‘NO CONDITION IS PERMANENT’: Informal Transport Workers and Labour Precarity in Africa’s Largest City

DANIEL E. AGBIBOA

Abstract

This article pieces together an understanding of everyday life grounded in the social imagination and everyday experiences of informal transport workers (ITWs) in Lagos, Nigeria’s commercial capital and Africa’s largest city. The article has two core objectives: to elevate the everyday practices of ITWs to the status of a critical concept in order to advance a sociology of everyday life, and to ground these practices on the precarious rhythm of everyday life as lived by people with the experience of radical uncertainty. By using crisis as a context of action and meaning, the article shows how uncertainty serves as a social resource that ITWs leverage to negotiate the precarious nature of everyday life and to make the most of their time. This foregrounding of uncertainty enhances our hitherto tenuous grasp of labour precarity, informal agency and the everyday struggle for survival in Africa’s informal transport sector.

Introduction

This article pieces together an understanding of everyday life grounded in the popular imagination and lived realities of informal transport workers (ITWs) in Lagos, Nigeria’s commercial nerve centre and Africa’s largest city. Its core aims are twofold: first, to elevate the routine experiences of ITWs to the status of a critical concept in order to advance an everyday life sociology, and, secondly, to ground these experiences on the precarious nature and rhythm of daily life. The emphasis on uncertainty\(^1\) as a vital aspect of informal urban transport illuminates our understanding of ‘the power of the unforeseen and of the unfolding’ (Mbembé and Nuttall, 2004: 349) and underlines people’s strenuous efforts to impose order and predictability on their day-to-day lives. In the article I use ‘crisis as context’ (Vigh, 2008)\(^2\) in passenger transport to illustrate how uncertainty serves as a social resource that ITWs leverage to navigate the everyday and to transform its ‘spaces of incapacity and marginality’ (Simone, 2001: 24) into ‘hope’ (Harvey, 2000), ‘vigilance’ (Pratten, 2006) and ‘active waiting’ (Cooper and Pratten, 2015). By foregrounding uncertainty in this way, my aim is to advance our rather tenuous grasp of informal agency, labour precarity and the everyday struggles for economic survival of Africa’s ITWs.

The article is divided into five sections. In section one, I discuss my methodological approach to the study. The discussion extends to ‘visual culture’ as a primary site of resistance. Section two engages with competing narratives of Lagos, particularly

---

1 Uncertainty is conceived in this study as ‘the lived experience of a pervasive sense of vulnerability, anxiety, hope and possibility mediated through the material assemblages that underpin, saturate and sustain everyday life’ (Cooper and Pratten, 2015: 1).

2 Crisis becomes context when ‘the troublesome events, with their convulsions and ramifications, acquire an air of social and existential constancy. When crisis becomes context it gains an oxymoronic permanence. No longer temporary it becomes instead a state of disordered order; a fact of social life and a point of departure for social rules, norms and meaning. Rather than seeing processes implode and disintegrate, what we see in situations of prolonged crisis is that the state of emergency becomes a “situation of emergence” whereby social life is made sense of and unfolds within a terrain of risk and uncertainty’ (Vigh, 2008: 11, 13; see also Taussig, 1992).
how Lagosians imagine the city they call ‘home’ (eko ile). In section three, I examine the risks and uncertainties associated with passenger transport in Lagos. Section four focuses on the precariousness of owning a commercial minibus-taxi (danfo). In the conclusion I recapitulate the important contributions of the article and underscore the temporality of hope and positive expectancy for urban survival.

**Embodied ethnography**

The article draws on the spatial theorizing of Henri Lefebvre (1996), who developed a sophisticated theoretical account of how urban spaces are relentlessly constructed at the intersection of ‘representations of space’ (by architects, planners and developers), ‘spaces of representation’ (the vast symbolic associations we link with particular kinds of spaces) and ‘spatial practice’ (the material, concrete, tangible dimensions of social activity and interactions) (see also Pieterse, 2011: 13). Lefebvre’s spatial theory is a key addition to our understanding of how cities embody immense heterogeneity and animate ‘various networks of communication and flows’ (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 2). Further insights are derived from the French Jesuit scholar Michel de Certeau, who argues that ordinary people’s everyday practices, particularly the tactics they deploy to traverse everyday life, are crucial to understanding the invention of space. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau (1984: 37) argues that tactics ‘[depend] on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized on the wing ... it must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities’.

This article results from eight months of ethnographic fieldwork (from 2014 to 2015) conducted in two local government areas (LGAs) in Lagos State: Oshodi and Alimosho (see Figure 1). Oshodi is a central hub for both intra-city and intercity transport. Prior to undergoing a radical facelift in 2007, it was considered the ‘most radical urban condition on the planet’ (Probst, 2012: 139). This is the place described by Nigerian architect David Aradeon (1997: 51) as ‘the interface between time and the interchange between destinations; the meeting space for people between places, the living stage where a collage of scenes are acted and played out without a script’. With a population of close to two million, Alimosho, where I spent my formative years, is the largest LGA in Lagos. My approach draws from a methodological tradition that combines fieldwork in multiple locations, visual culture and a microdimensional analysis of everyday social life. Unlike the detached observer of modern city life—the *flaneur* (Buck-Moss, 1986)—I entered into the workaday world of ITWs by doing a two-month stint as a danfo conductor on the busy Oshodi–Ikotun–Egbeda routes. This ‘learning by doing’ is in line with the ‘apprenticeship’ research method or embodied ethnographic practice, which emphasizes ‘the participant dimension of fieldwork’ (Downey et al., 2015: 184), making ethnographers ‘observing participants’ more than ‘participant observers’ (Woodward, 2008). As Thomas Fibiger (2010: 30) pointedly notes, ‘the anthropologist’s analyses are constantly shaped in collaboration with informants in the field by discussing situations and events while observing these informants and speaking with them about the observations’.

In contrast to Meghan E. Ference (2013), a white female researcher from Washington University in St. Louis, who did a stint as a conductor as part of her doctoral study of the *matatu* industry in Nairobi, I was not so easily noticed as an ‘apprentice’ and an ‘outsider within’ owing to my appearance (that is, my skin colour), accent and fluency in the commonly spoken languages on the streets of Lagos: Yoruba and Pidgin. When unobserved, participant observation is ‘the most authentic and reliable ethnographic method’ (Kusenbach, 2003: 461) because it provides access to ‘naturally’ unfolding events (Becker, 1958). During my ‘go-alongs’ (Kusenbach, 2003) as a danfo conductor,

---

3 Danfos are very much a phenomenon of the developing world. Known as tro tro in Accra, daladala in Dar es Salaam and *matatu* in Nairobi, they may be found in many cities in the developing world where there is a vibrant informal economy and a growing public transport need.
I observed firsthand the sheer amount in (non-)receipted payments that ITWs had to make per trip to sets of marauding touts and trigger-happy traffic police on the road, as well as the stream of ‘bad blood’ and violence that attended these exchanges. When I was not inside the motor parks (or garages, as they are called in Lagos), I spent my time ‘hanging out’ and ‘hanging about’ (Woodward, 2008) with Lagosians and traders by the roadside as ‘a venue for conversation, a place to wait, to watch, to talk’ (Weiss, 2005: 109). With my digital camera, which doubled as a sound recorder, I was able to capture the hyper-visuality and soundscape of Lagos life, including the colourful and wry danfo slogans and tableaux, the syncopated cries of street hawkers, the yelling of danfo conductors calling out their respective destinations and jostling for passengers, the impatient bleats of car horns (there seems to be a competition as to which car has the loudest horn) and the hordes of people in ceaseless motion. These rhythms enfold social relations and interactions into the everyday ritual of Lagos life, transforming its spatiality into ‘a place, a text, a photograph, to be read’ (Magee, 2007: 113).

