

Mobile bodies of meaning: city life and the horizons of possibility*

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ABSTRACT

Despite their centrality to the rhythm and practice of everyday urban life, there are, surprisingly, few studies on commercial minibus-taxis as a microcosm of city life in Africa, especially its precarious materiality. Using the trademark yellow minibus-taxis (*danfos*) in Lagos as a frame of reference, this paper explores what an interpretative analysis of the slogans that *danfo* workers paint on their vehicles can tell us about the city in which they weave their routine existence, especially the hopes, fears and actual material circumstances which informed their unique choice of slogans. Foregrounding the *danfos* as mobile bodies of meaning, the article finds that slogans not only reflect the lived realities of *danfo* workers, but are themselves vital means through which these workers get by, define their identity and expand their horizons of possibility.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, commercial minibus-taxis, of poor quality and run by rag-tag workers, have been central to Africa's urban transportation network and the economy. Known as *danfo* in Lagos, *matatu* in Nairobi, *daladala* in Dar es Salaam, *tro tro* in Accra, *kombi* in Johannesburg and *esprit de mort* ('death spirit')¹ in Kinshasa, we find these oft-dilapidated and privately owned minibus-taxis in most developing cities where there is a vibrant informal economy and a growing public need.

* I am grateful to Professor Abdul Raufu Mustapha of the Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford and three anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments.

In Lagos, Nigeria's commercial nerve centre and Africa's largest city, the roads are teeming with around 75,000 *danfos* with a carrying capacity of between 8 and 25 passengers. These *danfos* are organised into two major unions: the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) and the Road Transport Employer's Association of Nigeria (RTEAN). Over 16 million inhabitants of Lagos ('Lagosians') use *danfos* daily, constituting around 20% of their disposable income (World Bank 2014). Beyond their functionality, the *danfos* afford dynamic spaces of mutual exchange, interaction, production and consumption. They are spaces of, and forms for, everyday conversations where humour alternates with pathos, and dreams coexist with existential angst: angst about the violent extortion of motor-park touts (*agberos*) and traffic police officers (*askaris*), angst about growing poverty and inequality, and angst about the permanent failure of public transport. During the course of my fieldwork, for example, some of my most meaningful insights into daily life in Lagos came from spontaneous 'focused group discussions' inside the tight spaces of *danfos*. In fact, the slogans on the *danfos* are themselves an effective way to initiate conversations inside a *danfo*.

Despite their importance to the rhythm and practice of everyday urban life, there are, surprisingly, few studies on minibus-taxis as a microcosm of city life in Africa, especially its resourcefulness, astute capacity and precarious materiality. Informed by theoretical conceptions of space as a complex social construction (Lefebvre 1996), and spatial practices as tactical in nature (De Certeau 1984), my goal in this article is to explore what an interpretative analysis of the ubiquitous slogans that *danfo* workers² in Lagos paint on their vehicles can tell us about the city in which they weave their routine existence, especially the fears, hopes and actual material circumstances which may have informed their unique choice of slogans. Taking the *danfos* as 'mobile bodies of meaning' (Mungai 2013), I find that *danfo* slogans do not only reflect the lived realities of *danfo* workers, but are themselves vital ways through which these workers get by, define their identity, and expand their horizons of possibility.

METHODOLOGY

The study results from 8 months of ethnographic fieldwork (2014–15) in Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital and Africa's largest city. The fieldwork was conducted in contested transit spaces (such as

motor-parks, bus stops, junctions and highways) in two local government areas (LGAs): Oshodi and Alimosho. Oshodi was selected because of its role as the central terminus for both intra-city and inter-city transport in Lagos. Prior to its radical facelift in 2007, under the controversial urban renewal strategy of the Lagos state government, Oshodi was widely regarded as the most radical urban condition on the planet (Probst 2012: 139), a ‘living stage where a collage of scenes is acted and played out without a script’ (Aradeon 1997: 51). Alimosho, on the other hand, is the largest LGA in Lagos, with more than 2 million residents. The area is predominated by the *egbados* (*yewa*), a sub-set of the much larger Yoruba ethnic group in Lagos. Oshodi and Alimosho are both notorious for their massive traffic gridlocks (aka ‘go-slows’ or ‘hold-ups’), complicated by a never-ending tug of war implicating drivers, conductors, commuters, touts, hawkers and traffic police inspectors.

Unlike Walter Benjamin’s (1929) *flaneur*, the detached observer of modern city life, I entered into the workaday world of *danfo* workers by means of what Spittler (2001) calls ‘thick participation’. To wit: I did a two-month stint as a *danfo* conductor in a busy motor-park in Oshodi, plying the Oshodi–Ikotun route. As an apprentice of the driver, my core duties involved ‘going along’, calling for passengers, announcing bus stops, collecting bus fares, attending union meetings and negotiating the monetary demands of touts and traffic inspectors on the road. During this time, I experienced firsthand the countless unreceipted ‘settlements’ that drivers had to make to various groups of touts on the road, and the violence administered to defiant ones. In two months, for example, I witnessed first-hand the violent death of four *danfo* drivers at the hands of touts due to disputes over the extra-legal *owo load* (money for loading passengers). Besides, I also experienced the sheer daily demands on conductors, especially the ability to multitask: holding money, counting change, opening and closing doors, attending to passengers, and watching the driver’s blind spot – many *danfos* are without functioning gadgets. Amidst all of this, I had to be always alert to potential passengers on the roadside; to discern when to lean out of the door and call passengers and when to shut the door to avoid heavy fines by traffic police officers; and the tactic of ‘no shaking’ (hiding fear) in the face of menacing shouts of *owo da?* (‘Where is the money?’) by battle-ready touts on the road. I also learned to develop a ‘thick skin’ in the face of various abuses from rude passengers with preconceived ideas of *danfo* conductors as *con-*ductors, out to shortchange them. In short, throughout fieldwork, I was always aware of my precarious position as a researcher navigating

a transgressive space, as well as the widespread stigma attached to being a *danfo* worker.

