

“Agbero” and Maintenance of Social Order: A Study of Iyana Iba, Mile 2 and Oshodi Motor Parks

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Abstract

The paper examined the impact of ‘Agberos’ on the maintenance of social order at Oshodi, Iyana-Iba and Mile 2 bus stops in Lagos state. The study population includes, Agberos, traders, police officers, and Lagos’ residents, etc. Quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed. Thus, questionnaire, and Key informant interviews were the research instruments used for the collection of data. The sample size considered for the study was 110. The study found a significant positive relationship between the presence of ‘Agberos’ at motor parks and maintenance of social order. Thus, the activities of ‘Agberos’ have remarkable effects on the socio-economic lives of Lagos people as more than 50% of respondents considered economic hardship an important factor for the invasion of motor parks and bus stops by ‘Agberos’. For social disorder to be a thing of the past at motor parks and bus stops in Lagos, the study suggests that federal, state and local governments should partner in making qualitative education available to and accessible for youths as well as create job opportunities that will engage them on graduation.

New Words: *Qualitative Education; Agberos, Traders, Police Officers, Lagos’ Residents, Social Order*

Introduction

Every human society ensures that certain norms and values are thoroughly maintained to ensure its survival. *Agberos* are loosely organized gangs of street children and teenagers, composed mostly of males (but with few females), who roam the streets of Lagos, Lagos state in Nigeria. They extort money from passers-by, sell illegal drugs, act as informal security guards and perform other “odd jobs” in return for compensation (Wikipedia, 2010). The dire need for maintaining the functional pre-requisite of a society brings about the institutionalization of social control mechanism to contain crime. Nevertheless, the occurrence of crime in all human society remains a thing of terror. It is against this background that special attention needs to be paid to the activities of *Agberos* who claim to be workers operating under the aegis of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW).

Agberos sprang up in the early 1980s. Then, they were just small bands of bullies who roamed the slums adjoining the central business district. But since then their numbers have multiplied, fed by the steady flood of unemployed people that migrate constantly into Lagos from elsewhere in the country. Initially, *Agberos* did not start collecting money by force. Then, what they did was to assist drivers to fill their vehicles with passengers after which they would take any amount the driver gave them (Balogun, 2009). Today, *Agberos* are now rampant all over the city. Their favourite hangouts are bus stops, major highways and markets. In broad day light, they levy tolls on bus drivers, they demand bribes from market women wanting to set up stalls for the day, they patrol potential car-parking spaces and demand illegal fees from shoppers. They even threaten ordinary passers – by, demanding “donations”. The coercive and persuasive requests, petty crimes and sometimes violent offences by the Area boys to acquire resources, generally cash in the urban main business and crowded areas, have disturbed the civil society and defied the civic authority (UNDP, 2002).

The word “*Agberos*” generally paints the picture of miscreants, street urchins or thugs who forcefully extort money from commercial motorcycle riders and commercial bus workers at garages, bus stops and major highways particularly in Lagos metropolis. The *Agberos* in the country are able-bodied men who rush to grab the bags and luggage of passengers while at the same time trying to force them into vehicles they may not originally have the intention to board (Bologi, 2009). It is because of these activities that they were tagged “*Agbero*” a Yoruba word carved out of the sentence “*a gba ero*” for “conveyors of passengers”. But while the name appears appropriate for them, some of them disapprove the label. However, it was as a result of the countervailing response to the negative social label, some individuals whose activities fall within this description of such conjecture absolutely reject being referred to as “*Agberos*” (Bologi, 2009). In addition, some who see nothing wrong in being called *Agberos*, attribute a number of socially acceptable qualities to themselves. Some claimed to be responsible family men, while some hardworking youths who have taken it upon themselves to confront idleness, make themselves useful and create a means of livelihood for themselves, especially in the face of gross unemployment besetting our economy, and members of the Nigerian Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) (Aremu, 2010).

Agberos have turned all the bus stops into commercial avenues where they forcefully extort money from commercial bus operators to the extent of physically assaulting the few who refuse to comply and part with their money. *Agberos* surprisingly have the backing of the police! They also collect money on behalf of the police. “I once heard an *Agbero* tell a bus conductor that he has not paid ‘Askari’ fee. Askari is slang among the area boys to mean the police”. That is why you will see these people operate and the police will never challenge them because they are partners in crime (Azeez, 2009).

