

## **Omo'nile Syndrome and the Challenge of Community Development in Lagos Metropolis**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examined the challenges posed by Omo'nile in Lagos Metropolis and advanced suggestions for amicable coexistence with the landlords and other stakeholders. The Land Use Decree of 1978 was perused. 20 residential landlords were interviewed on their ownership status of the land on which they built and their challenges with the Omo'nile. Similarly, five royal families were interviewed. There were two self-structured instruments used to collect data and information from members of the public: 1,550 residents of the Metropolis were randomly selected. They completed the pre-tested self-structured instrument that contained 13 pre-coded and open-ended questions. The instrument explored information on the challenges that individuals and families had ever had with the Omo'nile. There was a second instrument, administered to randomly selected 55 Omo'nile. Again, the instrument collected data and information on what prompted the Omo'nile to foment trouble, their sponsors, etc. 5 Divisional Police Offices of the Nigeria Police Force provided data and information on land matters, and the Omo'nile in five years (2011 and 2015). Content analyses, tables and a plate were used for data analyses and presentation. The work established that the Land Use Decree had become moribund; and the presence of the Omo'niles inhibits sustainable community development in the Metropolis. Government intervention and declaration of laws against hooliganism must be put in place and enforced. There may be a need to revisit the Land Use Decree. The Omo'nile must be empowered for self-sustenance and for community development.*

**Key words:** *Omo'nile, Community Development, Lagos Metropolis, Adult Education*

### **Introduction**

With a population of about 16 million people and just about 20,000 policemen, communities of Lagos Metropolis have continued to bear the brunt of crime, as some places have gained notoriety for violent crimes (Aluko, 2016). In October

2016, against the backdrop of the rising spate of criminal activities in Lagos State, and particularly in the Metropolis, the Police Command in the state identified and warned people about hotbeds of violence just as its cops grappled with the daunting task of policing the megacity. The command listed what it called “164 observation points of violence across the state,” with the majority within the Metropolis. It further noted that not only had it marked the flashpoints but that the areas had been placed on 24-hour surveillance. These actions came on the heels of some residents' call for increased security in urban centers of the state, following unrelenting assaults from kidnappers, rapists, armed robbers and the *Omo'niles*. Both Lagos residents and the Police Command identified the following areas of the mainland (Metropolis) that called for police protection and surveillance: Ojelade and Oju Irin (Mushin), Ilaje (Bariga), Olodi Apapa and Apapa Ajegunle (Apapa), Odunfa and Onala (Lagos Island), AIT Road (Alagabdo), Afolabi Obadore (Igando), Shibiri (Okokomaiko), Papa and Orile Agege. Landlords and residents live in trepidation as they watch teenagers who are usually high on drugs commit crimes without scruples (Adekola, Badmus, Adewakun, Okoraocha, and Jayeoba, 2016; Olaitan, 2016).

While the residents grappled with the menace of rising criminal activities in their communities, the command felt the problems might not be unconnected with some elders and family heads, as “restlessness and impunity by youths” had been consistently noticed in some communities. The focus of this work, therefore, is on the *Omo'nile* and their restiveness in the communities of Lagos Metropolis.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The restiveness of youths in Lagos Metropolis is quite worrisome and it is drawing so much public attention. Some of the suburbs and communities are particularly notorious for the crimes, which necessitated the Police Command to identify them as crime hotbeds and gave them special surveillance. The *Omo'niles* (notorious miscreants and land grabbers) and their associates are often at the center of it all. But, it may not just be enough to identify the notorious spots and give them special surveillance, the root causes must be identified, and lasting solutions adopted.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of the study is to examine the challenges posed by the *Omo'nile* in Lagos Metropolis with a view to advancing suggestions for amicable coexistence between the landlords, *Omo'niles* and other stakeholders in the

Metropolis, for the sustainable development of the communities. Specifically, the work:

1. Studied the traditions, and systems of land ownership in Yorubaland, particularly Lagos Metropolis;
2. Examined the content and status of the 1978 Land Use Act;
3. Examined the *Omo'nile* syndrome and the challenges in Lagos Metropolis and the immediate environment; and
4. Made recommendations for peaceful coexistence and sustainable development of the communities in the Metropolis.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were posed to fulfill the purpose and objectives of the research:

1. What was the nature of land ownership in the traditional Lagos Metropolis?
2. What is the content and status of the 1978 Land Use Act?
3. Who are the *Omo'niles* and what challenges do they pose in Lagos Metropolis and environs?