When I was not on duty in the motor-parks or bus stops, I joined Lagosians by the crowded roadsides where nearly every inch has been appropriated by a vibrant informal market amidst a failure of urban planning. As an official in the Kick Against Indiscipline (KAI) complained to me: 'In Lagos, people will just see space and decide to occupy it as if it is their father's property.' Notably, the boundaries between motor-parks and markets are often so blurred that you can hardly tell where one ends and the other starts. This blurred boundary tends to expand the extortion rackets of touts who now tax not just *danfo* workers but street hawkers peddling their goods inside the motor-parks. Often without a start-up loan to rent rather expensive retail spaces, petty traders – such as hawkers of *paraga* (a local alcohol) – often set up collapsible kiosks by the roadside, while itinerant vendors cash in on the go-slows to adroitly weave in and out of traffic to sell their goods. There is a baffling mobility amid the go-slow: drivers pull in their side-view mirrors to squeeze through incredibly tight spaces, mobile street hawkers move between stranded yellow *danfos*. The *okadas* (motorbike-taxis) weave magically through the gaps as their passengers hang on for dear life. All this makes navigating Lagos an art of improvisation and a lesson in staying vigilant.

With my digital camera-cum-recorder, I was able to capture the hyper-visibility and soundscapes of Lagos, transforming this overloaded space into practical and relational existence by dint of 'rhythmanalysis' (Lefebvre 2004). Henri Lefebvre (2004: 15) argues that wherever place, time and energy interact, there is rhythm. This triad of time-space-energy has its ultimate reference not just in the living body, as Lefebvre (2004: 67) argues, but also in the vessels moving those living bodies on a daily basis. Following Lefebvre (2004: 87), therefore, *public space* is a temporalized space. Here, I understand public spaces (such as motor-parks, bus stops and junctions/roundabouts) as embodying a multiplicity of publics and counter-publics (Mustapha 2012). During fieldwork, I was able to capture the syncopated cries of street hawkers, the yelling *danfo* conductors calling out their destinations, the touts shouting *owo da? Owo da?* (Where is money? Where is money?), the impatient bleats of car horns, the noise of market women trying to 'fix' a price, the infernal noise of music from beer parlours, and hordes of people locked in ceaseless motion. All this overloading forms an aspect of not just the environment but of the 'culture' of Lagos itself (Mbembé 2001: 247).

The study draws on 312 eclectic slogans randomly collected from the bodies of *danfos*. The analysis of these mobile tableaux was informed by unstructured interviews and ethnographic hanging out with *danfo* workers and passengers. These were then supported by cumulative observations drawn from my long residence in Lagos and my experience as a *danfo* user. Some of the slogans were so cryptic in meaning that it was only by questioning the owners that I could discover the context of the text, thereby forestalling potential bias in textual interpretation. However, on a few occasions, I was unable to directly question the owners since I collected the slogans from moving *danfos*. While this goes down as a limitation of this study, it is instructive to note that lexico-semantic meanings (i.e. popular arts like slogans) are fluid and never entirely under the owner's control. As Karin Barber (1987: 4) argues, texts often generate 'surplus' meanings that transcend, even subvert, the purported intentions of the work. So conceived, I derived intersubjective meaning from the various insights offered by other *danfo* workers and passengers, who frequently commented on the *danfo* slogans, resisted them, joked about them, or expressed their personal preferences for one over another. It is important to note that the use of a qualitative ethnographic approach in this study is a deliberate attempt to give voice and visibility to *danfo* workers who typically struggle with a stigmatised identity, and who continue to be anonymised in many studies that depend on statistical surveys and randomised control trials.

THE MORPHOLOGIES OF DANFOS

Automobiles have a history of neglect as objects of ethnography in their own right. This lacuna inspired Kopytoff's (1986: 67) call for an ethnographic inquiry into the 'cultural biography' of cars because of their potential to reveal a wealth of 'cultural data'. Since this call, scholars have investigated the role of vehicles as instruments of African colonisation (Gewald *et al.* 2009), expressions of popular culture (Miller 2001), and hybrid environments for the discourse of identity, faith and social vision (Klaeger 2009). In Lagos, as in much of urban Africa, vehicles are not only commodities of modernity but also powerful symbols of class differentiation. In fact, the vehicle you drive in Lagos often determines how 'big' you are: whether you're *olowo* (rich) or *mekunu* (common man). The popular view is that owning or driving a car, even if rented or rickety, makes you (feel) important (*eniyan pataki*). By contrast, the expressions 'legedisbenz' (a parody of Mercedes

Benz) is often used to taunt poor Lagosians who commute regularly on foot. *Tie da?* ('Where is yours?') is a common *danfo* slogan (usually directed as an insult from a driver to a passenger) reflecting the pride in owning a car, even when it is hired. In short, a certain power is inherent in the driver's control of the vehicle and in a sense makes him a 'privileged citizen' (Lawuyi 1988; see also Quayson 2014). The importance of automobiles is also evident in the fact that when a *danfo* driver is reluctant to 'settle' touts on the way, the first action taken by these touts is to cause damage to the body of the *danfo*: they will pull out screen wipers, remove fuel covers, detach seats, or smash side-view mirrors.

