 1970s. Afterwards, the analysis was based on the spatial considerations of UNIBEN as a social product. This aspect entailed the landmass of UNIBEN, the NUC admission ceiling, and the dimensions pertaining to academic, communal, and residential space. Hence, Lefebvre's framework was used to analyse UNIBEN as both a social space and a product of social dynamics.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. University of Benin and Its Place in History

The historical context of Nigeria's colonialism is foundational to understanding its subsequent development, particularly in the political, educational, and economic sectors. Colonial rule by Britain established patterns that facilitated the control of Nigerian administration. Post-independence, Nigeria's economy appeared promising, notably due to its large population, which accounted for 25% of Africa's total population (Crowder, 1987; Pierce, 2006). However, this potential failed to materialise due to a series of detrimental political and economic events that hindered national growth and impacted the education system.

The economic landscape during the establishment of UNIBEN coincided with the Second National Development Plan (1970-1974). The economy primarily relied on petroleum, which accounted for 57.6% of exports and the bulk of federal revenue in 1970 (Imobighe, 2015; Aigbedion and Iyayi, 2007). Significant fluctuations in government expenditure were observed, with the ratio of government consumption and investment to GDP rising from well below 10% in 1950 to approximately 35-40% by 1980 (Rimmer, 1985). Following the civil conflict from 1967 to 1970, governmental authority became more centralised, bolstered by an oil boom in the 1970s that increased oil revenues from 1.4 billion naira in 1973 to 12.86 billion naira by 1980 (Imobighe, 2015; Walker, 2000; Watts, 1984). Despite the expansion of the government's economic role, there was no corresponding improvement in its political and administrative capabilities. Instead, it led to increased wealth and job opportunities primarily for the political elite and their affiliates (Ugwu, 2009; Forrest, 1986).

In 1970, the establishment of UNIBEN took place amidst political instability, resulting from a military decree that reorganised Nigeria's regions into 12 states between 1967 and 1976, leaving only the Mid-Western Region intact. Meanwhile, from 1967 to 1970, the Eastern Region's attempt to secede and

form the Republic of Biafra during the Civil War further complicated the sociopolitical environment (Suberu, 1991; Barbour, 1971).

Following Nigeria's independence on October 7, 1960, the university landscape expanded, beginning with the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, as the first full-fledged university. By 1962, three additional institutions emerged: University College Ibadan (which later achieved autonomy), the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), along with Ahmadu Bello University and the University of Lagos, all established in the same year. With the establishment of UNIBEN in 1970, the number of universities in Nigeria rose to six (Abdulrahman, 2013).

Based on Nigeria's economic and political situation at the time of UNIBEN's establishment, it suggests that the university was strategically founded in response to Nigeria's economic vibrancy following independence and the urgent need for rapid development to keep pace with its contemporaries. Additionally, its establishment was aimed at promoting regional balance and providing educational opportunities for the residents of the Mid-Western Region, fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging after its creation, as at least one university existed in other regions. Thus, the establishment of UNIBEN has resulted in a boom in social and economic activities in its surrounding environment.

3.2. University of Benin as a Social Production

The analysis of UNIBEN within the framework of social production necessitates an exploration of its social space from its establishment to 2024. Such exploration aligns with the various strata of social engagement and social production dynamics.

3.2.1. Spatial practices

UNIBEN comprises two campuses: Ekehuan and Ugbowo, each representing distinct physical spaces. This study primarily focuses on the Ugbowo campus, the main site housing the majority of the university's infrastructure and activities. The Ugbowo campus spans Sites 'A' and 'B': Site 'A' covers 361 hectares and Site 'B' covers 1,387 hectares. Figure 1 presents a map illustrating these sites. Notably, according to population land mass from Figure 1, both sites can accommodate up to half a million people with the implementation of a high-density development strategy (UNIBEN, 1993).

UNIBEN's extensive land area presents significant potential for growth and development. However, major constraints on this growth can be linked to adherence to NUC space regulations and funding limitations (UNIBEN, 1993). Currently, the physical space at UNIBEN has shown considerable progress, particularly noticeable in the development of site 'A' (Figure 2), while there is also a steady expansion taking place into site 'B'.

