

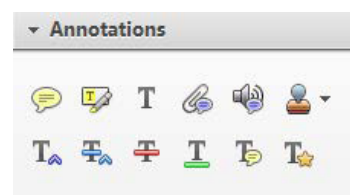
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“Baranda”: structure and praxis of “Onibaranda” (micro-middlemen) in Yorubaland

Structure and
 praxis of
 Onibaranda

AQ:1
 AQ:2

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the historical antecedent of baranda practice, marketing strategies of Onibaranda, as well as the benefits and challenges associated with baranda practice.

Design/methodology/approach – Using exploratory research design, primary data were collected from 27 interviewees in two purposively selected markets in Ibadan. Responses were audio-taped, transcribed, proofread, categorized into themes and, finally, content analyzed to decrypt the underlying thought patterns and processes.

Findings – The findings showed that the origin of the age-long practice of baranda was unknown. It was also discovered that Onibaranda used various, dynamic and situational marketing strategies to carve a niche for themselves, in response to the demand of the markets in which they operate. Lastly, the results showed that while some stakeholders see Onibaranda as useful and necessary marketing agents that uniquely connect sellers and buyers, others outline the ignoble role that Onibaranda play in their bid to create valuable exchanges between sellers and buyers.

Practical implications – Knowledge of this study is germane to informal market stakeholders both in Yorubaland and across the globe.

Social implications – Unless baranda practice is properly regulated, various ills associated with it might discredit the numerous benefits inherent in the practice. Concerted effort by all market stakeholders is, therefore, highly imperative so as to provide rules and regulations that will guide and check the excess practices of Onibaranda in the study locations, as this will enhance customer satisfaction, sellers’ profits and smooth continued operation of Onibaranda.

Originality/value – This empirical study represents the first attempt to examine the structure and praxis of Onibaranda in Ibadan.

Keywords Baranda, Onibaranda, Micro-middlemen, Informal markets, Marketing strategies, Market research, Ibadan, Yorubaland

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The role of informal markets (where sellers and buyers need to engage in trading through bilateral bargaining) in the development of the African economy cannot be overemphasized. Even though informal marketing in Africa has been primarily constrained by the unsavoury environment and arduous government policies, it has always assumed the pivotal role of steering economic development and poverty reduction on the continent (Onwe, 2013; Benjamin *et al.*, 2015; Skinner and Chikanda, 2015). In most developing parts of the world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), marketing of products (such as agricultural and manufactured products) is done mainly within the informal markets as defined and



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regulated by local and global cultures (Pedroza, 2013; Benjamin *et al.*, 2015; Oyekola, 2018; Fafchamps, 2020). By this, the informal markets provide a veritable platform and space for sellers and buyers to transact business. Mostly, in SSA, the informal type of marketing is a long-established practice. Africans have been transacting businesses within informal marketing space long before they had interaction with Middle-Easterners and Europeans. Of recent, informal marketing has gained more prominence in SSA (Benjamin and Mbaye, 2012). This is not unconnected with its ubiquity, increasing size, its implications on national socio-economic development and its rapid and progressive contribution to employment opportunities, growth and productivity within the continent.

In practice, informal marketing usually involves three major stakeholders, and this consists of sellers, micro-middlemen and buyers. Of these three, social investigations have been conducted most on the socio-economic activities of middlemen, as they create valuable exchanges between sellers and buyers. Despite the growing interest of academics and researchers on middlemen in informal markets, there are serious confusion and misgivings about their activities. While many scholars have given critical views about the activities of middlemen (Pedroza, 2013; Abebe *et al.*, 2016; Nosal *et al.*, 2019), others have presented more objective narratives (Feys, 2013; Nosal *et al.*, 2019). As such, there is lack of common understanding among scholars regarding the socio-economic importance and roles of middlemen in informal marketing in the process of serving as intermediaries between sellers and buyers. Existing studies on the activities of micro-middlemen have raised questions that many have found to be unclear (Morris and Morris, 2002; Crona *et al.*, 2010; Abebe *et al.*, 2016; Akaabre *et al.*, 2018; Sekhani *et al.*, 2019). This article aims at adding to the current debate by presenting detailed activities of micro-middlemen from the standpoint of all major stakeholders of informal marketing in Yorubaland.