In terms of form, *danfos* are generally fashioned out of Mercedes 911, Bedford or Volkswagen chassis and engines derived from second-hand buses (*tokumbo*) imported from Europe, around which the steel frame is constructed. Constructing the body of a *danfo* is very much a hybrid process: local craftsmen build a new body around an imported chassis, which is then creatively decorated by local painters with the state-authorized yellow and black colours, according to what Osinulu (2008) calls a tactic of 'subversion by interpretation'. In a way, this whole process reflects the condition of cultural production in the postcolonial and networked world, a condition wherein local users take an imported idea and convert it into a productive cultural vehicle. Finally, the form of *danfos* tends to conform to the slogans painted on them. For example, rickety *danfos* often bear slogans like: *e still dey go* ('It is still going'), 'God is in Control', 'No Shaking', 'Tested and Trusted', 'Experience is the Best Teacher', 'All that Glitters is not Gold.' In contrast, newer-looking *danfos* generally bear slogans like 'Lagos to London', 'Land Cruiser', 'Voda Foam' (a local mattress) and 'Paradise.'

In Lagos, *danfos* are also spaces for petty trading and religious conversion of souls. Typically, petty traders will secure a seat space at the front of the *danfo*, and as the *danfo* makes its way out of the motor-park, they will get up, clear their throat, and begin to peddle their products to commuters who are usually 'packed like sardines' ('full loading' as the *danfo* workers call it). All of daily life's necessities are on sale inside the *danfo*: from health care (*agbo jedi* – medicine for piles) to household (*ogun ekute* – rat poison) products. There is plenty of time for the trader to peddle his goods since the *danfo* journey is generally dotted with go-slows – a journey of 20 minutes can take up to 2 hours! Despite their relatively cheap prices, these goods are touted as working instant wonders. The sales gimmicks and 'sweet mouth' of traders, along with their unbeatable comedian wit, ensures that a good number of passengers exchange their money for goods before they alight. As the trader takes his seat, a

preacher seizes the moment. ‘My people, God has sent me to you to bring you good news. This year is your year of financial breakthrough! From today onwards I command the curse of poverty in your life to die. Can I hear Amen?’ The chorus of ‘Amen’ is usually emphatic. In a city dominated by poverty and scarcity, a doctrine of prosperity sells.

RIDING ON SLOGANS

A crucial aspect of *danfo* culture in Lagos is the slogans painted on them, both in English and vernaculars. These mobile arts reflect the life histories, expectations, fears and principles guiding the daily lives of *danfo* workers. They thus embody and mirror the simultaneous threat, resource and possibility of city life (Simone 2010), involving Lagosians in ‘operations of the productive imaginations’ (Mbembe 2001: 159). *Danfo* slogans form an integral part of Lagos life, imbuing the city with meaning, purpose and humour. As one commuter told me: ‘I can’t even imagine Lagos without its yellow *danfos* and their funny slogans. Sometimes I am in a bad mood and I see a funny slogan that makes me laugh and cheers me up. My two favourite slogans of all time are “No Time to Die” and “Time is Money Don’t Waste it on Bargaining.”’ Other commuters describe how the slogans on a *danfo* influence their decision on which *danfo* to (not) take every day. As one market woman in Ikotun said to me: ‘When I see a *danfo* slogan like “Relax: God is in Control” or “Be not Afraid”, I feel good about entering it because I feel protected. I feel like the driver really trusts in God’s powers, not his own abilities. I hate some of the useless ones like “Fresh Boy” or “Super Star”. What is that?’ An analysis of slogans therefore offers insights into how *danfo* workers develop a unique competitive edge through their choice of slogans.

Structure wise, most *danfo* slogans are short and pithy phrases. For example: ‘Trust Nobody’, ‘No Shaking’, *aiye mojuba* (‘I respect the world’ – see Figure 1). Several slogans draw on local proverbs (*ise l’oogun ise* – ‘Work is the medicine for poverty’), holy texts (‘No Food for Lazy Man’), or everyday street slangs (*jeun soke* – ‘eat up’). Other slogans tend to recycle popular Nigerian songs (*eko’ gbagbere* – ‘Lagos does not tolerate sluggish people’), *adara* (‘It will get better’) or *seun rere* (‘do good’). A great many slogans are multilingual, using a creative blend of pidgin or a combination of the dominant languages in Nigeria (Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo). For instance, the slogan *wa-zo-bia* strings together the Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo words for ‘come’. This is the owner’s own way of saying all are welcome in his *danfo*.



Figure 1 *Aiye Mojuba* [‘I Respect the World’]. Photo by author.

The diversity of *danfo* slogans reaffirms the plurality of Lagos, a ‘no man’s land’ where myriad cultures and variegated subjectivities intersect and generate cultural ripples across the world. Even within the prescribed anonymity of state legislated yellow and black paint schemes for *danfos*, and despite their sheer numbers on the road, workers still find ways of expressing their unique identity through not only the creative ways in which they paint their *danfos* (Osinulu 2008), but also their choice of slogans. The Lagos State Road Traffic Law (LSRTL) of 2012 prohibits the use of marks, stickers, painting and photos on commercial vehicles (LSRTL 2012: 7). Yet, the Lagos State Signage and Advert Agency (LSSAA) have failed to enforce the ban on the use of slogans, underlining the *danfos* as transgressive spaces for resistance.