Given the intense visual qualities of the African cityscape, it is surprising that many studies tend to ignore the visual aspect of urban spatiality—that is, ‘the ocular as well as the tactile and emotional qualities of the urban’ (Clammer, 2014: 66). Yet, the visuality of the city can tell us something about the nature of space, how it is navigated, and the bodies that occupy it. Thus, to understand how ITWs imagine and traverse their transit spaces, I looked interpretatively at the slogans that are prominently displayed on the rickety bodies of the danfos. The prevalence of vehicle slogans across urban Africa makes them a part of the occupational subculture of passenger transport and the intense visual qualities of the city (Date-Bah, 1980). As one commuter recounts: ‘I can’t even imagine Lagos without our yellow danfos and their colourful slogans’.

Given the intense visual qualities of the African cityscape, it is surprising that many studies tend to ignore the visual aspect of urban spatiality—that is, ‘the ocular as well as the tactile and emotional qualities of the urban’ (Clammer, 2014: 66). Yet, the visuality of the city can tell us something about the nature of space, how it is navigated, and the bodies that occupy it. Thus, to understand how ITWs imagine and traverse their transit spaces, I looked interpretatively at the slogans that are prominently displayed on the rickety bodies of the danfos. The prevalence of vehicle slogans across urban Africa makes them a part of the occupational subculture of passenger transport and the intense visual qualities of the city (Date-Bah, 1980). As one commuter recounts: ‘I can’t even imagine Lagos without our yellow danfos and their colourful slogans’.

**FIGURE 1** Map of Lagos State, Nigeria (source: https://fluswikien.hfwu.de/index.php?title=File:LAGOS_STATE_MAP.jpg). Permission to reproduce this map granted under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License.
During my fieldwork, I collected 312 danfo slogans, which I analysed for content through informal interactions with ITWs, especially driver-owners. I also conducted several interviews with key officials in the Vehicle Inspection Service (VIS) and the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW). Some of the danfo slogans were so cryptic that I could uncover ‘the text within the text’ (Lotman, 1974: 378) only by directly asking the operators about them. However, in some cases I was unable to directly ask the operators about their choice of slogans since I collected them from moving danfos. While this may go down as a study limitation, it is important to note that lexico-semantic meanings are fluid and not strictly monolithic: ‘texts generate “surplus”: meanings that go beyond, and may subvert, the purported intentions of the work’ (Barber, 1987: 4). So conceived, I derived intersubjective meaning from the interpretations offered by other ITWs in Lagos.

Across urban Africa, the vehicle slogans used reflect various sentiments, including apprehension, boastfulness, personal identities, role models, desires and hopes, financial anxiety, praise of generous benefactors or patrons, fear of disappointment, joy about success, spiritual (in)security, pious platitudes and waggish quips (Date-Bah, 1980; Lawuyi, 1988; Osinulu, 2008; Klaeger, 2013). These sentiments reinforce Kyei and Schreckenbach’s (1975: 1) contention that lorry slogans in Ghana ‘sometimes relate to some personal experience of the driver or the owner of the truck, such as for instance a happy turn in his life, events or happenings on the road; they may derive from the fact of a gift (Good Mother or Good Uncle); or they may relate to a personal idol (like “Samson”); or they may be an expression of the driver’s relationship to God’. Thus, an interpretative approach to vehicle slogans can tell us something about the oft-ignored affective characteristics of automobile cultures (Sheller, 2004; Stewart, 2007). As I show later, danfo slogans provide a window into the desires and dreams of ITWs. Indeed, in line with Barbara Hepworth (1996: 376), I contend that slogans may be imagined as conduits for ‘projecting our sensibility to the whole world’.

Yet, slogans may contradict the very sensibility they project. While I was walking the streets of Lagos I was regularly struck by the wry slogans on rickety danfos, such as ‘No Cause for Alarm’ or ‘Just Relax’. These curious slogans mirror the uncertain landscape of passenger transport, in which meanings are ‘simultaneously represented, contested, and invested’ (Foucault, 1984: 3). Moreover, vehicle slogans furnish us with a ‘multi-nodal’ (Quayson, 2014) and ‘entextualised’ (Barber, 2007: 22) language to represent urban spatiality in Africa. Barber (ibid) employs ‘entextualisation’ as a way of describing the associations between texts, persons and civic publics in various urban contexts. Accordingly, the morphologies of vehicle slogans help to ‘focalise several layered backgrounds against a foreground that is produced as an invitation to interpretation’ (Quayson, 2014: 144). In terms of structure, most danfo slogans I registered are short and pithy (such as ‘Let them Say’ or ‘Mind Your Business!’) and embedded in traditional aphorisms (such as ‘ise loogun ise’—work cures poverty), religious texts (‘Blood of the Lamb’) or local slangs (‘No shaking’—feel no fear).

The visual as a site of resistance
Since Walter Benjamin’s celebrated Arcades Project, it has been evident that cityscapes are subjects of the gaze. The city not only constructs itself to be seen, but also speaks to its dwellers through what it makes them see, through its visual culture (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Oha, 2001; Magee, 2007). This is evident, for example, in the use of religious images in Lagos. Ruth Marshall (2015: 2) observes that it is ‘impossible to move through [Lagos] without being bombarded by a multitude of posters, billboards and banners advertising churches, services, prayer meetings, revivals, miracles …’. As a primary site of ‘resistance’ (Mieke, 2003; Norman, 2003), visual culture embodies the ‘silent encroachment of the ordinary’ (Bayat, 2009: 45). Consider, for example, the
creative resistance associated with danfo painting and signage: although ITWs generally stick to the official state requirements of yellow and black paint for intra-city transport, they are finding ways to encroach on this system through their mode of compliance or what Osinulu calls ‘subversion by reinterpretation’:

One might find that one of the required black strips is thinner and shorter than the other and that the painter has made inscriptions within the black strip ... The state has legislated conformity and anonymity, but the [danfo] painters have carved out an identity for themselves within the interstitial spaces of the legislation (Osinulu, 2008: 50).

Question 18 of the ‘45 Frequently Asked Questions’ on the Lagos State Road Traffic Law (LSRTL) of 2012 clearly stipulates: ‘Am I permitted to paint anything I like on my commuter bus or taxi?’ The answer reads: ‘Except as prescribed by the Motor Vehicle Administration Agency [MVAA] and the Lagos State Signage and Advert Agency [LSSAA], the use of marks, slogans, stickers, painting, photos etc. on commercial vehicles is prohibited’ (LSRTL, 2012: 7). What this suggests is that the generalized and banalized use of slogans by ITWs flouts the official stipulations of the MVAA and LSSAA. Yet, by superimposing their own ordinary meaning, ITWs in Lagos have developed their own tactics for ‘avoiding, taunting, attacking, undermining, enduring, hindering and mocking the everyday exercise of power’ (Pile, 1997: 14).

The aesthetics of chaos
At the risk of this analysis being construed as overly schematic, two competing narratives have generally informed ways of seeing Lagos. There is the predominant narrative that imagines Lagos as a ne plus ultra of urban ‘apocalypse’ (Probst, 2012) and a primary site of ‘intensifying and broadening impoverishment and rampant informality’ (Simone, 2001: 16). The city’s ‘crime, pollution, and overcrowding make it the cliché par excellence of Third World urban dysfunction’ (Kaplan, 2000: 15). This lurid narrative has been criticized by Mbembé and Nuttall (2004: 353), who denounce ways of reading African cities that are still directed by ‘the meta-narrative of urbanisation, modernisation and crisis ... Forgetting that the city also operates as a site of fantasy, desire, and imagination’. For Mbembé and Nuttall (ibid.), the fabric of the African city has been imagined as ‘a structure in need of radical transformation and only rarely as an expression of aesthetic vision’. Elsewhere, Mbembé (2001: 2) argues that ‘there is no single way of “seeing” Africa ... Here, as in other spheres of contemporary African life, plurality is the norm’.