### **Materials and Methodology**

**Lagos Metropolis:** Lagos Metropolis is a melting pot of nations. Nations of the world are well represented in Lagos and there is virtually no major community of the states of Nigeria that is not well represented in the Metropolis. The Metropolis had been the commercial center of the country even before the federal capital was moved to Abuja in 1991. Those that have come to Lagos fell in love with the predominant lifestyle, regardless of the hustle and bustle. Invariably, from hiring places of residence to owning a business office and, eventually, building personal houses, people of different origins and ancestral backgrounds have become landlords, estate owners and roads, streets, lanes and crescents are named after some of them.

The Metropolis is not just a center of commerce. It is also noted for the best of education, transport and communication, art and culture, industrialization, and tourism. Over 35.00% of the industrial establishments in Nigeria are in the Metropolis Lagos also hosts the largest sea and airports in the country. The population of Lagos was 16 million, by the 2006 population census (National Population Commission, 2006).

**Methodology:** The descriptive research design method was used. The population consists of landlords, residents and the *Omo'nile* in Lagos Metropolis. The sample

sizes were 1,500 of the landlords and 55 of the *Omo'niles*. These were selected through a simple random sampling technique. 20 residents and other landlords were interviewed on their ownership status of the lands on which they built and their challenges with the *Omo'niles*. Similarly, In-depth Interview was conducted with five royal families. Another In-depth Interview was also conducted with five randomly selected *Omo'niles*.

1,500 residents completed the pre-tested self-structured instrument titled *Challenges of Omo'nile Syndrome in Lagos Metropolis* that contains 13 pre-coded and open-ended questions. The instrument explored information on the challenges the stakeholders (community leaders, professionals and residents) and or their immediate families had ever had with the *Omo'nile*, in the last five years. Table 1 shows the distribution of the questionnaire. There was a second instrument, also self-structured and pre-tested; and it was administered to 55 *Omo'niles* that were also randomly selected from different suburbs of the Metropolis.

Table 1: Distribution of the Samples

<i>Community</i>	<i>No. of Respondents (Members of the Public)</i>	<i>Proportion (%)</i>		<i>No. of Respondents (Omo'nile)</i>	<i>Proportion (%)</i>
Agege/Ifako	70	4.67		3	5.45
Mushin/Idioro	70	4.67		2	3.64
Egbeda/Idimu	70	4.67		3	5.45
Surulere	55	3.67		1	1.81
Alapere	70	4.67		2	3.64
Mile 12/Magodo	65	4.33		2	3.64
Ajah	70	4.67		3	5.45
Lekki	55	3.67		3	5.45
Isolo/Ejigbo	65	4.33		2	3.64
ApapaAmukoko	55	3.67		2	3.64
Ikotun	65	4.33		2	3.64
IyanIpaja/Ipaja	70	4.67		3	5.45
Lakowe/Shangotedo	65	4.33		3	5.45
Ijesha/Itire	65	4.33		2	3.64
Maryland/Obanikoro	60	4.00		2	3.64
Akoka/Bariga/Shomolu	65	4.33		2	3.64
Yaba	50	3.33		0	0.00
Ebute Meta	45	3.00		2	3.64
IsaleEko	45	3.00		2	3.64

Ojuelegba/Costain	45	3.00		2	3.64
Ikeja/Ogba/Oregun	70	4.67		3	5.45
Victoria Island	45	3.00		2	3.64
Ikoyi	55	3.67		2	3.64
Lagos Island	45	3.00		2	3.64
FESTAC/Satellite Town	65	4.33		3	5.45
Total	1,500	100.00		55	100.00

Again, the instrument yielded data and information on the needs of the *Omo'niles* that usually lead to their fomenting trouble, their sponsors, etc. Five Divisional Police Offices of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) provided data and information on the cases they handled on land matters and the *Omo'niles'* involvement in five years, between 2011 and 2015. In addition, the Land Use Decree was analysed, and substantial information was obtained from the document. Content analysis, tables and a plate were used for data analyses and presentation.

### Findings and Discussion

**Research Question 1:** *What was the nature of land ownership in the traditional Lagos Metropolis?* From the agrarian era to the period of industrial development, land has remained the most valuable property in the life and development of Lagosians (Odumosu and Aderogba, 2007; Aluko, 2016; Olaitan, 2016). According to these authors, it is a source of wealth to those who had it. In other words, virtually all the basic needs of human existence were dependent on land. In view of the importance and usefulness of land to man and the development of his society, every person generally desires to acquire and own a portion of land to achieve the various ends for which land is central. Therefore, to ensure easy access to land and the proper utilization for the needed development, different governments have enacted laws to govern the use or administration of land in Nigeria.

Thus, prior to the enactment of the *Land Use Act of 1978*, there were three main sources of land law: Customary Law (that varied from custom to custom), English received law (which comprises of Common Law, Doctrine of Equity, and Statutes of General Application), and local legislation. There was also a duality of the land use system in the southern and northern parts of the country.

