

"Nigerian Road Transport Union and the Politics of Unregulated Brigandage."

BY

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Abstract

*Lagos is celebrated and unique in many ways like it is with most international cities across the world, it is perhaps not strange that Lagos experiences continuous queue of vehicles which blocks the entire road network, bringing traffic in all directions to a complete standstill. Which transportation sector is a major employer in Nigeria, therefore The National Union of Road Transport Workers is an independent Nigerian trade union that serves the interests of transport workers in the road transport sector, by calling for collective obtaining and pushing for social stability for all workers in the transport sector as defined in its constitution. The leadership is guided by the General Secretary who continues to encourage and support members and officials to make the union appears strong and vibrant. This study seek to evaluate the Nigerian road transport union and the politics of unregulated brigandage, with the objective to examine the union activities and their political roles of unregulated brigandage in Lagos state. The study adopted the explanatory method for the study. This paper conclude and recommends among other that, as part of the reformation to be carried out in the affairs of the union thus, *there should be a laid down regulation that to be qualified to hold executive position in the Union, such person must have minimum education, probably WAEC/SSCE and such person must not have been involved in violent conducts or activities, or previously convicted of any crime by a court of law*

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1.0 Introduction

The transportation sector is a major employer in Nigeria (Olubomehin, 2012). The contribution of the sector to the development of the Nigerian economy is substantial (Olubomehin, 2012; and Ajaegbo, 2013). This has positioned commercial drivers as important partners in the development of the Nigerian state. Given that not all citizens can provide themselves with a means of transportation, it is obvious that citizens and commercial drivers are necessary partners in daily activities. However, the reality all over Nigeria is that commercial vehicle drivers frequently exhibit erratic behavior (Ogunmola, 2015; Bolashodun, 2015). A major part of such a disposition is violent tendencies which manifest as an incessant unleashing of mayhem on themselves and the citizens, with devastating consequences for order, peace and security (Sulaiman, 2007; Ogunmola, 2015; Ogundele, 2015; Bolashodun, 2015). Without a doubt, commercial drivers have emerged as major instigators and perpetrators of violent conflict in most parts of Nigeria. This is congruent with the opinion of Omobowale and Fayiga (2015), who believe that drivers come from a pool of individuals who have technical skills in violence and are recruited for reasons that are mostly political, or for personal advancement.

Lagos is celebrated and unique in many ways like it is with most mega cities across the world, it is perhaps not strange that Lagos experiences continuous long queue of vehicles which blocks the entire road network, bringing traffic in all directions to a complete standstill. The Lagos State Government noted the challenges the commercial buses undergo regularly, therefore, designed bus stops for picking and dropping of passengers along their specific routes, in the early 1980's. The government decreed that all danfo and taxi drivers must be registered members of the national union of road transport workers (NURTW) and display their NURTW identify cards (which must contain their passport photographs) in their vehicles. The National Union of Road Transport Workers is an independent Nigerian trade union that serves the interests of transport workers in the road transport sector, by calling for collective obtaining and pushing for social stability for all workers in the transport sector as defined in its constitution. The Union secretariat is managed by the General Secretary who has as one of his responsibilities a continuous encouragement and

support of members and officials of the Union to ensure the Union remains strong and vibrant. The Union raises fund through several methods, but the largest of these is through support, levies and willful contribution by members. Prominent bodies among Road Transport Unions are the Road Transport Employers Association of Nigeria (RTEAN) and National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW).

Members of the NURTW are refer to as ‘national’ and are mostly drivers. However, this distinction is not as clear as it seems, as several members of the two unions are either owners of vehicles or hired drivers.

The core functions of the union is to protect the rights of workers in the transport sector. Entry into the union is voluntary, however the dues/levies collected are used to run the activities of the union and support members. The union over times have been known for controversial practices including corruption, extortion, and nepotism, according to an American-British journalist Louis in his documentary in a 2010 film. The boys who carry out the task of collection of dues or levies at motor parks or bus stops are generally called ‘area boys’. However, the meaning of *area boys* had its origins in *omo eko* (‘Lagos child’) or *omo area/omo adugbo* (a child of the community or street).

In a study by Olawale, he recounted: ‘Back then, youth are known by two ways firstly by their family name and their area. From your area, people will know the *area boy* group you belong to in case of anything bad like fight, steal or cause trouble anyplace, you are easily traced to your *area boy* group. Thus, area boys was an efficient strategy for ‘keeping the peace’ in the area.

