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## SPECIAL REPORT

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### ARTICULATED VEHICLES, ARTICULATED DESTRUCTIONS

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Like undertakers, articulated vehicles ferry people to early graves and destroy property worth millions in short time. Yet, their importance to the economy appears indispensable. MOSES ALAO writes on the heavy duty vehicles and their menace on the roads.

Out of Igbogui flowed tears and blood; tears from the saddened eyes of onlookers and blood from mutilated bodies of hapless victims. But the sorrow was not Igbogui's alone, the fiery fire had burnt many homes, leaving many dreams charred and

many aspirations dead before they could even take off.

Like Igbogui, many towns and villages in Nigeria have become cemeteries, unwilling burial sites where dreams are interred daily. On a daily basis, residents of these towns receive undertakers with seething hate and in their very eyes, these undertakers dispense of cadavers, which might not be useful for medical studies but would of course have swollen the statistics of the dead and the wounded.

Igbogui is a town along Kilometre 65, Benin-Ore road, where 10 people lost their lives, on 21 March, 2014, in an accident involving a SINO truck with registration LSR 649 XK and a Toyota Hiace Bus belonging to GOD IS GOOD Transport Company. A month earlier, another fatal auto crash occurred on Dange along Funtua-Gusau-Sokoto road killing all the passengers of a car that had rammed into a parked articulate vehicle. That incident had increased the number of unaccounted for dead bodies in many of the nation's hospitals, as the occupants of the vehicle reportedly could not be identified by the men of the Sokoto State command of the Federal Roads Safety Corps (FRSC) back then.

With these screaming headlines, 52 dead in fire incident caused by fallen tanker; Babcock lecturer, two children killed on Lagos-Ibadan expressway by articulated vehicle; 15 killed in Kirikiri, not as a result of being imprisoned but as victims of a petrol tanker accident, over the years, Nigerians have become used to swallowing these daily doses of sorrow, with every attempt to seek information from the mass media always ending with one tale of sorrow or another.

According to statistics from the FRSC, articulated vehicles were responsible for 17 per cent of accidents in 2013. A year earlier, the corps revealed that out of the 6,269 crashes that involved 10,042 vehicles and left 4,260 people dead and 20,757 injured, articulated vehicles were responsible for 22 per cent of them. With several cases already reported this year resulting in the deaths of many people, one can only wonder what the statistics would be by June.

Indeed, for Nigerians, the fear of articulated vehicles has become the beginning of wisdom, as the accidents caused by the snaky commanders of the roads have become commonplace on all major roads and even the hinterlands. From the Lagos-Ibadan expressway, Enugu-Onitsha expressway, Benin-Ore expressway, Abuja-Kaduna Expressway, Ilorin-Ogbomoso expressway,

Kano-Maiduguri, the unifying factor for all small and medium vehicles drivers is the fear of death from the rampaging trailers drivers. Private vehicle owners as well as commercial drivers and even fellow articulated vehicle drivers, who spoke with Sunday Tribune, said they were indeed scared of articulated vehicles because of their unpredictability and heavy impact accidents.

According to a commercial driver, who plies the Sagamu-Ibadan road, Mr Akanji, driving on the Lagos-Ibadan expressway requires special prayers and watchfulness, because surviving on it is not only about being a good driver.

“My brother, our job as vehicle drivers needs special prayers. If it is rituals you can do to appease gods daily, so as not to meet with untimely death from the wicked trailer drivers, you have to do it and if it is prayer, you have to be committed to it. Forget what you said about people with poor driving skills and overspeeding being the causes of accidents, even those who know how to drive cannot escape if a trailer or tanker driver wants blood. Those people are just terrible.

“I have been driving for 25 years and there is virtually no state I have not driven to in Nigeria but on more than three occasions on this road [Lagos-Ibadan expressway] I would have been killed with my passengers, because of articulated vehicles. On one occasion, the trailer was carrying tomatoes and heading towards Lagos while I was going to Sagamu. I maintained the right lane as I was to enter the Saapade axis from the highway and he was rightly on the left lane. However, I didn't know what happened, I just saw him swerve to my side and I had to swerve off the road before I got to where I could turn right. I would have died with 17 passengers. The load was obviously too much and that is one of their problems. Because of greed, they overload [overload their trucks] but the policemen and other agencies do not stop them. It is only small vehicles that VIO, policemen and FRSC people always have the courage to stop. For me, all these heavy duty vehicles are the greatest causes of accidents on our roads,” Akanji said.



