

“AGBERO” REPUBLIC: TOUTS AND CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES IN KARU LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF NASARAWA STATE

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Abstract

The paper examined touts activities and the nature of crime in Karu Local Area of Nasarawa State. The study adopted survey research design and purposive sampling procedure to select informants from Mararaba under bridge and Masaka U-turn in Karu Local Government Area of Nasarawa State. In-depth-interview was the instrument used for information gathering which was analyzed non-numerically using content analysis. Findings from this study show that touts activities are usually disruptive in the study area; they usually attack their victim with different weapons and cart away their belongings. The paper concluded that, touts activities has severely disrupt security state as well as sky-rocketed crime such as: looting, killings, raping, thuggery, street violence, pick pocketing among others in Karu Local Government Area. The paper recommended investigation of touts activities and arrest, rehabilitating and harnessing the touts for productive activities as well as community collaboration as a way of controlling and preventing criminal activities by touts in the area.

Keywords: “Agbero” Touts, Crime and Criminal Activities.

Introduction

Touts (Agberos) are now rampant all over the cities in Nigeria. Their favorite hangouts are bus stops, major highways, motor parks 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 touts 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).

Omomia (2015) also noted that these social miscreants have positioned themselves as anti-social agents as they continue to work against the complete wellbeing of the citizens as a whole and the state in particular. Some of the criminal activities of the social miscreants range from outright killing to disruption of commercial life. They are also a threat to the law abiding citizens of the state. These social miscreants constituted themselves into social menace as they get involved in all forms of criminal activities. It is also argued that some of these miscreants have access to weapons and other types of instruments of oppression which are abused as they unleash their evil and wicked activities on innocent citizens.

Touts also refer to as “Agberos” are loosely organized gangs of street children and teenagers, composed mostly of males (but with few females), who roam the streets 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 (Morgan, 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 Touts (*Agberos*) who claim to be workers operating under the aegis of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW). This paper therefore examines the activities of Touts in Karu Local Government Area of Nasarawa State.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the activities of touts on criminal activites in Karu Local Government Area of Nasarawa State. The specific objectives are to:

- i. Investigate the nature of tout's activities in Mararaba under bridge and Masaka in Karu Local Area of Nasarawa State.
- ii. Investigate the role of touts on the state of insecurity in Karu Local Government Area of Nasarawa State.
- iii. Examine the perception of residents towards Touts activities around Mararaba under bridge and Masaka junction in Karu Local Government of Nasarawa State.

Literature Review

The word “Agberos” generally paints the picture of Touts, or thugs who forcefully extort money from commercial motorcycle riders and commercial bus workers at garages, bus stops and major highways. These Touts (*Agberos*) 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. It is because of these activities that they were tagged “Agbero” a Yoruba word carved out of the sentence “a gbaero” 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 (Aremu, 2010).

They 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. In the views of Ayodele (2012), Touts (*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 touts ‘Agberos’ that they are better than armed robbers who dispossess travelers of their money and valuables on the roads. This further compounds the vagueness of the concept of Touts ‘Agberos’ because they also maintained that they are organized and operate under a recognized union and so they are not touts (Bologi, 2009).

According to Salawu (2009) and Lana (2011), the pull created by unemployment has pushed many individuals into forming gangs usually referred to as ‘Agbero,’ whose activities revolve around the streets, bus stops, market, motor parks and especially, the

transport corridors. This gang around motor parks most times claimed they are working for the government especially the local government authorities. Realistically, most of these Touts (Agbero) work for their Godfathers, Union Chairmen and Garrison politicians. Momoh (2000) and Ikuomola (2011) added that, the activities of touts are characterized by incessant fights over loading rights in the street, bus stops, motor parks (transportation corridors) and business districts.

Similarly, the malevolent character of touts and the destructive goals of their members, as revealed by their atrocity in the urban areas are noted for the destruction of public peace. These atrocities are not only increasing in proportion but are lethally more devastating and sophisticated in organization. Reports of dastard acts such as: looting, killing, raping, acid bathing, thuggery, exhortation, property destruction and stealing have become more rampant among touts in the metropolis. Available police statistics report revealed in most Nigeria print and electronic media shows a strong association between touts activities and violence associated with criminal acts in most urban centres.

Adisa (1995) explained further that the young touts (agberos') are not wealthy like their masters but many claims that it pays well. Their lifestyle confirms this opinion. 'Agberos' live extravagantly; they are a unique sight to behold at motor parks at lunch hour. At the various parks visited by Adisa, it was noticed that they buy expensive bush meat, turkey and stock fish (expensive delicacies for a Nigerian meal), as well as costly food items, often pounded yam, from the plethora of hawkers and food vendors at the motor park. To aid digestion they order bottles of big stout (Odeku) or Guilder beer (the Ultimate). Touts are profligates, spending as much as 300 naira for a meal including about 250 naira on meat alone. At night they retire to local bars, brothels and restaurants

to enjoy the company of commercial sex workers. They also indulge in hard drugs, alcohol and cigarettes.