Among the people of Yoruba, informal marketing is a common social reality and micro-middlemen have been performing vitally important role such that have ensured their continuity in informal marketplaces. Since the pre-colonial era, micro-middlemen, also called *Onibaranda* in Yoruba, have been noted to be playing critical roles such as easing the exchange of goods and (recently) services between sellers and buyers (Johnson, 2010; Atolagbe, 2012). For clarity, *Onibaranda* are people who engage in *baranda* practices, while *baranda* refers to the common practices among micro-middlemen in various Yoruba informal markets. In other words, *baranda* refers to the act and, *Onibaranda* is someone who practices or participates in *baranda*. Scholars have contributed immensely to the connection among sellers, middlemen and buyers, and they have conducted comprehensive studies that have brought to fore the essential relationships among these stakeholders (Masters, 2008; Sarkar and Kundu, 2016; Nosal *et al.*, 2019; Zare *et al.*, 2019). However, their studies have paid little attention to the rare type of *Onibaranda* (or micro-middlemen) who only operate between retail sellers and buyers alone. In most of the previous studies, retailers were also considered middlemen (Crona *et al.*, 2010; Feys, 2013; Abebe *et al.*, 2016). They serve as the connecting rod between producers and buyers in most markets all over the globe. However, what distinguishes *Onibaranda* from other middlemen is the fact that they operate between retail sellers and buyers that converge or meet in the same market. In line with the operations of *baranda*, *Onibaranda* often parade themselves as retailers even in the presence of the real retailers or shop-owners. Although this type of micro-middlemen and their practice has been in existence for a long time, there is an apparent lack of knowledge regarding their organization and operations within informal markets in Yorubaland.

Hence, this paper presents, for the first time, the current viewpoint on the age-long social realities that operate among the three main stakeholders in informal market environment in Yorubaland of Nigeria in particular and of Africa at large. Attempts are made in this study to

provide insights to bridge the gap in knowledge about the operations and activities of *Onibaranda* as they ply their trade in selected popular markets in Ibadan. Specifically, the study seeks to investigate the genesis of *baranda* practice, marketing strategies of *Onibaranda*, as well as the benefits and challenges associated with *baranda* practice in Yorubaland. Unlike other research works carried out on the activities of middlemen as they operate between producers/sellers and buyers, this study is different because its focus is on *Onibaranda* that operate between retail sellers and buyers in large and popular informal markets in Yorubaland. On a cautionary note, the sellers here are retailers who sell articles such as vehicle spare parts and clothing materials to buyers or final consumers; they are different from the producers or manufacturers of those articles. These retailers/sellers are merchants who get their supplies and stock from more advanced geographies (such as Lagos and overseas) and display the same in their shops.

2. Theoretical explanation

This study adopts the role and social exchange theories to interrogate the activities associated with *baranda* practice, as this petty-middlemen interrelate with both the buyers and sellers in Yorubaland. These theories are derived from the fields of sociology and socio-psychology. According to George Hebert Mead, the role theory is an essential theoretical orientation whose usefulness is pivotal to explaining statuses and complementary roles of individuals as they engage in some activities within any human establishment or social organization (Biddle, 1986; Turner, 2001; Ritzer and Stepnisky, 2018). The theory highlights the fact that human beings behave in different and predictable ways, depending on their social identities and respective situations, as defined by the roles they play in society. It is concerned about the organization of social behaviour at the individual and corporate levels (Biddle, 1979; Fyall and Gazley, 2015). In sum, the theory postulates that the role of people's statuses provided contexts that shape their behaviour. The role theory, in particular, has in no small measure contributed to our understanding of how the operations and activities of *Onibaranda* have culminated to the seamless creation of valuable exchanges between sellers and buyers in Yorubaland. According to the theory, *Onibaranda* occupies the status of middlemen in the social system, and they play the corresponding role of making goods available to the intending or potential buyers. The social interaction among sellers, *Onibaranda* and buyers is not based on individual stakeholder's attributes but on the collective roles they played. No doubt, there is ensuing interaction among the three groups in Yoruba marketplaces. The existing interaction among them is different and has been interpreted variously by all the stakeholders in marketplaces. However, the determinants of human agency and the formation of social networks in negotiated exchanges between or among market stakeholders had not been adequately addressed by the role theory (Jackson, 1998).

The social exchange theory is appropriate in explaining the functionality and various performances of *Onibaranda* in Yorubaland. The exchange theory in sociology was rooted in the work of George Homans and developed in Emerson's social exchange theory (Homans, 1961; Emerson, 1976; Ritzer, 2011). From the point of views of Homans (1961), social exchange is defined as the exchange of activities, which could be tangible or intangible, rewarding or less rewarding, but which occurs between two or more people. The theory showcases the reciprocal or negotiated exchanges that occur between the stakeholders (sellers, *Onibaranda* and buyers) in Yoruba marketplaces. It espouses how social networks, trust and affection are formed between these stakeholders in their bid to create valuable exchanges in informal markets. The theory describes the exiting social behaviour among the three stakeholders as a function of payoffs provided by all the parties concerned. In consonance with the postulations of the social exchange theory, the existing relationship among sellers, *Onibaranda* and buyers in Yorubaland is one that is based on

