

Lagos community where every resident has sad tales of 'killer' bus stop

Published June 24, 2017

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•Mangoro bus stop

Gbenro Adeoye

Mangoro bus stop is along the Lagos-Abeokuta Expressway but it is not just like any bus stop; it holds too many sad memories for people, especially residents of an adjoining neighbourhood, Onipetesi Estate.

Too many lives have been lost at Mangoro bus stop facing the entrance to the community, where residents now appear to carry sorrowful memories around like souvenirs.

For Oriyomi Sowemimo, she wears hers on her face like a bad makeup. She was 32 years old when her husband, Yemi, 45, died at the bus stop in 2010. And even though, seven years have passed, Oriyomi's efforts to bury her unhappiness have been largely futile.

Each time she passes by the bus stop, her misery forms a large knot in her heart that brings hot tears to her eyes.

Oriyomi was reluctant to share her story with *Saturday PUNCH* and the way her body convulsed with sobs explained her difficult struggle to relive memories she had tried these past years to bury for good.

Double tragedy

“No! You want to take me back to the worst moment of my life. I cry every day to forget how I lost the love of my life at that (Mangoro) bus stop; it is very painful,” she said.

When Oriyomi later agreed to talk after much pleading, the first thing she said was “February 22”. Seeing the look of confusion on the face of our correspondent, she added “2010”, noting that it was the date her husband died.

Three months before the sad date, her husband was knocked down by a hit and run vehicle at the bus stop.

“He was rushed to a hospital and after some time, he survived. We were all happy that he was back home with us (his family) and things were getting back to normal. Then three months after the accident, he was hit by a vehicle at the same bus stop the second time. He wasn’t lucky the second time,” she said amid sobs.

Oriyomi was still dazed by the way her husband was hit by vehicles at the same spot twice in three months, and she admitted that wrapping her head around the mystery had not helped a bit, but left her with more and more headache.

Yemi’s death also left Oriyomi with the responsibility of caring for their three children alone, a task that has overwhelmed her.

“Even after seven years, I’m still not okay. There are many reasons why it is difficult to forget how he died. It was a painful death and I can never forget it. After he had an accident the first time and managed to survive it; three months later, he had another at the same bus stop and died. How can anyone forget that?

“I miss him. Passing by the bus stop every day is a painful reminder of how I lost my husband. I used to buy goods from Cotonou (in Benin Republic) to sell here but I had to stop the business after my husband died to be with our children full time. Now I bear all the responsibilities alone.

“I’m struggling alone to take care of the three of them. Right now, I’m yet to pay the balance of my children’s school fees. And even if I remarry, can the man ever be like my husband?” she asked.

It was learnt that after Yemi’s death, some youths in the area took their frustrations to the streets in protest and also blocked traffic along the Lagos-Abeokuta Expressway.

According to residents, there are at least three fatalities every month at Mangoro bus stop, with many of the victims getting hit while trying to cross the road. However, some residents there were times when there were as many as two deaths per week at the bus stop.

Our correspondent observed that almost every household in the community has a sad story of their own to tell about the bus stop. Some households have lost family members or friends to auto accidents there while some have stories of people they know who escaped with injuries – hence the reason for the community’s agitations for a pedestrian and an overhead bridge to aid the safe crossing of the expressway by pedestrians and motorists.

In the aftermath of Yemi's death, *Saturday PUNCH* learnt that the community put some lights at the bus stops to illuminate the area for pedestrians. But it didn't bring down the casualty figure.

For instance, Tony Ogiso, aka Tony Tonero, was killed in an accident while crossing the expressway at Mangoro bus stop on Thursday of the same week the community lost Yemi Sowemimo.

Tonero was an artist and a former member of Oxygen, a four-man music group, which included Paul IK Dairo, Slam and Swave. He featured prominently in Dairo's late 90s hit, 'Mo Sorire'.

Two deaths in one family

Tonero's death gave his mother-in-law, Mrs. Rebecca Ogundimu, 67, a horrible sense of déjà vu. Ogundimu had lost her son, Sina, who was 11 years old, to a hit and run bus driver at the same bus stop in 1982.

The late Sina was also crossing the road when he was hit by a vehicle.

"In the 1980s, I used to sell food across the road and it was while my Sina was coming home from the canteen that he was hit by a hit and run driver. And it was because of that incident that I closed down the canteen and opened a shop in the estate to prevent any of my children from having to cross the road from the canteen and back.

"So Tonero's death was very painful because he died at the same bus stop where I had earlier lost my son. It is still painful that my daughter lost her husband at the same spot where I had lost my son and where she had lost her brother. What tragedy is more than that?

