

Sharing the Road with Bikers: The Nigerian Experience

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Nigeria has dilapidated, overcrowded, and unsafe vehicles and motorcycles on its roads. A motorcycle operator may have as many as five or more passengers on board. The reasons for this situation are briefly described, and suggestions for improving safety are presented.

Many communities in Nigeria still depend on bicycles and motorcycles as a means of transportation. In some urban centers the services of the machines are even commercialized. This in itself is not as much a problem as the hazards from the modes of operation.

In most of the communities involved, bicycles are commonly used by women and girls, whereas motorbikes are usually operated by men. The women cyclists for the most part ride to run their businesses (often farming or, less often, trading). Those who are farmers are usually seen heading toward their farms in the morning. They have much more to carry on their way back later in the day. Unlike the women, the girls ride mostly to run errands around town or for pleasure. Their communities, however, do not have problems with heavy automobile traffic, as do bigger cities.

One danger does exist. In most cases interstate roads run through, and motorists drive on them carelessly. This has often resulted in knocking off cyclists who underestimate the speed of approaching vehicles as they attempt to cross the road. Such incidents apply not only to cyclists. Pedestrians and motorbikers have also been involved. In such instances, the vehicles involved make away where possible for one simple reason: to avoid being lynched by irate villagers.

Even in the cities, road designs are such that cyclists are put at a disadvantage with motorists. There are no pedestrian or cyclist paths as are found in most modern cities of the world. Cyclists as well as motorbikers are, therefore, left with no option other than to share the road with cars and trucks. Consequently, parents are very cautious to ensure that their children do not ride beyond their immediate (safe) neighborhoods. Children, especially in big cities like Lagos, are not allowed to go to school or run errands by cycling.

MOTORBIKERS

Unlike Europeans and Americans, who ride bikes at sporting meets and for pleasure, most motorbikers ride either as a means of getting to work (even to white collar jobs) or for a living. It is common to see as many bikers as motorists on the roads. In some cities, especially in the Delta areas of Nigeria,

motorbikers tend to outnumber motorists. In others, taxicabs are almost nonexistent; instead, motorbikes are the major means of transporting commuters from one place to another (see Figures 1 and 2).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before the oil boom days in Nigeria, people were content to ride in buses. There were enough buses on Nigerian roads, particularly because most Nigerians lived in the countryside. More people then were involved in farming, producing cash and food crops. The major transportation need was to move their produce to the cities for sale. Inhabitants of cities were civil servants and those working in industry. There was enough food to go around then and prices were affordable.

With the oil boom of the mid-1970s, people abandoned their farms for the cities to seek white collar jobs. The jobs, incidentally, were there. The effect was not only a crash in the production of food crops but also an influx of people to the cities, which led to the beginning of recognizable inflation in Nigeria.

Then, with the strength of the Naira against major world currencies (\$1 was equivalent to 0.75 Naira), Nigeria went on an import spree. Anything and everything was imported, including, of course, automobiles. Because they were so cheap, cars of different sizes, shapes, and makes flooded our roads.

It came to such a critical stage that the Lagos state government enacted a law regulating movement of vehicles on major roads on certain days of the week. Called the odd and even number edict, the regulation allows vehicles up to light trucks, except commercial vehicles, with registrations starting with an odd number to ply the roads only on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Vehicles with registrations starting with even numbers are allowed on these roads only on Tuesdays and Thursdays. This, of course, is similar to high-occupancy vehicle lanes in America.

(Nigeria and America have something in common here. Whereas some countries are worrying about emission control possibilities from the overflow of automobiles, we have been concerned with congestion.)

This led to most people acquiring more than one car to beat the odd and even number edict. The government provided a park and ride system, which made it possible for motorists to park their vehicles at a central lot and ride to and from work in government buses.

Unfortunately, however, the downturn in the economy hit everyone like a bolt from the blue. Despite warnings from a few people, nobody ever really believed that the Nigerian



FIGURE 1 Queue of bikers waiting for passengers in Surulere, Lagos.

economy could get bad. At the end of the day, the Naira lost strength. The Naira, which stood at 0.75 to the dollar, is now 35.00 to the dollar (as of March 1993). Exchange rates became the yardstick by which market performance was measured. Prices shot up so much that today an average 1.8-1 saloon that was purchased for 6,000 Naira (pre-second tier foreign exchange market) today goes for not less than 395,000 Naira. In most cases, salary scales have hardly changed. Motorbikes now cost 10 times what cars used to cost.

