

Man-Must-Wack: Life and Career of University of Lagos Pioneer Vendor

R. T. Akinyele

*Department of History and Strategic Studies,
University of Lagos, Akoka.*

I work at a newspaper, I'm not a journalist; I'm a delivery man.
Well, I will be, as soon as I get my bicycle flat tire fixed.

– Jarod Kintz

Abstract

The newspaper has been a part of the intellectual culture of the University of Lagos since its inception in 1962. The history of the institution will therefore remain largely incomplete without the documentation of the activities of the vendor who dominated the landscape for more than twenty five years. This paper attempts to highlight the life and career of Mr. Philip Nwadiwu Abasiri, popularly known as Man-Must-Wack. His experience in Onitsha and Lagos in the 1940s illustrates some of the key issues in rural-urban drift which is still a major problem in Nigeria today. He started selling his newspapers in the University in 1964 and the business expanded with the evolution of the faculties. By the time he retired from active business in the late 1980s, he had planted two of his sons in the business. The paper also highlights how the personal characteristics and trade techniques that ensured his success as a vendor can be harnessed to reduce the rate of unemployment in Nigeria.

Keywords: Newspapers, Vendor, University of Lagos, Rural – Urban Drift.

Background

O. M. Bankole and S.O Babalola (2011, 1) observe that newspapers are a source of information in enlightened societies. By all standards, the University of Lagos belongs to the category of literate society and enlightened community. Largely for this reason, the newspaper has been a part of the intellectual culture of the University since its inception in 1962. In fact, the history of the institution will remain largely incomplete without at least some comments on the newspaper vendor that dominated the scene for more than twenty five years.¹ This paper, therefore, attempts to fill this gap by beaming the searchlight on the life and career of Mr. Philip Nwadiwu Abasiri popularly known as *Man-Must-Wack*.

He was as famous as the most renowned professor on campus. From morning until evening, his newspaper stand was never short of patronage of buyers and free readers. The free readers comprised mainly of students who came to browse the papers for free. Since many of them did this on a regular basis, they soon acquired the label of free readers. And whoever was seen browsing at the newspaper stand was automatically presumed to be a member of the Free Readers Association.

In any case, *Man-Must-Wack* had numerous customers who read the newspapers for various reasons. Many of the lecturers routinely bought newspapers from him to get information on public affairs or to keep abreast of development in the society. As Cheney (1992 cited in

Bankole & Babalola, 2011:1) rightly observed, the newspapers “are the textbooks that provide up-to-date information on local, state, national and global affairs”. For most students however, reading newspapers was a way to release tension or past time especially in between lectures. There was no place to seat in between lectures then, no viewing centers and quadrangles. It is however important to situate this study in the context of existing literature.

The Vendor in the Context of the Press in Literature

The press in Nigeria has attracted a lot of scholarly attention in existing literature since the colonial period. This is ostensibly because of the role of the press in promoting western civilization in the early phase of the colonial era and in the nationalist agitation of the subsequent era. Since independence, scholars of various disciplines have analysed the role of the press in every important phase of Nigerian history, including the civil war, military rule, democratization process and the on-going insurgency in the country. Indeed, it is on account of the pervasive influence of the press in moulding public opinion that it has been rightly called the Fourth Estate of the Realm. A few of the publications will be highlighted here to reveal the scope of the existing works on the press in Nigeria. As already noted, the newspapers play a central role in the emergence of the elite culture of the Europeans and educated elite in 19th century Lagos. Indeed, the social history of that period has been reconstructed by Michael J. Echeruo (1979) using mainly the newspapers of that period. Even the way civilized children were portrayed in the newspapers has been examined by Saheed Aderinto (2015). That phase of Nigeria history was closely followed by the era of decolonization on which there are many works on the role of the press. These include: Y. Cohen (1972), Fred Omu (1974), R. A. Akinfeleye (2004) and Shina Alimi (2015). The role of the press in the Nigeria civil war has not ceased to attract the attention of historians, political scientists and international relations experts. The works in this category include A. B. Akinyemi (1972), Adepitan Bamisaye (1974) and Wale Adebani (2016:107-145). The theme of state repression and press freedom became popular during the period of military rule in Nigeria. The notable works on Mass Media and censorship include Tunji Bello (1995), Ayo Olukotun (2002), A. A. Akinwale (2010) Shina Alimi (2011) and E. S. Asemah et al (2013) among others.