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reinforcement principles (Emerson, 1976; Varey, 2015; Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017). This principle postulates that individual buyers and sellers who have had prior non-satisfying experiences in their relationship or interaction with *Onibaranda* were the ones that have refrained from further interaction with them, while others who had a rewarding experience with them were the ones who continually subscribe to the services of *Onibaranda*. In consonance with the main proposition of the social exchange theory, therefore, buyers who were of the opinion that the costs of patronizing the services of *Onibaranda* are higher and less rewarding discontinue the arrangement, while others who feel otherwise go ahead with the practice. In short, what determines whether buyers and sellers would continually patronize *Onibaranda* is based on the outcomes of costs and benefits of their analysis.

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The underlying assumptions of both the role and social exchange theories help this study to explicitly assess the operations and functionality of *Onibaranda* in Yoruba informal markets as they intermediate between the sellers and buyers. Both theories also provide explanations regarding the wide-ranging narratives given to *baranda* practice by all key stakeholders in informal markets.

3. Methodology

Investigation on the genesis, operations and activities of *Onibaranda* was carried out in Yorubaland, specifically, in selected markets in Ibadan, the capital of Oyo State. The people of Yoruba have been noted to settle in many regions of Western Africa, and Oyo State is one of the six states in Southwestern region of Nigeria that houses Yoruba people. Ibadan, being the capital of Oyo State, has been noted historically to retain the cultural relevance of the Yoruba people (Johnson, 2010; Agunbiade, 2016). Also, the choice of Ibadan was premised on the fact that it is one of the few remaining traditional but modernizing cities in Nigeria in particular and Africa as a whole (Olutayo and Akanle, 2009; Johnson, 2010; Ajani and Oyekola, 2019). The city of Ibadan, as the capital of the erstwhile Western Region of Nigeria, used to be the commercial and administrative capital of the whole of Yorubaland. In terms of proximity to Lagos, it lies 100 miles (160 km) from the Atlantic coast, and it is one of the largest metropolitan area (by population) in Nigeria (Demographia, 2016; Ajani and Oyekola, 2019). Ibadan houses many big informal markets where *Onibaranda* operate, among which are Agodi gate auto spare parts market, Alesinloye market, Labowo spare parts market, New Gbagi market and Saasa-Ojoo groceries market. Among these various markets, two were sampled using purposive sampling technique. Specifically, Agodi gate auto spare parts market and New Gbagi market were selected because of their vast size and the fact that they attract buyers from all the states in southwestern Nigeria, except Lagos State.

An exploratory research design was used to investigate the structure and praxis of *Onibaranda* in Yorubaland because it involves unravelling hidden information and collecting and analyzing qualitative data in a single study (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Bangura *et al.*, 2019). Primary data were collected from the population that consists of retail sellers, *Onibaranda* and buyers. Accidental or convenience sampling technique was adopted to select the sample for this study. The sample size of 27 interviewees were selected from two purposively selected markets in Ibadan. Although there are differing opinions on what is considered theoretically desirable and practically feasible when considering the sufficiency of sample size for qualitative studies (Guest *et al.*, 2006), there are consensus that between 20 and 30 interviews are sufficient enough to answer research question(s) irrespective of the nature of question, as well as the theoretical and mythological orientation and scale of the research (Guest *et al.*, 2006; Green and Thorogood, 2013; Ogunbameru and Ogunbameru, 2018). Hence, 27 in-depth interview (IDI) sessions were conducted among male and female market stakeholders.

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For the IDI sessions, a semi-structured interview guide was used as an instrument of data collection. This research instrument was used to generate information on collective views of a cross-section of sellers, *Onibaranda* and buyers about the meaning/s stakeholders attach to *baranda*; how *baranda* evolved; activities regarded as *baranda*; benefits of *baranda* and challenges associated with *baranda*. This type of interview guide helps the study to achieve the following: ask the right and exact questions from the interviewees, follow the right sequence and pose follow-up questions to responses that required follow-up. Follow-up questions (probes) were asked through the entire interview sessions, and the right to withdraw from the interview was granted to interviewee who wishes so. Indeed, the adoption of this type of interview guide in this study helped the researchers to introduce the flexibility needed to tap interviewees' understanding of questions that were asked.