Several facts are troubling. Very few people can now afford to buy personal cars. Those who still have one find difficulty in maintaining it properly. Public transportation standards are not what they should be. If vehicle "roadworthiness" regulations were enforced, most vehicles would have to be off the road and Nigeria would come to a standstill.



FIGURE 2 Biker with commercial passenger in Surulere.

SAFETY

It is also troublesome that law enforcement agents' hands have been tied with regard to roadworthiness regulations. Who wants to bring the economy to a standstill?

Consequently, dilapidated, overcrowded, and unsafe vehicles and motorcycles are on the roads. A motorcycle operator could have as many as five, sometimes more, passengers on board. They often include mothers with babies strapped on their backs.

A crash involving a biker can be devastating. All parts of the body are prone to various grades of injury, but head injuries are apparently the most feared by bikers. The campaign for protective wear has limitations, which result from the environment and the economy: the weather in the tropics is not conducive to wearing tight-fitting leather garments, and inadequate facilities lead to overcrowding. This is often reflected in more than one passenger riding on a bike without safety wear. In fact, families go to church on Sundays in their best riding four or sometimes five on a bike. Inevitably, safety is not given due consideration.

In our nationwide research into this subject, it was discovered that the cost of safety helmets and other riding gear has very little to do with why bikers are not wearing them. When originally enacted, the regulation on constant use of safety helmets by bikers and their passengers was enforced. This led to riders who intended to take on passengers being required to buy at least two crash helmets, but as time went by and passengers grew from the normal one to four, five, or six, the idea was abandoned.

The recommendations of our research work focused on eliminating the motive. That is, if commuters were given better alternatives, such as abundant buses, organized city cabs, a metro system, and ferries on waterways, fewer commuters would use bikes.

Whereas we look forward to eliminating a situation in which a family of four or five rides on a motorbike or bicycle at the same time, the use of bicycles is to be encouraged for two immediate reasons: it is cheaper by all standards, so more people can afford it, and it is ecologically friendly.

The one major problem we have always faced in Nigeria is the fact that we hardly ever plan ahead. We are used to waiting for crisis. More devastating is the fact that we are not

good managers of crisis, by design. Consequently, most problems are tackled with the fire brigade approach.

Such were the transportation policies of the nation since independence in 1960 that today, in 1993, we still depend on automobiles for mass movement. This is especially so in urban transportation.

The current economic situation in Nigeria can only encourage more use of cycles. It is for this that our 10-min video program, Safer Cycling, addressed the major causes of bike accidents and suggested tips on how to deal with them. Field surveys into final scripting of Safer Cycling took place in major cities of the country. Locations for film recording were selected according to intensity of use of bikes. Therefore, cities like Lagos, Ughelli, Warri, Port-Harcourt, and a number of villages were featured.

These are peculiar communities with high volumes of bikes. In recent times, the use of bikes has grown a great deal in Nigeria as a result of the downturn in the economy. Although bad economic times are not welcome, this development is creating a friendlier and more pleasant environment for us to live in.

Since the roads still have to be shared with pedestrians and other motorists, it is necessary to awaken bikers and cyclists to the possibility of a crash. With enough awareness, bikers who are prepared and properly equipped are better off on the road than others.

The key word, therefore, is safety.

CAUSES OF BIKE ACCIDENTS

The primary cause of bike accidents in Nigeria is the fact that most riders, like their motoring colleagues, have no training. Whatever skill they have was acquired along the line.

It is common to see riders display unethical riding characteristics. It is common practice, for example, for riders to maneuver between cars in traffic rather than to wait in line. It is also common for riders not to be bothered by traffic regulations at intersections. The latter is so bad that bikers not only jump traffic lights but also ignore traffic policemen at intersections. It is a kind of immunity; the attitude is inherent. The regulations seem to be for automobiles only.

In the meantime, the video program, basically addressing motorists, suggests ways bike accidents can be minimized with the cooperation of motorists.

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