An alternative narrative has since emerged: the ‘aesthetic of chaos’ (Gandy, 2005), which celebrates the coping mechanisms and creative forms of self-organization of the urban poor and dispossessed whose remarkable ability to exist is interpreted as defying common-sense logic and constricted Western ideas of order (Packer, 2006: 66; Haynes, 2007). Such narrative is exemplified by Rem Koolhaas, the renowned urban architect leading the Harvard City Project. Koolhaas (2001) and his team of researchers argued that the chaos of Lagos reveals a hidden order, lending support to Hect and Simone’s ‘invisible governance ... that maintains competing agendas and aspirations in some kind of functional and parallel existence’ (Hect and Simone, 1994: 13):

What is now fascinating is how, with some level of self-organisation, there is a strange combination of extreme underdevelopment and development. And what particularly amazes me is how the kinds of infrastructure of modernity in the city trigger off all sorts of unpredictable improvised conditions, so that there is a kind of mutual dependency that I’ve never seen anywhere else (Koolhaas, in Probst, 2012).
Lagos, with its massive traffic gridlocks (or ‘go-slows’, as Lagosians tend to say) creating opportunities for informal markets on public roads and highways, is not ‘a kind of backward situation’, but rather ‘an announcement of the future’, argues Koolhaas (cited in Packer, 2006: 66). Thus, for Koolhaas (2001: 652), Lagos represents a ‘developed, extreme, paradigmatic case study of a city at the forefront of globalizing modernity. That is to say that Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos’. Koolhaas’s depiction of Lagos is problematic on more than one count. First, it ignores the suffering of the urban poor and the predation of the informal economy. Secondly, it overestimates the extent to which coping with adversity is vitalizing, rather than depressing (Gandy, 2005). According to Laurent Fourchard (2012: 77), Koolhaas underestimated the ongoing criticism by Lagosians of their own city, especially ‘the corruption of its elite and of the permanent failure of the mass public transport system’. In his fascination with a city that works, Koolhaas and his team overlooked the fact that this kind of city works predominantly for those who are able to extract resources, in particular resources from the appropriation of its public spaces. This becomes all the more evident when we consider the ways in which ordinary Lagosians imagine their own city.

—

‘This is Lagos’

‘This is Lagos’ is a popular saying directed at newcomers to Lagos (also known as JJCs—short for ‘Johnny Just Come’) to remind them that eko lo wa (you are in Lagos)—a place where you must ‘shine your eyes’ and ‘sharpen your ears’ to get by, or risk becoming easy prey to ‘deception’ (Smith, 2007) and ‘illusion’ (Apter, 2005). The need to ‘shine your eyes’ reclaims the quintessential nature of African cities which, as AbdouMaliq Simone (2001: 18) points out, ‘often appear to act in an incessant state of preparedness. They keep residents in an almost permanent state of changing gears and focus, if not location’. Anecdotal evidence suggests that ‘This is Lagos’ is an expression from an old Nigerian joke:

It used to be said that whereas other Nigerian cities receive visitors convivially with signs such as ‘Welcome to Jos’ or ‘Welcome to Kaduna’, visitors are not welcome to Lagos. Instead a terse notice informs you ominously, ‘This is Lagos’. To confirm that you are now in a different clime, the familiar but unwelcome stench of refuse wafts in through open windows to assail the nostrils of those coming in by road … This is clearly not a city for the faint hearted (Ngwodo, 2005).

During fieldwork, I asked several ITWs about the meaning of ‘This is Lagos’. Below are two voices from the field that summarize recurrent views:

‘This is Lagos’ means that everybody has to be careful. Because in this Lagos brothers don’t know brothers, sisters don’t know sisters, uncle don’t know uncle. Anything you can do and get money you will do it. That’s why they say ‘This is Lagos’. No one cares whether you are dying or living. Everybody de vex. Everybody de frustrate. Even though you are from the same papa and the same mama they don’t want to know if you are living. If you like you live, if you don’t like you die, all for your own pocket (danfo driver, 12 November 2014).

‘This is Lagos’ means that this is a land of nobody, a land of no mercy, a land of no trust. It is a jungle. You have to be alert all time. No dulling my brother. But all those things is cheating. It is not a language of a child of God. It is not a language of love. My brother, Lagos life is war! It is full of suffering, like hell. At
times I start to cry when I look at the situation because we are living in a loveless place (danfo conductor, 9 January 2015).

The above perspectives reinforce Mbembé’s (2006: 153) image of the African city as a ‘figure of brutality’ and ‘archive of abjection’. This image underpins Mbembé’s prototype of the ‘common man’ in urban Africa:

Vulgarly carved from day to day by the harshness of the times, brutalized by the police, the search for subsistence, the fear of having nothing and the obsessive dread of famine ... Life itself [for the ‘common man’] is nothing but a permanent struggle. That is the reason why, here, the ordinary man defines himself as a ‘fighter’. To the question: ‘what is your occupation?’, he will reply: ‘I get by’ (Mbembé, 1997: 157).

Nowhere are the brutal characteristics of routine life and the ‘never-say-die’ attitude of city dwellers more visible than in passenger transport and its attendant micropolitics.

‘Arrive home or mortuary?’

Although the population of Lagos is over 16 million, its transport infrastructure can only support around 6 million (World Bank, 2011). Data from the Lagos transport authorities show that roughly 83,000 public buses operated in Lagos in 2008, accounting for 69% of motorized trips (LAMATA, 2009). Every professional commercial driver in Lagos is affiliated with the NURTW, the most politicized and violent union in Nigeria (Albert, 2007; Fourchard, 2010). The NURTW—through its hardcore ticket officials, the agberos—reaps huge revenues from illegal taxes imposed on ITWs for the use of motor parks and bus terminals across the state. It is important to clarify that the appropriation of motor parks by agberos and the collection of taxes there is illegal and usurps the constitutional mandate given to local governments as specified in Section 7, Fourth Schedule, of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution (Tribunal of Inquiry, 2012). As the former Lagos Commissioner for Transport, Kayode Opeifa, declared:

Henceforth, union activities are no longer allowed at our parks. They are to relocate to offices from where they will operate just like the National Union of Teachers and the National Union of Journalists. Also, no union member must be seen collecting money on the road. We recognize the right for them to associate but we believe that the motor-parks should be made easy for those who want to carry out their legitimate business of commuting in the state ... no union member should be seen on the road collecting money from transport operators as it is illegal (The Guardian, 2015).

The various taxes agberos demand from ITWs are numerous and, based on the notes in my 2014–2015 field diary, include ‘owo union’ (union money), ‘owo booking’ (booking fee), ‘owo loading’ (loading fee), ‘owo dropping’ (dropping fee), ‘owo weekend’ (money for weekend), ‘owo sanitation’ (money for sanitation), ‘owo security’ (money for security), ‘LASTMA money’ (LASTMA money, that is, money payable to the Lagos State Transport Management Authority), ‘owo askari’ (police money), ‘owo aro’ (money

---

4 Violence is part of a larger domination and extortion strategy by the NURTW (through the agberos) over passenger transport in Lagos (Agbiboa, 2016a).

5 This is not the first time that the Lagos State Government has banned the activities of the NURTW and its agberos in motor parks, or that the question of ‘control’ of motor parks has surfaced. Fed up with the violent activities and internal clashes of the NURTW, Fashola’s predecessor, Governor Bola Ahmed Tinubu (1999-2007), took a landmark decision in 2002 to ban the NURTW from operating in motor parks across Lagos State. Tinubu’s government argued that the NURTW did not have constitutional backing for some of the powers they claimed for themselves (see Albert, 2007: 135).
for morning), ‘owo osan’ (money for afternoon), ‘owo iro’le’ (money for evening) and ‘owo ale’ (money for night). Despite its extra-legal nature, tax collection in motor parks, bus terminals and roads across Lagos persists. Such payments are unpopular among Lagosians because they increase, mutatis mutandis, transportation costs and affect the overall quality of transport for commuters, operators and owners. However, the ban on the activities of agberos in motor parks and bus stops across Lagos lacked any gravitas, reinforcing the huge gap between the law and law enforcement in many African countries (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006). As one danfo driver in Lagos recounts:

When we heard that the activities of agberos have been banned by Governor Fashola, I was relieved that they have left the road for good, but within one month, the agberos soon found their way back to motor parks and bus stops. Out of the N10,000 I make daily, N6,000 goes to the owner of the bus, and I end up giving about N3,000 to these touts who collect money with various names. At the end of the day, I share the little that is left with my conductor. We are not happy about this situation, and government should not only make orders, they should also ensure compliance (The Guardian, 2015).