Another driver, who identified himself as Mr Ademola, but who plies the Ibadan-Lagos route from the Challenge, Ibadan Motor Park also shared Mr Akanji's sentiments about articulated vehicles and their drivers. “Most of the drivers are wicked,” he said.

“One of them once told me that commercial vehicle drivers are problems to them. They hate small vehicles and they don't want us to overtake them; yet they are slow. We specially pray to God about articulated vehicles and their drivers,

they are what the Yoruba call elenini [someone who does not want good for another].

Mrs Chidinma Eze, who said despite being a woman, she could drive anywhere in Nigeria and was even the one to drive long distance whenever she was travelling with her husband and children, also noted that the menace of articulated vehicles was something government should check immediately, saying: “It is just that our government does not pay attention to lives. In a good

country, articulated vehicles should have a time during which they should not be allowed to move on major roads or they should be given their own roads. That was why weigh bridges were introduced to check the damage the articulated vehicles do to lives and properties.

"I am not afraid of them, though, because I know I have to travel and I would rather drive myself than entrust my life and those of my family members to another person. That way, I can go at a speed that is reasonable. But I know many people that would rather lose millions than undertake to drive themselves on the highways. My husband had a bad experience and since then, he no longer drives out of Lagos, not even to the Redeemed Camp where we go for programmes."

But are articulated vehicles as bad as they have been painted? Alhaji Danlameen Usman, a container truck supervisor, whom Sunday Tribune came across at the Apapa Wharf in company of the truck's driver, Isa, said articulated vehicles were important and indispensable to Nigeria since the railway is not working well. According to him, heavy duty goods, foodstuffs and many important materials could only be moved from the farm locations or port to where they were needed by end users, noting that even if the railway was functioning, it couldn't have been moving goods to end users.

"I think the problem is not about articulated vehicles but their owners and drivers. There is nothing wrong with the proliferation of the vehicles.

They are important to the economy. You will agree with me that whenever petroleum tanker drivers under NUPENG boycott the road, the Nigerian economy will suffer. Same thing applies if some of us that have trucks taking goods from the ports to other places boycott the roads. However, some owners and drivers do not take caution by maintaining the vehicles and being careful while driving.

"For us, we ensure that all our trucks are well-maintained even if there are no businesses and to serve as caution to the drivers, each truck has a supervisor. I can drive but I rarely do. I just sit beside the driver and caution him. They are also human, they can become tired and sleep off and that is one major reason for accidents. Another one is overloading. Each truck, whether for carrying liquid products or solid, has a weight limit and failure to adhere to that limit is invitation to accident," he said.

On his part, Isa debunked the claims that articulated vehicles drivers are wicked; noting that no sane human being would revel at taking the life of another, noting that the damage that would be done to their vehicles and sometimes the products they were carrying would be enough to also make them want to avoid accidents.

He identified greed, taking illicit drugs, strong drinks and over-speeding on the parts of the articulated vehicles drivers as causes of road accidents, adding that impatience on the part of small vehicles drivers had been the cause of accidents involving articulated vehicles.





Another driver, Mr Musa Akande from Ogbomoso, who said he had driven his truck to about 30 states in Nigeria within the last 18 years, said the most important issue about container trucks are the hooks that are meant to hold a container down on the four edges. He stated that containers that fall off the trucks were as a result of the hooks not working properly or because the loads were not set properly. "Many drivers really do not care about their lives or loads. Some of them drink too much before driving," he said. Asked if the Yoruba

saying "oju lasan o see se were" meaning one cannot behave like a madman without being under the influence, was indeed true about truck drivers, Musa said there are many articulated drivers that do not drink or smoke. According to him, he had not been involved in accident in the 18 years he had been driving. Before anyone could drive a truck, he stated, such a person must have understudied a driver for many years.