3.2.2. Representational space

NUC oversees the admissions and enrolment of students at universities in Nigeria. An enrolment ceiling of 10,000 students was allocated to UNIBEN to effectively monitor the well-being and academic performance of its students (UNIBEN, 1993). To evaluate the impact of this enrolment ceiling on the growth of UNIBEN, it is essential to consider its capacity for expansion, which stands for representational space. UNIBEN's master plan is continually assessed through its admission processes, influenced by the increasing number of prospective students eager to enrol. This demand has led to enrolment exceeding the initially projected figures. Consequently, the anticipated academic, physical, and social growth of UNIBEN can be divided into three developmental stages. For the academic year 1984/1985, the planned enrolment was 8,700, while the NUC allocated enrolment ceiling was approximately 10,000 (UNIBEN, 1993). This ceiling impacted the academic, communal, and residential spaces within UNIBEN, prompting significant physical development in infrastructure over the years to meet the evolving needs of the university. This includes the construction of administrative offices, academic buildings, and student hostels, among other facilities.

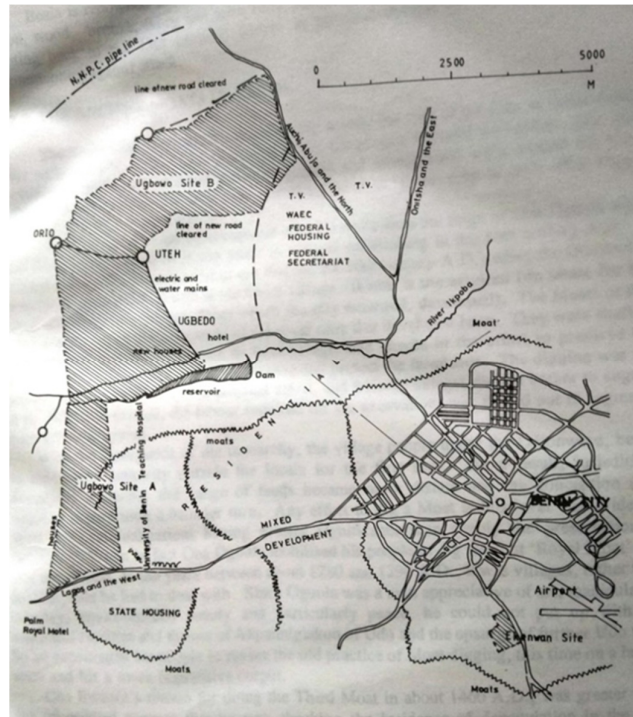


Figure 1: Showing the University of Benin Site 'A' and 'B' in relation to Benin City (Adopted from UNIBEN, 1993)

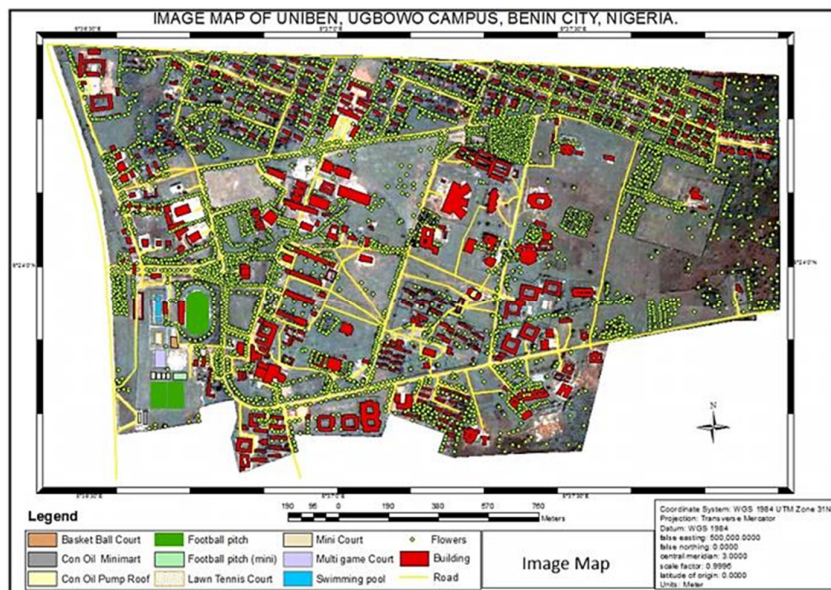


Figure 2: 2D As-Built Image map of UNIBEN Ugbowo Campus Site 'A' (Adopted from Bello and Ikuhuria, 2015)

