

Understanding Road Rage in a Developing Economy: The Port Harcourt City Experience

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Abstract

Road rage is Ubiquitous and is indeed a global phenomenon. Urbanization and the struggle for survival have made road rage part of our daily city life. However, while experts on road rage in the developed nations of the world tend to see road rage within the realm of psychological and environmental factors only, road rage in developing economies such as that of Nigeria should be studied within a broader spectrum to include socio-political- cum economic realities.

The cumulative effects of colonialism, the nature of the neo-colonial state prolonged military incursion in our body polity and the unbridled quest for materialism all gave a unique coloration to the nature and dynamics of road rage in Nigeria.

Port Harcourt, which epitomizes a third world city, has amply shown a symbolic intractable class struggle as exemplified by the different road users and the emergence of “blind solidarity” by motorcycle riders (also known as Okada men).

Introduction

The press is awash with countless cases of loss of temper and resulting violence amongst road users all over the world. Road rage has indeed “reached epidemic proportion in major cities of the world with almost half of all drivers experiencing some form of attack or abuse in the course of driving”. In Britain, an Automobile Association survey went even further to report that “nine out of ten motorists claim to have been victims of road rage” (BAA, 1996)

Indeed, in the course of our daily city life, we are confronted with incessant and mind-blowing exhibitions of aggression on our roads by the different users – truck Drivers, other Vehicle Drivers,

Motor Cyclists and of course Pedestrians. This phenomenon is not restricted to just the poor countries of the world but also rampant in the so – called advanced nations. The only difference may be the nature, dynamics frequency and the perception of road rage among the different nations albeit cities

“Road Rage” has not been given a scientific definition despite its prevalence. However, the media has attempted to give it a working definition as” a range of anti-social behaviours/ or acts of aggression which occur on the road. The range of these anti-social behaviours include: Minor instances such as gestures and the use of car horn through to more serious violent acts such as assault or even murder. Amongst some proponents, efforts are being made to draw a line between aggressive driving and Road Rage/Road violence with the latter viewed as a serious criminal offence (Elliot, 1999, Holm, 2001).

In developing countries (such as Nigeria) with poor infrastructural development, poor development and poor implementation of Road safety laws, the term “Road Rage” can appropriately be more encompassing to include all aggressive behaviours exhibited by the different categories of Road Users. This is because while Road Rage in advanced nations involves drivers of different vehicles, in Nigeria, it includes all road users including pedestrians who are also involved in their own form of road rage.

In general, the consensus view from among road safety experts around the world is that the term “Road Rage” ought to be limited to intentional acts of violence and assault, and that the issue is a criminal matter, not a road safety concern. Indeed the National Road Management agency (NRMA) believes that the use of road rage should not be encouraged. For them; many of the minor incidents such as

The use of car horn, come more from driver frustration than anything that comes close to a rage” and it would be unimaginable for most of these drivers to take this frustration further and engage in more violent or intimidatory acts. Linking these two different behaviours under one umbrella only promotes the idea that the frustration that many drivers feel could easily become more violent (NRMA, 1997).

Even with the aforesaid reluctance, a wide range of activities have been subsumed under the catch – all phrase of Road Rage. Many of the actions are minor and related to low levels of frustration where as some are major and relate more to assault or criminal action. Activities associated with road rage include, Beeping the horn, pursuing a vehicle, flashing headlights, forcing a car off the road, gesticulation, forcing a car to pull over, verbal abuse, bumping into another car, tailgating, threatening another driver, braking or slowing suddenly, damaging another vehicle intentionally, deliberate obstruction, physically assaulting another driver and cutting off or swerving with intent to obstruct the other car in front.

In Nigeria and indeed in all major cities including Port Harcourt, Road Rage also includes; mob assault, willful destruction of vehicle, arson and even murder.

Road rage has been attributed to a lot of factors ranging from psychological factors to environmental factors. Previous analyses tend to view road rage as more of a fall out of psychological factors revolving around frustration and aggression from the offender to the victim. Where environmental factors are identified, they merely include; traffic density, heat and humidity, deadlines and running late, high noise levels, weather conditions, road features, poor light and ambiguity in the road system over priorities and rights (Wright, P et al, 1997)

The above factors identified in Australia tend to be accepted by analysts in other advanced nations of the world. For a developing nation like Nigeria and, of course, a city like Port Harcourt, Road rage is a societal creation caused by the prevalent materialistic psyche imposed upon the society by the process of colonialism, military dictatorship and corrupt leadership.

