

Makoko's Claims of Property

Introduction

“Is it possible to catch a live fish from the water and put it on dry land to survive?” A question posed by the residents of Makoko, an informal settlement situated in the densely populated Lagos State of Nigeria. In a deeply economically divided Lagos, Makoko finds itself on the verge of displacement, leaving it with a housing shortage amid gentrification. The January 2026 demolitions brought this possibility back into residents’ consciousness, with bulldozing that saw property that dated back to the 18th century being destroyed, along with five residents. The reasoning for the demolitions ranges from health and safety reasons, particularly from the Lagos State government, highlighting the settlement residing over power cables, or gentrification, displacing indigenous residents in favour of luxury residential neighbourhoods. However, its existence despite eradication efforts is certainly in question, given its claims of occupancy. Essentially asking, how does Makoko justify its existence as a property that defies the leading narrative of the community being a hazardous water slum to which it is attached? Makoko effectively answers this through three distinct forms of claim: historical, economic, and communal. All claims somehow create a complete account of Lagos’s historical settlement progression, right up to the economic disparity that plagues the city. Alongside detailing the city's outer context, this paper will highlight political theorists' views on each claim and assess their legitimacy. Theorists such as Jo Guldi, Eduardo, Jeremy Waldron, John Locke, and Edmund Burke will be highlighted in the paper.

Background

Established in the 18th century, Makoko began as a fishing village, situated on the Lagos Lagoon. The community comprises the “Oko-Agbon” and the “Ago-Egun”, with the latter tracing their ancestry to the Benin Republic. The settlement is headed by a “Baale” or a Chief, with the current Chief Raymond Olaiya, with ancestry supposedly tracing back to “Oba Akinsemoyin from the Sa’deko branch of Lagos”, establishing a linkage to Lagos’s traditional head family. The settlement did have some aspects of private property law, with the Chief’s approval needed for admittance into the community and for where to build

accommodation. However, with the establishment of British rule, modern and more familial private property laws were instituted. It began with the formal segregation of land, separating where British nationals resided from where indigenous peoples lived. The area of Ikoyi, situated on the Lagos Island, was formerly a British-dominated community that later evolved into the high-income neighbourhood it is known for. Fears that "Africans were primary hosts for malaria parasites and somehow yellow fever" were the primary argument made in favour of the establishment and exclusion of the Indigenous peoples.

This brought informal neighbourhood establishments around established communities, dominated by immigrants seeking work on the prosperous Lagos Island, which were initially classified as slums. Areas such as "Ojualegba, and Obalende", both neighbourhoods that were later formalized. It stands to reason that Makoko hopes to achieve some level of formalization that Ojualegba and Obalende gained through patience and advocacy. However, both Ojualegba and Obalende still reflect slum-like conditions, with it being a "wilderness of confused housing" where access to the water supply is difficult. Both communities can be argued in failing to maintain the property, despite legitimacy, as residents "tend to make the area return to slum conditions", an issue that Aristotle highlighted, saying that communal ownership produces less care and cooperation in property. With both the establishment of the two communities and the aftermath of its legitimacy, it creates a discussion as to whether Makoko serves as an adequate formal communal property. However, the Lagos government's answer has consistently been demolition.

January 2026 Demolitions

From late December 2025 to early January 2026, the Lagos government demolished large sections of Makoko's waterfront settlement, an unannounced excavation that resulted in five casualties, further cementing the government's rejection of the community's efforts to gain legitimacy. It is not the first Makoko demolition, as prior ones occurred in a similar, shocking manner in 2005 and 2012. However, this recent one has sparked debate over the excavation's motive, with opinions ranging widely.

The Lagos government argues it was an "essential sanitation and security effort aimed at ensuring the

residents are safe from...a high-voltage power line”. The topic of safety frequently comes up when discussing Makoko, often highlighting the chaotic, densely populated waterfront community, with residents travelling by canoe or swimming in a highly contaminated lagoon. While Makoko may be encroaching on power lines, the community struggles with flooding, a problem exacerbated by the bamboo-dominated infrastructure of the stilted makeshift homes. With the combination of a nonexistent sanitation infrastructure and constant flooding in a below-sea-level city, Makoko residents face the heavy health risks of “diarrhea, skin infections, acute respiratory infections” that will face disadvantages in relief due to the environment. With the addition of malaria, the stagnant lagoon beneath homes is a hot spot for mosquito breeding that can be dangerous to residents. However, as shown in Drew Binsky’s *Makoko* vlog, the only illness in the community clinic is Malaria, according to the Chief’s son. The Chief’s son also claimed demolitions are occurring to support luxury residential spaces.