The Parliament of the then Northern Nigeria passed the Land Tenure Law in 1962, which governed all interests affecting land. The Land Tenure Law vested all land in the Governor who was to hold land in trust for the people and only *rights*

*of occupancy* (not rights of ownership) could be granted to other people. The consent of the Governor was required before any alienation of land could take place.

In the then Southern Nigeria, however, the customary system of land tenure governed land use. Land was owned by communities, families and individuals *on freehold* basis. Land was acquired either by inheritance, first settlement, conveyance, gift, outright purchase or long possession. There were also crown lands, which were acquired by the British Crown by treaty, secession, convention or agreement. When Nigeria attained independence, such crown lands became known as state lands.

Notwithstanding the existence of laws regulating land, the problems of land tenure and land administration persisted both in the Northern and Southern Nigeria. There were new problems such as land racketeering and speculation. Exorbitant compensations were demanded by landowners whenever the government acquired land for development. Thus, the acquisition of land by government or individuals was becoming almost impossible.

In fact, one of the major factors that was said to be the stumbling block in the efficient implementation of the Second Development Plan (1975-1980), was the lack of access to land for development projects (Sadiq, 2011). To break this barrier and the monopoly by landlords, the Federal Military Government set up some panels to consider how best to solve the problems associated with land tenure and administration generally. The report of one of the panels, that is, the Land Use Panel of 1977, eventually formed the basis of the Land Use Decree No. 6 of 1978.

**Research Question 2:** *What is the content and status of the 1978 Land Use Act?* The Land Use Decree (now Land Use Act) was promulgated in March 1978 following the recommendations of the alternative report of a panel appointed by the then Federal Military Government to advise on future land policy. Instantly, it vested all land in each state of the Federation in the Governor of that state (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1978; Ng-Environment, 2012).

The Act vested all land comprised in the territory of each state, except land owned by the Federal Government for its agencies, solely in the hands of the military governors of the states who would hold such land in trust for the people. The promulgation of the Act was because of two main factors:

1. The diversity of customary laws on land tenure and difficulty in applying the various customs of the different people; and
2. The rampant practice in southern Nigeria about fraudulent sales of land; that is, for example, the same piece of land could be sold to different persons at the same time, giving rise to so series of litigations.

The Act distinguishes between urban and non-urban (rural) land thus:

1. In urban areas (to be so designated by the Governor of a state), land is to come under the control and management of the Governor;
2. In rural areas, it is to fall under the appropriate local government;
3. *Land Use and Allocation Committees*, appointed for each state by the Governor, are to advise on the administration of land in urban areas; and
4. *Land Allocation Advisory Committees* are to exercise equivalent functions regarding rural land.

The Act envisaged that *rights of occupancy*, which would appear to replace all previous system or rules of inheritance to land, would form the basis upon which land was to be held. These rights were of two kinds: statutory and customary.

1. *Statutory rights of occupancy* were to be granted by the Governor and related principally to urban areas; and
2. *Customary right of occupancy*: This according to the Act, means the right of a person or community lawfully using or occupying land in accordance with customary law and includes a customary right of occupancy granted by Local Government under the Act.

Local governments are empowered to grant customary rights of occupancy to any person or organisation for agricultural, residential and other purposes with the proviso that grants of land for agricultural or grazing purposes should not exceed 500 or 5,000 hectares respectively without the consent of the State Governor.

The Act prohibits the alienation by assignment, mortgage, transfer or possession, sub-lease or otherwise, of customary right of occupancy without the consent of either the Governor or the Local Government. It also prohibits the alienation of statutory right of occupancy without due consent of the Governor (Land Use Act, 1978: section 21 subsections a and b).

Governors are empowered to revoke rights of occupancy for reason(s) of “overriding public interest.” Such reason(s) include alienation by an occupier without requisite consent or approval; a breach of the conditions governing

occupancy; or the requirement of the land by Federal, State, or Local government for public purposes. Only in the last of these cases would any compensation be due to the holder, and then only for the value of unexhausted improvements on the land and not for the land itself (Ng-environment, 2012).

However, there are four main objectives derivable from the Act, namely:

1. to effect structural change in the system of land tenure;
2. to achieve fast economic and social transformation;
3. to remove economic inequality caused by the appropriation of rising land values by land speculators and land holders; and
4. to make land available, easily and cheaply, to both the government and private individual developers.