What sounds so astonishing is the claim of ‘*Agberos*’ that they are better than armed robbers who dispossess travellers of their money and valuables on the roads. This further compounds the

vagueness of the concept of 'Agberos' because they also maintained that they are organized and operate under a recognized union and so they are not *Agberos* (Bologi, 2009). *Agberos* have their good uses, however. In places like Oshodi, Ketu and other congested bus stops, they "assist" some law enforcement and traffic officers, not only in ensuring an unhindered flow of traffic, but in extorting money from bus conductors. In times of politics, they also come in handy as political thugs and bodyguards for politicians (Adeboye, 2009). *Agberos* are part of the offshoots of underlying problems. This therefore raises some fundamental issues of social control that demand a comprehensive social attention through research. Could the rising population of urban *Agberos* be a factor in the worsening social ills that plague urban Lagos?

In combating the *Agbero* phenomenon, past governments have made various attempts to get *Agberos* off Lagos' streets. These efforts gave birth in 1999 to a skills training centre at Ita Oko, a disused island prison in Lagos Lagoon by the Lagos State government. As a follow up, state government has set up a committee drawn from the ministry of social affairs to remove *Agberos* from Lagos' roads. This was to ensure that *Agberos* are apprehended by law enforcement agents at different locations in the city and admitted into various developmental centres where they are orientated and satisfied for the duration of the rehabilitation programme. Currently, the state government is re-engaging the problem of *agberos* via rehabilitation and acquisition of skills. This time around, the centre is a penal island surrounded by water and separated from daily contact with the civil society. With high hope, Gaensler (2008:1) reports: 'If the rehabilitation efforts of the Lagos State Government are anything to go by, hope is not yet lost for the destitute in the state. In a bid to improve their lot, the state government has included them in its current programme at the rehabilitation and skill acquisition centre on Tekunle Island, a three hour drive from the city centre. Currently, about 100 area boys live on the Island.' On completion of the exercise, it is expected that these re-modelled citizens are re-integrated into the society and offered jobs in various vocational fields. This can then stimulate them to remain focused and contribute significantly to the development of society. However, there is a significant relationship between the presence of *Agberos* in motor parks and absence of social order.

Materials and Method

The population for this study comprises residents, males and females aged 18years and above, that is, young and old residents, marketers, traders, traditional rulers, National Union of Road Transport workers, *et cetera* within the motor parks under study are located in Lagos State. The selected locations for this study are Oshodi, Iyana Iba and Mile Two. The three parks were selected based on the high volume of human traffic and socio-economic activities going on at the parks. Moreover, these parks are located in densely populated areas of Lagos State with diversity in socio – economic characteristics thus making them quite suitable for social research.

The sample size for this study was 90 respondents comprising males and females (18years and above) at the aforementioned motor parks in order to study their perceptions and opinions about the menace of *Agberos* and the maintenance of social order in Lagos Metropolis. Also, 10 key Informants interviews were conducted to capture the purpose of the activities and modes of operation of the *Agberos* so as to discover the impact of their activities on the economic and social life, the socio-demographic characteristics of *Agberos*, the profile and perception of their victims and suggestions for solving the problems of *Agberos* within Lagos State. This study adopted the probability and non-probability sample procedures. Therefore, quota sampling and purposive sampling methods were used. Key informants interview respondents were based selected through purposive sampling (Police Officers; traditional and Religious Leaders; Chairmen of Landlord Associations; Representatives of Market Women/Men; Representatives of Residents' Association; Drivers *et cetera*.)

Results

Characteristics of Agberos

Table 1 below indicates that the majority of respondents 64 (71.1%) observed that 'Agberos' are likely to fall into the age bracket of 21-30years. As a result, their dominant presence at parks and major roads in Lagos is perceived to exacerbate traffic problem in Lagos state because sixty seven respondents (74.4%) confirmed that Agberos cause traffic problems on Lagos roads while twenty-three (25.6%) felt otherwise. It is obvious, however that from the analysis of responses from this study that some of the traffic problems in Lagos roads are caused by *Agberos*.

As revealed in table 1 below, a crop of female intersperse the population of Agberos as eighty-three (92.2%) respondents said that males are actively involved in *Agbero* business while seven (7.8%) of the respondents said the females. The activities for which respondents observed that "Agberos" are noted confirm males' overbearing dominance of the business. While 22.2% of the total respondents believe that Agberos are involved in all these acts, 25.6% insisted that Agberos extort money from motorists thus making fare hike a permanent occurrence in Lagos state. About 6% of the respondents attributed pick pocketing at bus stops to the presence of Agberos. Other misconducts such as robbery had 11.1%; election rigging 7.8%; street fight 10.0% and vandalism 8.9%.

