



## *Mobility, Mobilization, and Counter/Insurgency: The Routes of Terror in an African Context* by Daniel E. Agbibo.

Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2022. Pp. 248. ISBN 978-0-472-13290-4.

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Daniel Agbibo teaches African and African American Studies at Harvard University, specializing in development studies, urbanization, migration, insurgency, and counter-insurgency. His new book is, as he rather dauntingly puts it, an “empirically grounded ... broader theoretical project that critiques the popular representation of conflict terrains as spatially fixed geographical containers for insurgent and counter-insurgent processes, and geography as a neutral backdrop in which terrorist activities occur.” In the process, he seeks to “challenge the essentialist, functionalist, and characteristically Western representations of movement in Africa as one-sided, anarchic, and dangerous” (ix). His book should be required reading for audiences unaware of the importance of mobility, routes, and road and vehicle infrastructure in understanding Boko Haram’s insurgency and the Nigerian government’s response.

In an enlightening discussion of the relevance of roads and mobility in northern Nigeria, Agbibo takes the perspective of Nigeria’s first and only Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tarawa Balewa. For Abubakar, the improved and expansive road system built by the British proved “the transformative power of automobility” (14–15). This leitmotiv reminds us that sound road infrastructure and improved mobility had major political implications for the security of a region—in northeast Nigeria—over a decade of insurgency.

Agbibo maintains that northern Nigeria’s political elite recognized the critical value of roads and automobility as far back as the 1930s. Decades later, Boko Haram stressed motorized infantry as the nucleus of its overt front. Indeed, Agbibo astutely comments that, if the Toyota Hilux in war zones has been “the vehicular equivalent of the AK-47” (21), then Boko Haram has fully embraced it as an operational force-multiplier.

The author also details the role of road infrastructure and automobility assets vis-à-vis the government’s counter-insurgency efforts (e.g., checkpoints and motorcycle bans). But, if various actors, going back several decades, have appreciated the value of mobility, how is it, he asks, that scholars seem to have neglected critical mobility and automobility elements, including the role of the vehicle as the “modern chariot” (19), in insurgency and counter-insurgency in Nigeria? This is a question Agbibo addresses throughout.

Agbibo starts with a detailed literature review highlighting the disconnect between the insurgency and mobility discourse. He surveys the threats posed by motorcycles used by Boko Haram in its motorized infantry and, formerly, for drive-by assassinations. But what are the implications of such a ban on common folk riding motorcycles (*achaba*) for a living? Could the Nigerian government’s response to the insurgency be making things worse? This provides food for thought and a persistent theme in Agbibo’s later analysis of the social inconvenience of road checkpoints as a government response to Boko Haram’s threat to infrastructure.

The author also discusses mobility at the unit level in relation to migration patterns of the *yan ci runi* (seasonal migrant workers) and *almajirai*<sup>1</sup> of northern Nigeria. These lower social classes and their patterns of movement from rural to urban areas have been exploited by the Maitatsine Insurgency in the past and presently by Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria. Such clever use of the mobility thesis and the ties between it and insurgency in northeast Nigeria (74–85) make Agbiboa’s analysis shine.

Readers unacquainted with Boko Haram, its origins, recruitment techniques, and emergence as a security threat will find *Mobility, Mobilization, and Counter/Insurgency* to be good a place to start (esp., 63–102). Agbiboa does a fine job addressing issues like the violence of July 2009, which culminated in the death of Mohammed Yusuf, the one-time Boko Haram leader. The same is true of his discussion of motorcycle helmet law that indirectly ignited the violence.

Though Agbiboa’s book suffers from a dearth of primary source evidence in a few odd instances, his constructive use of interview responses from northern Nigeria is prominent throughout. One example of his brilliant use of primary fieldwork data comes in chapter four’s analysis of security forces’ abuse and the role of civilian joint task forces in response to Boko Haram’s insurgency. Chapter five draws on unique ground-level findings concerning Boko Haram’s threat. Agbiboa’s analysis of interview respondents’ views on security forces checkpoints proves that, for many locals, the checkpoints, not Boko Haram per se, posed the main threat to daily life. This highlights the need for government security and counter-insurgency policies relating to the social function of mobility.

Agbiboa errs in claiming that ties between automobility and insurgency/counter-insurgency have been neglected in the scholarly literature. Recent publications do in fact highlight the links among mobility, automobility, insurgency, and counter-insurgency.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Agbiboa’s monograph is the first focused study of the subject.

Another concern is the jejune discussion of COIN as an operational approach to military warfare. Agbiboa cites the role of the military only in passing, as when he briefly mentions “fighting between the Nigerian military and Boko Haram” (147). Even this criticism, however, comes with a caveat: military operations were not the sole method of countering insurgency.

Indeed, if the recent Afghanistan fiasco has taught us anything, it is that we must cease to think military operations are the best form of the governments’ responses to counter-insurgencies. In this regard, *Mobility, Mobilization, and Counter/Insurgency* is at the vanguard of that change. Agbiboa’s focus on government policies, such as the achaba ban, is a form of counter-insurgency analysis in its own right and a uniquely relevant one at that. Nevertheless, those expecting a military treatise on COIN warfare or the use of traditional military operations to counter insurgency will have to look elsewhere.

Is this a flaw in Agbiboa’s outstanding work? Not at all: as the author notes in his conclusion, he has concentrated on tying “together insurgent geographies and mobility studies” (176). This and the sheer depth of his critical analysis and fieldwork make Daniel Agbiboa’s study an invaluable addition to the current discourse on insurgency and counter-insurgency in Nigeria. It is must-reading for anyone interested in a shift in critical perspectives on Boko Haram’s insurgency and the Nigerian government’s response to it.

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1. Young, often marginalized, males who migrate to urban centers of northern Nigeria to study the *Qur’an* under an Islamic teacher.

2. See, e.g., my *Insurgency and War in Nigeria: Regional Fracture and the Fight against Boko Haram* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2019) on the Nigerian Army’s Mobile Strike Teams, as part of its Mobile Brigade concept around 2017.