

“Shit business is serious business”: Isaac Durojaiye Agbetusin (“Otunba Gaddafi”) and the business of mobile toilets in Lagos (Nigeria) since the 1990s

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Introduction

Much has been written on waste management in urban Nigeria but sewage management has suffered relative neglect.¹ In precolonial Lagos, human waste was deposited in pit latrines (*shalanga*) sited some distance behind the residence. However, open defecation took place outside the settlement on dump sites (*aatan* or *akitan*). From the colonial period (1861–1960 in Lagos), pit latrines continued in use in the indigenous quarters of Lagos. Bucket latrines were provided in the exclusive European residential areas at Ikoyi on Lagos Island, and at Yaba and Ebute Metta on the Mainland, inhabited by the emerging African elite drawn from descendants of slaves, mainly of Yoruba origins, who returned from Brazil and Sierra Leone in the nineteenth century. The bucket latrines were evacuated at night by night-soil men (*agbepo*). The British operated a sanitary tram service to discharge night-soil into the lagoon.² Much later in the colonial period, middle and upper class homes had modern water closets.

The *agbepo* (literally “carrier of shit”, the word *po* standing for the bucket or potty/chamber pot in which the night-soil was discharged) was an object of ridicule expressed in uncomplimentary epithets. It was a despised occupation, initially the preserve of non-indigenes, who remained largely anonymous in the community. The *agbepos* wore masks on duty and were identified by their trademark bucket and broom. Their job was soon identified with certain non-indigenous groups from the Lagos hinterland but indigenous Lagosians became *agbepo* because the job was lucrative. However, *agbepo* could also be a social nuisance when they responded to taunts by embarrassing their tormentors.³ They were maligned precursors of mobile toilets as they evacuated human waste from public toilets to the dump site in the Lagos lagoon. Strictly speaking, however, there were no mobile toilets, properly so-called, in Lagos till the 1990s.

A major turning point came in 1992 when Isaac Durojaiye Agbetusin (better known as “Otunba Gaddafi” from his earlier career as a bodyguard) pioneered mobile (public) toilets in Lagos. His entry addressed two issues: the huge demand for (non-existent) mobile (public) toilets and the odious image of the *agbepo*. Otunba Gaddafi demonstrated that sewage management was “serious business”, and that it was as respectable and profitable as any other. This was captured in the saying “owo igbe kii run” (“shit money does not smell”). Consequently, he named his company “Dignified Mobile Toilets” (DMT) to emphasise that he was a dignified *agbepo*.⁴ He explained his decision as follows: “There is nothing to be ashamed of about human waste, it is a reality – we all have to answer the call of nature... I named it ‘dignified’ to show the world that there is dignity in the business.”⁵

Otunba Gaddafi operated as a social entrepreneur in that, by providing this service, he not only made money but solved two societal problems: the near-total absence of public toilets and the high rate of unemployment of youth in the megacity of Lagos. After his pioneering effort, more mobile toilet operators emerged to meet the demand for their services in a megacity where major outdoor sports, religious and political meetings took place on a daily basis. Agbetusin’s career serves as an entry point into the business and

socio-economic dimensions of urban sewage management in Lagos, Nigeria. This piece contributes to the study of human waste management as a business enterprise in Lagos in a wider social and economic milieu from the late twentieth-century.

Otunba Gaddafi: Early life and foray into the “shit” business

Born in Lagos in 1955, Otunba Gaddafi was educated at Ipetu-Ijesha Grammar School in Osun State, Nigeria, Accra Polytechnic in Ghana and the Eastern College of Technology in the United Kingdom, where he trained as a graphic artist. He worked as a private security guard and later as a fraud investigator with American Express in the UK before voluntarily returning to Nigeria. On his return to Nigeria, he tried his hand at several temporary jobs to make ends meet. He ended up as the security detail to Chief M.K.O. Abiola, the politician and businessman whose election as President in 1993 was annulled by the military junta of General Ibrahim Babangida.