The expressions of individual identity through slogans may be interpreted as a tactical means of resisting the many spiritual forces against which *danfo* workers struggle on a daily basis. For example, whenever the term *aiye* (the world) is used in slogans, it is usually in recognition of enemies (*ota*) of one's progress (*aiye nreti eleya mi* – 'The world awaits my failure'). For this reason, *aiye* is a superior that must be supplicated (*aiye e ma binuwa* – 'World have mercy on us') and respected (*aiye mojuwa* – 'I respect the world') lest our destiny be altered (*aiye e ma pa kadara* – 'World, don't alter our fate'). Many *danfo* owners believe that forces, named or unknown, are conspiring against their good. Their palpable fears are not surprising if we consider that vehicle ownership represents wealth, giving rise to envy from one's enemies. During the course of my fieldwork, many owners expressed fears of being struck by *juju* (sorcery) orchestrated by enemies envious of their success. As one *danfo* slogan puts it, *ota po* (enemies aplenty). Hence, to protect themselves, many owners/drivers use their slogans as a talisman, a defence against *ota aiye* ('enemies of the world'), or a constant supplication for 'No Loss, No Lack, No Limitation', as one slogan put it. Slogans like 'Back to Sender' expresses the owner's prayer that any bad wish towards his *danfo* business backfire on those who wish them. Others like 'Sea never dry' reflect the owner's wish that his *danfo* never leaves the road. Implicit in slogans like 'No Weapon Fashioned Against Me Shall Prosper,' 'Do my Prophet No Harm,' 'Heaven's Gate,' or 'Blood of Jesus,' is a warning of the source of the owner's power. In this instance, the message to the enemy is unequivocal: if you want to take me on, then you must take on God himself, who is seen as superior to *aiye* (the world).

Thus far, we have focused on *danfos* and their slogans. In what follows, I draw on an interpretative analysis of slogans to understand how the city is experienced and practiced on a daily basis. Thematic concerns of safety ('Remember Ur Six Feet' – see [Figure 2](#)), precarity ('Life is War'), violent extortion ('Monkey dey work, Baboon dey chop' – One person works and another person reaps the fruit of his work), tactics (the use of *juju* or charms), abjection ('I dey like deadibody' – I exist like a dead body/corpse), and hope ('No condition is Permanent') are used to weave a sociology of everyday life in Lagos.

'REMEMBER UR SIX FEET'

A great many *danfos* ply for hire without licences and brazenly flout traffic rules. These *danfos* are usually overloaded, perilously speeding,



Figure 2 'Remember Ur Six Feet.' Photo by author.

and notorious for causing noise and air pollution. As a vehicle inspection officer in Alimosho complained to me: 'You wonder how these *danfos* secured roadworthiness certificates in the first place.' Due to their regular involvement in fatal road accidents, many Lagosians refer to *danfos* as 'flying coffins'. The slogans on *danfos* often mordantly announce to passengers their potential fate. For example: 'Carrying me Home', 'See you in Heaven', 'Home Sweet Home', *orun ile* ('Heaven, my Home'), 'Free at Last', 'Remember Now Thy Creator', etc. I asked a *danfo* driver in Ikotun about his choice of slogan – 'Remember Ur Six Feet' – and he had this to say: 'You see, my brother, in this Lagos anything [can] happen. Even the bible tells us to number our days so we can apply our hearts to wisdom. So I like to prepare passengers for the worst. The road is an evil spirit thirsty for blood.' In Lagos, *danfo*-related accidents

are so common that newspaper headlines announce them with shrugging resignation: ‘Another horror crash on Lagos road’, ‘Four perish in a fatal *danfo* accident’, ‘Conductor falls to his untimely death’, etc. According to a commuter in Oshodi: ‘Many of us know most of the *danfos* are death traps but since we can’t afford the high taxi fares, we have no choice but to use them.’

The ‘human factor’ is often blamed for the fatality of many road accidents in Lagos, with 75% of crashes due to human errors (Akoni 2013). In 2013, the Lagos State Driver’s Institute (LASDRI) ran a test on some 65,000 *danfo* drivers in Lagos, and found that 22% or 14,300 were ‘partially blind’, while 99% were ‘hypertensive’. The regular consumption of *paraga* and hard drugs (*igbo*) are important factors in this human error. In Lagos, *danfo* drivers have easy access to *paraga* due to the location of *paraga* kiosks inside or within 100 metres of motor-parks and bus stops, reinforcing the blurred boundaries between trade and transit.³ Many *paraga* sellers (mostly women) told me that their most reliable customers were *danfo* drivers and conductors. According to one seller, ‘*danfo* drivers usually throng to my joints first thing in the morning to drink and smoke before they start work. Some of them come as early as 5 am and demand that I put some *igbo* inside the *paraga*’. The perils of driving in Lagos are mirrored by road safety slogans such as ‘Drive Carefully. Your Life in Your Hands’, ‘Are you Following Jesus this Close’ (a sticker on the rear of a *danfo*), ‘Choose – Home or Mortuary?’, ‘Accident Kills’, ‘Drive to Stay Alive’, ‘Life No Get Part 2’.