"Tonero had just returned home in the evening and later decided to buy Suya across the road. He did not return home from that short trip as he was knocked down by a vehicle as he was crossing the road," she said.

The sexagenarian described the moment as a difficult time for her and her family.

Making a case for a pedestrian bridge at the infamous bus stop, the sexagenarian described the continued fatalities at the spot as sad, saying, "Before my son (Sina) died at the bus stop, others had also died. After him, more have died, including my son-in-law (Tonero) and sadly, after Tonero, more people have been killed at the same bus stop and many more have been injured. But still, nothing has been done about the situation. People die like chickens at the bus stop and we want that to stop.

“All we need is a pedestrian bridge for people who have to cross the road but the Federal and state governments are not doing anything about it. Some of us are still alive, but is it until we all die on the road before the government gives us a pedestrian bridge? If government does nothing about the situation, more people will still die. We need pedestrian bridge more than any other area.”

More tragedies

One of the pioneer members of the community, Chief Solomon Soremi, lost his younger brother, Ishola, 50, in 1987 at the infamous bus stop. Soremi had summoned Ishola over to his place one morning as he had just helped him secure an appointment in a school at the estate.

Ishola was on his way to his elder brother's house when he was hit at Mangoro bus stop. Meanwhile, hours after Ishola had been killed by a hit and run driver, Soremi was still home wondering why it was taking his brother so long to arrive.

When Soremi felt it was getting too late, he went looking for his brother at home. There, Soremi was told by Ishola's wife that her husband had left home early that morning for Onipetesi Estate for his new job.

“Then, I went to the school, where I had helped him get a job, but they had also not seen him. It was while we were looking for him that someone informed us about an accident at Mangoro bus stop and that a man had lost his life in the incident.

“I never thought it could be my brother, but after some time, people convinced us to visit the mortuary where the deceased had been taken and we did. My wife and I got to the mortuary and as the attendant pulled out one of the trays, I was shocked to see my brother lying there. I went mad; this was someone coming to see me that morning,” he said.

Soremi explained how he had to take over the financial responsibilities of some of his late brother's children to ease the burden on the wife who had lost her husband prematurely.

Soremi's wife, Grace, recalled how a woman also lost her life and two young children at the bus stop seven days after Ishola (her brother-in-law's) death.

“I remember that seven days after Brother Ishola's death, a woman and her two children were killed after they were run over by a vehicle at that bus stop. The woman was carrying her toddler on her back and holding two other children; it was only the toddler that miraculously survived while the woman and the other two children died.

“Then, there used to be one fatality at the bus stop every two or three days but it has reduced to an average of three in a month now.

“I also remember a New Year’s Eve recently, while we were returning from church, we saw a dead body at the bus stop. Apparently, she had also been hit by a vehicle,” she said.

‘I thought I would never walk again’

Emeke Umezina, 43, is one of the lucky persons to have survived an accident at the bus stop, although, it left him with a heavy and laboured limp. In September 2003, Umezina was on a commercial motorcycle (popularly called *okada*) with the rider when they were hit by a vehicle.

His right leg was crushed and he thought he would never walk again. But after two years of shuttling between orthodox clinics and traditional bone setters that left him about N5m poorer, Umezina was able to walk again, albeit with some difficulty. However, he was still grateful because the *okada* rider had not made it.

“Although, I can walk, I cannot do most of the things I used to do. For instance, I cannot fold my right leg even after spending so much. It was terrible; for over two years, I could not walk,” he said.

Umezina, who is a carpenter, with his shop close to the infamous bus stop, said his job has also suffered as a result of the accident he had.

“Since I returned to work, I have not been able to do most of the jobs myself. Now, I rely on paid labour to do most of the jobs I get because my ability to work has greatly diminished and that eats into my profit,” he said.

Although, Umezina was supposed to go for a major surgery in 2014 that would have cost him N1.5m with a promise to improve his condition, he had to shun it because he could not afford it.

“I didn’t have the money as I had already spent so much to get myself to this point,” he said.

Having his carpentry workshop close to the busy Mangoro bus stop has its good part because it gets him customers; however, there is also an unpleasant side to it. For starters, it keeps reminding Umezina of the dreadful night he almost died.

Second, the proximity to the bus stop positions him to be one of the first persons to get to the scene of any accident at the dreaded bus stop.

Recalling some of the gory incidents he has witnessed at the bus stop, Umezinwa said with a note of sadness, “There was a pregnant woman who came to visit someone in the estate and was killed right here by a hit and run driver. Four years ago, there was another pregnant lady, who was supposed to get married in the same week; she had crossed the expressway to get food for her fiancé in the estate when she was killed by a speeding vehicle.