While this category is seen as the ‘real’ area boys, imitation area boys are identified with the influx of migrants, which altered the identity and respectability of *omo area* as a social category in Lagos. This view emerged in an interview with a government official in Lagos, In contrast to area boys, *agberos* are institutionally embedded within the routine management of public transport by the NURTW. Unlike area boys who are frequently seen as deprived street urchins surviving on the social margins of the megacity, ‘real *agberos*’ by this, I mean those *agberos* who are able to appropriate the union’s name to legitimize their extortionary activities are seen as prosperous (*olowo*) and powerful (*alagbara*), with strong multiple ‘connections’ to ‘ogas [big men] at the top. As one *danfo* driver said to me: “Some of these *agberos* have been doing this work for over ten years now.



Picture 1: Lagos Head Office of the Union.

They won't leave it because it is very lucrative. Where else in this Nigeria can you *chop* [earn] over N10, 000 in one day without really working for it? Where else can this happen?" Thus, unlike the often marginalized and socially excluded *area boys*, *agberos* are, in fact, the 'included' youth who play a central role as conduits for the everyday collection of levies or if you like extortion rackets of the NURTW. In fact, studies revealed that to call an *agbero* an *area boy* was an insult because it implied that you were debasing them by implying that they were *talakas* that is, a person without an official position; a common man in the street. While *area boys* occasionally solicit tolls from operators under duress, this ordinarily happens when, in a bid to avoid the extreme traffic gridlock (which is termed 'go-slow' in Lagos), *danfo* drivers use alternative street routes. When this happens, *area boys* from that area will block the streets with sticks with inserted nails, and demand *owo ita* [street money] from the drivers.



Picture 2: Image of collection of garage money and union due with command

Owo ita is not to be confused with *owo garage* ('garage money') collected by *agberos*. Furthermore, many *agberos* distinguished between themselves (*awa we*) who represent the interests of the NURTW, and 'other touts' (*awon they*) who collect tolls from operators pretending to belong to the NURTW. The *agberos* in Oshodi unit, for instance, saw themselves as the 'official' and 'rightly connected' *agberos* (in Yoruba, *awon to lenu nbe* those who have a say) because they work every day for the NURTW on a commission-only basis; the 'others' are renounced as 'unofficial' (*awon ti o lenu nbe* those who have no say or belong to rival unions).

These are seen as the 'fake' *agberos* who collect money from operators by using the NURTW's name for criminal purposes. The above confusion partly explains why 'official' NURTW *agberos* in Lagos now increasingly wear a green and white uniform and carry with them a union identity card to 'determine those who really "belongs"' from fakes. Many *agberos* in Oshodi and Alimosho were quick to claim legitimacy through the proud show of their union card.

Moreover, the major officials in urban transport see those without uniforms and/or form of identity as 'hoodlums' who constitute a nuisance to the free-flow of traffic in Lagos. According to the Ministry of Transport: 'It is because the system has become so fluid that a lot of people have decided to take advantage of it. Some hoodlums have taken that opportunity to terrorize these

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motorists, because nobody will ask them who they are.’ The confusion between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ *agberos* is hardly surprising when we consider that even within the NURTW, there are various rival fractions (each with their own loyal sets of *agberos* and unit chairmen) jostling for ascendancy and control of public transit spaces. This confusion partly explains why many Lagosian tend to lump *all* transport workers as ‘criminals’.

Therefore, the wisdom of the motor-parks and bus stops is that resisting *agberos* may be penny-wise but pound-foolish. Many defiant operators end up being beaten (to death) and/or their *danfos*, their source of livelihood, vandalized beyond recognition. In Oshodi and Alimosho, many operators explained to me that daily demands for ‘settlements’ by *agberos* remains the biggest threat to their survival and that of their families.

In Lagos, many senior leaders of the NURTW are connected to state politicians and local government officials according to a deal that satisfies the vested interests of the actors involved and which has little to do with urban planning or the transportation system.

1.2 Leadership Tussle Within NURTW

Reports have it that the leadership of the union were between Tajudeen Agbede, lost to Baruwa. He picked the vice president slot and nothing can change that. Hence, during this period Baruwa had been the national treasurer before becoming the president-elect,” the unionist who belongs to the faction opposed to Agbede’s rule in Lagos disclosed under anonymity. The outcome of the election is reverberating in state councils, especially the South West where the two Tajudeens have the core of their supporters. Lagos is, however, feeling it differently, considering that Agbede is the incumbent chairman of the state council and Baruwa, though originally from Ogun State, where he once led the state council, had also at a time, briefly superintended Lagos council, an acting capacity. But beyond the president-elect’s and defeated candidate’s affiliation to the Lagos council, arguably the richest of all the state councils, where bloody battles are usually deployed to settle scores, the council itself is perpetually in succession crisis and the coming of Baruwa is already drawing daggers for another round of bloody confrontation for control and influence. However, history has shown that past event of the union can also be link to the killing of the former NURTW chairperson in lagos. According to the information in 2008, Saula Saka

chairman of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW), Lagos was shot repeatedly by killers at his residence, in Iyana Ipaja. Observatory expresses concern about Saula's death and fears that it might be the result of his trade union activities. Where the NURTW office is located when news filtered in about the murder of their leader. Irked by the development, members of the union were said to have gone berserk attacking people and destroying everything in sight.