"Driving articulated vehicle is not and should be an all-comers affair. You don't only have to know how to drive, you must also have followed one for some time. I followed a vehicle for eight years before I began to drive but our people are now nonchalant about safety," he explained.

Sunday Tribune's attempt to speak with the Abuja Command of the FRSC did not yield result but a publication of the FRSC entitled: "Safety requirements/guidelines for articulated lorries (tankers/trailers) operations in Nigeria," detailed the measures that owners and drivers of the vehicles must follow to ensure accident-free operations. Article 1 of the publication states as follows: "Driving articulated lorries (tankers/trailers) requires special skills and knowledge of traffic laws and regulations in force in the country. In Nigeria today, many drivers of articulated Lorries (Tankers/Trailers) are not qualified to operate such vehicles as they are not properly licensed and also lack the basic requirements to operate such vehicles, hence high incidence of Road Traffic Crashes (RTC) on the highways. In view of this high rate of road crashes resulting from unprofessional conduct and carelessness by some tanker/trailer drivers on the highways, the Federal Government mandated the FRSC to establish Minimum Safety Requirements for heavy good vehicles." One wonders, however, how adequately the corps has been monitoring operators of articulated vehicles to ensure compliance with all the articles of the publication on Road Transport Safety Standardisation Scheme, which relate to adequate registration, insurance and training for the heavy duty vehicles drivers.

In whatever light one chooses to see articulated vehicles, their presence on the Nigerian scene could be said to have come to stay as they play major roles in the nation's economy. A trip to the Apapa wharf area on a Tuesday morning saw this reporter count about 33 trucks waiting to be loaded. The containers, no doubt, were carrying different goods that would hold importance for the country's economy. A return trip to Liverpool junction in the same environment around 6 p.m. saw this reporter counting more than 26 loaded articulated vehicles in 53 minutes.

Where were these vehicles? What were they carrying? What would become of them on the roads? Would they spill blood? These were some of the questions ringing through one's mind, as a journey that began beautifully for articulated vehicles often becomes nightmarish for their drivers and other road users, with traffic logjam and accidents always waiting at a corner.

But there seems to be hope about their growing menace, with the Minister of Works, Mr Mike Onolememen saying that weigh bridges would soon be re-introduced to major roads in the country.

The works minister, who said one of the banes of Nigerian roads is the excessive axle loading, lamented the demolition of toll plazas, which ensured that there were weigh bridges on major roads, saying: "We have also looked at it that one of the causes of the perennial failure on our roads apart from construction problems or soil conditions is the excessive axle loading on the road. We, therefore, decided in 2012 to begin a systematic programme to re-introduce weigh bridges on those roads.

"If you observe, on most of the roads, we have started the construction of weigh bridges, and we are deploying them. We have almost concluded the first set, and we hope to put in place a proper governance structure for the implementation and usage of those way bridges."

He added that government had begun to engage the heavy users of the roads, "mostly the cement companies, the iron billet companies, the bitumen companies and others. We are engaging them so as to find a way of controlling their loads in the factory. We believe that will remove a percentage of excessive axle loading on our roads. But we have also found out that there is collusion sometimes between drivers, such that even when they leave the factories with the normal weight, they stop somewhere and reload, thereby putting on additional weight. So we are also mapping out plans to check those excesses."

Sunday Tribune sought the views of Nigerians on how the menace of articulated vehicles could be curbed, with many respondents saying that the railway system should be rejuvenated. But Alhaji Danlameen and Mr Akande said it should not only be about reintroducing railways. They noted that the government should improve on the roads because articulated vehicles would continue to be relevant. According to Akande, articulated vehicles driver would not be afraid of trains, saying though the revolution of the railway system was a good development, it would not dispose of articulated vehicles, thus the need for safety measures, enlightenment for road users as well as improvement of roads.

For Mr Ademola, government should create different roads for articulated vehicles or ensure they have a time they can use the roads, saying that the reconstruction of the Lagos-Ibadan expressway by the President Goodluck Jonathan administration would help to reduce accidents involving articulated vehicles and small vehicles on the highway.

As you read this, make sure you are not driving and if you are sitting in a vehicle or even in front of your house, it will not be wrong to watch your back or look ahead; the snaky carriers of destruction might be close by.

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