Fig. 1: Isaac Durojaiye Agbetusin

The remote background to Otunba Gaddafi’s pioneering of the business was his early induction into his father’s plumbing business. As a young boy, he accompanied his father’s workers as they distributed plumbing materials and thereby acquired first-hand knowledge of plumbing. This proved advantageous in later life as he discovered that the fulcrum of his mobile toilet business was plumbing. He recounted many years later: “that skill, though I didn’t learn it formally, because when they did it I saw it, I got to know how it is done. Ninety-nine percent of what we have in our toilets is all about plumbing skill, sewage skill, the Q-sitting and so many others.”⁶ He acknowledged the monetary gift of two kobo given by his father’s workers, which probably encouraged the habit of thrift.

The turning point in his eventful career was the eureka moment at Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS) in Lagos in 1992. According to him, when Kola Abiola, the first son of his employer, wanted to use the cricket pitch of TBS as the venue of his wedding reception, it was discovered that there were only two small toilets, which were grossly inadequate for the anticipated thousands of guests. He therefore proposed the acquisition of mobile toilets, but none could be found in the country. As the originator of the idea, he was asked to devise a solution and this led him to fabricating four mobile toilets for the event.

This was the tipping point in his career as he now ventured into the business of “packing shit”. However, he faced two major challenges. First, there was no patronage from customers in the first four years (1992-6). Second, his family and friends considered his career choice wrong and demeaning. The lack of patronage in the first four years of the business meant that he had to rely on other sources of income to fend for his family while he awaited his first mobile toilet business customers.

The initial struggles of Otunba Gaddafi have been related in several outlets but they are worth retelling, relying on his own testimony. It is not well known that he faced stiff opposition from his wife and ridicule from his close friends when he commenced operations. According to him, he started the business from his residence by dumping the waste in his cesspit to the displeasure of his wife. She could not stand the nuisance constituted by the waste, especially as the man lacked experience and appropriate technology at the initial stages. His wife gave up her objections knowing that he was not one to abandon his dream once his mind was made up. While his wife was won over after a time, his friends could not understand why a man with his cosmopolitan education and work experience could ever think of ending his career by carrying “shit”. However, some of his scornful friends later ventured into the business on their own after realising how lucrative it could be. “People who laughed me to scorn. People who thought I was unserious,” he said, “are now packing shit themselves.”⁷



Fig 2: Shit Business is Serious Business

Such was his passion for the unusual line of business that he resolved to remove the odium attached to human waste management. He branded himself “Senior Agbepo of Nigeria” (SAN) in a country where senior lawyers bore the title of Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN). He saw his business as important as any other, perhaps much more so. Hence, he adopted the mantra: “Shit Business is Serious Business”.

Why DMT achieved success

The propelling factors in the rise and resilience of DMT could be classified as attitudinal and strategic. In terms of attitude, he attributed his tenacity to his focus and passion: “I was the one with focus. I was the one with passion; there’s nothing you do on earth that people will not criticise. I’ve learnt never to listen to what people say in life a long time ago, but to follow my instincts... I believe that only a broken focus ... is the enemy of ideas. Once you lose focus [,] ... that is the end.”⁸

He also attributed his success to his adaptability and refusal to be tied to a career dictated by his academic qualifications. “I studied Graphics,” he explained, “I ended up in security. I never worked with Graphics Design for one day. I ended up in security. Today, I am packing shit and I am happy about it.”⁹ However, he admitted in a television interview that his original training in graphics design helped him to reconfigure the toilet design to suit the taste of the average Nigerian public toilet user. He reasoned that, since customers would wish to avoid making contact with the toilet seat, it was best to design a squatting toilet which would prevent contact with the water closet seat and the risk of contracting infections.¹⁰

