

Book Review:

Book Title: *They Eat Our Sweat: Transport Labor, Corruption, and Everyday Survival in Urban Nigeria.*

Author: Daniel E. Agbiboa,
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How do the tendrils of corruption insidiously operate in the quotidian experiences of informal urban transport workers and in what ways do the multiform nature of corruption blur the line between normalcy and aberration? How do these workers spatially comply, resist, and reclaim their right to the city? This book explores the musky line between survival and corruption in the context of Lagos informal transport sector, where corruption is not a far elite phenomenon but a subtle naturalised societal norm recognisable in its banal forms in the informal settings. The informal transport workers in urban Lagos driven by the exigency of economic hardship are caught in the corrupt nexus of formal and informal paratransit regulators, where they are cornered to comply and avoid “time wastage, unnecessary fine, detention, vehicle impoundment, and tire deflation” (p.105). The author, through urban ethnography, semiotic interpretation, and cross-national comparison, meticulously mines oral accounts, court cases, and ephemeral texts to profoundly aver that the informal transport sector spatially functions as a fertile ground for culprit-victim corruption where exploitative exchanges are normalised.

This book, which is organised into 6 chapters, navigates themes ranging from state and subaltern corruption, the discursive functions of corruption, makeshift urbanism, informal transport power cartel, and the paradoxical nature of urban reform. Chapters 1-2 explore the institutional and local concept of corruption in Nigeria since 1960. From the institutional framework, public offices are “weakly established” (p.48) which allows for the overlapping

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of private value and social expectations to the fosterage of corruption. This dysfunction seemingly entangles both formal and informal workers who participate in and legalise corruption in the framing of survivalism. In tracing the root of corruption, the author explores how the military regimes and post-1999 democratic governments portrayed corruption as a task to be eliminated yet “circumvented virtually all mechanism designed to promote accountability” (p.56) as they engaged in wealth accumulation which started from the oil boom era. The military regimes used their repressive and dictatorial powers to entrench corruption and by 1994 when Abacha came to power, “corruption was no longer an aberration” (p.65) but a systematised norm of the formal system. The decline of oil revenue ushered the performance of political patronage and transfer of corruption from the state to the subaltern. The quest for survival engineered by the demising social and financial security of the oil bust season prompted average Nigerians to venture into informal networks and turning to occult network, ritual killing, witchcraft, and penis theft for wealth. The turn towards criminalised wealth and fame by disaffected youth is a product of observed behaviours from the elites. Illustratively, the deceptive character of leaders like IBB served as manuals for youth who engage in fraud, impersonation, forgery, and deception such as *419* and *Yahoo*. The efforts of civilian government to curb corruption through institutions like the EFCC in the post-1999 period were subverted as the quest to remain in power turned leaders into zombies of corruption. The author analysed the symbolic and idiomatic expressions of corruption which are commonly framed through corporeal words like eat, chop, and water, suggesting the embezzlement, bribery, and extortion that characterise the formal and informal sectors. This is more expressed in the politics of corruption between politicians and the people through realities such as vote-buying, godfatherism, and political patronage and the informal rent-seeking that occurs in checkpoints between policemen and motorists.

Chapters 3-5 focus on the emergence of informal transport workers and their mundane expression of survival. The informal paratransit services “serve the African poor” (p.100) to cure the deficit of public transport and as a response to the widespread economic precarity. These informal drivers, bond by the need to meet their various expectations across family, personal, and hire purchase owners, are trapped in the practice of corruption whereby their mobility is facilitated through extortionary compliance to union touts, enforcers, and police officers in parks and checkpoints. The author explores the role of informal dons (*agberos*) who leech on drivers under the aegis of the transport unions and operate within networks of political patronage. Amid these circumstances, the drivers encode their everyday experiences as marked by informal toll, the rugged nature of their work and space, and the tension between aspiration and reality through slogans inscribed on their vehicles.

In chapter 6, the author reveals the paradoxical nature of Lagos State urban regulation through laws like the 2012 Road Traffic Laws, which systematically disrupted the livelihood of the informal workers, especially the cart riders, while erupting the latter’s involvement in the use of law to reclaim their right to the city. Left with no alternative economic option,

motorbike taxis (*Okada* riders) expressed defiance through court cases, protests, and bribing of enforcement agencies to attack the perceived segregation and exclusion of right as well as highlighting the precarious conditions of the urban poor. The book, *They Eat Our Sweat* boldly illuminates the culture of informal transport sector and the dimensions and reinforcement of corruption in Lagos State. This author's argument is insightful; however, it overlooks the colonial antecedents of corruption and its influential role in the post-colonial era.

Overall, the book is essential to understanding how corruption, urban regulation, and para-institutional actors shape the everyday life of informal transport operators which makes it priceless for scholars and students of African urban history and agencies.