1.3 NURTW and Politics

The activities of NURTW remain largely unregulated. The union enjoys a murky relationship with the state government. Though the levies they charge are theoretically meant to maintain motor parks, the majority of those motor parks remain in terrible state of disrepair. The NURTW's shady autonomy is protected by political interests. Some groups of the organisation are loyal to the current All Progressives Congress government, others to the People's Democratic Party (PDP) or other parties. Fights between rival factions are common. During this election periods the NURTW acts as a kind of support base for political parties. They're influential and the youths that work for them are like an important human capital for them. So even when the government wants to regulate them further, during election periods, it gets relaxed again." In other words, they help bring in votes. They embezzle the money from levies to pay young men to be particularly zealous at election time: canvassing for votes, attending rallies, tampering with election procedures and outright intimidation.



Picture 3: showing the fight between two rival body in support of political party

Foregrounding urban public transport as a terrain of political action and money-making, this paper, discovers the role and politics of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) and their involvement in Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital, located in the South-West of the country. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which political agency is being exercised at different levels (that is, both within the NURTW and towards workers and the state), the manner in which the union-state relationship is weaponized by both parties, and how the union is drawn into patronage networks that redistribute resources provided by the state. The analysis extends to the insecurities that road transport workers face on a daily basis in their struggle to navigate the extortionate power of the union-state alliance, and make ends meet. However, both unions are known for engaging in violence and militancy amongst themselves and towards members of the public.

The incessant conflicts include the politics of succession in motor parks: intra-union disagreements, inter-union rivalries, state instigation, political patronages, and disagreements over fare hikes, loading arrangements and the movement or relocation of parks.

With reference to Nigeria, there have been some attempts to analyse the phenomenon of commercial driver-induced conflicts in Nigeria. A review of the literature clearly shows that both NURTW and RTEAN basically emerged as trade unions to champion the cause of their respective members in terms of welfare and the promotion of the status of commercial driving as a profession in Nigeria (Oladipo, 2012). This is in line with the philosophy of most trade unions within the civil society discourse. However, over the years, violence has become so ingrained in the unions that major defining characteristics of commercial drivers in Nigeria are belligerency and unnecessary rivalries, meaning that the motor parks have become epicenters of disorderliness. The transformation from the humble background of trade unionism to violent groupings is, therefore, a clear demonstration of what Ikelegbe described as the perverse manifestation of civil society in Nigeria. Ikelegbe demonstrated how civil society, of which the drivers' union is a member, is instrumental in the challenges

of democratization as well as the state of instability and insecurity in the country, due largely to the antediluvian consequences of their negative activism (Ikelegbe, 2001).

Contributing largely to the travesty, in the case of the drivers, is the intrusion of political contractors into the sphere of motor parks. This intrusion manifests in the courting of the unions' leaderships for political benefits. The invasion of the motor park space works in a number of ways: it makes the transport workers a force to be reckoned with in the political sphere; it turns the motor parks into spots for political mobilization to the extent that the transport workers constitute a major factor in political campaigns; the transporters become ready tools during election time as bodyguards to politicians, intimidators of political opponents, snatchers of ballot boxes or outright fomenters of trouble to achieve election cancellations. Using Ibadan as a case study, Isaac Albert (2007), Omobowale and Olutayo (2007), and Gbemisola Animasahun (2013) show the political class as engaging in an orgy of violence perpetrated by two major factions within the fold of leadership of the State's NURTW, in the quest for political succession and supremacy.

In Lagos, the rivalry is usually as a result of control of parks. Sometimes it is between factional leaders within the NURTW, while in some instances it is between the officials of the NURTW and political agents/contractors who are beneficiaries of Government undue interference in management of the parks. Most times such clashes can be very brutal. One of the measures put in place to regulate the operations of the transport unions is the introduction of uniforms. Though the NURTW men are meant to wear green and white uniforms, few do. Many are "area boys" – Lagos slang for hoodlums. If drivers fail to pay levies, the aggression of the NURTW men can be almost unimaginable and sometimes amusing. They feign threats to pull off the wipers, or rip out the rubber window seals or physically descend on the driver or conductor as the case may be. At Oshodi bus station for instance, it's a fine line between banter and abuse.