In addition, he asserted that he harnessed his natural talent, which was a divine gift to all human beings. “Inside of you are talents that God has deposited already... I]nside of you, inside of me... There is an element of every good thing... Tap into it. Your talent can be what you will have to live on for the rest of your life; forgetting your (university) degree... Me, I’ve turned shit into an industry.” He also appeared to have had a talent for

spotting opportunity as he did in 1992 after fabricating the first set of mobile toilets in the country. In 1999, while attending an INTERPOL Conference he saw plastic mobile toilets for the first time and imported 40 of them.¹¹ These became the prototype of his own innovations in subsequent years. This was in consonance with his own philosophy that likened the secret of success in life to a parachute. He explained that a parachute was useless if it was closed but, once opened, would give its user a soft landing. In the same way, a mind has to be opened to receive inspiration and ideas that make for success.¹²

Strategy was a second key factor in the emergence of DMT as a dominant player in the business. This was the recourse to running the business as a social enterprise, focused on solving two major societal problems at the same time: human waste disposal and urban (youth) unemployment. He engaged the downtrodden of the city – unemployed and wayward youth, known as “area boys”, and widows – as agents and managers of the retail outlets. This was on terms spelt out in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which contained a sharing formula of 60:40 in favour of the agent-managers.¹³ The agents would manage the retail outlets for two years by which time the capital outlay would have been recovered, during which the managers paid an agreed sum of money every month. Once the capital was recouped, the ownership was transferred to the managers. By means of this “win-win” strategy, DMT was able to deploy over 300 toilets across Lagos. The operators also patronised DMT for the evacuation of their toilets and septic tanks once they were filled up. This not only made them dependent on DMT but it also assured the latter a steady stream of income from that service. The DMT toilets stationed all over Lagos had telephone numbers of the firm printed on them and this offered the company free advertisement for new customers who needed to rent their toilets for their outdoor events. Many new customers reached DMT via the advertised contacts. This was yet another stream of income for the firm.

But that alone did not fetch the bulk of the revenue that sustained the business. He then demonstrated business savvy by getting manufacturers of toilet-related materials to advertise their products on his mobile toilets. Advertising revenue covered 60 per cent of the cost of installing the mobile toilets which enabled the firm to recover its investment within 18 months. Altogether, advertisement fetched a quarter of the company's profits.

That said, DMT was sensitive to the special needs of the richer clientele for which it provided luxury mobile toilets. It created special VIP (Very Important Personality) mobile toilets equipped with red carpets, MP3 players, flat-screen television sets and air conditioning units.

Smart business strategy and social entrepreneurship combined to make the DMT brand. Regarding the latter, Otunba Gaddafi was passionate about the job-creating opportunities in the “shit” business. According to him:

It's a line of business that can create millions of job opportunities for people. Toilets must not be seen as toilet anymore. Toilet must be seen as business... [N]o toilet in the whole world, except the one in your bedroom... is free. You pay to use toilets in public places... Yes, toilet was the responsibility of the government before, but every now and then we shout private sector participation. Let government look at core issues and the smaller ones, the private sector can come in. So, give people the opportunity, build toilet, own toilet and for every toilet that is installed and built, somebody is employed to look after it and to maintain it. Employment is being generated.¹⁴

It could be said that DMT had attained its peak shortly before Otunba Gaddafi died in 2012. At his passing, it had established almost 20 branches in Nigeria and seven others across West Africa. DMT had manufactured and injected into the market over 3,000 mobile toilets of international standard.¹⁵ Earlier in 2005, he was elected as an Ashoka Fellow “for his innovative contributions to the fields of health and environment”.¹⁶ The

Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation also commended his work in addressing issues of health and the environment in Nigeria.

