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## Child Conductors Lagos' Forgotten Children

by Kemi Busari



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# Child Conductors: Lagos Forgotten Children

*From Oshodi to Mushin, Orile, Ojuelega and other streets of Lagos State, child conductors dare to survive in a world of no food, no shelter and no family. **Kemi Busari** captures the weird experiences of these children and brings to fore their plight in a hostile society.*



It is 4 p.m. on a sunny Thursday afternoon. Fifteen-year-old Samuel Dickson voraciously gobbles grains of whitish jollof rice from a black plastic bag which the seller, who now attends to other customers, served him. Having decided to skip school on this day, so as to make enough money, the sacrifice seems to be turning into futility; he has only made N100 since 7 a.m. Seated at the pillars of

the under-construction Lagos-Badagry mass transit rail, the fast movement of his meal explains his worry - he has to get back to work or have himself and brothers sleep on empty stomach.

Across from his sitting position is the Doyin-Orile-Mazamaza-Mille 2 Bus Stop flooded with mini-buses, mostly painted in yellow and adorned by child conductors hanging on its doors, calling on passengers to get a 'full load', which would either earn them N50 or N20, depending on where the driver decides their services end.



Business has been slow this day, but more troubling are the life travails that Dickson had gone through since his journey from Enugu to Lagos in 2014. “I used to live with my grandma in Enugu, but she always beat me and didn’t give me enough food, so anytime my parents or our relatives came to visit, I cried and told them I wanted to go live with my parents. They arranged my journey and I came to Lagos to live with them in 2014,” he started his story in an indifferent tone betraying no emotion.

On arrival, the then 12-year-old was enrolled at Imoru Memorial Primary School, Coker Orile where his brothers studied, but ‘things’ quickly changed for the worse. Soon, the incapability of the father- a trader and mother- a food seller came to the fore. Less than 3 months in Lagos, Daniel started hawking in traffic at Doyin-Orile and later joined the bus-conducting ring when the hawking failed to bring in enough returns.

He recounts his journey, “At first, my mum usually brought home remains of the food she sold for me and my brothers, but she later changed and preferred to keep it in the fridge to sell the next day. It was at this point I decided to locate my father’s shop in Doyin so that my brothers and I could be returning there from school. However, when I got there, there was no shop; I saw him selling slippers in traffic.”

Little Dickson did not let the opportunity pass him by; he, despite the shock, made new friends and by his next visit to his father’s ‘shop’, he already owned his own ‘shop’.

“I started selling sachet water in traffic but the gains were too small. I rarely sold a bag in a day and even if I did, I didn’t make more than N30 as I would have drunk from it while some would have burst in the process of running after vehicles. So, in 2016, I joined some friends here and that’s how I became a bus conductor.

“I make between N100 and N200 and I use it in feeding myself and siblings. It would be late before mum returns from the shop in the night and when she does, she doesn’t bring food for us.”

Dickson’s day is routine; he wakes up in the morning for school and returns to Doyin after school to complete the day as a conductor. He apparently enjoys the freedom fate has gifted him, but still loathes the fact that he doesn’t make enough to feed himself and his brothers. “No matter what you do in this garage, you can never make more than N200 in a day,” he said in a tone of finality.

Over the years, the phenomenon of child conductors has become normal, as the quest for survival rules the city. With a high level of unemployment, a high poverty rate, family breakups and several other socio-economic milieu in the country, innocent children are compelled by fate to take up responsibilities that force them to the street at a tender age. They don’t live; they survive under life-threatening conditions as hawkers, load carriers, beggars and bus conductors.

A typical child conductor in Lagos eats whatever he sees, roams the streets without hope of a permanent abode and takes refuge at night wherever nature permits — sometimes inside an abandoned vehicle, the top of a pedestrian bridge, the frontage of a shop, underneath a flyover or open spaces by roadsides.

Being homeless is like living in a post-apocalyptic world. You're on the outskirts of society. Frank Dillane

— Frank Dillane

### No more school



Twelve-year-old **Basit Sheriff** is the youngest conductor at the Doyin-Orile bus stop. Dressed in dirty shorts and an over-sized polo shirt, the dark-complexioned ‘boy’, as he is fondly called, visibly wears the aura of poverty defined by parental neglect. However, there is more to the story of the Ibadan-born Basit than his physical features.

First, he opted for bus conducting because he ‘loves doing it’ and does not want to continue going to school. Second, and more gnawing, he hates school.

“I make between N150 and N200 in a day. I will help them ‘shadow’ and they will give us a token for that. I started in January 2017 and I have saved up to N500 which I want to use in buying clothes.”