The theme of press and politics resurfaced strongly in Nigerian historiography following the political violence that accompanied the press elections of 2003. Then, the focus was how to use the press to control electoral violence and deepen the democratic culture. Among the works are: J. S. Popoola (2003), Tony Iyare (2003), Emmanuel O. Ojo (2003) and Ocholi Abraham (2009). The training of journalists has also received attention beginning with the pioneering work of Davidson Chuka Aniakor (1990) on press pedagogy in Nigeria from 1920 to 1990s.

And while popular journalists and newspaper columnists have been brought under academic searchlight (Olatunji Dare 1992, Lanre Idowu, 2009), the literature is unduly silent on the distribution of newspapers, particularly on the role of the vendors, an important link in the distributive chain. And while the life and career of Mr. Philip Abasiri and Pa Joseph Olobayo, the pioneer vendors at the University of Lagos and Obafemi Awolowo University suggests that some vendors have spent more than forty years in the newspaper business and transformed the trade into a thriving family business, it is ironic that little or nothing has been written on this category of people. The same trend is also noticed in the publications on the press in the United Kingdom and United States. Available record shows that the involvement of vendors in the

newspaper business in the United Kingdom dates back to 1833 when Barney Flaherty, a ten year old boy, was employed to deliver copies of the *New York Sun* to buyers (O'Brien, 1918).

The job became so popular to the extent that young boys were assigned to regular routes to deliver newspapers. The tool of the trade included a bicycle and the luminous water proof bag with a single strap. Yet, the importance of the paper boys was not highlighted in the landmark publication to commemorate the centenary anniversary of journalism in the United Kingdom. The book highlighted the phases in the evolution of the press in the United Kingdom, discussed the issue of press freedom and the outbreak of circulation warfare among the major newspapers (Cyril Bainbridge (ed.) 1984) To date, perhaps the best known publication on the paperboy is the memoir of Tony Macaulay (2010) aptly titled, *Paperboy: An Enchanting True Story of a Belfast Paperboy coming to Terms with the Troubles*. This book tells the story of a twelve year old boy who braved the odds to distribute his newspapers in spite of the violent conflict between the Catholic and the Protestants in Belfast in the 1970s.

The striking contrast in the degree of attention paid to newspaper publishers and the street vendors is even more glaring in the United States. The paperboys were seen on the various streets, particularly of New York, in the 1970s and until the early 1980s when they were gradually displaced by adults using vans to distribute newspapers in the very early hours of the day. But while there had been no fewer than two biographies on Robert Maxwell, the Czechoslovakian Jew who rose from poverty to become the owner of the largest printing company in Europe (Tom Bower, 1988, P. Thompson and A Delano, 1988), the only publication known to this author on the paperboys is the memoir of Henry Petroski in which the Professor of Civil Engineering explained how the construction of his delivery bike inspired him to study engineering. To drive home this point, the picture of a bike was used to illustrate the front cover of the book which he titled, *Paperboy: Confession of a Future Engineer* (Henry Petroski, 2003). The current study is, therefore, intended to draw attention to this gap in the literature on the press in Nigeria and beyond the country. It is also hoped that other researchers will see the research opportunity in this neglected area.

Early Life

Mr Philip Abasiri was born in 1922 in Mgbidi in Oru West Local Government Area of Imo State. His parents, Orjiwuru and Okeaku Abasiri, combined farming with petty trading to feed the family. Philip was the eldest of the children. His siblings included Vincent, Felix, Nsemakuelu and Nwada.

Since it was the practice for children of his own age to accompany their fathers to the farm, Philip also started life in Mgbidi in that way. Although he did not have the opportunity to acquire western education, he was focused and enterprising. In adolescence, the urge to leave the village and seek greener pastures in the city became very strong. First, he headed for Onitsha to explore what he could do for a living. But like every young man who had been attracted by the lure of the city without adequate means of sustenance, he soon realised that everything that glitter was not gold. After a while, he returned to Mgbidi but the experience was not enough to make him abandon the dream of going to the city. It only meant that in the future he would not venture into the city without a guide and adequate preparation.