DMT in the post-Gaddafi era

DMT did not die with Otunba Gaddafi. The Chairman of the Board of Directors of DMT and the Secretary, Fes Eze Eke, assured concerned stakeholders that the company would continue to fulfil its statutory obligations to the public.¹⁷ It was later reported that “his friend and business partner, Caje Oleforo, now runs the company. The business’s mobile toilet units remain a common feature in many parts of Lagos including motor parks, bus stops and several other public places.”¹⁸

However, contrary to the optimistic notes struck above, DMT faced an initial crisis after the death of Otunba Gaddafi. It contended with unpaid two months’ salaries, repayment of a loan of N62 million it had taken from Skye Bank, the upkeep of Otunba Gaddafi’s six children, sundry bills and re-purchase from land grabbers of the land on which the company was located. By 2014, these challenges had been surmounted and a top official claimed that the company was “bouncing back”.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the outlook remained dismal:

Today, innovation, steadfastness, calculated risk taking and diligence all watchwords which Otunba Gaddafi preached as key to a successful business are no longer peculiar with DMT Toilet any more, as it seems the inventor who breathed life into the business from the start took away the magic touch when he died. DMT has suddenly witnessed a nosedive and hardly has a public presence with what with what [had]... been the leftover touches of the last days of Otunba Gaddafi. The situation in DMT presently is believed to be so appalling that nothing is being heard of the bio-gas plant which was designed to process and convert sanitation waste into cooking gas and electricity.²⁰

It would appear that, typical of many African enterprises before it, the organisation experienced the challenges of transition in leadership. An informant claimed that “those who took over ... messed up the business” but the company did not collapse “because of the strong foundation” laid by the founder. A major challenge was finance, since the cost of acquiring a mobile toilet facility had more than tripled from N90,000 in the 1990s to N300,000 in the 2010s.²¹ In spite of these challenges, DMT has rebounded, though it never managed to attain its projected targets, such as establishing the human waste to biogas enterprise. It also contended with an unfavourable macroeconomic environment occasioned by the rapid fall of the naira, Nigeria’s currency. The firm faced increasing difficulties to import new sewage suction trucks which cost between \$22,000 and \$33,000 depending on the capacity of each truck. Unfortunately, adverse foreign exchange rates undercut the capacity of the firm to discharge its obligation to empty customers’ domestic septic tanks. DMT still does business by renting out VIP sewage suction trucks at N275,000 each and each mobile toilet at N65,000 exclusive of a transport charge of N5,000. Inside sources assured that the company would keep going in spite of the adverse economic conditions in the country because of its pool of expertise and stock of quality equipment.

Lagos State Government policy towards open defecation and mobile toilets

The megacity of some 15 million persons is adjudged to be the fifth largest economy in Africa. However, it faces, among others, the challenge of open defecation and the inadequate supply of public toilets in Lagos. The pressure on inadequate public facilities in the city has been compounded by the daily influx of persons into Lagos. A major initiative to eradicate open defecation was taken by the State government under Governor Babatunde Raji Fashola (2007-2015) which enacted an environmental law against open defecation. Offenders were made to clean public toilets and sweep the streets. Such punitive measures did not solve the problem because there were too few public toilets in the motor parks, markets, hospitals and government establishments to serve the huge

population of people who traversed the city on their business runs.²² In 2019, it was estimated that Lagos State required a minimum of 5,000 mobile toilets to eradicate open defecation.²³ The government however urged business operators, including filling stations, supermarkets and eateries, to make their facilities available to guests in need of toilets. That said, public toilets are available at motor parks and markets operated by the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) and market associations respectively. They charge fees of between N50 and N100 for use by the public but the numbers are too inadequate for the population of commuters and customers. Hence, many people still resort to open defecation at night when the facilities are closed and when they cannot be accosted.²⁴ Users of public toilets at state institutions, such as the Secretariat at Alausa-Ikeja, also pay N50 for use of the facility. At the Tafawa Balewa Square on Lagos Island, a large facility for indoor and outdoor events, where Nigeria's independence was declared in 1960, only eight toilet facilities are operated at a cost of N50 to the user. These charges are relatively low and generally affordable but the pressure on the facilities is unbearable.