This work will try to look at the nature and dynamics of Road rage in Nigeria and Port Harcourt in particular and, in the course of doing that, provide answers to emerging peculiarities of Road rage in developing countries such as Nigeria and developing cities like Port Harcourt

Socio-Political Origins/Political Economy of Road Rage Colonial and Post Colonial Nigeria State

Nobody is born a practitioner of the acts of road rage. The society in which we live makes one either road aggressor or decent road users. The psychological explanation of road rage, though may be correct, does not seem to provide adequate explanation to the “Road rage culture” prevalent on Nigerian roads. It is indeed expedient to look at the structure of the society that generates these harmful behaviour patterns on our roads. This will provide us with comprehensive solutions to this social malaise.

It is well documented that the Nigerian state has since independence developed into a political society where the liberal ideas of democracy as obtainable in the metropolitan countries, most of which controlled over colonial era, are practised.

That is, the social structure changed thus affecting pre-colonial institutions of our societies such as the political, the economic and the religious which altogether held the communities together. (into the modern state). Relationships became competitive rather than co-operative thereby eroding the social fabric that held the people together (Nzimiro, 1999, Mere, 1987).

The colonial regime stamped into our psyche, the main aim of their conquest, that is to control the state politically in order to ensure that the entire economy was monopolized by the metropolitan institutions controlled by the conquering capitalist class of the mother country. These two principles of political control to ensure a hold on the economy became engraved in the society. Economic exploitation was the root of the growth of capitalist acquisition. Materialism was blessed as the de facto outcome. The politicians that fought the British wanted to assume political power as a means of controlling the economy. (Nzimiro, 1999)

Subsequent political developments in Nigeria accentuated the lucreativeness of politics as government was conceived of more as a vehicle for distributing bounties to party faithful, than as an agent of economic development. Access to state power was and is still a passport to appropriate the social surplus generated by oil which has emerged as the prominent pivot of the economy. Misappropriation of public funds by public offices became rife. Cohen noted that where finance on any scale was available to Nigerian, it was closely, linked to the capture of political power by the elite group. State corporations were indeed run as extension of political parties while unreserved access to political power, particularly at the regional level was used as a means to finance private investments or, more usually, private consumption (Cohen, 1974).

The “Juicy “ Nigerian State which has created a lot of money bags, military adventures and the epileptic political transition in Nigeria so far has institutionalized corruption and accentuated conflicts between the different classes, subclasses and regions. All the struggles in the various regions of the nation ***inherent in the dialectical relationships*** are based on the scramble to appropriate the surplus generated by oil. The net effect of this scramble is an extremely violent socio-political culture in Nigeria (Nte, 2001.)

The series of military coups and counter crops, electoral fraud and institutionalized corruption succeeded in stamping a violent culture on our national psyche and also legitimize the axiom that “Might is right.” The long period of about three decades of military rule out of our forty five years of existence as a nation caused the unconscious internalization of military ethos and excesses.

The military mentality has therefore perverted all areas of the society. The total disorganization of the power structure in our polity, strong command – and – obey mentality decapitated the social fabric. The glorification of violence, sadistic belief in power albeit intimidation through violence, belief that grass materialism is a blessing, all combine to reinforce and sustain the replication of road

rage in our cities in Nigeria (Nzimi 1999.)

Road rage in Nigeria can conveniently be attributed to the inherently violent nature of our society caused by the glorification of materialism and the unbridled pursuit of social surplus in the country. In the same vein, the corrupt nature of the Nigerian State has drained the economy through institutionalized corruption leaving the country economically decapitated and life hellish for the masses. In the ensuing scenario, the battle for survival by the masses of Nigeria will translate to a squeeze on the road leading to road rage. This is also added to the poor state of Nigerian roads caused by irrational ordering of priorities, official corruption and irresponsible leadership. The high incidence of road rage on our roads becomes normal under these prevailing circumstances.

A corollary to the above suppositions is the fact that the nature and pattern of road rage reflects to some extent the class structure of the Nigerian society. (Owners of expensive/posh cars such as Jeeps, Lexus and high grade Mercedes Benz cars approximate the oppressors – cum bourgeois. Another oppressive group is the lorry drivers who because of size can intimidate other road users with terrifying horn blast and screeching brakes. The owners of middle class cars such as Peugeot, small Japanese cars, Volkswagen etc are the equivalent of the middle class of bureaucrats and middle level business men/women.