By and large, the Act had some effects on Land Use Planning in the entire country and in the Lagos Metropolis. Land use regulations and controls were employed to restrict the rights of private land holders and to protect public interest in the use of private land. The regulations stem from the need to provide public amenities, to increase the efficiency of land-use, to limit urban sprawl and unnecessary encroachment on agricultural land, and to achieve economies of scale and lower the cost of public services. The regulations were also used to ensure the availability of land to all groups, and to ensure that the benefits of development go to the community. In short, and according to Ng-environment (2012):

1. The Act controls the way land is used;
2. Land acquired by government would be made easier for urban expansion: so that ethnicity would be less of a factor in land ownership in urban areas as indigenous groups often controlled land in the older urban areas; to encourage the non-indigenous population to have access to land, and to curtail land speculation by limiting the amount of land owned by individuals;
3. The legal status of the Nigerian land user becomes that of statutory occupancy, not one of ownership and the economic interests and benefits of 'statutory rights of occupancy were severely limited by law since proprietary interests in land were lost and claims were restricted to improvements made on the land. Thus, subdivision regulations, height and building limit, etc., were included in the Certificate of Occupancy granted, to control development of projects in certain areas for aesthetic reasons and for the convenience of the economy;
4. The Act empowers the Governor to revoke rights of occupancy for reasons of overriding public interest: such as alienation of the land by the occupier



without due approval, requirement of the land by Federal, State or Local Government for public purposes. In such cases, compensation may be paid but only for 'unexhausted improvements' on land and not for the land itself since with the Act, land no longer has an economic value;

5. The act sought to break up large land holdings, and hence facilitate the transfer of land for housing development and to encourage rehabilitation of older indigenous areas in prime commercial locations in city centers;
6. By the state ownership and control of land, and by the trusteeship arrangement, speculations in land which largely accounted for the exorbitant rise in the value of land especially in urban areas were done away with. Speculators now found alternative outlets for their capital and entrepreneurial ability and this has contributed to the stabilization of land value. Such stabilization has, in turn, contributed to the stabilization of the cost of government projects, especially in urban areas of the country;
7. Since all the undeveloped land in every state has been vested in the Governor, the physical planner can plan vacant land and zone any particular part thereof for any use, including public open space;
8. The Land Use Act enables the Town Planner to plan in such a manner that different land uses are juxtaposed in the most harmonious and beneficial relationship for the good of the people in an area or in a state. This is because the end product of scientific planning is the optimum use of land in any area for the good of the people in the affected area in any given time frame; and
9. The Act imposed obligations on the right holder to utilize his land and the consequence of breach of these obligations. The strongest argument for the introduction of rights of occupancy was the process of facilitating planned development as an aspect of land tenure. While at common law, the freehold system is characterized by discretion in the owner to use or neglect the use of his land expressed as the concept guaranteed, the right of occupancy is characterized by the adoption of the principle that security of tenure depends on land utilization.

Above all, the Land Use Act is meant to secure for every Nigerian, a piece of land for his use within his financial means, that is, at any time it is needed. There was also to be a reduction in the incidence of land disputes. The Act was to absolutely regulate the manner and type of development on the schemes to ensure that lands were used and developed with the best planning principles.

But, according to Chukwujekwu (2012), “the implementation of the Act has brought to the fore the cumbersome and costly procedures for obtaining Certificates of Occupancy, Consent to Mortgage, Assignments and Leases, thereby hampering housing delivery.” Like Sodiq (2016), Chukwujekwu (2012) went further to say that the Land Use Act of 1978 had done even greater harm to housing delivery. In his words:

The implementation of the Act has brought to the fore the cumbersome and costly procedures for obtaining Certificates of Occupancy, Consent to Mortgage, Assignments and leases thereby hampering housing delivery. .... because of the perceived security and genuineness associated with government allocation, the demand for such land is very high and government has been using this to increase cost of allocation yearly. Land charges keep going up every year as government sees these as [an] avenue for income generation.

He concluded with a call for enactment of supplementary legislation to facilitate effective and efficient implementation of the *Land Use Act*, and for an effective land administration system involving secure, tenable and marketable titles on land. But, what about the rampant menace of the *Omo'nile* syndrome in Lagos Metropolis? Obviously, the lapses of the Land Use Act gave rise to the menace of the *Omo'nile* syndrome.

**Research Question 3:** *Who are the Omo'niles and what the challenges do they pose in Lagos Metropolis and environs?* The *Omo'niles* are land grabbers who have frustrated the aspirations of many potential landowners and homeowners. Over the years, they have constituted themselves into a nuisance to many Lagos residents interested in owning landed property. Their activities have increasingly caused social concern so much so that successive governments of the state have attempted, to no avail, to take measures to run them out of business (Chukwujekwu, 2012; Adekoya, Badmus, Adewakun, Okorocho and Jaiyeoba, 2016; Olaitan, 2016; Aluko, 2016).