In 1944, the long awaited opportunity to go to Lagos came his way. This time, he accompanied Mr Okorie Eze, his kinsman who was living in Balogun Area to Lagos. His plan before leaving Mgbidi was that he would, at least, find someone to employ him as a domestic servant in Lagos. If he was lucky enough, he might find a company to employ him as a casual worker since he was unskilled. At that initial stage, he was assisted by Patrick Eburo who generously accommodated him in Lagos.

The reality was different in Lagos. He did not secure the paid employment as anticipated. In the course of searching for a job, he probably observed that those who sold chickens during the festive periods made a huge profit. At that time, the chickens were bought in large baskets by traders from the far north. Poultry farming was not common then and the birds were free range. After weighing the options, Philip entered into the business. He shuttled from Lagos to Kano for many years. He soon discovered that the business was not as lucrative as he had thought. First, the market was seasonal. Second, the journey to the North was tedious and risky. Hence, he abandoned the trade as soon as he found a viable alternative.

The breakthrough came in 1964 when he established contact with one Mr Alfred Onyia, a newspaper agent who distributed newspapers to vendors in Kakawa Street in Lagos.² Lagos has remained the home of Nigerian newspapers since the emergence of *Iwe Irohin*, the first Nigerian newspaper in Abeokuta in 1859. Between 1860 and 1900, many prominent educated elite established several newspapers in Lagos. The reading population was concentrated on Lagos Island where most of the educated elite lived. Indeed, Michael Echeruo (1979) has shown that the newspaper constituted an important aspect of Victorian Lagos. In any case, Kakawa is still generally associated with the publication of the *Daily Times*, established by Sir Adeyemo Alakija in 1925. The paper played a leading role in the nationalist agitation and was subsequently acquired by the Federal Government. It is, therefore, not surprising that the distribution of newspapers to vendors took place in Kakawa in the early 1960s. It was from Alfred Onyia that Philip Abasiri learnt the rudiments of the trade.

Man-Must-Wack: The Vendor

The establishment of the University of Lagos in October 1962 created an ample opportunity for newspaper vendors to supply the need of the institution. The foundation stone of the University was laid at the College of Medicine, Idi Araba in 1962. The Arts and Social Science and Education components started in 1964. Philip Abasiri was one of the young vendors that began to supply the lecturers and the institution with newspapers. Then, many of the pioneer lecturers lived in Obanikoro area of Lagos. Indeed, the foundation students of the University were first accommodated in a building inside the Baptist Academy, Obanikoro. Philip Abasiri routinely supplied the lecturers with newspapers at home or in their offices. Then, the main campus was divided into Academic South and Academic North. Academic North housed the Humanities while the South hosted the Sciences. The popular newspapers then were *Daily Times*, *West African Pilot*, *Sketch* and *Express*. Among his numerous customers were the renowned professors Chike Obi, Ayodele Awojobi, Nurudeen Adalemo, Olatunde Oloko, O. Olakanpo and Oye Ibidapo-Obe.³

The number of copies collected from the newspaper agent by the Abasiri family to be sold has remained consistently stable over the years, except for the few that have gone into extinction. The figures supplied by Mr. Sunday Abasiri on 15th August 2016 are as indicated below:

Name of Newspaper	Number of copies
<i>Daily Times</i>	50
<i>Business Times</i>	30
<i>Punch</i>	100
<i>Concord</i>	100
<i>Observer</i>	10
<i>Nigerian Tide</i>	5
<i>Nigerian Chronicle</i>	5
<i>Statesman</i>	5
<i>Sketch</i>	10
<i>Tribune</i>	10
<i>Spear</i>	15
<i>Headline</i>	20
<i>Drum</i>	20
<i>Weekend Times</i>	30
<i>Sporting Record</i>	10
<i>Atoka</i>	20
<i>Ikebe Super</i>	30