‘LIFE IS WAR’

For many *danfo* workers, the struggle for survival remains the highest concern. As a driver with the slogan ‘24 Hours on the Road’ on his *danfo* said to me: ‘To eat, you need to hustle 24/7 because stomach no get holiday. Man must *chop* [eat]. Man must survive.’ I spoke to another driver about his choice of slogan ‘Time *na* [is] Money.’ This slogan suggests that time, a significant and productive resource, requires prudent management for maximum achievement of livelihood. Time expenditure thus equips a framework for making sense of the dynamics of poverty management among the urban poor, especially their efforts to increase profit in a city of innumerable risks and possibilities (Agbibo 2017a). The owner of another slogan, ‘No Time to Check Time’, who goes by the nickname ‘No Time’, explained why he chose this slogan:

I like this slogan because it describes my condition of living from hand to mouth. I begin work around 5 am in the morning and come home after 12 pm. In between, I live and eat on the road, inside *danfo*, in go-slows. Sometimes I don't get to see my little daughter for two or three days because when I am at home she is already sleeping. Such is life. My *oga* [his employer] is constantly on my neck to deliver N4,000 [\$12] to his house everyday without story or he will sack me. He warns me that there are many people queuing up to take my job every day. So my brother, *time na money*. I need to speed as fast as possible between Ikotun Egbe and Cele Express if I am to make extra-cash for myself. Sometimes I bribe the *askari* [police] to take one-way so I can reach the motor-park faster and get ahead of the queue to load 'next turn'. I decided against a conductor to save money and because many are not trustworthy. I beg the passengers to collect the money for me and pass it forward. Life is hard my brother but we are managing. There is God. (*Danfo* driver 2014 int.)

Given the relatively few full-time jobs in Lagos, nay Nigeria, it is unsurprising that informal transport attracts plenty of labour in form of unemployed youth waiting to become adults. Consequently, owners/drivers⁴ are usually in a strong position to dictate the everyday conditions of labour on an individual-by-individual basis. In fact, the usual practice is that most drivers operate on a daily franchise basis, earning income only after an agreed fee is paid to the owner and petrol cost is covered from the day's earnings. The situation is complicated by the presence of violent extortionists on the road, such as traffic officers and touts. The traffic officers and touts are popularly seen as 'partners in crime', routinely combining to create and sustain a predatory economy on the road (Agbibo 2015). As one *danfo* slogan puts it: 'See *Agbero* [tout], See Police.' An extract from the *Vanguard* newspaper paints a picture of a typical tout on a Lagos road:

Their ages generally range between 20 and 50. They can easily be recognized by their gruffly voice, their bloodshot eyes and sometimes incomplete set of teeth obviously lost in street brawls. At almost all the bus stops in the city they could be seen racing after commuter buses that have just arrived or are about to leave. They normally charge at the drivers or conductors and demand for money. Once the driver pays what is expected of him, the wind-screen of his vehicle is marked with a felt pen of a certain colour. If the driver fails to comply either his side view mirror or his petrol tank cover is instantly grabbed and the tout melts into the crowd. Any driver or conductor who challenges a tout would surely receive some slaps sometimes in full view of the enforcement officers. (*Vanguard* 11.7.2001)

Nearly every bus stop between Oshodi and Ikotun routes, which I plied regularly as a conductor, had its own units of touts often armed with wooden clubs, to brutally attack drivers who do not stop to

‘settle’ their taxes, ranging from N50 (\$0.25) to N500 (\$2.5). As a result, many drivers employ tactics to avoid these violent extortionists on the road. For example, as a *danfo* conductor in Oshodi, the driver and I usually carry (without charge) uniformed security personnel – such as soldiers, air force and mobile police – in the front seat of the vehicle to shield us from rampaging touts. While this usually lessens the level of assault, it does not completely prevent extortion, which has assumed a kind of *de facto* legitimacy. In fact, during the course of my fieldwork, some *danfo* workers went on strike not because they were paying bribes to touts but because there was no agreed sum to be paid and an agreed point where it should be collected. According to a *danfo* driver: ‘It is confusion. You don’t know who is who. Every place you stop to pick or drop passengers, you have to settle these *agberos*, all of them claiming union status and ready to beat you up if you refuse. Maybe it’s their strategy to take more money from us. I really don’t know. Only God can help us.’

Many drivers that I spoke to were convinced that touts have ‘no shaking’ (no fear) because politicians and party officials partake in the taxes that they collect each day, which is used to cover the enormous expenses incurred during electoral campaigns and to shore up their patronage for regime survival. In particular, the violence and impunity of touts were often related to the fact that the NURTW, on whose behalf they claim to work, serves as the main supplier of thugs from among its touts to assist the Governor and his political party during their electoral campaigns: to intimidate and, if necessary, kill political adversaries (Agbiboa 2017b). In exchange, union chairmen are given the freedom to control and exploit the motor-parks and bus stops. As one *danfo* driver in Ikotun said to me:

To remove these touts you need to be prepared to go after those behind their daily collections. You need to follow the money. Touts collect money for the local government chairmen, councillors, police officers, LASTMA [Lagos State Traffic Management Authority] officials, and even *obas* and *baales* [kings and chiefs]. That is the problem! They wine and dine with the high and mighty. How can you bite the fingers that feed you? The union’s slogan is very simple: “you eat, I eat. I scratch your back, you scratch mine”. (*Danfo* driver, 2014 int.)