Even though Basit is lucky enough to belong to a nuclear family of 7, with both parents still living together, he would jump at any opportunity to stop schooling and pursue his life dream.

“Currently, I’m a member of Boys Scout, but I don’t want to go to school again; I just want to be a soldier.”

Asked how he intends to be a soldier without formal education, Basit looks away and puts up a ‘what’s-your-problem’ stare. “I just want to be a soldier,” he insists.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Nigeria has 10.5 million out-of-school children, the highest rate (47%) anywhere on earth. Almost 1 out of every 3 primary age children is out of school, and roughly 1 out of 4 junior secondary age children is out of school.

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.

— Nelson Mandela

Lagos child conductors constitute a good percentage of this figure. They live in their own academic world and develop their vocabulary as the society evolves. To a Lagos child conductor, the word ‘shadow’ refers to the act of calling passengers into a bus; ‘Fiber,’ means Naira, while ‘watch’ (often pronounced as ‘wash’) is used to alert the driver to imminent danger.

Basit, though enrolled in a primary school by parents, seems to have found enough education in these words, as he made use of them more often than not while the interview lasted, but why would a 12-year-old boy so detest education?

Mr. Kelani Akeem, a social worker and founder of Out of School Children Empowerment Foundation (OSCEF) blamed the moral decadence on a failing parental system.

“When you see a child at Orile, Mushin or CMS who tells you he doesn’t want to go to school, it tells you something and that is the fact that our parental system is failing. The father and mother are not taking up their responsibilities as they ought to and, immediately, such a child has the opportunity to taste another life out there; the child will discover that the parent has been depriving him or her of a lot of things.

“It starts from feeding, provision of school material, shelter, clothing and other needs. If a child lacks this at home and finds a chance of getting it elsewhere, he joins a new family, which totally changes his orientation and after making money on his own for some time, he doesn’t see a world beyond that again and that is why we have some of them not interested in education.”

### ‘We love it, the way we live our lives’



The atmosphere gave a wrong impression of their life predicaments. **Adeola Wasiu**, 14, and **Daniel Ifaluyi**, 16, provided the beats from a cushioning loose fill obviously dumped along the rail line. Meanwhile **Yusuf Owolabi**, 16, **Afolabi Samson**, 15 and **Azeez Fatai**, 17, the only one who had experienced a fall from a moving bus, hummed loudly the lyrics of a Nigerian song, which connotes that they will get rich soon.

The setting is the notorious under-bridge in Oshodi, Lagos and the characters are children who eke out living as bus conductors. It rained in the morning, thus, the environment remained wet, murky, dirty even at the height of the Friday sunshine but this didn’t deter the ‘Oshodi boys’ from having what could be termed as the only moment of excitement in their day. Some others who appear indifferent to the activities either smoke or in the process of doing so as they wrap with expertise the ‘weed’ into *Rizla*.

They are through with the morning ‘shadow’, hence, the need for a well-deserved moment of gyration before the evening rush of passengers.

### Runaway Yusuf

Popularly called 400, 16-year-old Yusuf Owolabi, the first- child of a polygamous family in Abeokuta, Ogun State left his parent's house a month he couldn't remember in 2016. Events that culminated in how he got the nickname 400 seem more interesting than his present situation.

It was a rainy day in 2016 when a car got stuck in the mud. Yusuf was called to help in pushing the car out of the mud and when the task appeared bigger than his little biceps, he called a friend nearby to help.

“When we finished pushing the car, the man gave me N400 and in order to make more than my friend, I quickly pocketed N200, told him the man gave us N200 which I shared equally,” he narrated hilariously.

Yusuf's antics were not enough to put off his friend, as he insisted the man gave them N400 and would take his fair share of N200. A fight broke out and in the end, he earned the tag of one who fought his friend over N400 and thus, the nickname stuck. Some months later, Yusuf joined the bus conducting ring of Oshodi.

Except in well-recognised car parks, there is no particular initiation or registration process into bus conducting in Oshodi, like other places in Lagos, but Yusuf was not lucky enough on the first outing.

“My friends told me that whenever I see a bus, I should mount the door and call passengers but I didn't stay up to one minute on this bus before the driver sent me away; he said I don't know how to call the bus stops well. I was discouraged and decided to join the load carriers here while I learned the bus stops, and two months later, I finally became a conductor for the Oshodi-Iyana Ipaja buses.”



Yusuf, who confessed he had never gone back home since he left said he makes up to N2000 in a day, an amount which goes for his feeding, savings and smoking. ‘I smoke at least 4 times in a day,’ and when quizzed further on how much he spends on this, ‘like 600,’ he said.