T1 The selection of participants in the exercise was prompted by research interests and goals of the study, respondents' willingness to participate in the exercise, their knowledge about *baranda* practice and the representativeness of participants in relation to their gender and market location. As indicated earlier, a total of 27 respondents were involved in the IDI sessions. From the textile market in Gbagi, 14 interviewees participated in the exercise, while 13 interviewees participated in the IDI exercise conducted at Agodi gate auto spare-parts market (see Table 1 for a summary of the study sample). At every point where IDI was conducted, the researcher ensured that a considerable amount of time was spent in creating rapport with the interviewees and explaining the research topic and its goal. Conducting IDIs for this study was smooth and eventful. There was no record of any challenges during the planning and execution of the fieldwork. Also, the fact that all respondents selected for IDIs were proficient in the English language ruled out the possibility of seeking services of interpreters. In consonance with the principles of informed consent and voluntary participation, all the interviewees were dully and fully informed about the aim of the study before interview sessions commenced. In the same vein, anonymity and confidentiality of all the participants were maintained.

Responses from the interviewees were audio-taped, after being granted permission by the interviewees. Transcription of the voice recording was done on the same day of the interview or the following day so as to ensure the freshness of the information and to be able to capture and put down any likely information observed (but not recorded) during the interview. All transcriptions were proofread before categorizing them into themes and then content analyzed to decrypt the underlying thought patterns and processes. The ensuing analyzed data from the IDI sessions were then presented as qualitative summaries and narratives.

4. Findings

4.1 Meaning of Onibaranda and baranda

This section presents the findings and interpretative analyses of findings obtained from the IDI sessions through the use of qualitative research approach. Meanings, constructions and narratives of *baranda* practice, as identified in this article, are the opinions, perceptions, views and depictions of market stakeholders (retail sellers, *Onibaranda* and buyers) who

| Markets | Stakeholders | | | Total |
|------------------------------------|----------------|--------|------------|-------|
| | Retail sellers | Buyers | Onibaranda | |
| Gbagi textile market | 7 | 5 | 2 | 14 |
| Agodi gate auto spare parts market | 6 | 5 | 2 | 13 |
| Total | 13 | 10 | 4 | 27 |

Table 1. Summary of study locations and sample

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participated in the study. These representations are important to the study because they reveal how the stakeholders have socially constructed dissimilar meanings to what *baranda* practice represents. These constructions vary and range from positive to negative. What informed these constructions were the existing social and economic relations between and among the stakeholders in the study locations.

The findings showed that stakeholders interpreted the concepts of *Onibaranda* and *baranda* differently, as there were dissimilarities in their responses. Glaringly, the differences in their responses were not unconnected with their roles and different economic activities they engaged in the markets. While some interviewees portrayed the concepts of *Onibaranda* and *baranda* in a positive light, some others considered the concepts as derogatory. In defining the concept of *Onibaranda*, a 44-year-old female buyer in Gbagi textile market stated that "Onibaranda are people who make a living from assisting buyers to source for goods and items in some of the big markets in Yorubaland". According to the interviewees, *Onibaranda* play vitally important role in informal markets, and that the relevance of *Onibaranda* in informal markets is "like what salt does inside the food". In addition, many of them have good working relationships with both buyers and sellers. According to another 40-year-old female retail seller in Gbagi textile market:

Onibaranda is none other than individuals that serve as intermediaries between sellers and buyers. They know the entire length and breadth of this market, and they are conversant with the different segments and layouts of the market.

Among those who simply defined the concept of *baranda*, a 62-year-old female seller commented thus:

What is clear is that one engages in Baranda when a "seller" or Onibaranda [micro-middleman] collects goods from another person's shop, claims he is the owner of the goods and sells to a customer for the sole aim of making profits.

However, there were a number of interviewees in the study locations who stated that the concepts of *Onibaranda* and *baranda* carry derogatory connotations, and that nobody wants him or her to be referred to as *Onibaranda*. As discovered in this study, people who are into *baranda* do not refer to themselves as *Onibaranda*. Despite the fact that they do not have any shop or store of their own, they still parade themselves to customers as businessmen or shop-owners instead of identifying themselves as *Onibaranda*. According to the interviewees, the appellation "Onibaranda" is demeaning, but their relevance in terms of services they render cannot be discountenanced in the market. They are responsible, in part, for the smooth operation and ease of doing business in almost all the major markets in Ibadan. In her words, a 29-year-old female retail seller in Gbagi textile market said:

Baranda [. . .] is a language that connotes that the seller is dubious, not straightforward, and wanting to make extra profit from the sale of goods or items he/she collects from a real owner or seller.