Many of the ITWs I spoke to during fieldwork believe that the Lagos State Government lacks the will to enforce a ban on touts partly because the NURTW acts as a provider of thugs (recruited among its agberos and rag-tag operators) to support the governor during his electoral campaigns (Albert, 2007; Agbiboa, 2016a), in exchange for a high degree of autonomy to levy taxes in motor parks and at bus stops (Fourchard, 2012: 51). I encountered this view repeatedly during my fieldwork, conducted at a time when preparations for the Nigerian general elections in 2015 were approaching boiling point. Another issue relates to the fact that local authorities that should check the illegal activities of agberos in transit spaces (such as the Nigerian police force and LASTMA) have all been ‘settled’ or ‘captured’ by the touts who collect various taxes on their behalf each day (Agbiboa, 2016b). As one LASTMA official said to me rather bluntly: ‘Who bites the fingers that feed them?’

Renowned worldwide as an ‘action governor’ (Vanguard, 2014) who ‘tamed’ Lagos (The Telegraph, 2014), Governor Fashola failed miserably by not acting decisively against the ‘untamed monsters’ (The Guardian, 2015) of Lagos’s roads—the agberos. His failure has only amplified the fear of agberos among ITWs, fuelling views that they are ‘state pickin’ (children of the state), ‘untouchables’, ‘kings of the road’, iku (death), orisha (god), onile (landlords), alagbara (powerful) and iwin (a masquerade). A danfo driver in Oshodi reinforced the popular image of agberos as ‘hard men’ by saying to me:

If they give am blow for mouth, agbero go buy ogogoro use wash am down tell you say na treatment be that. Agbero get plenty action. Agbero no get fear. Agbero no be person⁶ (danfo driver, Oshodi).

The point here is that the government’s repeated failure to keep in check the excesses of the NURTW and its agberos has not only deepened the ITWs’ fear of agberos but has also resulted in the expansion of their parallel economy across the city. Today, agberos not only collect taxes from ITWs, but also from mobile street hawkers and market traders. As one ‘pure water’ hawker in Ikotun Junction said to me, ‘There is agbero for everything. Their code is: tax anybody that is taxable’.

---

⁶ When you punch an agbero in the mouth, he would buy ogogoro (local gin) and wash down the blood with it, saying that it is a form of treatment. An agbero has plenty of action. An agbero has no fear. An agbero is not a person (author’s translation).
Many danfos in Lagos operate in Lagos without licences and brazenly flout traffic rules. These danfos are generally rickety, perilously overloaded and notorious for causing hazardous noise and air pollution. Seating in a danfo is ‘pure torture’—commuters in Oshodi and Alimosho frequently complained about being ‘packed like sardines’. Many rickety danfos display slogans such as ‘Remember UR Six Feet’ (see Figure 2), ‘Trust in God’, ‘Let us Pray’, ‘Relax! God is in Control’, ‘God moves with his people’, ‘Remember now thy creator!’ or ‘PRAY and HOPE’. These slogans are clearly ironic. According to a regular commuter in Oshodi, ‘Many of us know the majority of danfos we use are death traps, but since we can't afford the expensive taxi fares, we have no choice but to use them’. ‘Osa [Lagoon] Straight’ is a popular expression in Lagos for describing the tendency of danfos to literally fly off the bridge into the lagoon. In 2013, the Lagos State Drivers’ Institute (LASDRI) ran a test on ITWs in Lagos State and found that 22% or 14,300 are partially blind (Vanguard, 2013). Another test in December 2015 showed that more than 99% of ITWs are ‘hypertensive’ (Vanguard, 2013; Sahara Reporters, 2013).

The LASDRI survey also showed that 75% of road accidents in Lagos are caused by the human factor (Vanguard, 2013). Alcohol and drug abuse are key issues in these errors. During my fieldwork, I found that ITWs generally have easy access to paraga (a locally made gin), also known as ‘recharge card’ owing to the location of paraga kiosks.
within 100 metres of motor parks and bus terminals across Lagos. Many of the paraga sellers (mostly women) I interviewed told me that their reliable customers were danfo drivers, conductors and agberos. According to a perceptive Lagos resident:

Many times, hapless commuters watch the consumption of the illicit drinks and smoke with fear, praying that the young men who just gulped two shots of paraga while smoking a stick of Indian hemp would not be the ones that handle the steering when the bus is filled. From Iyana Ipaja to Oshodi, Ojuelegba and Lagos Island, all you need do is ask and someone points to a corner, and for as little as 50 naira [US $0.25], you can get high (Tunde, resident of Lagos).

The everyday perils of driving in Lagos are mirrored by several road safety slogans such as ‘Drive Carefully. Your life is in your hands’, ‘Choose—arrive home or mortuary’, ‘Accident kills more passengers’, ‘Drive to stay alive’. In a song entitled Eko Ile, the late Nigerian musical iconoclast Fela Anikulapo Kuti made reference to the unique confusion and contradictions of driving on Lagos roads:

Bi mo ba wa moto ni London o,
ma tun sese wa ko ti wan n’ile.
Bi o ba wa moto ni New York o,
wa tun sese wa ko ti wa nilo.
Ti wa tun yato si tiyin o se en ngbo o.8

—

‘Stomach no get holiday’

Many ITWs I spoke to in motor parks across Oshodi and Alimosho regard the struggle for survival and personal security as their overwhelming concern. As one danfo driver in Ikotun Egbe said to me, ‘To chop (eat), you need to hustle because stomach no get holiday’. Given the relatively few full-time jobs available in Nigeria, it is not surprising that passenger transport often attracts plenty of labour, with some ITWs constituting a ‘reserve army of workers who are capable of “relapsing” into full-time touting should the need arise’ (Okpara, 1988: 331). As a result, transport owners are ordinarily in a strong position to dictate the terms of labour on a daily, individual-by-individual basis (as I shall show, these owners also find themselves in a precarious position). Thus, the majority of ITWs in Lagos operate on a daily franchise basis, earning income only after an agreed daily fee has been paid to the transport owner and petrol expenses are covered from the day’s takings. In short, the ITWs’ access to survival jobs is insecure (as one danfo slogan puts it, ‘Hired Today, Fired Tomorrow’), their labour conditions are harsh (‘aiye le’—life is hard) and their economic returns measly (‘ko si ere’—there is no gain). The situation is complicated by the ever-present corrupt traffic police officers (known as askari) and agberos on the roads, who create a predatory economy across Lagos (Agbiboa, 2015). This extract from the Vanguard newspaper paints a picture of an agbero that Lagosians are au fait with:

In an interview I held with the area commander of the Vehicle Inspection Service (VIS) in Alimosho, he pointed to the clearing of illegal paraga kiosks across Lagos as a key factor in the reduction of road accidents and misconduct in and around the motor parks and garages. In his words, ‘Many danfo drivers think when they take paraga they become invincible’.

Extract from Eko ILE [Black Man’s Cry] (available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aK43iAg9p1w). My translation of the Yoruba lyrics is as follows: Even if I drove in London, / I would have to learn driving anew when I return home / Even if you drove in New York, / You would have to learn driving anew on return / Because ‘Turn Right’ in Lagos, open your eyes, is really ‘Turn Left’ / Because you see ‘Turn Right’ in Lagos, my friend, it is really ‘Turn Left’ / Ours is different from yours, you hear?
Their ages range between 20 and 50. They can easily be recognized by their gruffly voice, bloodshot eyes and sometimes incomplete set of teeth obviously lost in street brawls. At almost all the bus stops in the metropolis they could be seen racing after commuter buses that have just arrived or are about to leave. They normally charge at the drivers or conductors and demand for money. Once the driver pays what is expected of him, the windscreen of his vehicle is marked with a felt pen of a certain colour. If the driver fails to comply either his side view mirror or his petrol tank cover is instantly grabbed and the tout melts into the crowd. Any driver or conductor who challenges a tout would surely receive some slaps sometimes in full view of the enforcement officers (cited in Weate and Bakare-Yusuf, 2003: 11).