### **Abandoned Daniel**

Yusuf’s story paled significantly when compared to that of Daniel Ifaluyi, a native of Ewotubu in Edo State whose mum abandoned him at 9-months-old, dad at 14-years-old.

“My father is a travel agent so when he wanted to help some people to travel 9-months after my birth, my mum pleaded to be included and that was how she left Nigeria. She never contacted my dad or any relative.”

“My dad took me to her sister in Benin who trained me till I was 9-year-old and after that she told my dad she can no longer continue. I went back to my dad’s house only to meet another wife and two children. At first, I thought she was my mum, but later realised she wasn’t. Things were going fine until last year when my dad decided to travel abroad too.”

“When I was growing up, they usually told me that my mum travelled abroad, and to me, this was a country on its own. I believed this until my father told me before his journey that he was going to Italy and that my mum also went to Italy. He gave me a number to call and he did call like two times; later, the number wasn’t reachable to me or anyone. It became glaring at this point that he played the same prank as my mum.”

A few weeks after his father’s departure, Daniel decided to move on with life; he stole some money, enough to take him to Lagos.

“When I reached Lagos, I saw some boys walking towards here (under a bridge) and approached one of them. We slept in Idi-Oro that night and the following morning, I followed him out, I started working as load carrier. When this seemed not to be bringing in enough, I decided to be a bus conductor last month (April, 2017).”

Daniel, nicknamed Junior due to his small frame, smokes ‘once or twice in a day,’ never saved any part of his earnings because ‘they will beat me and collect it,’ and would want to be a musician or footballer.

Even though their lives are surrounded by jaw-gnashing predicaments, none of the ‘**Oshodi Boys**’ will leave the ‘brotherhood’ for any reason. ‘We love it the way we live together here; it’s far better than what we passed through at home before coming here,’ Daniel concludes as he walks away.

### Adeola The ‘14’ Year Old Veteran



Adeola, Daniel’s first contact when he arrived in Oshodi last year, has been on the job for more than 10 years. Call him the oldest, most experienced of all- you are not mistaken as he sees far beyond the male fold but has the binocular to mirror the life of female street children.

Even though Adeola’s claim of being 14-years-old betrays his looks and character, the strongly built 5-ft native of Abeokuta insisted he was. No amount of questioning will make him say his ‘real age.’

“My mum and dad used to live together but they fight every day and at a point, I think I was 5, mum left. After some months, my dad told me and my siblings he can no longer take care of us, that we should fend for ourselves. That was how I became a child of the street very early,” he says of why he joined the Oshodi Boys.

In a sonorous staccato voice, deepened by the many years of smoking, Adeola described how they sleep, wind up after the day's work and their relationship with Oloshos (women of easy virtue).

“If you want to see them I can take you there; they (females) live in Idi-Oro. Some already have children of whom they don't know their fathers.”

“Females don't do conductors here, but at night, they are commodities to us. If you want to play with them you give them money and you can enjoy yourself for a short time or overnight.”

Investigations revealed that Idi-Oro, Mushin remains a resting point for most of the Oshodi, Mushin, Agege bus conductors. The area prides itself in its provision of open spaces for shelter to street children, several alcohol and marijuana joints, brothels and meeting points for hoodlums.

According to Adeola's account, when it rains, and the open space becomes unshelterable, the best option is to 'go in' with one of the 'commodities.'

“I use to go there after work to wind up the day. There is a woman who rents out mats for N200 and blankets for N150. After renting that, I will negotiate with the girl and we will get down to business till dawn.”

In case any of the girls became pregnant, Adeola who wouldn't want the government to eradicate streetism but provide basic amenities for street children has his plans.

“(if she gets pregnant) I don’t know what will happen oooo. Anything should happen. If I have money, I will cater for the child, but if I don’t, I can’t kill myself; I will just find my way,” he says in a tone that depicts little or no worry for the unborn.

Children conductors like Adeola, Yusuf and others face myriads of life challenges, which include health - nasal congestion, partial blindness, skin irritation, education, abuse and others, but there exists a far more threatening challenge, the quest for survival.

### The N5,000 per head slave trade



Mrs. Ngozi Okoro, the Lagos State Coordinator of Child Protection Network, CPN, a non-Governmental Organization for abused children nationwide, revealed that apart from the dangers of abuses, trafficking and introduction to social vices, Lagos children conductors just like other street children get sold by older urchins popularly called ‘*Area Boys*.’

“They (Area Boys) wait at interstate bus parks and when they see a child alighting unaccompanied, they know he ran away from home. They call them *Osanle*. They put the child somewhere they call guard room and feed him or her. In the morning, people that want to buy the children for different reasons would line up, and one-by-one they would disperse them.”