The sentiment is not shared by other users of motor parks. Most drivers and passengers perceive the touts as both menaces and parasites. They hold them responsible for the hikes in prices that motorists pass on to commuters and accuse them of terrorizing the park, prompting, encouraging and indulging in acts of violence. Indeed touts even collect weekend fees ‘Owo Ose’ and other fees for festivals such as Easter, Christmas or Muslim holidays such as Id-el-Fitri and so on. At other times, they steal luggage under the pretext that they are carrying it into vehicles. Their activities and the rowdy sub-culture they promote in parks also serve as cover for pick pocketing and thieves operating in the park. Some see touts and criminals as operating in concert. Besides, master touts often double as master rogues, with a ‘dual mandate’, confirming their general status as ‘lords of the park’ (Adisa, 1995).

The term crime on the other hand, derived from the Latin word “crimen”, meaning offence and also wrong-doer. On the bases of this understanding, a public wrong is a crime which makes it an injury to the state even though the victim of the crime is an individual. Crime according to Marshall and Clark (1900/1952) in Smah, (2014) “is any act or omission prohibited by public law for the protection of the public, and made punishable by the state in a judicial proceeding in its own name.” It is a public wrong, as distinguished from a mere private wrong or civil injury to an individual.

Flowing still on the basis of law, crime is any action which contravenes the laws established by a political authority (Giddens, 2001). While Alubo, (2012) in a similar vein opined that crime is concerned with acts which are found in the law books,

forbidden by the state and derived mostly from higher norms. From these understandings, it can be deduced that, crime is held to be an offence which goes beyond the personal and into the public sphere, breaking prohibitory rules or laws, to which legitimate punishments or sanctions are attached and which requires the intervention of a public authority (the state, or a local body).

Theoretical Framework

The paper reviews and applied the sub-cultural theory to the phenomenon under study. A Sub-culture is a group that has values that are different to the mainstream culture. The Sub-cultural theory emerged from the work of the Chicago School on gangs; developed through the symbolic interactionist school into a set of theories. The theory argued that, certain groups or subcultures in society have values and attitudes that are conducive to crime and violence. As such deviance is the result of whole groups breaking off from society who have deviant values (subcultures) and deviance is a result of these individuals conforming to the values and norms of the subculture to which they belong.

In contrast to Social Control theorists, it is the pull of the peer group that encourages individuals to commit crime, rather than the lack of attachment to the family or other mainstream institutions. Sub-cultural theory also helps explain non-utilitarian crimes such as vandalism and joy riding which strain theory cannot really explain. Deviance is a collective response to marginalization.

Furthermore, Cohen (1989) argued that many boys react to this by rejecting socially acceptable values and patterns of acceptable behavior, because there are several boys going through the same experiences, they end up banding together and forming delinquent subcultures. This delinquent subculture reverses the norms and values of

mainstream culture, offering positive rewards (status) to those who are the most deviant. Status may be gained by being malicious, intimidating others, breaking rules or the law and generally causing trouble. This pattern of boys rejecting mainstream values and forming delinquent subcultures first starts in school and then becomes more serious later on, taking on the form of truancy and possibly gang membership.

Cloward & Ohlin (1997) develop Cohen's sub cultural theory, expanding the argument of the theory to explain why different types of subculture emerge in different regions. They suggest that the 'illegitimate opportunity structure' affects what type of subculture emerges in response to status frustration – The varied social circumstances in which working-class youth live give rise to three types of delinquent subculture.

1. Criminal Subcultures are characterized by utilitarian crimes, such as theft. They develop in more stable working class areas where there is an established pattern of crime. This provided a learning opportunity and career structure for aspiring young criminals, and an alternative to the legitimate job market as a means of achieving financial rewards. Adult criminals exercise social control over the young to stop them carrying out non-utilitarian delinquent acts – such as vandalism – which might attract the attention of the police.

2. Conflict subcultures emerge in socially disorganized areas where there is a high rate of population turnover and a consequent lack of social cohesion. These prevent the formation of stable adult criminal subcultures. Conflict subcultures are characterized by violence, gang warfare, 'mugging' and other street crime. Both approved and illegal means of achieving mainstream goals are blocked or limited and young people express

their frustration at this situation through violence or street crime, and at least obtain status through success in sub cultural peer-group values. This is a possible explanation for the gang culture which is increasingly appearing in run down areas of the UK, and possibly explains the UK riots of 2011.

3. Retreatist subcultures emerge among those lower class youth who are ‘double failures’ – they have failed to succeed in both mainstream society and in the crime and gang cultures above. The response is a retreat into drug addiction and alcoholism, paid for by petty theft, shoplifting and prostitution.