The drivers of commuter buses/Taxis are the lower class of the Nigerian roads while commercial motor bike riders are the lower- lower class with the pedestrian making it up as the dregs of the Road.

Daily observations of Nigerian city roads will reveal an interesting struggle and disagreements between the aforesaid groups of road users – a state of regular and almost spontaneous out burst of rage on our roads. The pattern also replicates the oppressive process of the bourgeoisie and the resistance of the proletariat leading to an irreconcilable extension of the class struggle inherent in our socio-economic system.

A common observable scenario of incessant rage takes place on our roads by the second. From the ever busy roads such as Aba Road in Port Harcourt to less busy ones such as Industry Road, different road users exhibit series of rage essentially as a survival strategy and a way to re-enact the oppressive nature of our society.

The “Okada men” Motor bike riders can easily be seen here as the greatest protesters of the seemingly oppressive city life. In what can be summed up as “Blind Solidarity”, swarms of these riders will not hesitate to pounce on any “Oppressor” i.e. vehicle drivers at the slightest provocation such as a little brush or collision.

The city of Port Harcourt is replete with countless cases of “jungle justice” meted out by Okada riders on other road users – including beating up the “perceived oppressor” damaging the oppressive vehicle and even out right arson/murder. This aggressive behaviour pattern by Motor bike riders approximates an unconscious resistance/social movement aimed at protecting this class of down-trodden road users. The solidarity is further reinforced by the fact that the sub sector is dominated by a particular ethnic group – the Ibibio-Efik clusters who are immigrants to the city of Port Harcourt. Road rage therefore in Port Harcourt especially has amongst Okada men has an ethnic dimensioned.

Road Rage in Port Harcourt

The Setting

Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State and South-South region of Nigeria was believed to have been founded as a trading post by the dawn of the 20th century. The boom of the palm oil trade made it expedient for a satellite centre for this lucrative business at that time. Consequently, Port Harcourt was created to fill that gap. (see Ekpeyong, 1992).

For decades, Port Harcourt became heavily impacted by the numerous socio-economic and

political development in Nigeria transforming into a mega cosmopolitan city only second to Lagos in terms of complexity and sophistication. However, it must be noted that it is the petroleum industry that has made the most significant impact on the growth of the city. The immigration rate is the highest in the country as people stream in search of jobs and other economic activities (see N.P.C. Survey, 2005)

Port Harcourt is equally expanding at an alarming rate reaching the fringes of Etche, Eleme, Oyibo, Aluu and Igurita areas of the state from the central areas of the city which serves as the administrative centre. The city is also noted as the fastest growing city in Africa, estimated to accommodate over 4 million people based on the 2005 projections. (see British Council, 2003; NPC, 2005).

Port Harcourt has a distinctive socio-economic arrangement. The central entrance is the Aba – Port Harcourt Express way and the East West Road that links it with North and West respectively. There is also a major road to Owerri from Port Harcourt. These axes are centres of heavy Vehicular / Motor bike traffic. There is also an interesting stratification of the city into the Government Reservation Areas (GRA), the Industrial areas of Trans-Amadi, the disappearing Communities of Diobu / D’ Line areas, the old Port Harcourt Township and the Slum Areas/Water Fronts of Diobu, and Port Harcourt Town Areas. Other adjoining areas of Okrika, Ikwerre, Obio/Akpor, Eleme, Oyigbo, Etche Communities are rapidly diffusing into port Harcourt and giving the road rage dynamics the colouration explained in the subsequent sections of the work.

Methodology

In determining the incidence of Road Rage on our roads in Port Harcourt, the authors relied extensively on surveys. This study employed a reconnaissance survey based on a sample of twenty strategic road intersections. Each point was used as a data base for Road Rage counts. The count was due simultaneously at all points within the rush hours of 7.00am – 9 30am to determine the morning peak hours and between 3.00pm – 6.30 pm to determine the evening peak hours flow. The summation of the per station counts gave the incidence (no) of road rage per road.

The authors assigned code members to each data base station ranging from 01 to 10 showing the major road intersections in Port Harcourt.

Table 1: Major Roads Daily Rush – Hours Vehicular/ Motor Bike Traffic in the Port Harcourt Central District.