2.0 Events of the Union and Their Electioneering Process.

"Eight years ago, the two leading contenders were the then chairman, Rafiu Olorunwa and Musiliu Oluomo a.k.a MC Oluomo (Oluomo is actually an alias not real name) and they both belonged to the ruling party but an outbreak of violence in many parts of the state changed everything.

Eventually, Agbede was made to head the caretaker committee and that was the end. A similar thing may happen again this year. “The fact is that there is nothing like the Agbede/Baruwa group in Lagos. Instead, what we had was the Agbede group on one side and Oluomo, Sego and other people who felt cheated by Agbede on the other side. Though Baruwa was once a caretaker committee chairman in Lagos State through an arrangement made in Abuja, he never had any serious influence within the political class in Lagos.” Less than four days after the Abuja arrangement, one person was reportedly killed as the two emerging groups in Lagos NURTW clashed in the Ijora area of the state. The deceased person, Yusuf Rilwan and other members were reportedly returning from the state council office in Agege when a clash ensued. Both groups pointed fingers at each other over the clash which created serious panic around Ijora and neighboring communities. The police later arrested nine people in connection with the incident. That was the last that was heard of the matter.

The chairman of the Tricycle Owners Association of Nigeria, Oyetakin, popularly known as School Boy, who escaped the clash narrated the deadly clash this way; “On Friday, our members who belong to the Baruwa group, led by MC Oluomo and Sulaiman Ikudeleti, organized an open party at the main road, blocked the main road and caused heavy traffic in Ijora Badia while celebrating their winning. “Our leader, Tajudeen Agbede, had earlier called us that our team had lost the president position and as a result, we should remain peaceful in our various branches in the state and that if anybody wants to make an attempt to fight us, we should report such to the police. “Our members did not intend to attack them based on the instruction given to us by our leader to remain peaceful. On that fateful Friday, our members were at the state NURTW secretariat in Oko-Oba, Agege, where we organized our own programme.” Lukmon Alabi, popularly known as Luku Mobil, who was accused of spearheading the Ijora attack, however, denied any involvement in the clash, insisting that Oyetakin was just a talebearer and was not even anywhere near the venue of the party as of the time of the clash.

According to him, “it was all lies. Oyetakin was not even there when the clash started. I don’t have any reason to fight with anybody. The police are in a better position to say the truth. They caught some people with guns and other dangerous weapons. “I drove past that place on the day of the incident and I did not stay at the venue of the party. I only greeted some of my people there and I

drove away. It was later that I heard of the clash.” The union member also condemned the reports of factions in the Lagos council, saying “there is no group in our union. We are all members of the NURTW. Agbede and Baruwa contested for the election and Baruwa won. We don’t belong to the new president’s group and we are not planning to take over parks.” Calls to Agbede’s mobile line to seek his response to the rising tension and bloody confrontations between his loyalists and the opposition were not picked. Area likes Ijora, Badia, Apapa residents fleeing, residents of this area of the state, felt concerned about the rising cases of violence among NURTW members in the area, have been calling for solution to avert forthcoming disaster. One interesting feature about the means of identification of most prominent NURTW chieftains is that they always go by aliases. Only a few of them are known by their real names. They often go by such names as: MC Oluomo, Sego, Luku Mobil, School boy, Kunle Poly, Tokyo etc. There's no doubt that some of these fellows wield so much powers within the political settings and among the top security hierarchy.



Picture 4: Image of the present Lagos Chairman been reacued by his supporters during a fight between rival groups at an Election rally earlier in the year (2019).

3.0 Conclusion

This study recommends as part of the reformation to be carried out in the affairs of the union thus:

- a. There should be a laid down regulation, that, to be qualified to hold executive position in the Union, such person must have minimum education, probably WAEC/SSCE certificate;
- b. A prospective Union leader must not have been involved in violent conducts or activities, or previously convicted of any crime by a court of law;
- c. Government should stop patronising the Union officials for political gains including using them as political thugs during elections;
- d. Any act of brigandage, disturbance of public peace or display or brandishing of weaponry in all motor parks should be outlawed;
- e. Strict enforcement of laws against drug abuses at motor parks and garages.
- f. A unified code of conduct should be introduced for transport workers in all motor parks, bus stops and garages; and
- g. Regular seminars on public relation, civilised conduct and peaceful resolution of conflicts should be instituted in the management policy of all motor parks.

There is no doubt that if Government and political leaders at all levels reduce their patronage of the union leaders and their followers, and the aforementioned proposals are strictly implemented, our society will begin to experience lesser brigandage and wanton killings, maimings, and destruction of properties that is often associated with the activities of the Transport Unions.

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