My interview with a veteran danfo driver and former agbero drew my attention to two categories of agberos in Lagos:

The ones at the top they are somehow closer to the government. And the ones below they are the erukus—they are the ones dying for the ones up. The ones up they can travel abroad, have investment, but the one dying for them they have but not much. They are very loyal to those at the top who reward them handsomely for their loyalty. The erukus aspire to rise through the ranks one day, to become patrons and godfathers [baba alaye] to other erukus (veteran danfo driver, Lagos).

The erukus are mainly recruited from a large and ready pool of unwaged ‘area boys’ (boys from the area/street—see Momoh, 1999), not to be confused with agberos who roam the streets of Lagos, many of whom were born into squalor, live a life of utter desperation and participate in organized street violence. Many erukus migrated to Lagos from neighbouring states to ‘become somebody in life’, as one of them told me. They are often ‘from “extended” families, with a mother in one place and a father in another’ (Kaplan, 1994). Many erukus are victims of what J.D. Virgil (2003), in his article entitled ‘Urban violence and street gangs’, calls ‘multiple marginality’—that is, they are ‘bereft of social control from families, schools, and law enforcement, which have all failed to maintain or even gain a guiding influence on their lives’ (ibid.: 230). To be recruited into the powerful and lucrative ranks of the NURTW, it is not enough to be unwaged and in the streets; you must also be feared. As one danfo driver in Oshodi said to me, ‘If you’re in your street or area and you can create a scene, cut somebody’s head, do whatever. The union will find a garage for you as an agbero. You’re born to kill’. Another danfo driver in Ikotun told me he used to be an agbero until he witnessed an agbero detaching a person’s head with a cutlass in a fight in Oshodi. According to him, ‘Na dat day I run commot for agbero work’ [that was the day I ran away from agbero work] (Agbiboa, 2016b). These accounts reinforce Virgil’s point that ‘the streets have become the arena for what is learned and expected by others to gain recognition and approval’ (Virgil, 2003: 230; see also Momoh, 1999). Louis Theroux’s BBC documentary entitled ‘Law and disorder in Lagos’ corroborates the role of violence in the making of an agbero. One of the agberos in the film recounted:

When you want to be an NURTW member, you have to control some part of your area. You have to be a tough guy. When you want to be a tough guy, you

---

10 A complex problem such as urban gang violence necessitates examining many factors, such as neighbourhood effects, poverty, cultural conflict and sociocultural marginalization, and social control, among other gang dynamics.
have to go through scarring things in your streets. You get caught several times in violence and life goes on after the wounds have healed.11

During fieldwork, I observed that nearly every bus stop between Oshodi and Ikotun had its own unit of agberos who extort money from ITWs (and hawkers in and around motor parks). Agberos are usually armed with wooden clubs, sticks, whips or iron rods, violently attacking ITWs who do not stop to pay financial tributes ranging from 50 naira (US $0.25) to 500 naira (US $2.50). When a danfo driver hesitates to respond to their hostile shouts of ‘owo da? owo da?’ (where is the money? where is the money?), windscreeners are smashed, side view mirrors and seats broken off, wipers removed and petrol tanks destroyed. Delay or refusal to pay the toll could lead to savage beatings (that could result in death) of the operators by agberos who lurk around bus stops to monitor the tax collection. As one danfo driver in Oshodi said to me, ‘In our business, the fear of agberos is the beginning of wisdom’. During the course of my fieldwork in Lagos, Samuel Adamo, a danfo driver in Oshodi, was stabbed to death in a motor park while calling passengers. Adamu was accosted by a group of agberos demanding ‘loading fee’ (owo load), but he declined payment saying he has yet to load a passenger. In the ensuing altercation, three of the enraged agberos stabbed Adamo in the neck, chest and stomach, leaving him in a pool of his own blood (Nairaland Forum, 2015).

Against this backdrop, many ITWs in Lagos employ several tactics to avoid violent extortionists such as agberos on the road.12 For example, danfo operators regularly carry military personnel in the front seat (next to the driver) in order to shield them from rampaging agberos on the road. While this may lessen the usual level of assault, it does not completely prevent extortion, which has taken on some de facto legitimacy. During fieldwork, for instance, a group of ITWs in the Alimosho area went on strike not because they were paying taxes to agberos but because there was no set amount and specific points of collection. Many ITWs I spoke to were convinced that agberos have ‘no shaking’ (feel no fear) because local politicians (that is, party officials) partake in the taxes that they collect every day. Others believe that agberos are ‘tools of terror’ in the hands of local politicians. This view recurred ad nauseam in my interviews—which, as stated earlier, were conducted at a time when Nigeria was preparing for elections. As one danfo driver on the Oshodi–Ikotun route said to me:

If ogas [big men] at the top are not backing agberos, then they would be long gone from the motor parks and roads because they are a complete nuisance. They reap where they have not sown and scatter where they have not gathered. In our business, agberos are kings, they are ‘no go area’, untouchables. And many of them are fully backed by local politicians going up to state governor and local council chairman. Now they even wear green and white uniform because previous governors installed them there to extort money and to harass people during elections. That is why they can do and undo (Gbenga, danfo driver, 28 years old).

The fact that the political elites in Lagos are implicated—at least discursively—in dubious relations with leaders of the NURTW sheds light on the impunity of the agberos and the radical uncertainty the ITWs experience in Lagos. Wale, a veteran danfo driver in Ikotun, told me that driving is ‘the job I use to provide for my family, to send my children to school. I have four children. Three are in school. I thank God for eating and drinking’. According to Wale, the routine extortionary activities of agberos remain one of the biggest threats to his survival and that of his family:

12 The limited scope of this article does not allow me to go into the various tactics employed by ITWs.
NURTW now put their agberos at every bus stop in the city. Once you make a stop, you pay them just to pick a passenger or two from the bus station. Some of them say they are collecting money for ‘owo booking’, others say it is for security (owo security), some say they are collecting afternoon money (owo osan), when its night time some say they are collecting evening money (owo irole). Every day is the same. Some even go as far as training themselves in boxing so that they can quickly punch the conductor or driver in the mouth if they refuse to pay. This isn’t right. It’s something that is very irritating. My wife and children advise me that if agberos or askari ask me for money, I should give it to them quickly, so that they will not hurt me. I believe that leaving my home in good health and coming back home in good health—there is no greater happiness than that (Wale, veteran danfo driver, Ikotun).

Semi-private figures

In his article ‘The everyday functioning of an African public service’, Thomas Bierschenk (2008: 130) draws attention to ‘the phenomenon of a grey area of semi-private figures on the interface between the public service and citizens in all areas of the public administration in West Africa’. In urban Africa, semi-private figures come under various epithets: ‘fixers’, ‘brokers’, ‘auxiliaries’, ‘intermediaries’, ‘go-betweens’, ‘captains’, or ‘bosses’ (see Roitman, 2006; Price and Ruud, 2012). Semi-private figures also surface in ethnographies of youth and marginality in Africa, for example, Jeremy Jones’s (2010) account of hustle in Zimbabwe, Roitman’s (2005) work on crime in the Chad Basin, and Sasha Newell’s (2006) parallel discussion of illegal politicking in Cote D’Ivoire. My fieldwork lends support to the active presence of semi-private figures in transit spaces. During the course of my fieldwork, I observed that many agberos were ‘employed’ by askari and positioned at junctions (a lucrative spot) to collect illegal taxes (owo askari—police money) from ITWs. Junctions are contested sites where urban actors such as agberos and askari meet to exploit moneymaking opportunities (Ismail, 2009: 474). In Yoruba tradition, road junctions (orita) where three roads intersect (orita meta) are sacred places. Here, people offer all sorts of sacrifices (ebo) to spirits and ancestors. In Yoruba mythology, orita is the home of two key ministers of Olodumare (God)—Eshu and Ogun—believed to be extremely powerful and dangerous. During my fieldwork, I observed the various shrines and ebo that were placed at orita to appease malevolent spirits. Analogously, junction members, such as agberos and askari, seem to appropriate the identity of Eshu and Ogun, seeing moneymaking opportunities at junctions as part of the repertoires of ebo on offer. This explains why Weate and Bakare-Yusuf (2003: 12) describe the infamous Ojuelegba junction in Lagos as ‘a micro-economic self-organizing system that embodies the spirit of Eshu’.