Code	Road/Street	Morning 7.00.9.30	%	Evening	%
1	Aba Road/Garrison	6,359	11.57	6,493	11.67
2	Rumuola/Rumowuta	5,596	10.18	5,624	10.11
3	Azikiwe Road	5,729	10.42	6125	11.01
4	Aggrey/Habour Road	5,833	10.61	5634	10.12
5	Ikwerre Road	6,832	12.43	6955	12.50
6	Agip Road	5,754	10.47	5932	10.66
7	Olu Obasanjo Road	4,538	8.25	4682	8.41
8	Eastern By Pass Road	3,515	6.39	3633	6.53
9	Elekahia/Trans-Amadi Roads	5,958	10.84	5835	10.49
10	Ojoto	4,865	8.85	4735	8.51
	Total	54,979	49.70	55,648	50.30

Table 2: Aggregate Incidence of Road Rage for Five Major Roads in Port Harcourt Central District for 7 days; Time/incidence/PCU

Major Roads	7-8am	10-11am	1-2pm	3-4pm	6-7pm
Aba road	890	771	606	808	649
Azikiwe road	828	724	601	697	729

Ikwere road	754	851	799	826	844
TransAmadi Road	993	980	954	962	904
Aggrey Road	484	453	599	407	407
Average	769.8	755.8	711.8	739.8	706.6

Source: Authors' field work February April 2008

Table 3: Road Rage By Road Users/7 Days

	Big Vehicles/Small Vehicles	Expensive Cars Less Expensive	Vehicles Motor Bike	Vehicle v *****
Aba Road	895	765	1,524	450
Azikiwe Road	874	690	1,480	435
Ikwere road	899	740	1,920	515
T. Amadi	1101	603	2,408	680
Aggrey Road	578	502	1,230	340
Total	4348	3300	8362	2510
Average	22.86%	17.35%	46.59%	13.20%

Source: authors' field work Feb. – April 2008

Forms of Road Rage / 7 days

	Covert Aggression	%	Overt Aggression	%
Aba Road	2464	66.17	1260	33.83
Azikiwe Road	2560	73.58	919	26.42
Ikwere road	1815	57.28	1356	42.72
T. Amadi	3328	69.34	1465	30.56
Aggrey/Aggrey Road	1898	71.62	752	28.38
Total	12068	67.72	5752	32.28

Data Analysis

The analyses of the foregoing field surveys show a reasonably high incidence of Road Rage on Port Harcourt roads with an interesting pattern. Trans-Amadi Road has the highest incidence of road rage per week from the study. The reason for this is not far-fetched. The area is home to the industrial complex of the city and the adjoining Slum areas of Azuabie, Zoo and the stretch to Elelenwo and Akpajo areas of Port Harcourt and Eleme Local Government areas.

Similarly, Road Rage seems to be highest between “Okada men” (46.59% or 8362 cases/week) and other vehicles – most cases resulting in violent reprisals by swarms of other Okada riders who will not hesitate to descend on other road users if any one of them is involved. While deaths resulting from road rage are not common, the burning of the “offending vehicle” and beating up of the driver is a common scenario.

All in all, covert aggressive behaviour patterns tend to be more prevalent than the overt display of aggression on the roads in Port Harcourt.

Conclusion

This work has made a modest attempt to x ray the various intervening variables concerning road rage in developing economies including Nigeria and in such third world cities as Port Harcourt.

Road rage is a recurring decimal in Port Harcourt amongst the different road users. On a daily basis, different forms of rage take place on all the roads. Such busy roads as Ikwere road, Aba road and Trans-Amadi road show an interesting pattern of aggressive behaviours on the roads. Heavy trucks

relying on “size is might” scare away smaller vehicles with terrifying blasting of their horns, while expensive cars intimidate the less expensive ones. Commercial buses and cars struggle in their endless quest to make ends meet and in the process aggravate aggressive behaviour on our roads.

Another interesting observation is the relatively low level of incidence of road rage along Aggrey Road. This can be attributable to the spacious and very good conditions of the road which tend to give ample accommodation to the different road users. This also validates the assumption that poor level of social infrastructures such as roads could increase road rage in such developing cities like Port Harcourt.

The high incidence of road rage between giant trucks and smaller vehicles along Azikiwe and Trans-Amadi roads is quite explicable. These areas are connected to the Port Harcourt seaport and industrial complexes respectively. While that of Azikiwe Road are mainly haulage trucks, that of Trans-Amadi combines massive haulage activities with the transport of company personnel.

The motor bike riders “Okada” men who are essentially the poor are the most aggressive in a bid to protect themselves and to eke a living. No matter the road user, road rage remains not just a product psychological and environmental factors but a manifestation of a sick economy caused by the nature of the neo-colonial state the Nigerian ruling class.

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