4.2 Historical antecedent of *baranda*

The findings from the study further showed that the genesis of *baranda* practice was unknown, as none of the sampled stakeholders could provide an understandable and convincing narration about the genesis of *baranda* practice. Although all the interviewees referred to the practice as an age-long practice they all grew up to discover, none could explain its evolution. For instance, a 44-year-old female retail seller in Gbagi textile market said, "I may not be able to tell you how the practice of *baranda* emerged". Also, a 62-year-old male retail seller in Agodi gate auto spare-parts market stated in one of the interview sessions as follows:

I cannot say specifically when the practice of Baranda began in this market. I believe it has been on for a long time because we grew up to see our people engaging in the practice. I cannot even say specifically how the word originated. I do not know whether it is Yoruba, Hausa or Tapa language.

Structure and praxis of Onibaranda

In a similar vein, another 36-year-old male *Onibaranda* in Agodi gate market stated that “baranda practice has been on in this market even before my birth; I do not know its origin”. Hence, *baranda* practice is a popular marketing activity and arrangement in Yorubaland that has been in existence from time immemorial.

4.3 Recognizing *Onibaranda* in marketplaces

Investigation on how to recognize *Onibaranda* in marketplaces showed that *Onibaranda* were somewhat easily recognizable, but at the same time, might be very difficult, if at all possible, to be recognized by novice. This is because some of them did not want to be identified considering the derogatory connotation that the name carries, in addition to the belief that they always inflate market prices. Generally, the findings about their areas of jurisdictions were revealed during interview sessions. For instance, a 37-year-old male buyer in Agodi gate spare parts market said, “Onibaranda is easily recognizable in the market; you will know them by the distinct activities they engage in within the market”. According to him, while describing where Onibaranda can be found, he stated further that one can “find most of them [Onibaranda] in strategic areas in the market, particularly, the entrance to the market”. “They are always standing or sitting outside shops soliciting for customers”. Contrarily, a 29-year-old female seller in Gbagi textile market stated as follows:

If you are not one of us (Sellers or Onibaranda), you cannot easily identify Onibaranda in this market. You find them in front of most big shops where they solicit for customers.

4.4 Marketing strategies and operations of *Onibaranda*

The analysis of data from the study also showed the views of the interviewees as they defined various marketing strategies and activities associated with *Onibaranda* in the study locations. Remarkably, they all provided similar views about the myriad of activities of *Onibaranda* in these markets. However, a variety of noticeable trends and patterns have emerged, which describe the unique operation of *Onibaranda* as they act as agents that connect buyers and sellers in the study locations, and some of these include how *Onibaranda* canvass and convince buyers for patronage, how they demonstrate ingenuity with the desire to rip-off their customers, how they network with sellers to get goods to sell and how they are able to earn trust from sellers. According to a 37-year-old male buyer in Agodi gate auto spare parts market, it was reported that Onibaranda “are always on their feet (standing position) beckoning to potential buyers and asking them what they want to buy”. Also, a 34-year-old female buyer in Gbagi textile market said Onibaranda “are not stable; they are always on the move seeking buyers who are in need of wares”. Another interviewee, a 29-year-old female seller in Gbagi textile market, while recounting higher profits made by *Onibaranda* than retail seller (or shop-owner) during marketing gimmicks said:

Most times, they [Onibaranda] present goods they source from our [retail sellers] shops to the customer at exorbitant price, and after the good is sold, they give the shop owner the face value of the article and pocket whatever excess profit made.

These marketing strategies and activities have made *Onibaranda* to be seen as making more profits than the retail sellers – the true shop-owners. “More often, they make more profits than many of the shop-owners”. Another 55-year-old male seller in Agodi gate auto spare

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parts market gave a vivid description of the activities of full-time *Onibaranda*, which he anchored on the close-knit relationships and trust that exist between the sellers and *Onibaranda*. According to him:

At every point in time, they [*Onibaranda*] make overtures to would-be customers and reel out names and types of several items they have in their imaginary shop. Sometimes, they dash into a shop and with the knowledge of the owner pick one or two things which they take to buyer/s in another part of the market. They later return the cost price to the owner of the item/s after they might have taken their profit. One of the reasons *Onibaranda* enjoys such benefits is because the marketers know and trust them.

The findings further showed that *Onibaranda* can sometimes use deception as a marketing strategy to convince buyers to patronize them. For instance, a 43-year-old male buyer who captured the prevailing disposition of a typical *Onibaranda* as somebody who sometimes use deceit to convince buyers said:

Unlike the shop-owners, a typical *Onibaranda* claims he sells all goods or wares. No matter the type or quantity of an item that you want to buy in a market, a typical *Onibaranda* would tell you he has in stock whatever you intend to buy. Their resourcefulness is second to none; they know where to find whatever the customers want, and they know the ruling price for all articles in the markets.