The Lagos State government has encouraged private investors in the public toilet business but though it had received proposals from many prospective investors only a few have ventured into it. One of such is the firm of Reckitt and Benckiser, which had rehabilitated and operated four public toilets out of the 500 available in the megacity.²⁵ This is a token intervention which cannot cope with the huge demand for public toilets in Lagos. Among those who need but cannot access the few public toilets are the daily arrivals in Lagos and the significant number of homeless street youth who live under the bridges and in uncompleted buildings where toilet facilities are unavailable. The wide gap between demand and supply points to the great investment opportunities in the human waste management business in Lagos.

Lagos State Waste Water Management Office is charged with the evacuation of septic tanks, the regulation of the evacuation of wastes, and ensuring that prospective investors in "shit" business must procure quality equipment to do so. However, while credible investors have not been forthcoming, pirate operators have reportedly taken advantage of the situation. Those "quacks... station their obsolete waste suction trucks beside the Lagoon for messy operation".²⁶

Meanwhile, new players have entered the "shit" business in Lagos modelled on the DMT format but distinguished by their innovative services. These operators offer a wide range of services and products priced to suit the calibre of the clientele and their specific demands and locations.²⁷

One of the new major operators is A-Mobile, a firm that commenced operations in 2007 from Kano Street in Ebute Metta, a high-density locale on the Lagos Mainland.²⁸ It took off from Borno Way where it launched its street cleaning services and rented mobile toilets. It spread its wings across Lagos State and Nigeria and into the West African sub-region, offering a customised range of services targeted at different categories of clientele ranging from children and the physically challenged to the elderly. The firm provides wheelchair access for the physically challenged and the elderly.

Priding itself as a one-stop sanitation and hygiene company, A-Mobile sells and rents standard mobile toilets, mobile handwashing machines and mobile stand-alone urinals for the average clientele, as well as luxury products for the rich. In the latter category are the VIP and VVIP mobile toilets equipped with air conditioners, powered by its power generators. To be sure, although A-Mobile improved on the DMT in some of these respects, it has apparently replicated the DMT business model. Even so, A-Mobile designed products to service outdoor events and, most significantly, construction sites. Construction sites usually rented its mobile toilets for several weeks and months at a stretch. The company also evacuates septic tanks in homes and offices.

Conclusion

The pioneering career of Otunba Gaddafi in the mobile toilet business is a study in social entrepreneurship and the valorisation of the dignity of labour. From tentative beginnings, he built an enduring business in an ordinarily despised sector of the socio-economy. He blazed the trail and others have continued to provide a much-needed service in a city (and country), where open defecation continues to be a nuisance and public toilets still remain grossly inadequate. Though he died too early to fulfil his dream of processing “shit” into bio-gas, his early success provides a template for fresh innovations and further possibilities in social entrepreneurship in the sector. For example, bio-gas would be a valuable resource that fills a gap in the energy sub-sector as an alternative to fossil fuels. The actualisation of the shit-to-gas initiative will be a fitting tribute to Isaac Durojaye Agbetusin (“Otunba Gaddafi”), a pioneer social entrepreneur in the shit business in modern Nigeria. His career has indeed proven that “shit business is a serious business”, though one that is still grossly underexploited in Nigeria.²⁹