Explaining his choice of slogan ‘Life is War’, Wahid, a driver in Ikotun, confided to me: ‘This business is what I use to feed my family. I don’t have any other source of money. I have four children, and three are in school. I thank God for my life.’ According to Wahid, violent extortion by touts is the greatest threat to his survival:

NURTW now put their touts at every bus stop in the city. Once you make a stop, you pay them just to pick a passenger or two from the bus station. Some of them say they are collecting booking fee (*owo booking*) others say it is for security (*owo security*), some say they are collecting afternoon cash (*owo osan*), when it is night, some say they are collecting night money (*owo ale*). It's something that is very irritating. My wife and children advise me that if *agberos* or policemen ask me for money, I should give it to them without story, so that they will not hurt me. I believe that leaving my home in good health and coming back home in good health, there is no greater happiness than that. (Wahid 2014 int.)

‘MONKEY DEY WORK, BABOON DEY CHOP’

There is an increasing presence of semi-formal actors on the interface between public service and citizens in all aspects of public administration in West Africa (Bierschenk 2008: 130). Such intermediaries – who often come under various epithets such as ‘fixers’, ‘brokers’ or ‘go-betweens’ – surface in a number of ethnographies of youth marginality in Africa, including Jeremy Jones’ (2010) account of hustle in Zimbabwe, Janet Roitman’s (2005) work on road banditry in the Chad Basin, and Sasha Newell’s (2012) illegal politicking in Abidjan. My study supports the presence of violent intermediaries at junctions across Lagos, lucrative spots where miscreants, marauders, beggars, fraudsters and touts meet to exploit moneymaking opportunities (Ismail 2009). Junctions are ordinarily located at *orita* (intersections of three roads). In Yoruba tradition, *orita* is a sacred place where people offer sacrifices (*ebo*) to two Yoruba *orishas* (gods): *ogun* and *eshu*. The former is much feared for his propensity to induce violence and death at the slightest provocation, while the latter is the trickster god whose shrines are found at the entrances of compounds (*esuona*), crossroads (*eshuorita*) and markets (*eshuoja*). *Orita* activities are never seen as good ventures deserving of an *omoluabi* – a hardworking person of good character. Junction members like touts are seen as *omo orita* (‘child of the junction’) who take on the identity of *eshu*, and see moneymaking opportunities at *orita* as part of the repertoires of *ebo* on offer. The taxes collected by touts are seen as *owo eru* (mischievous money, or money that enslaves) that brings death (*owo ree! iku ree!* [behold Money! behold Death!]). Thus, junctions in Lagos have been described as ‘micro-economic self-organising systems that embody the spirit of *eshu*’ (Weat & Bakare-Yusuf 2003: 12).

During fieldwork, I observed how touts were hired by traffic officers and tactically positioned at junctions to extort monies (*owo askari* – ‘police money’) from *danfo* drivers. At the junction, the officer

wields a gun, while the tout holds an iron rod and a felt marker to mark the windscreen of *danfos* that have ‘settled’ them. Based on my observations, a tout typically works at the junction with an officer for five days after which another tout replaces him. As I learnt from a *danfo* driver in Alimosho, this regular change is meant to reduce any form of complicity in the ‘no-nonsense’ business of extorting money. For example, some touts may become friends with drivers in the process of tax collection and this may reduce the share of the traffic officer. At the end of each day, the tout gets a ‘fee commission’ from the police officer. The role of touts as go-betweeners emerged during an interview with a driver/owner whose *danfo* displayed the slogan ‘Monkey dey work, Baboon dey Chop’:

The previous owner of this *danfo* had a different slogan, ‘Cool Boy’, which I inherited. But after working in this business for one year, I took the *danfo* to the painters and changed the slogan to ‘Monkey dey work, Baboon dey Chop.’ There is no ‘Cool Boy’ in this business. I chose this slogan because it expresses the anger I feel everyday on the road. I work tirelessly each day like a monkey, while the baboon [referring to the touts and traffic officers] stand somewhere and just *chop* [eat] from us. The traffic police cannot control touts because they work for them. Many police hire touts to collect from us. So you see different touts collecting money for different police. Sometimes even traffic police will fight themselves over junction spots where they can put their touts. Junctions bring more monies because every vehicle must pass through that place; you can’t avoid it. Just yesterday, one police shot another officer because of this competition for junctions. (*Danfo* owner 2014 int.)

The organising urban logic (Roy & AlSayyad 2004) that governs the alliance between touts and traffic officers calls into question the tendency in the literature to depict urban governance regimes as mutually exclusive (for example, Simone 2010: 3). In other words, it complicates the formal/informal divide that has long characterised the field of urban studies. If anything, the alliance between touts and traffic officers suggests that coalitions among state (formal) and non-state (informal) actors do play a central role in shaping urban regimes and producing city forms. Given their close ties with street-level bureaucrats in Lagos, touts are emboldened to conduct their affairs without fear of intrusion from members of the police who are usually ‘in on the game’. Commenting on this violent complicity, a commuter related his first-hand experience of witnessing the brutality of touts and the ‘I don’t care’ attitude of the police:

The other day, a set of touts beat one *danfo* conductor to death at Cele bus stop. They pushed him down from the *danfo* and descended on him with sticks and heavy blows to his face and head. Blood was pouring from his head. All because he refused to pay N200 (\$1). Can you imagine that? The police watched from a distance and did nothing. But I'm not surprised. The touts are their boys; they collect bribes on their behalf. It's so painful. (Commuter 2015 int.)