Since 2025, Lagos has been experiencing a luxury real estate boom, with the segment “projected to retain growth in 2026”, amidst a growing economic inequality that is “forcing millions of residents to the margins” of the city. With each demolition and eviction in Makoko, residents immediately face the ever-increasing cost of living, which sees rent jumping from “N900,000 to N2.8 million”. Paying more on average due to the Naira's declining currency value, while witnessing the jarring rise of luxury residential buildings, Makoko residents will feel that the shocking demolition of their community is intended to support that rise, even as the state fails to relocate them. Additionally, active demolition will create anger, especially given the community’s long history, which they frequently cite to claim ownership.

Historical Claim

Building on the community’s history, Makoko is headed by the Oloto family, with the purchase of Makoko led by Adamo Emmanuel Oloto, at some point, leading to Chief Raymond Olaiya. In the early years of the settlement, the family invited Egun people to bring fish to sell in Makoko, where they were offered space to settle along the fringes of the Lagoon, which began the rapid population increase. From the fishermen of the Egun tribe came their families, then the Ijaye tribesmen, then foreign investors setting up “sawmills around the

waterfronts. Residents were instructed to pay royalty and rent in Makoko, as land was owned by the Oloto family. Fast forward to today: the waterfront is dominated by Egun residents, drawing on their deep aquatic history to adapt to the environment. Moving inland, the Ilaje, Yoruba, and Igbo residents live, creating a deeply diverse community in the settlement. The diversity of the community did create subcultures tied to regions of Makoko, resulting in about 30 chiefs in Makoko today, who meet monthly as a council, headed by Chief Raymond. As a Chief, he is Makoko's representative in legitimacy negotiations with the government and is responsible for admission to the community.

Makoko's historical legacy is highly important in advocating for its existence, so it is understandable that there are strict depictions of its community. There is an awareness of Makoko's constant photography depicting the settlement's slum-like conditions, which can be seen as a critique or a form of ridicule. In other words, the chief wants to contain the "poverty porn" commercialization of Makoko that it is subjected to from vloggers. The chief's view on foreign photography explains the checkpoint inspection that vloggers like Drew Binsky were put through, with residents acting as security, instructing him to check in with the chief before gaining admission to Makoko. The decision to have the chief's son accompany Drew was to ensure his coverage of Makoko reflected the region's historical legacy, highlighting its fishing past and the distinct culture of its residents, which is not present anywhere else in Lagos.

Among political theorists, the significance of tradition and inheritance strongly correlates with Edmund Burke's advocacy of traditional conservatism, as articulated in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. His passionate, disapproving sermon on the First French Revolution discussed at length the need for hierarchies and the monarchy, as well as the masses' need to accept inequality. Although not necessarily fitting for Makoko, Burke does speak to the significance of tradition in maintaining stability, famously noting that "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation". He essentially advocates a gradual reform rooted in existing traditions rather than a radical or destructive one like the French Revolution. Regarding Makoko, this aligns with a gradual, cooperative reform that sees the Lagos state government

cooperating with the chief to legitimize the community while addressing the region's safety and health risks. However, a wider awareness of Makoko's significance in Lagos's fishing economy by the Lagos government can also signal a shift towards legitimizing the community, as it is a safe haven for the lower class and a major hub for the fishing trade, which is another claim of ownership the community uses.

Economic Claim

Although a segment of Makoko's population chooses to live there for the culture, a major component of the population settles in the community due to the community's low rent, or even for the lack of alternatives. Reason dominated by the city's stark economic disparity, where yearly rent in Lagos Island costs N900,000 at the minimum, with the national minimum wage being N840,000 a year. It's a rapidly growing, out-of-control issue that a city of 22 million is struggling to contain. Coupled with the fact that "6,000 new inhabitants" from other states in the country are hoping to achieve success in the megacity. One way to combat the high cost of living is simply to live on its fringes, bordering a neighbouring state, such as Ogun State. However, a typical commuter would have to endure a four- to five-hour commute that steadily numbs their legs from sitting in a cramped bus. Another possible way to combat the cost of living is to live in an informal settlement, such as Makoko. It would make sense that the settlement's population is estimated at 234,420 as of 2016, and that it would likely have increased drastically by 2026, since simply staying for cheap accommodation is "63%" of the population's reasons for being there. A general lack of space or exclusion is a theme Lagos is familiar with, as seen during British colonial times. Where an outright inability to live in the prosperous regions, due to race or, now, in this case, wealth, results in the growth of informal settlements, they will inevitably increase around those regions. It is clear that it is a form of intentional lawbreaking to protest the city's inability to accommodate its citizens, where intentional squatting is used to acquire property while simultaneously expressing discontent with the state.