Mrs. Ngozi recalls her experience with the bigger boys in what she referred to as Old Oshodi before its present face-lifted status.



“I went there with my team on a rescue mission, but it was hard to penetrate their fold, so I and some team members had to speak with some of the Area Boys guarding them. They told us that they will release them at N5,000 per child without a question of what we want to do with them.”

“They also send some of these children back to the village, give them some money and tell them to bring other children with them back to the city. One of the boys we rescued told us how he was being lured from Ijebu Ode to Oshodi in Lagos. He left home due to abuse, and where he sleeps in the market, one of his friends who had been in Lagos offered him and 11 others free transport to Oshodi where they could earn a living. He yielded and on arrival, he was sold to a family in Ilupeju where he later ran away and found himself on the street again.”

Mrs. Ngozi noted that parental separation constitutes a larger percentage in factors that force children out of a home.

“The major factor is a broken home; the father will leave the children, the mother will also abandon them and they will be left at self-mercy or that of wicked step parents who force them out of the home. She advocates for a ‘proper arrangement’ between parents whenever parents choose the divorce.”

“It’s not the fault of the child that you can no longer continue with each other, but the responsibility still lies on you both as the father and the mother. So, you two should as a matter of compulsion see to that before separation.”

### No smoking, no entry – welcome to ‘under’



A story on Lagos children conductors would not be complete without a glimpse into the world of street urchins who operate the CMS-Ajah route of the Island.

“You can’t go there alone, but I will take you there. You have to be very sharp and keep all your gadgets from sight so they won’t ‘obtain’ you,” Sako, an adult conductor cautions the reporter as they approach one of the Shelters under the Falomo-Ikoyi Bridge.

They live, sleep, eat and sometimes fornicate at different make-do shelters along the CMS-Bonny Camp ring road, which has a bad name for harbouring conductors who flirt with a menagerie of social vices ranging from, stealing, thuggery, smoking, waylays, alcoholism to rape.

Popularly called *Under* due to its location (under the Outer Marina bridge), the brick, unplastered, open roof building, not bigger than the size of a standard room house, ‘about 30 of us,’ says 15-year-old Muiyiwa who first approached the reporter on getting there.

“What kind of goods do you want to sell,” he queries, face-lit, partly to the hope of making business and more to prolonged smoking.

‘This phone,’ the reporter replies. ‘How much does it go for?’

After close observation he replies; “it depends on when you need the money. If you leave it with me, I can sell for N12, 000, but if you need money sharp sharp, I can give you N8, 000 for it now.”

He was later excused with the promise that the reporter will get back to him.

Investigations revealed that apart from being conductors, all occupants of *Under* deal in goods and services which earn them extra. The goods include stolen phones, wrist watches, iPads and other gadgets while the outright services include kidnapping and bullying.

However, ‘*Under*’ more than any other shelter in CMS is known for its acceptance criteria, a criterion which posed itself as the first stumbling block for then innocent 17-year-old Lekan when he arrived from Ibadan in 2016.

“I used to be an apprentice barber in Ibadan, but when fortune turned bad for my family, I left home and came here in April 2016. I approached one of them here and he told me I can never be accepted in *Under* because I don’t smoke. Left with no other option, I gave in and instantly got a shelter and people I could call family.

“I have been a bus conductor since then and today, there are two things you can never take away from my life; my conductor job and *Under*. These people are my family; I can’t leave here. Even some people here who have better options of accommodation prefer to stay with us. We high (smoke) together and we own this road.”

The smoking criterion was confirmed by all occupants of *Under* interviewed by this reporter. “If you don’t smoke, you won’t be allowed here,” says another occupant who did not give his name. ‘It’s a tradition that has been over years and you can’t change it,’ he concludes walking away.

Law enforcement agents have over the years become friends to occupants of *Under* as they neither arrest nor caution them on their kind of lifestyle. “They know us and we know them so we don’t get in each other’s way,” says Lekan.

Lekan was right! As this reporter prepares to leave the premises, a policeman walks to the door of *Under* and makes faint friendly conversation with interval gesticulations.

‘He came to ask for *Rizla*,’ Lekan who seeks assistance of funding to establish a barber’s shop says smiling in triumph. ‘You see, I told you, we know them and they know us.’

### **The Child Rights Act**

In July 2003, the National Assembly passed into law the Child Rights Act, a legal document that sets out the rights and responsibilities of a child in Nigeria and provides for a system of child justice administration.