The volume of sales was determined largely by the significance of the events reported by the newspapers. For instance political events and crisis, such as electoral violence and military coups, usually attracted high sales. The remuneration of the vendors was and is still on commission basis and the rate depends on the price tag on the different papers. For instance, the price of the *Daily Express* in 1963 was 2 pence. In 1965, the *West African Pilot* was sold for 3 pence. In 1974, the *Daily Times* attracted the price tag of 5 kobo. In the 1960s, a paper purchased from the newspaper house at 2 pence would be sold at three pence. Today, the oral interviews conducted with leading vendors and distributors in Ojuelegba and Lawanson areas of Lagos show that a newspaper sold for ₦150.00k will attract a commission of ₦30.00k; that of ₦200.00k a profit margin of ₦40.00k while the paper that is sold for ₦250.00k will produce a gain of ₦50.00k.⁴

The newspapers that are not sold at the end of the day were returned to the agents for onward transfer to the publishing house. The only publishers that initially expressed reluctance at collecting them back were the *Punch* and *Guardian*. Consequently, the agents and distributors were always careful to limit the number of copies from the two newspapers to only what they could reasonably sell. In any case, the vendors do not run their business at a loss although their gains depend largely on the topicality of the news and their own marketing abilities.

It was also a common practice for newspaper vendors to be directly involved in pool betting in those days. Pool betting is based on predicting the outcome of a number of top-level English football matches taking place in a week. The pool has two packages namely perming and napping. Coupons are provided for betters to tick the itemized clubs in the fixtures. Success

depends largely on the ability to study the results of past matches and strategically analyse the strength and weaknesses of the various clubs. But as with many other things in Africa, most stakers often rely on the numbers supplied by spiritually gifted individuals who could foretell the winning numbers. Man-Must-Wack also sold coupons, collected from his agent, for a short period. The agent usually brought the coupons and certain winning numbers on weekly basis. The sale was done inside the kiosk in front of 76 Shipeolu Street, Palmgrove where he resided for a long time. This aspect of the business was however left to his children who were always eager to show their commitment and sense of responsibility. At any rate, the agent stopped bringing the coupons after a few months for the reasons best known to him. Throughout his lifetime, *Man-Must-Walk* never played pool. Pool betting declined rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s in Nigeria. Indeed, it was gradually overtaken by Premier Lotto called Baba Ijebu, a company incorporated by Chief Kessington Adebutu in 2001. While it is commonly believed that it is greed and laziness that drive people into gambling, the resurgence of pool betting in Nigeria is a reflection of the harsh economic condition that the country is currently passing through (Oghene Omonisa, 2016).

In the course of the business that spanned over twenty five years, Mr. Abasiri joined some professional associations that could advance his interest. These included the Nigerian Daily Newspapers Distributors (NDND) and the Nigerian Newspapers Vendors Association (NNVA). And, as the supply expanded, he drafted two of his sons, Sunday and Uzoma into the business .He also bought himself a bicycle to solve the problem of mobility. The entire Akoka-Bariga area did not have many cars or buses plying the area until the late 1970s. The campus cabs (Kabukabu) that now take passengers from one part of the campus to another did not start until 1985 (Ndidi Patrick 2011).To his numerous customers who resided in the quarters, he had a familiar way of sounding the horn of his bicycle (Pa pa, pa, pa) which usually heralded his arrival. And he routinely responded to those who acknowledged his consistency by responding in his usual slogan ‘wetin we go do now, at least man-must-wack’. With time, ‘man-must-wack’ became his trade name. The nick name eventually eclipsed his real name. The nick name became so popular on campus to an extent that many children believed that the name of a person that sells newspapers is ‘man-must-wack’.⁵ Even today, many of the elderly lecturers in the University of Lagos still fondly remember the energetic light complexioned man with small frame riding his bicycle to supply his newspapers. For instance, Professor Adebayo Lawal recalled that he knew *Man-Must-Wack* as far back as 1970 when he was admitted to read History in the University of Lagos. He disclosed that all non-science students were located in the northern campus where the Faculty of Business Administration now stands. The Arts Block was not built until 1975. He noted that the only vendor on campus then was *Man-Must-Wack*. He stated that after supplying the lecturers in the quarters with their newspapers early in the morning, *Man-Must-Wack* would routinely display the remaining in the open space close to the present site of the Senate Building. He recalled that it was common to see students, particularly the free readers, milling round him. He said he continued to patronize him after he became a member of staff in 1979. He described *Man-Must-Wack* as “a jovial man, particularly tolerant of students especially the free readers”. He identified the character traits that accounted for his success as “consistency and contentment with the little that he had”.⁶ He concluded that *Man-Must-Wack* was able to bequeath the trade to his children just like many street traders and artisans who run family business.