The *Omo'niles* are known for extorting money from and hurting anyone found uncooperative on any building site. They have destroyed, maimed, wounded and killed. Every Police Station visited had at least 11 cases, and the largest was found at Egbeda Police Station, 33 cases. Incidentally, only 7 (12.73%) of the 55 sampled *Omo'nile* had their origins from the Metropolis, others are *Area Boys*, who became *Omo'nile* for lack of jobs and or as matters of choice. Their age

bracket ranges between 25 and 50 years; and majority of them (92.00%) were males. More than 75.00% of them were school drop-outs though 4.00% claimed to be National Diploma (ND) certificate holders. Their lawlessness knows no bounds as they have sent many breadwinners to their early graves for nursing the ambition of becoming landlords.

The 1,500 members of the public that responded to the questionnaire item *What are your assessment of the Omo'niles towards community development in Lagos Metropolis?* have unpleasant stories to tell. Table 2 summarises the community assessment of the *Omo'niles* and their impact on community development. All the respondents picked more than a choice out of the 27 predetermined attributes/assessments. Apart from "Others Specified," all the respondents picked "They are Land Grabbers," "They have the same attributes all over the Metropolis," "They do not observe/respect Land Use Act." "They can destroy, maim and kill," "They can sell a piece of land to several people," "They stall progress on buildings," "They are well known in nearly all the Police Stations in the Metropolis," "They are dubious," and "They may be diabolical and fetish." Even, there was no virtue attributed to them. Only 6.53% said "They are well educated." 4.74% said "They respect educated persons." 6.60% picked "They respected constituted authorities." Only 4.73% picked "They could be very friendly with potential landlords." Only 11 respondents, 0.73% say that "They can give genuine support for building projects," just as only 19 (1.27%) picked "They can be very helpful towards community development."

Table 2: Community Assessment of the *Omo'nile* towards Community Development in Lagos Metropolis

Attributes/Assessment	Frequency	Proportion (%)
They are Land Grabbers	1500	100.00
Hoodlums of the Metropolis	1236	82.40
They have the same attribute all over the Metropolis	1500	100.00
They are next to arm robbers	1059	70.60
They do not observe/respect Land Use Act	1500	100.00
They are well educated	98	6.53
They respect educated persons	71	4.74
The take instruction from the Local Chiefs	1100	73.33
They respect Constituted Authorities	99	6.60
They fear police	542	36.13
They fear nobody	1452	96.80
They can destroy, maim and kill	1500	100.00

They can sell a piece of land to several people	1500	100.00
They stall progress on buildings	1500	100.00
Their actions lead to several abandoned projects	1421	94.73
Their actions lead to undeveloped lands “vacant lands”	1008	67.20
They are dubious	1500	100.00
They can be very helpful towards community development	19	1.27
They work for their chiefs	591	39.40
They are well known in nearly all Police Stations in the Metropolis	1500	100.00
They can give genuine support for building projects	11	0.73
They are too authoritative over issues of land (They are all in all)	1482	98.80
They may be diabolical and fetish	1500	100.00
Their activities are detrimental to community development	1441	96.07
They can be very friendly with potential landlords	71	4.73
People fear them a lot	1477	98.47
Others (Specified)	1,500	100.00

Findings indicated that all their victims have tales of woes to tell in terms of pathetic, unpalatable, nasty and harrowing experiences. One of the victims, Iyanda Oke Alaro who got transferred from Port Harcourt by his company, relocated his family to Lagos and spent his transfer benefits to buy a piece of land (36' by 18') at Ejigbo for ₦2.75 million. He felt thoroughly devastated with the experience he subsequently had with the *Omo'nile*, which he briefly narrated as follows:

I cannot forget and would not like to pass through that experience again. .... In 2013, I secured a plot of land, I laid the foundation and built the perimeter fence as well as a gate without any hindrance .... [My] entire family was looking forward to owning a personal apartment soon .... For each of these [foundation and perimeter fence stages], I paid N250,000:00. I could not progress at a time, for about nine months. When I got there in January, there was an almost completed house in front of my own, on my plot. I was accused of building on another man's land. I was chased away. .... Long story, ....and so much money went into that. Eventually, we settled for another piece of land

which was not shown to me until one year after. On getting to this new piece [of land] together with my children and my wife, we were chased away again, like goats. Till I am talking to you, I have never been there anymore. The *Omo'nile* are terrible in Lagos .... I was warned. I have lost everything I invested there. Only God can see me through.

Another victim of the *omo'nile*, Josiah Okonkwo, who is from Imo State but needed to have a house at Abule Egba near Katangoa Market, Oke Odo where he deals in used clothes. His experience was bitter, and he lost one of his carpenters in a fight with the *Omo'niles*. He narrated his ordeal:

*Omo'nile!* Never think you have a friend among them. Their so-called Secretary was the one that invited me to come and buy the land. He accepted me, but all was fake. The same piece of land was sold to three of us. I was the last person. The so-called Secretary gave me the greatest surprise; he was inviting my wife for an outing, promising her money and land. .... The team waylaid me one morning when I was going to the market and accused me of telling stories against them about the land that I bought from them. They have about four different receipt booklets they give their victims. .... I have packed out from that community, ....and I don't think I can think of any landed property in Lagos again.

