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They Eat Our Sweat: Transport Labor, Corruption, and Everyday Survival in Urban Nigeria, by Daniel E. Agbiboa, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, 266 pp., £75.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780198861546

Nigeria has a well-known corruption problem. Political elites syphon away public money from oil rents and ordinary citizens need to bribe civil servants to gain access to crucial health, educational, and administrative services. 'Grand,' elite-level corruption, and 'petty,' street-level corruption are usually researched from different disciplinary angles, with political scientists and economists looking at the elite-level, and anthropologists to the everyday realities of ordinary citizens (p.14). While trained as an anthropologist and using the conceptual frameworks of the discipline as well as the

ethnographic method, Daniel Agbiboa aims to not only describe street-level corruption, but also to demonstrate the interrelations between so-called high-level and low-level corruption through his rich account of the daily struggles of transport workers in Lagos state. In doing so, Agbiboa, convincingly challenges the argument that corruption is a culturally accepted norm in Nigerian society related to gift-giving, in contrast showing how Nigerians reject corruption but also face the reality of having to play the game.

The introduction of Agbiboa's monograph sets out these aims, while also carefully describing the author's challenging methodological approach. Agbiboa spent twelve months interviewing urban transport workers at bus stops, junctions, and checkpoints in two of the most congested areas of Lagos State. He also took place behind the wheel as a minibus conductor himself for a period of two months, allowing him to directly experience corrupt exchanges between drivers, police, and members of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW). Together with other sources including newspaper reports, court and archival records, the empirical material certainly allows for a "thick" discussion of corruption, coercion, and complicity' (p.17) in the Lagos transport sector.

Chapter 1 has two major aims. The first is conceptual and challenges existing understandings of corruption, while the second is empirical and sets the stage by explaining the history and practice of corruption in Nigeria since independence. Agbiboa critiques simple definitions of corruption focusing on the public/private and legal/illegal dichotomy as Western-centric, but at the same time dismisses views attributing corruption to traditional modes of African governance, let alone culture. He draws on the concept of neopatrimonialism, which highlights the interrelationship between economy, politics, and society and the use of the state for personal interests but is careful not to see corruption as a fixed feature. This is also made clear through his historical account of Nigeria. While grand and petty corruption were both certainly present in post-independence Nigeria, the advent of oil exploitation together with decades of military rule intensified these and contributed to today's valid perception of Nigeria as a hotbed for corruption and crime, both at home and abroad. While democratic rulers have since 1999 campaigned on the theme of halting corruption, for now, corruption has continued to 'fight back' (p.70) and Nigeria remains 'fantastically corrupt' (UK prime minister David Cameron, as quoted on p.75).

Chapter 2 uses critical discourse analysis to investigate the language ordinary citizens use to describe corruption in Lagos, but also in other parts of Nigeria, and the world. Agbiboa situates the language of corruption within the framework of 'the politics of the belly' (Bayart 1993) and highlights the linguistic interconnections of corruption with eating. In doing so he shows the tension between food and drink as a basic need ('something for water,' p.83), as something to be shared ('you chop, me self I chop,' p.88), and as something that can be consumed in gluttonous excess ('they eat our sweat'). Discourse hence balances between legitimizing and denouncing corruption.

Chapter 3 briefly introduces the reader to the transport sector in Lagos. It describes the widespread use of informal modes of transport: minibuses (*dankos*), motorcycles (*okada*), tricycles (*keke*), and shared taxis. Working conditions are bad, besides the risk to one's health due to pollution and damaged roads, there is the constant pressure to speed, go against traffic, overload vehicles, and work too many hours to gain sufficient income to survive.

The daily challenges of minibus drivers and conductors (those who call stops and collect fares) are described more in depth in Chapter 4. Agbiboa creatively builds this chapter around the slogans that are painted on minibuses. Whether humorously dealing with the safety risks of the job ('Remember Ur Six Feet,' p.125) or lamenting them ('To Live is To Struggle,' p.127), drivers and conductors find themselves stuck in precarious positions. Only few drivers achieve sufficient income to pay off police ('Police is Your Friend,' p.133) and NURTW agents ('Monkey De Work, Baboon De Chop,' p.135), to pay their dues to car owners, to cover costs for fuel, and to support their families. This also leads to conductors cheating their drivers out of income, or drivers

lying to owners about unforeseen car costs and illness ('Because of Money, No Truth,' p.129), overall heightening distrust in the sector.