At the road junction, the askari often wield a wooden stick or a gun, while the agberos hold a cane or stick and marker to mark the danfos whose drivers have ‘settled’ their dues. The sticks they wield become useful in situations where danfo operators hesitate to part with their hard-earned money. Thus, agberos operate at the interface between formal law enforcement agencie (the police) and informal transport operators (the danfo operators). Based on my cumulative field observations, an agbero typically works at a junction with an askari for five days (morning or night shifts) after which he is replaced by another agbero. The regular change of agberos is meant to reduce complacency in the ‘no-nonsense’ business of collecting taxes from ITWs. As one intermediary figures were already central to economic relations between bureaucratic apparatuses and populations in the colonial government (Mamdani, 1996). Writing about the Chad Basin, Roitman (2006: 259) notes, ‘during colonization, the “brigand-chiefs” constructed for themselves positions for economic accumulation by straddling the line between officialdom, as intermediaries for the colonial administration, and non-officialdom, as leaders of well-known highway gangs’.
danfo driver in Ikotun explained to me: ‘Some agberos may make friends with us in the process of collecting taxes and this may reduce the amount that the askari makes during his shift’. At the close of a day or night shift, the agbero gets a share of the day’s takings in what may be called ‘collusive corruption’—a corruption that emerges when ‘public officials and private agents collude to share rents generated by the illicit transaction’ (Sequeira and Djankov, 2009: 4). The popular perception that agberos are intermediaries emerged in an interview with a danfo driver in Alimosho:

Only God can remove these devils [agberos]. I tell you, only God. Even the police cannot stop agberos because they work for them as their boys. They are friends. Many askari hire their own agberos to collect money from danfo drivers at their own junction spot. That is why you see different agberos collecting money for different kinds of people. Some collect ‘owo chairman’ [money for chairman], others ‘owo Kabiyesi’ [money for the King] or ‘owo askari’ [police money]. Sometimes even askari will fight themselves over junction spots where they can put their agberos to extract money. Junctions are the most lucrative spots because every car passes there (danfo driver, Alimosho).

A danfo operator in Ikotun reported the total impunity of agberos in Lagos to the point that they can beat operators to death in full view of the police:

The other day, agbero beat one danfo conductor to death at Cele Egbe. They pushed him down from the danfo and descended on him with sticks and heavy blows to his face and head. All because he refused to pay only N200 [US $1]. The askari watched from a distance and did nothing. Nothing! What do you expect? The agberos are their boys; they collect egunje [bribes] on their behalf. It is so painful though (danfo operator, Ikotun).

This partnership between askari and agberos resembles the one described by Janet Roitman in her work on the ‘ethics of illegality’ in the Lake Chad Basin. Roitman (2006: 250) found that ‘the networks of local people who engage in unregulated economic activities and road banditry partake in prevailing modes of governing the economy in the Chad Basin. These networks involve relationships between agents of the state, those who straddle lucrative economic positions and government positions, and those who are simply trying to make money according to the available resources’. The whole economy of junction extortion in Lagos supports Ismail’s (2009: 478) argument that ‘junctions represent parallel regimes of (dis)order existing alongside, in competition with or in collaboration with the state’. More importantly, the alliance between agberos and askari questions the tendency to represent urban governance regimes as singular and mutually exclusive (Schindler, 2014). An example is Simone’s (2010: 4) reference to two governance regimes in Lagos that can alternate in the course of a single day. He argues that Lagos’s Ojuelegba area undergoes a nocturnal change in which ‘the assemblage of discrepant activities seems to pile up on each other’, only to give way to a regime of formal urban governance during the day. Yet, the relationship between agberos and askari suggests that multiplicities of urban governance regimes can coexist, supporting the point that coalitions among state and non-state actors play a critical role in shaping urban governance regimes (Harvey, 1989; Schindler, 2014). This web of tightly interwoven arrangements is part and parcel of ‘urban governance regimes’.

---

14 The term ‘devil’, of course, implies Eshu.
15 As urban governance regimes emerge through the interactions of state and non-state actors, the state becomes a ‘contingent development’ that undergoes constant reconfiguration (MacLeavy and Harrison, 2010: 1038). Through this coming together of ‘heterogeneous elements’, ‘new social-spatial relations and forms may emerge’ (McFarlane and Anderson, 2011: 163; see also Schindler, 2014: 403).
[in contemporary Africa] resulting from a wide range of transactions among varied interests, where functional compromises are negotiated and renegotiated' (Simone, 2005: 5). For instance, touts who are intuitively assumed to be at daggers drawn with the authorities are counter-intuitively finding ‘zones of interaction and cooperation in endless search for opportunity’ (Pieterse, 2011: 19).

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that for many ITWs in Lagos, daily life is a battle that takes place in a precarious space (the road) where there is ‘no time to check time’. Indeed, the slogans displayed on the danfos often reflect the hardship of life and attest to the frustrating gap between labour (ise) and reward (ere). Examples are ‘Water pass Garri’ (a reference to a situation that spirals out of control), ‘Naira hard’, ‘Monkey dey work, Baboon they chop’ (The poor work, the rich benefit), ‘I don tire’ (I am tired), ‘Suffer suffer for world’, ‘Man must chop (Man must survive) and ‘Mr Nobody’. Similar visualizations of everyday life as a lasting struggle may be found in other parts of Nigeria and beyond. For example, David Pratten’s (2012) ethnographic study of southeastern Nigeria shows how members of the Annang ethnic group employ the idea of ‘the rugged life’ when describing their everyday experiences: in the Annang language, people refer to their life as a life of ntime ntime (trouble) and a life of akeme itipe (anything can happen). In Tanzania, Matteo Rizzo (2011) found that transport operators were preoccupied with the daily struggle for economic survival and the ‘hardship of life’. Rizzo draws on the example of daladalas (the equivalent of danfos) with slogans such as ‘Kazi mbaya; ukiwanayo!’ (Bad job; if you have one), ‘Money Torture’, ‘Maisha ni Kuhangaika’ (Life is about suffering) and ‘Kula Tutakula Lakini Tutachelewa’ (We’ll eat, but we’ll eat late).

**Precarious ownership**

Owning a danfo is as precarious as driving one. From my field interviews I gathered that many danfo owners are either (former) drivers, or conductors who continue to drive one of their own danfos while renting out another. Therefore they have insider knowledge of the transport business. I also found that self-employment is one of the reasons why people invest their resources in passenger transport. Government jobs are seen as unrewarding and, as the mass retrenchment of workers during the structural adjustment period showed, are not as secure as some might imagine (Lawuyi, 1993). Many owners I interviewed regarded the danfo business as a major survival strategy. But whether wealthy or not, all owners faced the problem of how to maximize returns on their danfos in a precarious business. During fieldwork, I observed that many danfo owners who invested in the business without (insider) knowledge of its workings opted for ‘hire purchase’. This strategy involves giving out a danfo to a driver (and his conductor) on the informal agreement that he will use it exclusively for passenger transport purposes in a bid to pay for the total cost of the danfo (with interest) in instalments. Most danfo owners told me that they made an (informal) agreement with their driver(s) to remit N4,000 (US $20) each day. After 12 months, drivers are given permission to own the danfo. However, failure to meet the income target means that drivers automatically forfeit ownership.