In is important to note further that the marketing strategies and operations of *Onibaranda* are well known and acceptable in marketplaces in the study locations. According to the interviewees, these activities and strategies are backed by local rules and regulations governing market operations. "Our local regulations in the market permit them and their activities". Although many sellers do not desire their activities in the markets ("Many of us do not want them"), they did not have the capability to disallow their operations ("as a seller or shop owner, you do not have the power to stop them from coming to your shop or disclose their identity to customers"). This is because there is nothing sellers can do to stop *Onibaranda*. In fact, one of the unwritten rules that guide their operations stipulates that "shop owners are not expected to talk when they [*Onibaranda*] haggle with customers".

4.5 Challenges and benefits associated with Onibaranda

Further investigation was carried out on the pros and cons of *baranda* practice. This was important to adequately understand the usefulness and danger inherent in the practice from the point of views of all market stakeholders. Evidence showed that *baranda* practice was a mixed bag of activities. The findings further revealed that the responses of the interviewees about the benefits and disadvantages associated with the services of *Onibaranda* varied. While few respondents saw it as an ill-wind that blew nobody any good, majority believed that the practice was beneficial to a large number of people, but must be appropriately regulated. For instance, most of the buyers who were interviewed maintained that the services of *Onibaranda*, though expensive, had made their tasks in the market easier. They claimed that a lot of *Onibaranda* were reliable and trustworthy, and that the practice should not be outlawed in the market. They further indicated their readiness to continually patronize and engage the services of *Onibaranda* because of several benefits associated with the scheme. Moreover, the findings from the study suggested that most critical factor responsible for such positive description was the experiences the buyers had had with *Onibaranda* over the years. Explaining the benefits derived from *Onibaranda*, a 25-year-old male buyer in Agodi gate auto spare parts market averred thus:

Without mincing words, people known as Onibaranda have made things easier for me. What I do always is to inform them beforehand to get the needed [materials] ready for me at a designated place in the market. They do all the searching and haggling before I arrive in the market. The only thing I do is to check the spare parts and pay them.

Another 34-year-old male buyer in Agodi gate auto spare parts market remarked as follows:

My job has been made a lot easier because of the services rendered by Onibaranda in this market. Often, they have brought their knowledge to bear in the area of assisting me in getting genuine [materials] in this market. There is no limit to what they can do for you once they realized you are not a stingy person, and they would make good money from you. They will do all the leg work and get you something good.

In line with the aforementioned narratives, some interviewees who were retail sellers affirmed that the activities of *Onibaranda* have contributed to the increasing and optimal level of sales in their businesses, especially for those retail sellers whose market locations are not favourable. For example, a 39-year-old female seller in Gbagi textile market had this to say:

One principal thing they [Onibaranda] do is to assist in bringing buyers to our [sellers] shops. Sometimes they collect goods from our shops and facilitate how the goods are sold to their numerous customers. For instance, look at where my stall is located, how many customers do you think would locate this place without the assistance of some of the Onibaranda that are loyal to us.

Supporting this view, another 53-year-old male seller in Agodi gate spare parts market retorted as follows:

We derive a lot of benefits by allowing Onibaranda to partner with us [sellers] in this market. One of the good things with Onibaranda is that they assist us in selling some goods that we believe are stale or no longer fashionable. They have the special skills of convincing customers to buy what is available when they [Onibaranda] cannot get what they [customers] want.

The findings further revealed that Onibaranda provides market information on the type of goods that sell fast in the market, as this information guides what retail sellers buy from manufacturers. A 27-year-old female seller said:

They [Onibaranda] provide information for sellers about the type of good that sells fast in the market. They always tell us the goods that are in high demand by the customers and encourage sellers to stock such goods.

Contrary to the claim of a segment of interviewees that admirably described the contributions and benefits of *Onibaranda*, some others, though few, pointed out some disadvantages associated with *Onibaranda* in the study locations. "The fact that they do not have a permanent shop or store has made tracking them difficult". Furthermore, a 35-year-old male buyer in Agodi gate auto spare parts market commented on some adverse effects of engaging the services of *Onibaranda*:

It is always a problem locating them whenever you want to return any faulty or wrong items you bought from them. Even when you know the exact shop where the goods were purchased, the owner would not want to attend to you because you did not buy the good from him. I once met one that denied he sold a good for me just because he did not want me to return the faulty goods I bought through him.

Aside finding it difficult to locate *Onibaranda* when they are needed, a 34-year-old female buyer identified another challenge associated with Onibaranda in terms of product prices and originality by stating that:

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Onibaranda is fond of inflating prices of goods in their care. If you do not know how to haggle, you will end up paying double for the goods you purchase through them [. . .]. At times, they [Onibaranda] confuse those that patronize them and sell inferior materials for the price of the original.