Another victim, Labake Okudigwe, a businesswoman and wife of a retired police officer, did not find it funny with those groups she simply described as hoodlums, who made her lose a finger, and pay a lump sum “compensation” of ₦2,000,000:00, that is, after the actual cost of the land had been paid for and receipted. She lamented thus:

It was a tug of war between the *Omo'niles* and me here. Two of us were constructing at the same time. Incidentally we started the same day. The other person, a man, started in the morning and I started in the evening. Before the following day, I had destroyed all the foundation and blocks he laid, and

I had finished my own foundation. He was amazed to see what happened over the night. He beat the hell out of my security men and the workers. He invited the police, but the officers that came happened to know me very well; [so] it became difficult for them to make any arrest of me. The policemen departed but they (*Omo'niles*) mobilized tugs who came in a pick-up vehicle. They started destroying the blocks I had laid. I involved the military. They came in a lorry. .... Raufu, the leader of the group, swift to my side, pointing to me. I gave him some dirty slaps. .... I lost a finger in the scuffle and the windscreen of my car was shattered. It was to be burnt but my driver drove away. .... I paid a compensation of N2,000,000:00 to have the land back. .... I learnt my rival died about a week after. They threatened to kill me too, but the police eventually made them write an undertaking [not to kill me]. .... Surprisingly, their *Kabiyesi* pretended as if he was on my side, but *na lie* (it is a lie) .... They were all full of intrigues. .... I don't pray to go through that experience anymore.

Adekola, Badmus, Adewakun, Okorocho, and Jayeoba (2016) like Olaitan (2016) observed that the hooliganism and cantankerous behavior of the *Omo'niles* over the years have deprived many people of the opportunity of owning houses. It is for this reason that the name *Omo'nile*, is synonymous with “parasites, hoodlums and enemies of progress” who enjoy reaping from where they have not sown. According to these authors, rather than get themselves gainfully employed, they inflict hardship on those who have worked hard to provide for themselves and members of their dear families the good things of life, like shelter (good accommodation). The *Omo'niles* show up at the last minute to make demands on the excuse that their fathers own the land.



Plate 1: Inset from left to right, Lagos State Governor, Akinwumi Ambode, and the Lagos State Commissioner of Police, Fatai Awoseni, on a disputed piece of land where several lives were lost

Source: Adekoya, S., Badmus, B., Adewakun, A., Okparocha, C., and Jayeoba, K. (2016). A look at the activities of land grabbers, otherwise known as the *Omo'ile*, in Nigeria's commercial city, Lagos: *Vanguard*: News Comment (July)

Plate 1 is a contentious piece of land between the Lagos State Government, *Omo'nile* and a land speculator at the outskirts of the Metropolis - Ikotun. There was mayhem, as the *Omo'niles* had sold the land to a land speculator who had in turn sold four plots out of the lot; and wrote "NOT FOR SALE" on the rest, whereas, the Lagos State Government was making a road to pass through the area. The crisis lasted weeks and all residents of the neighbourhood had to run away for their lives. The State Government and the State Commissioner of Police had to visit the community to intervene. Several lives were lost in the crisis. And there have been many of such disputes that resulted in tortuous and complex litigations (Odumosu and Aderogba, 2007; Adekoya, Badmus, Adewakun, Okorocho, and Jayeoba, 2016).

The dream of many people living in Lagos to build their own houses have become almost impossible to realise in view of the lawlessness being perpetrated by the *Omo'niles* who have made "owning a piece of land" appear like an unrealistic

ambition. It has become an unwritten law in the Metropolis for anybody attempting to erect a structure, on a newly acquired piece of land to first “settle” them, that is, pay them off, before any work can commence. At every remarkable stage (foundation laying, decking, roofing, etc), the prospective builder (owner) must pay the fee stipulated by the *Omo'niles*.

In making their illegal demands, they often subject any uncooperative victims to inhuman treatment. They harm anyone found uncooperative. Aside the money received for land, they often demand additional money -land clearing, security, construction of fence, excavation and laying of the foundation, decking, roofing and house warming, among others before any of such stage could begin. Sometimes, they extort money also at lintel, plastering and painting stages.