Such routine experience of violence combined with the perils of driving in Lagos, foreground the abiding need for some form of (divine) intervention that enables *danfo* workers to impose order and predictability on their precarious business.

‘ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN’

Many *danfo* owners/drivers that I spoke to believe that some form of spiritual intervention is necessary to enhance their business and safety in a city where ‘anything can happen’, as one slogan puts it. Roads, as many drivers told me, symbolised their source of livelihood. At the same time, the roads are fraught with malicious forces (spiritual and physical) that, like vampires, always crave blood. These forces illustrate the contradictory nature of roads in African cities as objects of both ‘fear and desire’ (Masquelier 2002: 831). According to Comaroff & Comaroff (1993: xxix), the road, along with its various forces, is a liminal space that embodies the contradictions of modernity: ‘its inescapable enticements, its self-consuming passions, its discriminatory tactics, its devastating social costs’. In Lagos, many *danfo* drivers turn to *juju* (charms) as a survival tactic against accidents and bad luck, as well as to attract passengers and reduce contact with violent extortionists on the way. The *jujus*, which are indicative of the power that inheres in social relationships, usually come in various forms: the shape of a lock, a dry head of a rat tied to a cowrie, or a dry animal skin twisted into a rope and tied around the arm. These symbols – often hidden under the dashboard, tied to the mirror, or placed under the driver’s seat – display “a form of empowerment which expresses ‘the fact of powerlessness’” (Gelder & Thornton 1997: 375). A study of Yoruba taxi drivers in the 1980s, for example, found that 80 per cent of Muslims and 60 per cent of Christians had protective charms in their taxis (Lawuyi 1988: 4). The *juju* in the *danfos* mainly serves to remind the drivers of their power to escape from any danger on the road. They also bring wealth by attracting passengers on the road.

During the course of my fieldwork, I interviewed a group of *danfo* drivers in Oshodi who related to me their habitual offering of weekly food sacrifices to *eshuona* (the dreaded god of the road) before embarking on their work. According to them, their sacrifices are meant to propitiate *eshuona* so as to fortify themselves against his malevolent tricks and to implore him to *fi wa le* ('leave us alone'). Here, repetition does not necessarily amount to the workers' domination or enslavement in the ordinary – their link to immanence rather than transcendence – as may be inferred from the work of Lefebvre (1987). On the contrary, these repetitive placations of *eshuona* help these *danfo* workers to transcend their precarious existence and avert any danger in the nick of time. In this case, repetition indicates 'resistance through rituals' (Hall & Jefferson 1993) and 'symbolic opposition to a dominant order' (Highmore 2002: 12). This reinforces Rita Felski's point that 'repetition is one of the ways in which we organise the world, make sense of our environment and stave off the threat of chaos' (Felski 2000: 21).

'NO MORE PERSON'

In Lagos, *danfo* workers regularly devise tactics to evade violent extortionists on the road. A common tactic is for these workers to align themselves with the urban big men, the benefactors (i.e. political patrons) who provide them with material and social security, often in exchange for their loyalty transferred into votes during elections. This supports Eric Wolf's (1977: 175–6) argument that patron-client relations serve primarily to bridge 'functional gaps' in the social fabric and protect individuals against insecurity. It also reinforces de Certeau's point about how the 'weak' tactically make use of the 'strong' and create for themselves a sphere of autonomous action (de Certeau 1984). In order to secure elections and maintain their hold on power, political patrons need to distribute largesse to their loyal followers ('stomach infrastructure', as one slogan puts it), which in turn raises the stakes for control over state resources. Such 'logic of solidarity networks' (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 40) sheds light on the forms of 'social capital' (Bourdieu 1986) of *danfo* workers in the building of social networks that will protect them when *wahala* (trouble) comes. In the zero-sum politics of patronage, 'woe betides the man who knows no one' (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 41).

While some patrons may assist workers when they run into trouble and come for help, others may not. Patrons who have the resources to help and do so are fondly remembered in *danfo* slogans such as: 'Givers Never

Lack', *ola oga mi l'eko* ('The benevolence of my Big Man in Lagos'), *oga nla fans* ('Big Man fans'), *oga oga* ('Big Man, Big Man'), *oga mi* ('My Big Man'), *oga tie da* ('Where is your Big Man'), *ere oga mi* ('The benefits of my Big Man'), *kiku ma pa alanu mi* ('May death not befall my helper'), etc. Other slogans like *ola iya* ('mother's benevolence') or *ola egbon* ('brother's benevolence') express gratitude to one's mother or brother who helped with acquiring the *danfo*. Patrons (including one's own relatives) who have the means to help but fail to render help are often labelled *awon aiye* (the wicked world), illustrating the beneficial and deleterious possibilities that inscribe social relationships.

