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**Powering Urban Development:  
Public Electricity Supply in Lagos from Independence to the Present**

This paper will draw attention to two paradoxes: the first concerns the historiography of Lagos, the most populated city in Africa and the former capital of Nigeria. As an example of rapid urban development, the demographic and strategic growth of Lagos in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was truly spectacular. From a modest fishing village it would become a global commercial and administrative hub, attracting hundreds of thousands of migrants seeking to benefit from its superior hospitals, schools, modes of transport, pipe-borne water system and electrified social housings in the process. Yet, in most recent works, the rich and sometime pioneering infrastructural history of the metropolis is either ignored or simply disparaged. Lagos, as a consequence, appears as an irrational and de-historicized city. To be sure, Lagos is a complex city where the provision of public services, ranging from healthcare to domestic electricity, has often failed and still largely fails to guarantee its inhabitants a decent life. Yet, it is everything but a new city and critical analyses of its development often fail to highlight, against clichés, the impact of major infrastructural policies by focusing almost entirely on political instability and its demographic growth. The second paradox that this paper will draw attention to therefore precisely concerns one of the most spectacular aspect of its infrastructural past and yet one of the most infamous aspect of Lagosian life, namely: the provision of public electricity. For Lagosians, for more than half a century, the subject of public electricity supply has enjoyed a particular position typifying, like no other issue, the failures of successive civilian and military governments to harness, for the common good, the paradoxically formidable potentials of the River Niger, a coal-rich soil, the largest sub-Saharan African gas and oil fields and a legacy of pioneering electrical infrastructures. How did the city, in this context, managed to propel its urban growth? How was its physical development impacted by public electrical provision? Were its generating infrastructures ever sufficient to satisfy demand? How did Lagosians managed to power their economic and domestic life? How, finally, does this history enable us to understand wider aspects of its alleged chaotic

growth? In the context of a conference entitled 'Energy *in* History', this paper will precisely attempt to both write a history of public electrical supply in Lagos and highlight the usefulness of infrastructural history in attempts to bypass prejudices concerning its historical spatial development.