

World of Lagos area boys



• While area boys generally scrap for survival on the streets, their female counterparts often work in hotels as commercial sex workers. Here, Patience negotiates with some area boys while they grope and fondle her at the hotel where she works at Lion Junction, Oshodi, Lagos.

Social constructions of the area boy

Area boys like Asade, T-Money and Mukesh depict popular representation of youths from the coastal city's backwaters. The increasing presence of such youths, is however, blamed on the prevalence of slums in the Lagos metropolis. Endemic poverty, social inequalities and rising standards of living force considerable segments of the population into extreme living conditions such as shanty settlements. According to Omotoke Iyunade, a social psychologist, the harsh living conditions and endemic poverty in the slums wreak untold havoc on the inhabitants, the children in particular. "Such children having undergone a gruesome childhood characterised by an insidious socialisation process eventually mature into what could be termed as damaged youths."

According to her, young people in the slums are often the victim of non-existent or dysfunctional family structures, lack of education and opportunities, race and class-based discrimination. This militarises them and forces them to adopt a hostile attitude to the world. Ultimately, they are considered enemies of the state by law enforcers and the society at large and this is due to their hostile disposition and inclinations for violence.

Shanty life is such that vulnerable children and youths are exposed to considerable amount of hazards and they face a number of problems ranging from financial problems to harassment and extortions from police and the ubiquitous area boys; eventually, many of such vulnerable youths evolve to become area boys. As area boys, they learn to perpetuate the insecurity, severe beatings and fighting, sexual abuse (especially of the females) and health hazards that they had erstwhile been exposed to as vulnerable minors.

According to Patrick Edewor, PhD, Department of Sociology, Covenant University, the presence of street children (and homeless children and youths) is an indictment of the way the society construes its priorities. "These children and youths suffer considerable amount of hardship. Although they are ignored by the society, they hope to become productive members of the society," he noted.

Gangs of area boys are composed of mainly young males aged 11 to 25 years and they are a typical characteristic of the state. These gangs provide young people with a sense of belonging and social identity, and as they operate in shadow economies, they make up for the lack of educational and job opportunities.

Within gangs, young men find a way to make a living. Many of them primarily commit serious crimes such as robbery and burglary with the intention of exchanging the stolen goods for cash. The money earned from such crimes is invested in patronising sex workers, gambling and other guilty pleasures. Others expend it on status enhancement drives such as 'looking good,' eating out, smoking cannabis, cocaine or crack, and clubbing.

In Lagos, many area boys act as violent brokers in parallel structures, having created an income for themselves via forced extortions (*owo ile*) and narcotics peddling, playing guard of individual property or public space in situations of inadequate or ineffective police presence. Over time, they have become an

accepted part of the urban landscape even as they become willing tools and available mercenaries for various forms of political, ethnic and religious criminal contracts in the process.

Lagos gangs at a glance

Time was when the state was at the mercy of certain fearful gangs terrorising the Isale-Eko and Stadium/Barrack axis of Lagos Island. The most notorious amongst them was the Kainkain gang of Isale Eko; this gang was persistently blamed for serial criminal acts, including rape, mobile phone theft, pick-pocketing and armed robbery. The leader of the group, 'Surubu,' allegedly relocated from the neighbourhood after he was shot.

And residents of Ajegunle otherwise known as Lagos' jungle city, will not forget in a hurry, their ordeal in the hands of One Million Boys (OMB), a gang of hoodlums that terrorised the area before they were arrested by the police. At inception, 20 boys in Ajegunle united to form the association with the original intent to fight perceived injustices synonymous with the township. Subsequently, the gang grew in strength and numbers and soon they formed a vigilante group to checkmate and fight crime and criminality in the community. But somewhere along the way, some members of the association hijacked it and turned a hitherto crime fighting group into a sinister one; terrorising the entire community, raping hapless women and robbing defenceless residents.

Residents revealed that the group metamorphosed into a gang of outlaws. "Before they invaded any community or street, they usually wrote a letter to inform the residents. They sent the letter through a courier, usually a minor, to the head of that street or the landlord association. And when they come, they would rob from one house to the other, raping young girls and even married women. There was one bizarre situation when members of the group allegedly raped a pregnant woman to death and forced a father to sleep with his daughter with a threat that if he did not comply, he would be killed. Of course, the man complied with their wish while they laughed maniacally.