When patrons disappoint, it is time for *danfo* workers to console themselves, and to ponder on the frailty of human behaviour (*iwa eda*) and the precarity of everyday life. This mood is rendered in slogans such as: 'Such is Life', 'If Men were God', *eyi a lo* (This too will pass), 'Delay is not Denial', 'No More Person' (see Figure 3), 'Helpers are Scarce', 'Trust nobody', 'This Life', 'No One Knows Tomorrow', 'God Dey'. To reduce the likelihood of disappointment, *danfo* workers tend to keep many patrons simultaneously. Yet, the ultimate lesson for many workers is that *igbekele omo araye, asan ni* ('reliance on people of the world leads to disappointment') because *olowo kin se olorun* ('The rich man is not God'), to string two *danfo* slogans together. Thus, workers often appeal to God – *oga pata pata* ('Biggest Man') – to negotiate everyday failures and disappointments. In an uncertain and competitive world where fortunes are made and lost and one's own fortune appears to be beyond one's control, the constant appeal to God becomes a common category for explaining success or lack of it.

'I DEY LIKE DEADI BODY'

To my social question about how he is doing, a *danfo* driver in Ikotun replied: 'I dey like deadi body' ['I exist like a dead body/corpse']. According to Kristeva (1982: 3), the corpse is 'the most sickening of all wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything ...' In a way, many *danfo* workers see themselves as sickening wastes waiting for decomposition to happen. Although the waiting may lead to ennui and temporal anxiety, it is not entirely unproductive. The very act of waiting denotes an 'active state of the mind', which remains vigilant to opportunities (Cooper & Pratten 2015). As one *danfo* slogan puts it, 'Who No Die no Dey Rotten' ('Who is not dead does not get rotten').



Figure 3 ‘No More Person.’ Photo by author.

This implies that where there is life, there is hope. This reinforces Mbembe’s (1997) image of the ‘common man’ in Africa:

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

Similar imaginations of everyday urban life as a permanent struggle may be found elsewhere in Nigeria and Africa. For example, David Pratten’s (2006) ethnography in south-eastern Nigeria shows how the Annang ethnic group appropriate the idea of ‘the rugged life’ when

describing their lived experience – in Annang language, the life of *ntime ntime* ('trouble') and of anything can happen (*akeme itipe*). In Dar es Salaam, Matteo Rizzo (2011) found that *daladala* workers were preoccupied with the everyday struggle for economic survival. He adduces the example of *daladalas* with painted slogans like *kazi mbaya; ukiwanayo!* ('Bad job; if you have one'), 'Money Torture', *maisha ni kuhangaiika* ('Life is Suffering'), *kula tutakula lakini tutachelewa* ('We'll eat, but we'll eat late'), and 'So Many Tears'.

CONCLUSION: 'LAGOS WILL NOT SPOIL'

This article has interrogated ways in which the slogans painted on the mobile bodies of *danfos* shape, and are shaped by, our everyday experience of the city and its visual landscape. Using the slogans as a point of entry into the precarious world of *danfo* workers, the article sheds light on the ordinary but powerful ways in which *danfo* workers make do against all odds. In the face of numerous challenges, I was often struck by the *danfo* workers' capacity to aspire, which reveals their ability to construe the realisation of the good life as a genuine possibility, beyond what is currently given in their lives. For example, many workers aspired towards running a *danfo* of their own, becoming 'somebody', marrying a graduate, winning the American Visa Lottery, acquiring the status of *eni olokiki* (a famous person), *olowo* (a rich person), *eniyan giga* (a high person), *eniyan pataki* (an important person), etc. These hopes are epitomized by the official slogan of Lagos itself, *eko o ni baje* ('Lagos will not spoil').

There is a temptation to dismiss the above aspirations as mere utopianism; in other words, to smother the *danfo* workers' hopes analytically with what Clifford (2009: 241) calls our own 'wet-blanket "realism"'. Yet, these aspirations are not simply shadows of reality but its very touchstones; they are not mere fantasies woven from sleep but a technique for negotiating the risk and uncertainties of the present in hope of a better tomorrow. As Burrige (1995: 180) argues, 'dreams tend to pull a future into current sensible reality; they give definiteness to hope, adding faith, thereby putting the dreamer in touch with a verity shortly to be manifest'. The positive expectancy of *danfo* workers in the face of severe hardship is exemplified by future-oriented slogans like: 'One Day is One Day', 'Keep Keeping On', 'Never You Give Up', 'God's Time is Best', 'Who Knows?', 'Time will Tell', 'No Competition in Destiny', 'No Condition is Permanent' and the more verbose 'Let my enemies live long to see what I will become in the future'. Collectively,

these slogans signal the temporality of hope (Crapanzano 2003; Guyer 2007) and the fact that the present and the future are not disconnected horizons of social practice. In this context, uncertainty becomes a vital resource that *danfo* workers constantly draw upon to *get by* in the present, but also to *carry on* in the future. What emerges, therefore, is a greater appreciation for ways of experiencing the city that transcends the usual focus on the product(ion) of uncertainty (crisis as context) to foreground the productivity of uncertainty (crisis as possibility).

NOTES

1. This name was attributed to it by urban dwellers because of its propensity to fatal road accidents.
2. It is not unusual for *danfos* to change ownership several times during their lifespan; with subsequent owners keen to impose their own slogans on newly procured *danfos*.
3. In an interview I had with a vehicle inspection officer in Alimosho, he alluded to Governor Babatunde Raji Fashola's clearing of *paraga* kiosks in Lagos as a factor in the reduction of accidents and misconduct in and around motor-parks and bus terminals. In his words, 'Many operators think when they take *paraga* they become invincible.'
4. Many owners drive their own buses (due to lack of trust in operators) and every driver intends to make a profit for himself after delivering to the owner an agreed sum of money. Hence, the more trips he makes, the higher his profit.

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