“There was an old woman who was hit by okada rider that was driving against traffic and while she was still on the ground, she was crushed by an oncoming vehicle. There was a man who used to carry loads across the expressway for stipends; he was also killed recently while crossing the road.”

Also close to the dreaded bus stop is Olukayode Healthcare Centre, where most of the accident victims around there are first taken.

A medical doctor who had spent seven years at the hospital, Akanni Abayomi, said he had seen more deaths than was necessary in a lifetime as a result of the frequent accidents at the bus stop.

“Since our hospital is the closest to the bus stop, the victims are first brought here. We handle some of the cases and the ones we cannot handle, we quickly refer to the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital, Ikeja.

“A lot of the victims are strangers, so we won’t know who to contact. I have personally had to take corpses to mortuaries and paid since we didn’t know who to contact and we could not leave the bodies here,” he said.

Desperation for a bridge

The Chairman of Onipetesi Community Elders’ Forum and first Chairman of the estate’s community development association, Alhaji Kazeem Ipadeola, who confirmed the situation, described it as grave. He added that the community had been agitating for a pedestrian bridge since early 1980s without success.

Ipadeola, who noted that the community had lost count of the number of people that had been killed by speeding vehicles at the bus stop leading to the estate, appealed to government and non-governmental organisations to come to the aid of families who have lost their breadwinners at the bus stop.

It was learnt that some of the estate’s residents had some times connected the deaths to a diabolical theory, but Ipadeola dismissed such claims as borne out of ignorance.

“Yes, there was a time some residents suggested that it might be diabolical and that we should take sacrifice there to appease whatever god is responsible, but I told them that I would not be part of that because I’m educated,” he said.

Ipadeola said the community had written several letters explaining the problem to the Ministry of Works and Infrastructure in Lagos, and that he once shot a video of the situation at the bus stop and sent the footage to the same ministry, but that nothing came out of it.

Explaining the problem with the bus stop area, Ipadeola said, “I was the first chairman of Onipetesi CDA when it was set up in 1988 and one of my cardinal programmes was to ensure that we got a pedestrian bridge right at Mangoro bus stop.

“There have been so many deaths there and we have always found it difficult to come into the estate or go out by car or on foot. I can never forget one accident that occurred there during the time sir Michael Otedola was governor of Lagos State. A pregnant woman was crushed to death by a Jubilee bus (old bus used in the state) with registration number LA661CJA; I can never forget the plate number.

“We have studied the problems here and they are unique, which is why accidents are so common. Coming from Ikeja and going towards Iyana-Ipaja, the road has a sharp bend and descent. Someone at the bus stop won’t be able to see beyond a few metres while motorists will also have the same problem. Meanwhile, because of the sharp descent, many vehicles speed at the bend.

“And in the evening, some motorists are so negligent that they don’t put on full light and in the day, their speed is always too much. By the time they realise that someone is crossing or by the sharp bend, it is already too late.

“Meanwhile, our estate is mainly residential. We don’t have markets and we only have a primary school that cannot cater for the population. Therefore, many people from this side of the road have cause to cross to the other side for education and commercial purposes. We once estimated that about 5,000 people cross the road daily to and fro at the bus stop.”

Ipadeola also said that because of the absence of a U-turn around the estate, gridlock during peak hours makes some motorists drive against traffic; a situation he described as largely contributing to the casualty figure.

“Some weeks, two to three persons die at the bus stop, that is how serious the problem is,” he said.

During the administration of former President Olusegun Obasanjo, the construction of a bridge was started at Cement bus stop, over one kilometre away from Mangoro bus stop, but even that was shortly abandoned.

Our correspondent however learnt that work had resumed at the bridge around the end of last year but it had yet to be completed. Even when completed, residents said it would not have any impact on the current situation at Mangoro bus stop due to the distance and the human traffic at the dreaded bus stop.

“Whether the pedestrian bridge at Cement bus stop is completed or not, we still need one at Mangoro bus stop because we have found out that the traffic here is more and that the siting of the bridge at Cement bus stop was political. It was meant for this place before it was hijacked by some people close to the government in that area,” he said.

Assistant Director, Public Affairs Office, Ministry of Works & Infrastructure, Mr. Sina Thorpe, however, urged the residents to formally write another letter to the state governor, stating their past efforts and the justifications for having a pedestrian bridge at the bus stop.

He said, “Tell the CDA to write directly to the governor. We have over 54 pedestrian bridges spread across the state and some that are metals are being rebuilt.

“Governor (Akinwunmi) Ambode is passionate about the safety of pedestrians. The letter should state efforts made in the past and they should justify their need for the bridge and I’m sure he will look into it.”