While 40.0% of the respondents strongly agreed that economic hardship is an important factor for the invasion of motor parks and bus stops by *Agberos* in Lagos State, 11.1% simply agreed; 3.3% took a neutral position; 22.2% disagreed and 23.3% strongly disagreed. Nevertheless, 52.2% of the respondents strongly agreed that lack of respect for social values characterises the activities of *Agberos* at bus stops and motor parks; 22.2% agreed; 1.1% was undecided while 13.3% strongly disagreed. However one elects to look at the activities of Agberos at parks and highways, their presence was motivated by a desire to meet the financial expectations of their sponsors. As contained in table 1, 11.1% of the respondents strongly agreed that *Agberos* invade parks and bus stops for that purpose, 27.8% agreed, 4.4% was neutral; 33.3% disagreed and 23.3% strongly disagreed.

Table 2 below indicates that aggregate majority of respondents 36(40%) disagreed with the view that *Agberos* are motivated to invade the park and extort money from innocent motorists and other park users. However, 32(35.6%) believed the contrary, while 22(24.4%) are undecided. What this implies is that while some perceive *Agbero* business to be really deleterious to social order in some respects, some others think the phenomenon is also functional for society in some other regards. This thinking must have informed the neutrality of the respondents who sat on the fence over the issue.

The phenomenon of *agbero* causes untold hardship to commuters and residents of Lagos state. Table 2 below 68 (75.5%) agreed that Agberos have the tendency to breach the peace and truncate foreign investment agenda in Lagos state. While 18 (20%) felt differently, 4 (4.4%) remained undecided. This is further reinforced by the outcome of the perception of respondents about the influence of Agberos activities on the social life of Lagos people. Ninety two point two percent agreed that their activities on the social life of Lagos' people are negative while 7.8% said it was positive. The impact of Agberos transcends these, their invasion of parks and highways also have significant implications for small and medium scale investment in the transport subsector. Seventy one (78.9%) of respondents said that their activities discourage the interest of small and medium investors in the transport subsector, 17 (18.9%) disagreed while 2 (2.2%) remained undecided.

On government's effort at controlling the activities of Agberos in Lagos, 63.4% of the respondents adjudged government's effort as manageable or improving. Twenty eight point nine considered it commendable but 7.8% felt it was disappointing. Since the question of Agberos is seen as a social problem, it requires an urgent solution. In this connection, a variety of suggestions were advanced by respondents. While 37.2% of respondents favoured the provision of jobs as the panacea, 18.9% opted for the provision of rehabilitation centres, 17.8% parental care/control, 7.8% recommended incapacitation, 3.9% canvassed for training and retraining, 11.7% supported improvement of security measures and 2.8% said engagement of thugs for advancing political supremacy should be stopped.

Test of hypothesis

From the test of research hypothesis, it was discovered that there is significant relationship between the presence of Agberos at motor parks and absence of social order.

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.262 ^b	1	.609		
Continuity Correction ^a	.000	1	1.000		
Likelihood Ratio	.494	1	.482		
Fisher's Exact Test				1.000	.782
Linear-by-Linear Association	.259	1	.611		
N of Valid Cases	90				

a. Computed only for a 2x2 table

b. 2 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .23.

Interpretation and Decision

From the Chi-square analysis of research hypothesis, it was discovered that Pearson's chi-square value was 3.355 and probability value is greater than 0.05.

Hence, the alternative hypothesis is rejected while the null hypothesis which says that "There is no significant relationship between public perception and Agberos in motor parks" is thus accepted.

Discussions of findings

Contrary to public perception that some are drop outs while majority are illiterates, research shows that about 55% of the respondents have WASC while about 15% have both OND and B.Sc. respectively. This implies that they are not a bunch of illiterates but rational social actors who collect money for their union but in most cases, people consider their mode of operation aggressive.

It was also found out that in maintaining order, Agberos go for seminar once in two months, to receive lectures on how to portray themselves to the people and society at large. As a part of maintenance of order, Agberos prevent their members from picking road side passengers to avoid criminalizing the union and also to give room for proper identification of drivers and buses. They collaborate with law enforcement agents to ensure easy flow of transportation as well.

On the importance of Agberos, a respondent who is also an official of a local government observed:

In addition, the Agberos are always at hand to support government policies and most of them are used as the security vanguard of the government of the day. They also collaborate with government to prevent indiscriminate packing of vehicles on the road by their members or stopping at unauthorized bus stops even when they do that in an aggressive way that tends to overshadow the social utility of their service. They collaborate with government to enforce the policy of not drinking

while driving. In most cases, when some of their members are identified for criminal acts, they hand them over to the police.

On the disadvantageous activities of Agberos in Lagos, another respondent who is also a commuter working on the Lagos Island said:

Some Agberos also misbehave and this gives the public wrong perception concerning others. Some of them involve in smoking, drinking and other criminal activities, such as, pick pocketing, handset snatching, bag snatching, carjacking and robbery.