Similarly, some interviewees (who were sellers) in the study locations reported some atrocities they have discovered over the years as they transact business with *Onibaranda*. An instance of such was a 37-year-old male seller who provided a graphic description of certain misconducts widespread among *Onibaranda* as they intermediate between buyers and sellers in the markets:

I had experienced situations where goods were taken from me to customers, and they never showed up again in my shop. Recently, another Onibaranda sold some items in my shop but failed to remit the full money after the sale had been made. He did not disappear like the other ones, but gives flimsy excuses for the past six months.

Another interviewee, a 56-year-old female seller in Gbagi textile market, equally alluded to this fact as she narrated different ordeal that retail sellers usually have with Onibaranda:

Once any customer discovers that an article was sold to him in a particular shop at an excessive rate, he would not want to patronize the same shop again. In a competitive business like ours, where there are many sellers; no buyer/s would want to visit in future any shop where he has been outwitted financially. You know when this happens, Onibaranda has little or nothing to lose because they do not have any business of their own.

5. Discussions

Consequent upon the findings of the study, it was observed that *Onibaranda* were ordinary petty-middlemen within local markets whose duty was to assist both buyers and sellers achieve their ultimate goals, although not without their own profits. The activities of *Onibaranda* were unanimously likened to the services rendered by middlemen in making goods available to buyers or final consumers (Feys, 2013; Nosal *et al.*, 2019). Two different types of people who engaged in *baranda* were identified. The first group consisted of individuals who participated fully in *baranda*, and the other group comprised sellers (middlemen-traders) who occasionally did brisk business by collecting goods from their colleagues and selling them to buyers purposely for profit-making and also to prove to their regular customers that they were not running out of business. In other words, apart from those who engaged in *baranda* as a full-time job, some other shop-owners or sellers did participate in *baranda* too. In essence, *baranda* is not essentially a status that one occupies but a role that is being played by individuals (Fyall and Gazley, 2015). The understanding from this is that aside from the full-time *Onibaranda* who were not engaging in any other economic activities, few sellers sometimes engage in *baranda* for different reasons such as to make more customers, to impress existing customers, to increase sales and to make more profits, among many others.

Lack of knowledge about the genesis and evolution of *baranda* practice in the study locations was another striking revelation. The generality of the respondents could not provide comprehensible step-by-step historical development of *baranda* practice in Yorubaland. The prevailing narrative from all the stakeholders is that they all grew up to meet *baranda* in the markets. Nevertheless, they were able to identify some factors that have continuously buoyed the practice of *baranda* in these markets. The first was about the cases of sellers who had mismanaged or lost their capital due to other vicissitudes of life such as illnesses, debt, robbery, etc. but had alternatively ventured into *baranda* as a means of eking

out a livelihood. Another factor was youngsters that had learnt various trades such as selling clothing materials or auto spare parts but could not raise the required capital to establish their businesses. This group, like the former, also resorts to *baranda* practice as a viable alternative to remaining jobless.

Two divergent views about *Onibaranda* were noted: while some criticized the activities of *Onibaranda*, many others considered their roles in the markets as invaluable. For most buyers, the demerits of *baranda* far outweighed its usefulness. According to many of the buyers, most *Onibaranda* were shrewd marketing agents whose main ambition had always been to deviously make more money from the buyers whom they feigned to assist. Similarly, few retail sellers corroborated the assertion that *Onibaranda* had the knack to fleece buyers rather than assisting them. In line with the basic assumptions of the social exchange theory, the ensuing social interaction among sellers, *Onibaranda* and buyers shows how the behaviour of one group is reinforced by the behaviour of the other and vice versa. In other words, buyers who had identified some discrepancies or dysfunctions with *Onibaranda* had discontinued their patronage, while those who claimed that *baranda* practice was beneficial were the ones who persistently patronized the services of *Onibaranda* (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017; Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu, 2018). In essence, reinforcement is the basis for continuity in social exchange that exists between and among sellers, *Onibaranda* and buyers in the locations. Despite extensive criticism levied against the services of *Onibaranda* particularly by a broad spectrum of buyers, their proponents (who also included both buyers and sellers) had also highlighted some of their positive contributions in the study locations. The protagonists of *Onibaranda*, who were majorly retail sellers in the markets, claimed that the services of *Onibaranda* were indispensable in the markets; hence, they avowed their continuous support for *Onibaranda*. The different perceptions and views of market stakeholders about *baranda* will, therefore, continue to shape their orientation on whether or not to continue their relation or connection with *Onibaranda*.