In Chapter 5, the focus is shifted to the NURWT and its agents. Agbibo traces the origins of the NURTW motor park touts or *agberos*, to the economic crisis of the 1970s/80s when countless young, urban men were pushed deep into poverty. The precarious job of 'passenger caller,' morphed over time into the job of violent motor park tout in the predatory service of the NURTW. *Agberos* are now feared and respected due to their connections to higher-up patrons, to which they channel part of the gains they make from extorting an increasing number of fees from drivers. Most fees are illegal, but the state is complicit in this extortion. The gains accrued by the NURTW are used to fund politicians' campaigns, in turn allowing them to continue enriching themselves with public money. This mutual dependency between high- and street-level corruption may also explain why state government actions to halt the *agberos'* intimidation have been (intentionally) unsuccessful. Nevertheless, *agberos* also use their violent agency to resist attempts to restrain them (p.168).

In the last empirical Chapter 6, the implications of consecutive Lagos state governments' efforts to modernize the city are scrutinized. The urban renewal campaign included a new Bus Rapid Transits (BRTs) system and (failed) efforts to halt *agberos*. While internationally praised, the renewal campaign had negative effects on Lagosian citizens as street hawkers and slum dwellers have been pushed out of the city to places where they find no livable alternatives. Motorcycle taxis (*okadas*) have been prohibited in many parts of the city due to the high number of accidents they cause. Yet for the Lagosian poor, they offered the easiest and cheapest means of transport. As police officers set about extorting drivers seeking to make an income regardless of the ban, and NURTW agents keep charging fees, drivers are pushed further into poverty. Notably, the same poverty that ties them to politicians' gifts during election times, which actually often include motorcycles and gear. Interestingly, rather than using protests and violence, Agbibo notes that *okada* associations are increasingly seeking legal means to reverse traffic bans and escape their dire situation.

While the author primarily focuses on the foregoing in-depth description of the everyday experiences of Lagos transport workers with corruption, I now turn to my own reflections, which stem from the disciplinary viewpoint of a political scientist. These views are not necessarily those of the author.

First, I believe the findings hold important lessons for policy efforts on curbing corruption and improving governance. A key belief that is challenged in Agbibo's book is that bribery is culturally accepted or forms part of a 'moral economy.' In contrast, the continuous extortion from state and affiliated actors is continuously decried by ordinary citizens as 'eating too much,' yet citizens have no choice to participate in order to survive (211–212). Anticorruption campaigns aimed at stressing the amorality of bribery do not alter this reality and are therefore likely to be ineffective. Indeed, a recent survey experiment in Nigeria found that anticorruption messages, including those that make moral claims, are ineffective or even counterproductive (Cheeseman and Peiffer 2022).

Findings in the book also have important implications for evaluating the fuel subsidy program in Nigeria. Anyone seeing the billions of dollars that are spent by the Nigerian government on the subsidy would at first hand call for a scrapping of the policy in favor of direct pro-poor measures. Indeed, this is what international advisors commonly do (e.g. IMF 2021). Yet, ending the fuel subsidy does not end high-level corruption, nor does it guarantee that funding streams will not be channeled away from the poor. For many, the fuel subsidy is the only benefit offered by a Nigerian state populated by predatory elites (p.93). Furthermore, given that transport workers cover fuel costs from their own precarious incomes (p.128), any shock in the program without carefully developed alternatives will only push them and their customers further into poverty.

Secondly, the book offers important hints on the relationship between high- and low-level corruption in Nigeria beyond the specific context of Lagos, though also raises new questions. The strengthening of high-level corruption is attributed (among others) to entrenched military rule (p.55), and it was during military rule that road checkpoints emerged as symbols of corruption (p.105). This seems to indicate a positive relation between military rule, the hollowing out of the state, and public officers

seeking gains through other means. However, the use of road transport unions and their touts to collect rents is also firmly related to the advent to democracy (p.160) and it is during election times that extortion is typically ramped up (Ibid.). This raises questions on how regime characteristics influence the level and shape of corruption in the long run, but also on how citizens perceive specific regimes. While the Abacha period is known among scholars as the most predacious regime (p.65), some citizens evaluate it more positively than the current one (personal field work observation). Scholarship has started to focus on how experiences with street-level corruption influence people's regime perceptions by making use of survey research (Hatungimana 2022), but ethnography and in-depth interviews among ordinary citizens would also be an excellent method to investigate the interrelations between corruption and regime legitimacy further in the future.

Daniel Agbibo's new book on Lagos transport workers' experiences with corruption offers a complex understanding of their lived realities and the connection between grand and petty corruption pushing them into their precarious positions. The book offers valuable theoretical, empirical, and methodological lessons for scholars of corruption, but also for scholars of Lagos in general. I join the author in stressing that 'this is not just a book about corruption but also about Lagos, its transport system, and the society surrounding it' (p.214). For anyone preparing field work in Lagos, this book may offer the kindest welcome to 'This is Lagos' (p.124).

Notes on Contributor

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