Methodology

Mararaba and Masaka in Karu local government area of Nasarawa State is the study location. Information utilized for this study was gathered through primary source. The research design adopted for the study is survey; the study engaged qualitative methods of information gathering. Key-Informant Interview (KII) was used as the qualitative method instrument of information gathering. A total number of twelve (12) persons (six (6) from Mararaba under bridge and six from Masaka round-about) were interviewed (four touts, four street hawkers and four Mararaba and Masaka residents); The interviewees were selected using purposive sampling technique based on age, resident status, duration of stay in the area of study, experience and knowledge on the phenomenon under study in the area. The information was analyzed non-numerically using content analysis.

Analysis and Discussion of Major Finding

The discussion begins with an enquiry of the informants experience on touts activities and operations in their area. As expected, the informants narrated how touts activities

started like a neglected seed that have grown with many branches signifying their various criminal activities and operations which are usually brutal without human face and fear of any security operative other than the Nigerian army. One of the Key-informants expressed his experience of touts activities and operations in his area in the following light:

This whole touts activities and operations in Karu Local Government state is as old as Local government itself; I'm sixty (60+) plus and have lived in Karu Local Area for over twenty-five (25) years now to let you know how long this touts activities have started. It started like just motor park activities but it is bigger than that now; like a neglected seed that grown into an iriko tree, these guys are involved in virtual all kinds of criminal activities known to man with the back-ups and support of politicians who are the main area fathers or touts leaders.

The interview section then proceeded to what the informants have experienced as the mode of operations of these touts; to that effect, four (4) out of the twelve (12) interviewed informants stressed that, the mode of their operations are usually disruptive and divers like a war tough zone. They attack their victims with different weapons and cart away their belongings. In another form, they kidnap and demand for ransom which equally has a devastative and psychological effect on their victims and their love ones. Three of the interviewed informants further stressed that, either robbing, kidnapping, thuggery, park touts (Agbero), cult activities and so on. None of their mode of operation is subtle with human face; they are all disruptive and deadly.

Furthermore, on what they think trigger and encourage touts activities in their respective areas; the informants opined that, what trigger and encourage their activities and operations are not different since these guys operate in network. The quest for cheap

fame and riches is the probable factor that triggers their activities and operations according to the informants. The politicians who are their “area fathers” are further encouraging them to deepened their touts activities and operations in their various locations and activities. One of the informants paints the situation thus:

These guys do not operate in vein and wholly on their own. Love for materialism without patience, ‘the get rich quick’ syndrome ‘are the various triggering factors. The politicians are the other catalyst and encouragers of these guys who use them for all their dirty political jobs. The park activities are just a mere cover up.

On the implications or impacts of all these activities and operations on the residents of their areas; the informants asserted that, it is highly frustrating and devastating. These guys have instilled fear on residents in their areas; the fact that they operate without fear or recourse to the law and security operative is further disheartening leading to residents’ loss of trust on the security agents. They further stressed that, touts’ activities and operations have led to several losses of lives and property which are swept under the carpet under the guise of investigations.

All their activities and operations have though been welcomed with several government deployed measures to curbing and combating their activities which according to them are not effective and efficient to curbing touts menace in the state. The challenge to curbing touts’ activities and operations rest on whether the politicians using this touts for their various dirty political works and activities will give the measures the necessary political will and vigor to be effective, efficient and result oriented.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is the conclusion of this paper that touts activities has severely disrupt security state as well as sky-rocket the rate of crime in Karu Local Government Area; crime such as:

looting, killing, raping, thuggery, exhortation, street violence, pick pocketing among others that most of the residents have fell victim of, are the various crime or criminal activities that looms in Mararaba and Masaka areas in Karu Local Government Area. Unfortunately, the deployed measures or mechanism thus far adopted by the appropriate authorities to combating the menace of touts' activities in the selected study areas are highly ineffective since their activities are increasing in all proportion despite the mechanism deployed to combat the dastardly act. This could be as a result of poor or improper implementation or ineffective adopted measures in the first place. Attitude of the residents of these areas are compounded with constant fear, unrest and insecurity due to these touts' activities.

The paper therefore suggests the following recommendations based on the major findings from this study:

- i. Community collaboration or joint community based efforts should be deployed; forming a strong synergy with the various security operatives especially the Nigerian police and Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) to effectively checkmate touts activities and operations in the area.
- ii. Arrested touts of any criminal activities should first be prosecuted and transformed through vocational and other survival skills; thereby redirecting their energy to positive and productive ventures. In the same vein, unrepentant touts should be dealt with using capital punishment instruments which will in the long run serve as deterrence strategy for other touts operating in the areas.
- iii. Law enforcement officials as well as politicians who aid and abate the

activities of these touts in the study area through the collection of returns and other inducement packages should be thoroughly investigated and brought to book; and appropriately dealt with to ensure the out-right eradication of touts operations which has triggered various crime and criminal activities in the area.

iv.

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