In line with the views and narrations of interviewees, it was evident that *Onibaranda* (micro-middlemen) were very active in the study locations. They played important roles in connecting buyers and sellers as they created valuable exchanges within the markets. Accordingly, *Onibaranda* operates only in big markets, which attract a large number of buyers from different parts of Southwestern Nigeria. One of the factors that reinforced the relevance and the continuous operations of *Onibaranda* in the study locations was the sheer size of the market in terms of landmass and the enormity of people transacting business in it. The fact that not all customers/buyers had the patience to traverse the length and breadth of these markets in search of articles was another pertinent factor that had contributed to the growth of *baranda*. Relatedly, the practice of *baranda* had also been growing in leap and bounds, in part, because of the exceptional touting ability of full-time *Onibaranda* and their excellent persuasive skills. Over the years, *Onibaranda* through their persuasive skills and touting knowledge had won many buyers to their side, particularly the buyers that were just visiting these markets for the first time. Another significant factor that had contributed immensely to the survival of *baranda* practice in the selected markets was the unalloyed support that *Onibaranda* enjoyed from all the various unions and groups in the markets. This market partnership had provided enabling environments and conditions necessary for the effectiveness of *baranda* in these markets.

There was no formal rule guiding the activities of *Onibaranda* in the study locations, and that tended to affect informal marketing strategies and operation of *Onibaranda* in Yorubaland, and by extension, in developing countries, as *Onibaranda* use this as a means to exploit buyers and/or sellers. Prospective buyers were, therefore, advised to be vigilant while patronizing informal marketing agents so as not to be duped. Formal rules and

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regulations are necessary for official recognition of *baranda* practice, thereby serving as a viable job alternative for some unemployed youths in developing countries and as a means of ensuring consumer protection. Market community partnership involving all market stakeholders will aid effective and collective efforts in putting down formal rules and regulations that will guide stakeholders' interests and in turn ensure smooth market operations such that it will allow mutual benefits but not at the detriment of any other stakeholder(s) (Anbarci *et al.*, 2012; Fafchamps, 2020; Oyekola *et al.*, 2020).

6. Conclusion

The contribution of *Onibaranda* (micro-middlemen) to business and commercial activities in most indigenous and local markets in Yorubaland cannot be overemphasized as they perform multiple, differentiated, but harmonizing roles, such that they have made them indispensable, and at the same time, loathsome, to different categories of sellers and buyers. This study has subjected *baranda* practice in Yorubaland to a sociological inquiry with the sole aim of examining how *Onibaranda* (micro-middlemen) deliver and implement their bipartite roles and the narratives these have generated as they intermediate between sellers and buyers. What emerges from the study indicates that although there are relevance and benefits accruable from the *baranda* practice among market stakeholders, contentions equally abound. Not only do the stakeholders (buyers and sellers) who have direct economic relationship or connection with *Onibaranda* share meanings that underline the relevance, usefulness and necessity of the *baranda* practice as a veritable mechanism for the smooth running and operation of economic activities in the study locations; there is also an implicit conclusion among the same stakeholders that unless *baranda* practice is properly regulated, various ills associated with some of the practitioners may discredit the numerous benefits inherent in the practice.

7. Implications and recommendations

Knowledge of this study is germane to informal market stakeholders both in Yorubaland and across the globe mainly because micro-middlemen or *Onibaranda* are present in these informal markets, although they may not have been formally recognized. This study becomes more relevant, as new informal markets emerge and existing ones enlarge. With the growing number of informal markets, especially in developing countries, and the dynamism of human relations in the busy market world, the acumen of *Onibaranda* becomes more demanding even as customers find themselves in a different marketing system. Against the backdrop of raging narratives produced by the stakeholders on the activities of *Onibaranda* in the study locations, concerted effort by all market stakeholders is, therefore, highly recommended so as to provide rules and regulations that will guide and check the excess practices of *Onibaranda*. This will be an important attempt towards promoting customer satisfaction, increasing sellers' profits and ensuring smooth continued operation of *Onibaranda*. Being the first empirical study to examine the structure and praxis of *Onibaranda* in Ibadan, more comprehensive studies (in terms of geographical locations, sample size and characteristics) are also recommended. Further studies may also unravel or explore the evolution of *baranda* practice in Yorubaland, as this will help in proper documentation of the origin and development of informal marketing. The need to further appraise the benefits and challenges of *baranda* among market stakeholders is an important one in this era of evidence-based research work. This is vitally important to gauge whether the *baranda* practice contributes to sustainable human development or not and also to ascertain the broader implications of benefits and challenges associated with the practice.

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