Alongside being a safe haven for the lower class in expensive Lagos, Makoko also claims ownership

through its influence on the city's fishing economy. It's without a doubt that fishing is a highly valued aspect of the settlement, with residents' livelihoods dedicated solely to the purpose of fishing. Residents advocated for the community's legitimacy, often citing the Makoko Seafood Market, located in the settlement's inland area. Vloggers, such as Lateef Oyawole, talk about the importance of the market, where “millions of naira worth of fresh seafood” are bought and traded daily. In the video, he offers a first-person view of the chaotic, bustling market, where he haggles for fresh fish, crabs, or snails, while advertising each vendor's contact details to the viewer.

Relating to John Locke, who emphasized people as property themselves, especially with their labour constituting a tool, there's a certain level of ownership in Makoko. Shown especially in the Seafood market, where fishermen and vendors use their labour in acquiring and selling goods, while creating profit for the land. In Locke's perspective, mixing one's labour with the land justifies a degree of ownership, even in the absence of formal legal recognition. Therefore, Makoko's residents, despite lacking official land rights, can be seen as actively producing value from the environment they inhabit. Furthermore, the structure of the Seafood Market itself reinforces this Lockean perspective. Vendors organize, negotiate prices, and establish long-term relationships with buyers, creating an informal yet highly functional economic system. It also implies limits: one should appropriate only what one can use without waste. The scale of operations tends to remain small and community-focused, in contrast to a large industrial system that may overexploit resources. This localized, labour-driven approach aligns more closely with Locke's original vision of property as labour-driven and without excess.

Additionally, Jo Guldi's *Long Long War* also provides a framework for understanding Makoko's economic legitimacy as an active resistance to a system designed to exclude the have-nots from urban prosperity. He argues that eviction is fundamentally inappropriate because it undermines the poor's long-term capacity to weather financial instability. Makoko's lagoon is the accumulated economic infrastructure of generations. Knowledge of where to fish, how to price, and how to distribute the catch is

not necessarily transferable to a new location. Displacement can erase the economic competence they have built through years of labour on that specific land.

There is no confirmation as to whether the Lagos government intends to use the demolished land for real estate. However, with the luxury residential sector projected to grow substantially through 2026, this raises the question of whether the displaced residents of Makoko will have sufficient housing replacement amid the growth of luxury real estate, as it could potentially fulfill Guldi's idea of colonial economic displacement, creating the chance of more informal settlements.

Communal Claim

Finally, for a community that has existed since the 18th century, the evolution of its traditions and ways of living has produced a distinct, tightly knit society that fosters its own form of ownership. Makoko has transformed from a squatting fishing settlement into a community with a defined cultural identity, one that continually adapts to and resists the pressures of an increasingly exclusive and expensive Lagos. Its communal identity itself is a claim to ownership, a key example of occupancy that Jo Guldi illustrates, talking about the resistance against flawed economic systems.

The quote "Is it possible to catch a live fish from the water and put it on dry land to survive?" is a theoretical question about the absolute life-sustaining need for Makoko, where the consequences of its absence can be compared to death. Drew Binsky's *Entering Makoko* shows a balanced view of the community, where he passes by children travelling on canoes along the lagoon, or sees them playing soccer on small plots of land. He offers a relatively peaceful account of Makoko, while still noting its complications. But despite its complications, residents do feel a sense of pride in what they do, especially fishermen and cooks, who enjoy their work despite troubles from the government. However, the vlog does show some bias, especially from the chief's son, Sunday, who tends to downplay the overall safety issues plaguing Makoko. Talking to Drew in a small bamboo house in Makoko, Sunday notes that residents are

generally content with just “getting food on the table” rather than aspiring to “build a house, or get a car”. He greatly emphasizes the communal aspect of Makoko, arguing that it is a way of life that is entirely self-sustaining and prosperous, with the only enemy being the government.