---

16 This situation is not unique to Lagos. In the matatu industry in Nairobi, Kenya, for example, it is well documented that members of the police collude with members of the Mungiki—an organized criminal gang—to extort taxes from ITWs. The police receive weekly bribes from the Mungiki on certain routes, which allow the outlaw gang to conduct its affairs with impunity (The Standard, 2005). According to Kamau, a matatu operator on the Embakasi-Mombasa route, ‘They [the Mungiki] collect up to Sh500 from each matatu on the route daily. If one refuses to pay, one is beaten so badly they could end up in hospital (Standard Digital News, 2013).

17 Neoliberal policies and the decline in formal employment opportunities have led to a significant increase in self-employment in most African cities, often resulting in intense competition in the informal economy (see Hansen and Vaa, 2004; Bryceson, 2006; Lindell, 2010; Meager, 2011).
Across urban Africa, car ownership is closely associated with wealth and prestige. Field (1960: 134) describes how ‘among young men in Africa ... there is no more widespread ambition ... than to drive, and if possible own, one of the thousands of passenger lorries that rave about the roads’. Across urban Africa, cars are not only commodities of modernity but also status markers. This is true for Lagos, where the car you drive determines your social status (how ‘big’ you are)—whether you’re olowo (rich) or mekunu (poor). In fact, there is an assumption that owners are eyan nla (a big man), eyan pataki (an important person) or olowo (a rich person). Thus, vehicles embody wealth, success and contempt; they are a measure of how well one has done in the transport business. By contrast, the expression legedisbenz or legxus is used to taunt poor Lagosians who walk everywhere because they cannot afford to own a vehicle. Tie da? (Where is yours?) is a common danfo slogan that reflects the owner’s pride in owning a danfo, irrespective of whether it is rickety or chartered. However, success (i.e. ownership of a vehicle) often results in more jealous enemies (ota). During the course of my fieldwork I was regularly struck by the pervasive sense of insecurity many owners felt in the face of ‘unseen powers and invisible forces capable of causing real, palpable, material, physical effects in the here and now’ (Ashforth, 1998: 62). This sense of ‘spiritual insecurity’ is evident in the perception of many owners that awon aiye (the world) views them with a mixture of iféran (admiration) and ilara (envy). Many owners have a deep-rooted fear that forces, known or unknown, are conspiring against their good fortune when, in reality, it may be their ‘powerlessness and estrangement that produces this erosion of self-confidence’ (Vigh, 2008: 71). Such palpable fears are unsurprising if we consider that African ‘cities are overpopulated, not simply with people, but also with the forces of magic, spiritual invocation, sorcery, willfulness, and death’ (Simone, 2001: 17).

A great many owners expressed a fear of being struck by juju (witchcraft) orchestrated by their ota, revealing the precarious environment in which ITWs ply their trade. In short, for owners, ‘everyday life has come to be defined by the paradigm of threat, danger, and uncertainty. A social world has gradually taken form where general distrust and suspicion go hand in hand with the need for protection against increasingly invisible enemies’ (Mbembé, 2006: 310). In particular, owners’ perception that they are victims of juju intersects with ‘occult cosmologies’ that ‘claim that power operates in two separate yet related realms, one visible, the other invisible’ (Sanders and West, 2003: 6–7). In this context, uncertainty produces ‘apprehension’ (Cooper and Pratten, 2015) which, in turn, results in heightened ‘vigilance’ (Pratten, 2006) as a coping or survival mechanism. Many owners’ slogans serve as a talisman or protection against ota aiye (enemies in the world), as a response to ‘haters’, or as a prayer for ‘No Loss, No Lack, No Limitation’, as one danfo slogan puts it. Slogans in this category include ‘Blood of Jesus’, ‘I am untouchable’, ‘Mojuba aiye’ (I respect the world), ‘Alubarika’ (Success), ‘I wish you what you wish me’, ‘God Bless my Hustle’, ‘No Weapon Fashioned against Me’, ‘Only God can Judge’, ‘No Competition in Destiny’, ‘You own your mouth, I own the car’ and ‘Leave me’. Danfo slogans such as ‘Back to Sender’ express the owner’s supplication that any wish towards his danfo business be reflected back on those who wish it on

---

18 Osinulu (2008: 52) defines the ota as ‘persons or entities that have malignant feelings towards the individual’. While the concept of ota may be found, mutatis mutandis, in every culture, Oyetade (2004: 81), in his work on ‘The enemy in the belief system’, reminds us that ota ‘is very strong and widespread among the Yoruba and it is evident in their everyday speech’. He adds: ‘The Yoruba believe that every living human being has one type of ota or another’. In one of his songs, King Sunny Ade, a famous Yoruba musician, noted that, ‘one’s good luck and prosperity in life may attract enemies’. Oyetade (2004: 82–3) notes that, in Yoruba thought, ota is often part of one’s household—ota ile—or one’s lineage—ota idile (cf. Osinulu, 2008: 53).

19 The Yoruba people believe in oro lagbara—that words [written or spoken] are powerful.
them. Others, such as ‘Sea never dry’, reflect the wish that the owner’s danfo (his source of livelihood) may never leave the road.20

As noted earlier, most owners’ goal is to maximize returns on investments. To achieve this aim, owners tend to rent out their danfos on a day-to-day basis. In this way they ensure a regular and substantial return on their investments. The golden rule is to ‘trust nobody’, especially ITWs. This lack of trust mirrors a deeply embedded problem in Nigeria. In a recent nationwide survey, for example, the Afrobarometer (2013) found that four out of five Nigerians (80%) are usually very careful when dealing with other Nigerians and only around one in seven Nigerian citizens (15%) believe that most Nigerians could be trusted. The lack of trust in passenger transport is not unrelated to the fact that, despite the many overhead costs, a mechanically sound danfo is capable of generating substantial income if well managed. Owners’ subscribe widely to the popular held belief that a danfo driver will always be inclined to filch from the day’s takings in order to supplement his meagre wages. Thus, one owner in Ikotun has this inscription on his danfo: ‘Because of Money, No Truth’. This slogan reflects the view of many danfo owners who claim that on several occasions, they had been forced to sack drivers who ‘play 419’ (use danfo proceeds to line their own pockets) or drive ‘anyhow’ (recklessly). Many owners I spoke to also expressed a preference for a ‘matured’ driver (and preferably has children) to run their danfo; married drivers are perceived to have more bukata (responsibilities) and therefore take their business more seriously compared to odo (youth) who are seen as ‘carefree’. As one danfo owner in Ikotun said to me:

I prefer to go for a family man with children to feed because I know he will try to be responsible to himself and to his family. If he defaults, I don’t ask questions, I just collect the danfo from him and show him the door. No ‘please sir’ in this matter. I don’t like stories because me too I get plenty mouths to feed. I have my own mechanic. If my driver repairs the car, it is on his own account, unless I gave him the order to go ahead (danfo owner, Ikotun).