Adopted by Lagos State on 2007, the law, an offshoot of the United Nations, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and African Union, AU Charter on the Rights of the Child (CRC) outlines the human rights to be respected and protected for every child under 18 years and requires that these rights be implemented.

Section 30 (1) of the act states that no person shall buy, sell, hire, dispose of or obtain possession of or otherwise deal in a child and (2) b; makes it clear that a child shall not be used as a slave or for the practices similar to slavery such as sale or trafficking of the child.

The implication of this passage ordinarily would mean that children are well protected and a breach of such act attracts a punishment of fine of two hundred and fifty thousand Naira, but one wonders how the trend of child conducting is still on, perhaps on the increase on Lagos roads.



Attempts at getting the reaction of the State Chairman of National Union of Road Transport Workers, NURTW, Alhaji Tajudeen Agbede proved abortive as several visits and follow-up to a letter submitted at his office went unanswered

“The Chairman said he is not interested in speaking with you,’ the Secretary Tijani Omowumi told this reporter on the third visit.”

The union’s Deputy State Secretary, Paul Oginni, in a telephone interview said that Lagos NURTW does not condone the use of children as conductors and to that end has retribution measures against erring drivers.

“Apart from domestic laws, the Union recognises international laws that prohibit child labour and we respect them.”

“We have our patrol always on the road and at the same time we have the monitoring committee. Wherever a child is spotted on a bus, we normally arrest the driver and delay him for hours thereby disrupting his day’s plan. No driver would want to be delayed for hours so they also cooperate. Maybe those you (the reporter) see are JJC (new comers).”

Asked about the specific age set by the Union for bus conductors, Oginni said, “If you want to be a bus conductor in Lagos, you must not be below the age of 17-18-years-old.”

On the other hand, the Lagos State Government through the office of the Environmental and Special Offences Enforcement Unit (Task Force) said it is doing its all to rid the road of children conductors as well as other street children.

The Chief Public Affairs Officer of the Task Force Adebayo Taofeek noted that the Task Force works hand in hand with the NURTW in enforcing the Lagos State road traffic law of 2012, which prohibits the employment of under aged transport workers.

“The Task Force works in tune with the NURTW. We hold occasional meetings with the officers and drivers to enlighten them on the content of the law.

“Also, with the enforcement of the environmental law, we arrest miscreants and often times, they are under-aged conductors. Particularly around Oshodi, Obalende and Pen Cinema, when we arrest anyone below 18, we screen them through our liaison office and refer them to Lagos because you can’t send an under-aged to jail. They go there for counselling and rehabilitation.”

### **‘Lagos roads need no conductors’**

On the 21st of June, 2016, Lagos State Governor, Mr. Akinwunmi Ambode after signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the City of Dubai to turn Lagos into a smart city, said the deal was ‘a deliberate attempt by us to establish a strong convergence between technology, economic development and governance.’

He said: “The MOU is between Lagos State Government and Dubai Holdings, LLC, owners of Smart City (Dubai) to develop sustainable, smart, globally connected knowledge-based communities that drive knowledge economy. A Smart-City Lagos will be the pride of all Lagosians just as we have Smart City Dubai, Smart-City Malta and Smart-City Kochi (India).”

To achieve this feat, especially in the area of transportation, Lagos roads need no conductor, child or adult, posits Prof. Samuel Odewumi, Head, School of Transportation, Lagos State University.

The don prescribes a model which will totally eradicate the use of bus conductors and reduce traffic gridlock on major roads.

“The conductors perform three major roles that can be substituted with proper planning; they call in passengers, collect transport fare to allow drivers to focus on driving and help passengers identify their destinations.

“For the first role, you don’t need a conductor to shout at the top of his voice to call passengers. What we need is a banner or electronic notice by the side or on top of the bus that will directly tell the passengers instantly where the bus is heading to. We can employ the ticketing method and later, the use of cards for money collection; lastly, an electronic visual and sound system inside a bus should occasionally remind passengers of the next bus stop. That is the only way we can reduce the nuisance caused by conductors on the road and eradicate the use of under-aged children.”

On rehabilitation of children already into transportation work as conductors, Prof. Oduwumi prescribed a flexible model which will transform them into skilled individuals over a period of time.

“The government should not try to take them off the street immediately. First, visit and pay off one of their days in a week, teach them some things in the area of affective domain. Talk to them, give them new orientation, hope and then ask them what the government could do for them to take them off buses.”

“From there, you can increase it to two days and based on their responses, hold skill acquisition programmes in just the two days. Don’t tamper with the freedom they enjoy in the remaining days yet. After a year, reward the good ones and make it a sustained policy. They will see it as a hope lifter and before long, many will key into the programme.”

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