Though the infrastructure is proof of investment and care for the community, its self-sustainability is especially evident in the schools, clinics, and orphanages. There are two major schools in the community, with one located in the aquatic region and the other on land. Children clad in bright, colourful school uniforms were often shown travelling in canoes in the vlog. Schools are often built similarly to homes, with bigger wooden stilts supporting the infrastructure. Education is highly valued in Makoko, with Sunday using his newly acquired smartphone to teach kids. Additionally, there is a clinic present, although empty, as Sunday boasted. He talks about the lack of illnesses in Makoko, with any form of illness emerging only during “mosquito season” or “typhoid”, claiming residents are used to the contaminated water in the lagoon. Finally, there is an orphanage where the communal claim emerges, as highlighted by the story of Drew’s canoe sailor, Friday. Friday grew up in the Makoko orphanage, where he was raised since being found in a Lagos market. It’s an action that highlights the settlement’s communal claim as a safe haven for the lower class in expensive Lagos.

In Jo Guldi’s *Long Long War*, he references John Locke and his belief that labour being mixed with soil as a basis for ownership. Compared to Makoko, residents have long laboured in the lagoon, building settlements, fishing for seafood, and selling it at the market at small, non-excessive prices. Though unlawfully occupying the land, Makoko has made use of the land, the common land that God provided, according to Locke, and contributed to Lagos’s economy. Guldi expands on Locke’s idea of ownership, adding to the fact that occupancy “originated with the resistance of colonized inhabitants of a place”, essentially talking about those who, despite having no formal deed or title, established their right to remain through the act of living, building, and surviving on the land. Makoko’s residents fit squarely within this ideal, as they are descendants of Beninese and Togolese immigrants who arrived in the 19th century and built a

community on water that the formal city refused to accommodate. Their occupancy was a response to economic systems that would have otherwise ensured their displacement entirely.

This is where Guldi's concept becomes more analytically powerful for Makoko's case. He argues that eviction is "fundamentally inappropriate to the long-term ability of the poor to survive economic uncertainty", and Makoko's residents demonstrate exactly this. Nearly half cite affordability as their reason for living there, occupying a safe haven and cheaper settlement that the Lagos government fails to recognize. Makoko's communal infrastructure enables residents to access education or medical care that may be inaccessible in formal settings.

Where we are now

On March 24th 2026, Human rights lawyer and a representative of Makoko, Femi Falana, called on the Lagos government to respect the right to housing, protected by the "Nigerian Constitution and the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights". His advocacy creates a legally recognized, representative voice that the chiefs do not possess. Falana talks about the illegality of the Lagos state government's demolitions, which lack legal justification and fail to provide adequate compensation and alternative accommodation for affected residents. Additionally, a leader of the Nigerian Slum/Informal Settlement Federation stood in solidarity with Makoko, stressing the importance of consultation and resettlement before drastic, shocking decisions of demolitions are finalized.

Prior to that meeting, the Lagos State House of Assembly proposed reallocating residents of Makoko to a "proposed low-cost housing estate to be constructed in the Agbowo area of the state, where they can continue their fishing activities". It also proposes involving the Oloto family in the construction, recognizing them as the "original owners of the land".

There is no certainty that the proposal will be formalized, but discussions and debates will inevitably begin, signalling that, given the presence of Falana, a federation representative, and the Assembly's own proposal, Makoko's legitimacy has forced its way into formal political discourse. The proposal raises questions

about the significance Makoko has for its residents. As relocation does sever the economic and communal identity of the residents and the location. As established, the lagoon is not incidental to Makoko, as it is the basis of its labour, its market, and sense of belonging. A housing estate in Agbowo, though well-intentioned, does risk replicating the same displacement that Guldi warns of. The promise that residents “can continue their fishing activities” reflects a misunderstanding of Makoko's culture. Whether the Agbowo proposal is formalized or abandoned, Makoko’s residents remain caught between a state that acknowledges their presence yet refuses to recognize their property.

Conclusion

Mako’s claim to legitimacy is one built from centuries of history, with generations of labour and a rich community to show for it, despite a lack of state recognition. Its historical claim traces ownership through lineage and tribal establishment; its economic claim demonstrates that residents have mixed their labour with the lagoon in exactly the Lockean sense that justifies possession; and its communal claim reveals a self-sustaining society whose very existence is a form of occupancy that Guldi argues the state has no moral right to dissolve. Together, these three claims argue for Makoko’s legitimacy in the face of governmental demolitions. A destruction that is opposed by human rights lawyer Femi Falana and Makoko’s very own hundreds of thousands of residents. The residents may have a decision on their hands: relocating to Agbowo, proposed by the Lagos state government, or choosing to survive in the water away from dry land.