In-depth interviews were conducted with five *Omo'niles*. One of them, was Ajebo Lawal Omon'la from Oke Aro on the outskirts of the Metropolis. He is a long-time member of a group of the *Omo'niles*. He wickedly and carelessly but truthfully expressed the way they operate, victimize and extort money from their victims:

*Ko si baban'la eni to'le sope ki a ma gba  
₦500,000:00 lori piloti kan nigbogbo adugbo yi.  
Iyen koja mo owo ile o; daju, daju! Kabiyesi soo ti.  
(There is nobody that can say that we should take  
less than ₦500,000:00 on any plot of land in this  
community. That is apart from the cost of land,  
mark you! Not even the Kabiyesi [King] can try it).  
.... We can only support you and stay behind you  
after you have provided all your [our] entitlements,  
the money, drinks and the kola nuts. We take money  
for bush clearing, fence, foundation, deck (if you  
are building a storied house, you pay for every  
floor), roofing and house warming. If you pay for  
the land and you could not do anything (start  
building) within thirty months, you may lose the  
land. .... We have sold a piece of land to five people  
before .... The Divisional Police Office knows us.  
We give them their cut, we “settle” them too.*



Jabi Clinton Ogbaba, another *Omo'nile* operating at the Lekki-Ajah axis, wanted to justify their activities and expected members of the public to see them as beneficial to both government and members of the public. In his words:

Many of the landlords don't appreciate us (*Omo'nile*). We act as intermediary and assist them (landlords) to secure their land that might have been forcibly taken by government. .... After giving us our dues, we protect them (Landlords). .... Some cases remain in the court of law for years .... till the speculator/owner dies. .... Government has made several attempts to fractionalize and ban us and the Chiefs, but I don't think it can work. Any time any of us runs into any problem, we rally round him. .... In most communities, it is men's affair, young men for that matter. But, there may be one *Iya'nla*, [big mother] among some groups. They sometimes do the liaison. .... We cannot tell you everything. .... This thing is our job. We cannot stop it; and if government should attempt it, there would be more problems in the society.

But, regardless of whatever could be the “benefits” the *Omo'niles* represent, if any, to the government and or members of the public, their negative activities are better imagined than experienced. There was no single person interviewed that spoke well of them. It was all stories of anguish. They are thus not wanted in the communities. It was even almost impossible to trace the origin of many of them. The police and the landlords on whose behalf the *Omo'niles* claim to be acting are quick to absolve themselves from any wrong doings. While the traditional rulers believe they are only taking what belongs to them by tradition, the police equally affirm that they only play the role of “law keeper” in the whole saga, a claim that has been hotly contested by Tipatipa [ enforcer] Moses who claim to be the ‘Sector Commandant’ at the Lekki- Ajah Axis. He said:

I stand to be corrected, the Kabiyesi[traditional ruler is our *babangbejo* [godfather]; and the police would not leave us alone: they take their cuts, and reporting our cases at the police station is sometimes *yeye* [nonsense].Don't try that...If you dare leave out the Kabiyesi and his subjects in any

case you are done for. Just leave us alone as we are with the police command and the royal family.

**Contemporary Status of Land Ownership and the *Omoni'le* Syndrome**

Community development has been evidently hampered as many projects remain perpetually abandoned. They have successfully frustrated the aspirations of many potential land and homeowners in many parts of the Metropolis (Federal Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, 2003; Aluko, 2016; Chukwujekwu, 2016; Olaitan, 2016). Indeed, some communities were particularly notorious as hotbeds of their activities.

Table 3 is a self-assessment of the *Omo'niles* themselves. The 55 that responded to the questionnaire item: *How can you describe yourself and your activities in respect to land and community development in Lagos Metropolis?* Many of them made some confessional statements. The responses were amazing: some of their responses confirmed how members of the community describe them. In other instances, the public description of them was refuted. They said they do not fear the police and that their activities were well known to the police in the Metropolis (100.00%). Also, the 55 of them said they had *Baba Isale [godfather]* and they can sell a piece of land to several people. Only 12.73% claimed that their fathers were the owners of the land they looked after. 5.46% have no claim except they were from Lagos Metropolis; and 90.90% were from outside of Lagos State .98.81% affirmed that they can maim and kill.

Table 3: A Self-Assessment of the *Omo'niles* in the Metropolis

<i>Attributes/Assessment</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Proportion (%)</i>
We are land owners	53	96.36
We are agents to the land owners	48	87.27
We are agents to the agents of land owners	54	98.18
Our father has the land	7	12.73
I'm from Lagos Metropolis	3	5.46
I'm from Lagos State	2	3.64
I'm from outside of Lagos State	50	90.90
We can be diabolical and fetish	46	83.64
We do support potential land lord	4	7.27
We are land grabbers	51	92.73
We can maim and kill	54	98.18
Our activities are well known to the police	55	100.00
We have <i>Baba Isale</i> (Some one that defends us)	55	100.00
We are hoodlums/rogues	15	27.27

We can sell a piece of land to several people	55	100.00
We respect constituted authorities	2	3.64
We fear police	4	7.27
Others (Specified)	55	100.00

Past administrations in the Metropolis and the state have made several attempts to put a stop to the phenomenon or curb their activities but failed (Federal Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, 2003; Adekola, Badmus, Adewakun, Okoraocha and Jayeoba (2016). The failure of previous administrations to check their activities has been criticized by many Lagosians who also attribute the enormous power the hoodlums wield to the support they enjoy from traditional rulers (Olaitan, 2016; Aluko, 2000 and 2016). Apart from the alleged involvement of traditional rulers in land grabbing, government officials and law enforcement agents have been accused of aiding and abetting the *Omo'niles*.