Prof Lawal's assessment of *Man-Must-Wack* is not different from the account of Mr. Asonye Uba-Mgbemena who recently retired from the Department of Asian and Africa Studies of the University of Lagos. The closeness of Uba- Ugbemena to *Man-Must-Wack* dated back to 1979 when he was appointed Lecturer II. From 1990 to 2014, he lived at 9 Ozolua Road which also made him very much a part of the campus community. The Igbo origin of both men pushed their association beyond the vendor-client relationship. According to Mr Uba-Mgbemena, he and *Man-Must-Wack* frequently held discussions. He described him as "very jovial, very open and has no room for malice, worry or anxiety".⁷

Mr. Uba-Ugbemena recalled how *Man-Must-Wack* once told him that he experienced difficult times before going into the newspaper business. He also disclosed how passionate he was about educating his children even though he himself did not attend any school. In this regard, he achieved a measure of success. One of his children, Chikezie read sociology in Ogun State University in the 1980s. He now works in an Insurance company in Abuja.

By the time *Man-Must-Wack* retired from active business in the late 1980s, he had successfully planted two of his children – Sunday and Uzoma, in the trade. Sunday now sells newspapers at the entrance of the Arts Block while Uzoma had his stand at the Guest Houses Complex.

For a long period, *Man-Must-Wack* dominated the scene. It was much later that other vendors came in. One of them was Mr Moshood Balogun popularly called 'Baba Ijebu'. He operated on campus for more than twenty years before finally relocating to his home town of Ijebu Isiwo in Ogun state in 2013. Baba Ijebu had his own newspaper stand at the Senate Car Park. Even in retirement, he is still fondly called 'Baba Ijebu Oni Paper', that is, Baba Ijebu, the vendor. He spoke of *Man-Must-Wack* with nostalgic feelings. He disclosed that there was no rivalry between him and *Man-Must-Wack* since the campus was large enough for them to operate. And in any case, each of them had his own area of operation.⁸ True enough, the newspaper business had expanded to an extent that there was no basis for rivalry among the vendors on campus. As at the time of writing this paper, the University library alone buys an average of 276 papers at the cost of ₦49,000 per month. This is done on cash and carry basis.⁹

From the sale of newspapers, *Man-Must-Wack* was able to train his children– Akunnaya, Uzoma, Sunday, Obiageri, Kenneth, Onyeka, Ozumoka, Gabriel and Chikezie. He married two wives, not as a polygamist but out of necessity. Beatrice, the first wife whom he married in 1948, died after giving birth to two children. He married Paulina the second wife in 1958. He later graduated from riding a bicycle to a motor cycle. The same business enabled him to build his personal accommodation. He built a seven room bungalow with a Boys Quarter in the village. His retirement to Mgbidi in the late 1980s was precipitated by the death of his father. As the first son of the father, he had to assume the responsibility of the head of the family. Pa Philip Nwadiogwu Abasiri, alias Man-Must-Wack died in 2012 and was buried in Mgbidi. Among the dignitaries that attended his burial were community leaders including E. M. Dike and Mr Frank Jacob.

Lessons on Personal Entrepreneurial Characteristics

Nigeria is currently witnessing massive unemployment. There are many people, especially youths, roaming the streets looking for what to do. The assessment of the situation has led to the

introduction of entrepreneurial studies as a compulsory course in the University. The life and career of Mr. Philip Abasiri reveals some of the characteristics that an individual must possess to become a successful entrepreneur or a trader (Stephen Adegbite 2011: 18-27). These are highlighted below.

One, Mr. Philip Abasiri was a risk taker. He left the comfort zone of the village and tried his hands on many things before he finally chose and pursued the newspaper business. As the saying goes, ‘nothing ventured, nothing gained’. Practical experience has also shown that those who have carved their names in gold as captains of industry are people who had taken risks at one time or the other.