NOTES

1. Notable exceptions are John Uwa, “Transcultural tension and the politics of sewage management in (post) colonial Lagos”, *Social Dynamics*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2018): 221-38; and Chris Ogbechie, “Social entrepreneurship: answering “the call of nature”, *Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 5 (Oct. 2014):1-27, which includes a case study of Otunba Gaddafi.
2. S.O. Daniel, “Health and social welfare”, in A.B. Aderibigbe (ed.), *Lagos, the Development of an African City* (London: Longman, 1975): 144-72.
3. I owe some of the ideas in this paragraph to Uwa, “Transcultural tension and the politics of sewage management”.
4. A writer asserted that “Otunba Gaddafi has given a professional face to human waste disposal”. John Paul Iwuoha, “Enter Dignified Mobile Toilets: The mobile toilet success story”, 16 September 2013, <https://www.smallstarter.com/get-inspired/dignified-mobile-toilets-lagos/>, accessed on 29 June 2023.
5. Newton-Ray Ukwuoma and Tunde Alao, “Lucrative s**t! How some individual profit from lack of toilets”, *Nigerian Tribune*, 20 November 2016, <https://tribuneonlineng.com/lucrative-st-individual-profit-lack-toilets/>, accessed on 29 June 2023.
6. Azuh Arinze, “Otunba Gaddafi’s last interview on earth – ‘I love everything about shit business’”, <https://theyesng.com/otunba-gaddafis-last-interview-on-earth-i-love-everything-about-shit-business/>, accessed on 29 June 2023.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Television interview with Funmi Iyanda at <https://youtu.be/euXKqSaw-RQ> (n.d.).
11. Emmanuel Akinla, “Otunba Gaddafi: Exit of a distinguished entrepreneur, aka (SAN)”, 28 March 2012, <https://www.gistmania.com/talk/topic,97598.0.html>, accessed on 29 June 2023.
12. Interview with Funmi Iyanda.
13. *Ibid.* The agents included 1,350 “area boys”.
14. “Otunba Gaddafi’s last interview on earth – ‘I love everything about shit business’”.
15. Ahmed Korede, “Two years after Otunba Gaddafi’s death DMT Toilets witness dwindling fortunes”, *The Octopus News*, 30 October 2014, <https://www.theoctopusnews.com/two-years-after-otunba-gadafis-death-dmt-toilets-witness-dwindling-fortunes/>, 29 June 2023.
16. “Ashoka remembers fellow Isaac Durojaye”, <https://www.ashoka.org/en-ng/story/ashoka-remembers-fellow-isaac-durojaye>, 29 June 2023.

17. Korede, “Two years after Otunba Gadafi’s death”.
18. John-Paul Iwuoha, “Shit Business is Serious Business – An amazing mobile toilet success story from Lagos, Nigeria”, 16 September 2013, <https://www.smallstarter.com/get-inspired/dignified-mobile-toilets-lagos/>, accessed on 28 July 2023.
19. Korede, “Two years after Otunba Gadafi’s death”.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Iyanu Peter, Personal Assistant to the MD, interviewed in 2016 by *Africana Entrepreneur* correspondent, <https://africanaentrepreneur.com/shit-business-the-abandoned-goldmine/>, accessed on 29 June 2023.
22. <https://africanaentrepreneur.com/shit-business-the-abandoned-goldmine/> is the source for the entire paragraph.
23. “Lagos state needs 5,000 mobile toilets to eliminate open defecation—Expert”, 26 December 2019, <https://sunnewsonline.com/lagos-state-needs-5000-mobile-toilets-to-eliminate-open-defecation-expert/>, accessed on 29 June 2023.
24. <https://africanaentrepreneur.com/shit-business-the-abandoned-goldmine/>, Mrs Alimot Kareem, a resident, interviewed by the magazine’s correspondent inside Ketu Market in 2016.
25. *Ibid.* Assistant Director, Public Affairs, Lagos State Ministry of the Environment, Mr Mukaila Sanusi, interviewed by the magazine’s correspondent in 2016.
26. *Ibid.*, quoting an official, Mrs Aderemi Falae.
27. For pricing of various mobile toilet products in Lagos State, see <https://jiji.ng/lagos/165-mobile-toilets>, accessed on 28 July 2023.
28. The following paragraph is based on material from the company’s website: <https://amobiletoilets.com.ng/?v=4874ed2a3309>, accessed on 28 July 2023.
29. Daud Olatunji, “Nigeria can earn billions from exporting human faeces, cockroaches — Don”, *The Punch*, 25 June 2023, <https://punchng.com/nigeria-can-earn-billions-from-exporting-human-faeces-cockroaches-don/>, accessed on 28 June 2023.

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