Informal social networks are regularly used in passenger transport to vouch for the character of ITWs. Some owners explained that they only considered danfo drivers who had a strong character reference from their church pastor or who were recommended by a paddy (loyal friend). Owing to the ‘trust factor’ in transport, a number of owners told me they were inclined to work only with members of their own family or kinsmen, as ‘blood’ is always ‘thicker than water’. But this is not always true. One owner in Ikotun told me how the son of his late brother, to whom he entrusted his danfo, stole his money and ‘disappeared’: ‘Till today, I haven't heard anything from him. I don't know whether he is alive. The thing is like magic. My own late brother's son!’ This reinforces Bledsoe’s (2002: 21) contention that a ‘sense of vulnerability applies even to intimate social relations despite the security these relations appear to offer’. Other owners shared (personal) stories about drivers and conductors who made off with their danfos and resettled in other Nigerian states or sold the vehicle and changed their address. A former owner of three danfos in Oshodi told me:

Running a danfo business is like digging an early grave. The drivers always have one problem or the other. Yesterday LASTMA, today gear problem, tomorrow

---

20 The precarity of owning a passenger transport, combined with the mystical turn for protection from ota, is not unique to Nigeria. In her sociological analysis of daily life in Ghana, Date-Bah (1980: 525) found that ‘drivers of passenger vehicles were often supplicants at shrines because of a paranoiac fear of failure, perceiving themselves as the objects of envy of those who wanted to have financial disaster’. Similarly, in her work on the search for everyday security in Ghana, Field (1960: 134) found that ‘the driver is acutely conscious of himself as an object of envy, and has much anxiety lest those seeking his humiliation should bring it about by bad magic designed either to wreck his lorry or to bring it financial disaster. Therefore he seldom neglects to take his new lorry to a shrine for protection’.
radiator, next tomorrow silencer and overheating and the day after agbero trouble. The troubles never end. Every day new story. I bought three danfos and within three months I was left penniless! The problem is that my driver was bringing in four thousand every week. But he was arrested twice in two weeks and given ticket of twenty-seven thousand naira. Each time he brought the ticket to me to go and settle LASTMA (former danfo owner, Oshodi).

One owner I spoke to in Oshodi believes that the ‘key is to choose a danfo driver who needs the money more than you do and you should be ready to park the danfo at any time’. Mrs Morenikeji (not her real name), a commuter in Alimosho LGA, narrated the troubles of her husband who tried his luck in a danfo business:

My husband ran this danfo business for a while. So I’m talking to you from experience. We nearly died of high BP [blood pressure]. Every week I had high BP. The driver would work full days, after which he would lie that he was with mechanic for the whole day. He would have bargained with a mechanic who will testify and share your money. Drivers would take even the money you think you made eventually. He would cooperate with the mechanic to remove a spare part that is working well and replace it with bad spare parts. When he tells you about the ‘part’ you have to buy, he will inflate the prize and eat [steal from] you. I got so frustrated that one day I told the driver that I will be the conductor for that day. The useless driver kept telling the ‘Union boys’ on every bus stop that I was the owner of the bus which made them inflate the illegal dues (Mrs Morenikeji, wife of former danfo operator).

Despite its many troubles, a number of owners told me that the danfo business can be very lucrative if a reliable driver can be found. But ultimately, these owners insist that driving the danfo yourself is the best way to overcome the trust factor. As a former danfo owner in Ikotun Egbe recounted:

There is money in danfo business but the problem is that you can never get a honest and good driver who would not chop [eat] you. The best thing you can do is to drive the danfo yourself. That is what I used to do when I was a primary school teacher. I will close at 2 p.m. and drive from Ikotun Egbe to Oshodi or Ikotun to Iyana Ipaja. Sometimes, I call Ikeja along directly from Ikotun (former danfo owner, Ikotun Egbe).

Daily rental agreements between drivers and owners partly explain the aggressive disposition of many ITWs in Lagos. Since the daily returns they have to remit to owners (often before the start of each working day) are usually non-negotiable (despite the many bribes they have to pay to agberos and askari), ITWs can only raise their daily income by increasing the number of trips or the number of passengers per trip (‘full loading’). Invariably, therefore, danfos are overloaded and drive at dangerously high speeds. If the driver is to recoup the daily rental as quickly as possible, he must race between the two points of his chosen route at the highest speed possible. It is therefore no surprise that the word danfo means ‘hurry’. This permanent sense of ‘hurry’ is reflected in danfo slogans such as ‘Ghetto Boy: No Time to Check Time’, ‘No Dulling’, ‘Jeun Soke’ (eat up), ‘No Pain, No Gain’ (see Figure 3), ‘Time is Money’, ‘Young Pilot’ or ‘From Lagos to London’. Matteo Rizzo (2011) found in his study of the daladala industry in Dar es Salaam that the situation there is similar to that in Lagos: the harsh
conditions of labour are an inevitable result of the intense struggle of the ITWs for everyday economic survival (see also Lindell, 2010). And, as Simone (2010: 38) argues, ‘the pursuit of survival involves actions, relations, sentiments, and opportunities that are more than survival alone’.

**Conclusion: ‘God’s Time is the Best’**

In this article I have taken the ordinary seriously as a category of analysis to interrogate the micropolitics of ITWs in Africa’s largest megacity. The article makes an original contribution to our understanding of informal urban transport by illuminating the risky and uncertain conditions under which ITWs ply their trade and, importantly, how they manage these radical uncertainties to carve out meaningful temporalities. On the one hand, the article underscores the routine challenges ITWs faced in Lagos and, on the other hand, it shows their determination and considerable agency in the face of these challenges. The article contributes to the literature on urban livelihoods that explores diverse ways in which informal workers get by within a context of a shrinking formal job market. Furthermore, it shows how ITWs and transport owners both find themselves in precarious positions in relation to the informal transport sector, suggesting that the sense of insecurity is felt as much by those who temporarily win control of critical resources as by those who feel excluded from them. Their precarious materiality notwithstanding, many ITWs retain the capacity to aspire to the finer things in life, including ownership of a danfo, marrying a graduate, winning in the American visa lottery and acquiring a college degree. These dreams are not ‘weak reflections of truth [but] its source’ (Crpanzano, 2003: 24) and they ‘are not simple fantasies woven from sleep [but] a normal technique for solving a problem or *finding a way* out of a dilemma’ (Burridge, 1995: 219, original emphasis).

In the face of an everyday life that seems to be falling apart before their very eyes, few ITWs accept ‘victim identities’ (Kihato, 2007: 104) which analytically alienates them from their social agency in ways that reinforce images of disempowerment.
Rather, they draw upon positive future qualifiers (such as ‘My time will Come’, ‘Time will Tell’, ‘Time is Money’, ‘Very Soon’, ‘Better is Coming’ or ‘God’s Time is the Best’) that help them manage their here and now. This challenges the entrenched views that tend to deprive Africa’s informal workers of agency, while establishing the need for more empirical studies on the relations between contingency and futurity. Also, the aforementioned danfo slogans underscore the ‘temporality of hope’ (Crpanzano, 2003) and point to the fact that conjectures about the future form an implicit part of imagining and navigating the workaday world where ‘fortunes are seen to be made and lost and one’s own fortune often appears to be beyond one’s control’ (Williams, 1980: 114). In this setting, the very certainty of uncertainty helps ITWs transcend the present order of disorder, serving as a point of departure from experiences that impinge on self-fulfilment. Put differently, for ITWs, uncertainty is a productive force, a source of hope and dreams, and a ground for orientation and action towards the future (see Guyer, 2007; Cooper and Pratten, 2015). Ultimately, therefore, an ITWs’ aspirational capacity is animated by his abiding awareness that ‘No Condition is Permanent’. This slogan, found on the back of a moving danfo, evokes Simone’s representation of African cities as ‘places of experimentation for engagement, the terms of which are not exclusively fixed or determined in advance’ (Simone, 2001: 22). In this respect, to manipulate the opportunity that chance or risk may present requires ‘anticipation and mobility—a propensity to being in the right place at the right time’ (Cooper and Pratten, 2015: 12). These opportunities extend to cities in Africa precisely because ‘they appear to be outside effective control, and thus anything can happen’ (Simone, 2001: 23; emphasis added). Given just how increasingly precarious everyday lives in many African cities are, uncertainty constructs and cultivates acquired dispositions and temporal ‘horizons’ by which ITWs survive or get by against all odds.

Daniel E. Agbiboa, Perry World House, University of Pennsylvania, 3803 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA, danielagbiboa@gmail.com

References


22 Horizons are time-specific: ‘what looks like a hopeful prospect now may be closed down without warning tomorrow, and another potential future may open up’ (Johnson-Hanks, 2002: 871). This realization led Johnson-Hanks (ibid.) to propose ‘a unit of social analysis based in aspiration rather than event’.