Two, Mr. Philip Abasiri started his business in a very little way and allowed it to grow with the evolution of the campus. This should be a vital lesson for those who would prefer to fold their hands until they have a huge capital to start a business.

Three, he was focused and consistent. This apparently won him the admiration and patronage of his customers. The consistency gave him the fame that made his nickname to become a household name in the University of Lagos.

Four, all those who interacted with him affirmed that he was very simple and honest. Today, integrity is lacking in private and public lives in Nigeria. This is why corruption has occupied the centre stage of the political process. If *Man-Must-Wack* had not been honest with his customers particularly those who paid their subscription on monthly basis, many of them would have turned elsewhere. For Mr. Philip Abasiri, honesty was a way of life. While expressing the lesson he learnt from his father, Sunday Abasiri, said *Man-Must-Wack* taught them “to be honest and to be kind to others”.

Five, *Man-Must-Wack* invested in tools that could enhance his business. The bicycle was critical to his business.

Six, he also joined professional associations that could protect his interest. This generally underscores the importance of networking and professional organisations in business and career mobility.

Seven, although the popularity of *Man-Must-Wack* is beginning to recede with the passage of time, the smallish man from Mgbidi has left his footprints on the sand of time through the continuation of the newspaper business by his children at the University of Lagos. This successful incorporation of children into the family business partly explains the economic miracle of Japan. This is an area that the State and Federal Governments in Nigeria can explore to reduce the massive unemployment in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the life and career of Pa Philip Abasiri, popularly known as *Man-Must Wack*. There are, however, many newspaper vendors and distributors whose careers deserve scholarly analysis. Indeed, a comparative analysis of the way Man- Must –Wack conducted his business in Lagos with the method adopted by Pa Joseph Olobayo his counterpart at the

University of Ife (now known as Obafemi Awolowo University) shows a striking similarity that has nothing to do with the diffusion theory. Relating the experience of those early years, Pa Olobayo said:

The price of newspaper then was sold for around 3 pence. The mode of distribution was door – to – door hawking at the University Staff quarters. There were also points of sale or stands on campus. Those stands were not physically monitored. Newspapers were left at the stands as there was no fear of theft of newspapers or money. Interested buyers picked their copies and left money on the ground.¹⁰

There is, therefore, a great opportunity for researchers interested in the distribution of newspapers in Nigeria.



Mr. Philip Abasiri (alias *Man-Must-Wack*)

Notes

1. The University of Lagos celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 2012. One of the highlights was the publication of a book on the history of the University. See R.T. Akinyele and Olufunke Adeboye (2014). *A history of the University of Lagos, 1962-2012*. Lagos: University of Lagos Press.
2. The reconstruction of the early life of Pa Philip Abasiri was based on oral interviews conducted with his son Sunday Abasiri and his brother Felix Abasiri in July 2015.
3. Oral interview, Mr Sunday Abasiri, University of Lagos, July 2015
4. Oral interviews conducted with A.P.C Ndubusi, Chairman, Ojuelegba Vendors, Under-bridge, and Mr. Ajayi, Distributor and Zonal Coordinator, Surulere, 31 Akintan Street, Surulere, 10 & 11 August 2016.
5. Personal discussion with Dr. Ade Adefuye, High Rise, University of Lagos, 1981
6. Oral interview, Prof. Adebayo Lawal, Department of History and Strategic Studies, University of Lagos, 1st May, 2015. Dr E.K Faluyi of the same department similarly described *Man-Must-Wack* as jovial and consistent, on 18 May, 2015
7. Oral interview, Mr. Asonye Uba-Mgbemena, Department of African and Asian Languages, University of Lagos, 4th May 2015.
8. Telephone conversation with Mr. Moshood Balogun, 7th August, 2015.
9. Oral Interview, Dr. (Mrs.) Ngosi Blessing Ukachi, Ghandi Library, University of Lagos, 4th May, 2015.
10. I am grateful to Dr. Shina Alimi of the Department of History, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife for helping me to interview Pa Joseph Olobayo , 10 August, 2016.

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