However, possibly the wailing of the city dwellers on the lawlessness of the land grabbers has finally reached the ears of the state government and the law makers. Thus, the government recently approved a 21-year jail term for anyone found guilty of land grabbing. The State House of Assembly passed the Act to prohibit forceful entry and illegal occupation of landed property in Lagos State and the Metropolis in particular.

The Act prohibits forceful land takeover, entry of land by force, illegal occupation of property, use of land agents, illegal use of law enforcement agents, encroachment on land with any weapon, sale of land without authority and professional misconduct among others. Each of the offences comes with attendant punishments for offenders. It is hoped that the passage of the bill into law and its endorsement for enforcement by the state government would be a step in the right direction towards an enduring resolution of the dastardly, age-long menace.

### **Implications for Community Development**

Undoubtedly, the *Omo'niles* are clogs in the wheels of progress of community development. They constitute social vices, threat to security of lives, and most community crisis starts and ends with them. They maim, kill and disturb the peace and tranquility of communities. Their criminal cases are well known at every force command – Police, Navy, Air Force and Army; and the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC).

They would never allow uninterrupted progress of any building project - corporate, family or individual. Aluko (2016) asserts that they were often associated with the crime hotbeds of Lagos Metropolis. Community development has been evidently hampered as many projects remain perpetually abandoned. They have successfully frustrated the aspirations of many potential land and home owners in many parts of the Metropolis (Federal Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, 2003; Aluko, 2016; Chukwujekwu, 2016; Olaitan, 2016). These corroborate the findings and assertions of Odumosu and Aderogba (2007) and Olaitan (2016) that they are miscreants and could be as powerful as the state government as no local government of the metropolis dare intervene in their matters. More than 40.50% of all uncompleted projects in the metropolis were those stalled by them. And, Oghenekohwo (2014), like Susan (1999), realising their joblessness and uncivilized engagement in destructive activities advocates holistic training and empowerment programmes for such members of the community.

### **Conclusion**

Land speculation has been very rampant in Lagos Metropolis, the melting pot of nations. Equally significant were the activities of the *Omo'niles*, the land grabbers. Incidentally, only about 12.73% of those interviewed have their origins in the Metropolis. Others are *Area Boys*, who became *Omo'nile* for lack of gainful employment and/or as a matter of choice. Their age ranges between 25 and 50 years; and majority of them were males. More than 75.00% of them were school drop-outs although about 4.00% claimed to be National Diploma (ND) certificate holders. They have no skills or other specific jobs. They live on whatever they can grab from potential landlords. The goal of the Federal Government Land Use Act is to make land available to whoever needs it but this has become moribund and ineffective. The *Omo'niles* often have field days. The encounter of the urban dwellers with them has not been palatable, as it is virtually impossible to erect any structure in the Metropolis without the interruption of the *Omo'niles*. Many lives have been lost to the activities of the *Omo'niles*, who will stop at nothing to make their victims part with sums of money ranging between ₦500,000 and ₦1 million, or more, depending on their mood and location.

They were the cause of more than 40 to 50% of all uncompleted and abandoned projects in the Metropolis. There is need for massive and holistic training and empowerment programmes for them, at least, to ensure sustainable community development.

### **Recommendations**

There must be an empowerment programme for the *Omo'niles* so that they can meaningfully contribute to the social and economic development of the communities, the state and the nation at large. Their capacities and capabilities must be harnessed to enable them work towards improving themselves, their families and the society. This implies that the empowerment programme should involve creation of an enabling environment for their productive and intellectual abilities to be realised. Those that lack personal skills should be trained in any trade such as disinfectant production, bead making, electrical installation, carpentry and upholstery, interior decoration, shoe making, bag making, spiral binding, fashion design, fish farming, poultry farming, vegetable farming, piggery, cream and soap making, catering services and management, events management, hairdressing, and block making, among others.

The onus is thus on the Metropolitan and state government to make available and accessible adult and non-formal education programmes that will be of benefit to such jobless citizens. Aside from the formal school system, government should establish, equip and staff, in each Local Government Area, Adult Non-Formal Training Centers.

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