Academically, UNIBEN started with three faculties: Engineering, Science, and the College of Medicine (MBBS87UNIBEN, 2023), which have since expanded to fifteen faculties by 2023 (Ajagbawa, 2023; Nweke, 2023). In the 1980s, there were notable shortages in usable space for the faculties of Engineering and Medicine, leading to overcrowding in the Faculty of Social Sciences, Arts, and Law

(UNIBEN, 1993). The NUC's recommended standards highlighted deficiencies in lecture theatres and classroom spaces. In response, master architects and planners suggested the construction of new lecture theatres and classrooms to accommodate the rising student population. The justification for increasing space is rooted in the disparity between the master plan's quinquennial (five-year) target of 9,202 students and the existing design capacity of 4,143 students using the academic buildings (UNIBEN, 1993).

It can be inferred that UNIBEN's representational space has been significantly developed and continues to evolve as the NUC raises its admission and enrolment ceilings. This development is evident in UNIBEN's improved image and reputation, reflecting its academic environment and achievements at both the national and international levels. Contributing factors to this positive narrative include organised academic innovations, seminars, workshops, and campus tours that have provided students with opportunities to expand their knowledge through these avenues.

3.2.3. Lived space

The development of lived space at UNIBEN has been significant in recent years. Initially, communal areas were insufficiently provided, with the auditorium serving as the primary available space (UNIBEN, 1993). This limitation can likely be attributed to the self-sufficiency of the resident and working populations on campus at the time, who did not require extensive inter-site teaching loads. However, as UNIBEN continues to grow, the number of students, staff, and facilities has concurrently increased, resulting in a substantial increase in the communal space around 2015, as shown in Figure 3. Consequently, the establishment of new infrastructure has catalysed academic activities, social interactions, and leisure, exemplified by the development of the Bukateria, HALIS Guest House, Shopping Complex, and Students' Centre. These facilities serve as essential hubs for social and extracurricular activities and have become central to campus life for both students and staff.



Figure 3: Freshers and visitors navigation aid (Adopted from UNIBEN, 2015)

In terms of residential accommodations, the NUC regulation requires that UNIBEN provide accommodation for 25% of its senior staff on campus. This necessitated the creation of 154 new units

specifically for senior staff housing, designated for site 'B'. Also, to support the increased levels of staffing, an additional 160 housing units were proposed for junior staff. Meanwhile, it was suggested that the current junior staff accommodations on site 'A' be redesigned for postgraduate students, and that a larger, more extensive junior staff housing scheme be developed on site 'B' (UNIBEN, 1993). The present-day residential space has increased tremendously as a result of the NUC increasing the accommodation ceiling of UNIBEN. This increment has enabled the hiring of more staff, which has led to the development of more housing units around UNIBEN's neighbouring areas. This development has led to improvement in property values and economic growth in areas such as Ekosodin, EDPA, Adolor, and Isiohor, among others. In general, the development of residential facilities has augmented the social spaces within UNIBEN's environment.

4. CONCLUSION

The study underscores the importance of comprehending UNIBEN as a social product through the lens of complex contextual forces such as social, political, cultural, and economic dynamics. The findings reveal that UNIBEN does more than its mandate as an educational institution, becoming an essential space that promotes the physical, psychological, and social well-being of students and staff. Using Lefebvre's conception of space, this study underscores how the dynamics of spatial practices have changed since UNIBEN was established in 1970, and how it has adapted to its evolving and expanding needs through 2024. Regarding spatial practices, the continuous development of infrastructure demonstrates that UNIBEN is committed to improving both academic and social life, and the reproduction of representation spaces is directly linked to the rising admission thresholds established by NUC. The notable expansion in lived space, which is marked by the growth of social and communal spaces, indicates that UNIBEN has recognised the value of extracurricular activities in supporting holistic student development.

The study concludes that an educational institution such as UNIBEN, where social, political, cultural, and economic relationships are intertwined, is a place as a social product. Its adequate development will continue to positively impact its students' learning psyche.

5. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest associated with this work.

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