They operated with such impunity until their operation in Agugu Street, where they killed a young man, after robbing a resident. The community could not take it any longer and they sent an SOS to the Commissioner of Police, Umaru Manko, who issued a directive for their arrest. The police was able to arrest over 400 suspected members of

the group.

The raid was led by Area B Command Apapa, comprising Apapa, Ajegunle, Tofu, Trinity, Amukoko, Ijora Badia, Layeni and Kirikiri Police divisions. "The onslaught was led by the Area Commander Mohammed Alli.

Ijaya Boys (Minstrels of fear) comprise a group of 17 boys, all school drop-outs except their leader who never attended high school. The latter, a former butcher, assembled young boys in his area in Alimosho to form a gang with a purported mission to right the wrongs in their community. No sooner did they form the gang than he led them in two bloody turf wars in which they succeeded in dislodging two former gangs that held sway in their neighbourhood. They operate with knives, cudgels, guns and dangerous charms.

Several gangs are linked to criminal operations between Surulere and Lagos Island, where several house burglaries and armed robberies are perpetrated and the stolen valuables are sold often at ridiculous prices. Most area boys are principally concerned with fighting and conquering other young male gangs from one street or district to another in violent turf wars to establish their dominance. After establishing their dominance in any neighbourhood, they engage in a peculiar brand of hustle by which they perpetrate scams, bullying, political violence and armed robbery, according to Ikuomola Adediran Daniel (PhD), Department of Sociology, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State.

Living by the street code

Analysing the street code of the ubiquitous area boy, Dr. Ikuomola stated: "Within the social world of the area boy, familial and peer group attachments are essential in terms of 'back up' and possible retribution for an act of bullying, violence and robbery. As such, when a group of boys from 'rush' or 'jack' a young person - either from their hood or a surrounding neighbourhood - with no obvious familial or peer group attachments, most young males in public will just shrug their shoulders as if to say 'well that's just how things are on the street.' However, in private the young males will acknowledge that the assaulters involved were out of order, they shouldn't have picked on an innocent."

Yet the code of the street dictates that sympathy for the victim is at best fleeting and generally non-sympathetic, as the commonly held view amongst young males is that 'they' (victim) should not have allowed themselves to be picked on so easily. On the other hand, when the victim is a known but disliked individual - usually a rapsallion who does not play by the rules - perhaps he attacks people indiscriminately, harassing young girls at street corners and therefore creating lots of potential enemies within the neighbourhood - the code of the street determines that the defaulter probably got what he deserved, as he was beginning to believe too much 'in his own hype,' running about upsetting 'too many of the area boys' in the neighbourhood.

Deviance, family and stereotypes

Growing up in a slum takes a grievous toll on area boys; they are forced to assimilate real life representations of bad and dangerous guys. Eventually, mannerisms they internalise while growing up manifests as the core of the adults they become, argued Dele Alobo, a social psychologist and founder of Youth Haven International (YHI), a non-governmental organisation (NGO).

True, while most touts, especially the young ones, are offended at negative stereotypes and portrayals of them as area boys, there exists a small fraction who for personal reasons readily buy into those images of the 'cool' but 'dangerous' area boy and urban rebel. Whereas those of a more 'respectable' disposition refer to themselves as *Omo adugbo* (decent or homely children of the neighbourhood), which connote a different meaning, from *Omo ita* (area boys). Many who work with the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) on Lagos Mainland lamented the unfair stereotypes accorded them.

A gangly teenager who simply gave his name as Bebo complained of the negative stereotyping members of the public subject them to. "Most people consider us to be thieves and armed robbers because we live and sleep on the streets. They think because we work in the motor park, we are irresponsible. Many of us have wives and children at home...look at me, for instance, I have two wives and three children, and I take care of them from the money I make on the streets. They call us *omo ita*, born troway, *o sanle*; we even call ourselves by those names for fun but it doesn't mean that we are bad or irresponsible.

"Most times, when people's cars break down in the night, we look after those cars and protect the valuables in them till they

Many people used to look down on us, especially the so-called *alakowe* (educated elite) but seriously, what do they have that I don't have? They speak English, I speak English. It may not be fluent but at least you understand me. Look at me, for instance, I dropped out of primary school but I currently employ graduates and undergraduates. Everybody respects me. They know I am an achiever. Won't recognise presence mi. (They recognise my presence)

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