Conclusion

Obviously, having described who ‘Agberos’ are as well as identified and shed light on the threat their activities constituted to the populace, there is no doubt that ‘Agberos’ give expression to the extent of our society’s socio – economic problem. Youths lack normative orientation that could motivate them to see mainstream traditions as containing values that are capable of being respected with obedience. This way, their behaviour constitutes a threat to the maintenance of social order in the motor parks and even beyond.

‘Agberos’ are mostly boys commonly found at bus stops, motor parks and junctions beside major roads (on the highways). They are otherwise known as “street urchins” (Area boys) both juvenile and adult delinquents who have decided to become a pain in the neck of citizens and the state. In addition, the study reveals that among other activities, ‘Agberos’ also indulge in extortion, robbery, pick-pocketing, inter-gang fights, vandalism, harassment and other frightening vices at bus stops and motor parks. One attribute that respondents condemn about the *Agberos* is their forceful and violent operations that give them away as citizens to be loathed by right thinking members of the society. They constitute threats to security at the parks and hinder investment that would bring meaningful development to the transportation sector and the society in general.

Recommendations

The study proposes the following suggestions as panaceas for the threats which *Agberos* constitute:

- There is need to re-examine our family life and child upbringing practices so as to discover the point at which our values were misunderstood and misapplied to produce the effects that the *Agberos* now display
- Government should stabilise electricity generation so as to stimulate employment creation that will enable youths to channel their energies to productive enterprise.
- The state government should revive and build more rehabilitation centres to equip youths who have embraced the values of *Agberos* with vocational skills.
- The unparalleled gap between the rich and the poor needs to be bridged to foster natural justice, equity and good conscience in the distribution of natural resources.

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TABLE 1

Response	Frequency	Percentage%
The age bracket into which 'Agberos' are likely to fall		
Less than 21yrs	24	26.7
21-30yrs	64	71.1
31-40yrs	2	2.2
Total	90	100
Agbero's activities normally cause traffic problems in Lagos State		
Yes	67	74.4
No	23	25.6
Total	90	100
'Agberos' are noted for the following activities		
Pick-pocketing	5	5.6
Robbery	10	11.1
Election rigging	7	7.8
Street fighting	9	10.0
Vandalism	8	8.9
Extorting money from motorist	23	25.6
Pick-pocketing and robbery	4	4.4
Election rigging and street fighting	4	4.4
All of the above	20	22.2
Total	90	100
The sexes that are actively involved in the Agberos group		
Male	83	92.2
Female	7	7.8
Total	90	100
Economic hardship is an important factor for Agberos' invasion of motor parks and bus stop		
Strongly Agreed	36	40.0
Agreed	10	11.1
Neutral	3	3.3
Disagree	20	22.2
Strongly Disagreed	21	23.3
Total	90	100
Lack of respect for social values causes 'Agbero' activities at bus stops and motor parks		
Strongly Agreed	47	52.2
Agreed	20	22.2
Neutral	1	1.1
Disagree	10	11.1
Strongly Disagreed	12	13.3
Total	90	100
Agberos invade parks and bus stops to meet the financial expectations of their sponsors		
Strongly Agreed	10	11.1
Agreed	25	27.8

Undecided	4	4.4
Disagree	30	33.3
Strongly Disagree	21	23.3
Total	90	100

Source: Field Survey, 2011

TABLE 2

Reference	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Agberos are motivated to invade park & extort money from innocent motorists and other users		
Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agreed	17	18.9
Agreed	15	16.7
Undecided	22	24.4
Disagree	20	22.2
Strongly Disagree	16	17.8
Total	90	100
Agbero's tendency to breach the peace and foreign investment Response		
Strongly Agree	40	44.4
Agree	28	31.1
Undecided	4	4.4
Disagree	12	13.3
Strongly Disagree	6	6.7
Total	90	100%
Agbero activities have socio-economic effect on the social life of Lagos people		
Positively	7	7.8
Negatively	83	92.2
Total	90	100
Governments effort in controlling the activities of area boys in Lagos		
Commendable	26	28.9
Disappointing	7	7.8
Improving	34	37.8
Manageable	23	25.6
Total	90	100
Agberos activities discourage small and medium scale investors' interest in transport sector		
Strongly Agree	33	36.7
Agree	38	42.2
Undecided	2	2.2
Disagree	7	7.8
Strongly Disagree	10	11.1
Total	90	100
Suggestions for solving the problems of agberos		
By providing jobs	33	37.2
Rehabilitation centre	17	18.9
Parental care/control	16	17.8
Imprisonment	7	7.8
Training and retraining	3	3.9

Security measures	11	11.7
Stop using as Political Thugs	3	2.8
Total	90	100

Source: Field Survey, 2011